A Preliminary Investigation into Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories: Conceptualisation, Measurement, Exploration, and Intervention

By

Reza Shabahang
B.A. (Hons.) and M.A. in Psychology

Thesis
Submitted to Flinders University
for the degree of

PhD in Psychology
College of Education, Psychology and Social Work

May 2025

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

Conspiracy theories are pervasive in contemporary life and have the potential to cause significant negative outcomes for people and societies. These theories can target a wide range of subjects, including media—for example, some people believe that Mark Zuckerberg is not a human, the Polybius videogame was a government-run crowdsourced psychology experiment, or the animated TV show The Simpsons is evidence of predictive programming. While some individuals subscribe to media conspiracy beliefs, the potential predictors and effects of these beliefs remain underexplored. Studying these beliefs is necessary because findings and interpretations of conspiracy beliefs cannot be indiscriminately generalized across different conspiracy beliefs or contexts without empirical evidence. For example, conspiracy theories about the same target (such as those concerning the origin of COVID-19) may have different predictors and outcomes, or a single conspiracy belief may produce contrasting effects across diverse populations. Accordingly, my thesis aimed to conceptualise and measure belief in media conspiracy theories, explore its associated consequences, investigate its determinants, and pilot test an intervention to address them. Specifically, I ask: How can we conceptualize and measure belief in media conspiracy theories? What are the possible mental health and sociopolitical consequences associated with such beliefs? How do sociodemographic factors, personality traits, thinking styles, and media use patterns contribute to belief in media conspiracy theories? Finally, can an online educational intervention on mindful social media use reduce media conspiracy beliefs? In Study 1, I draw upon the definitions of conspiracy theories and beliefs, the characteristics of conspiracy theories and beliefs, and conceptually similar constructs (i.e., scepticism and cynicism). I develop a conceptualisation and measure of belief in media conspiracy theories. I define media conspiracy belief as a belief that powerful, secretive groups are manipulating media to advance hidden, harmful agendas. These alleged agendas are perceived as extreme and are believed to have devastating consequences for ordinary individuals and society (e.g., programming people through media). The results indicated good psychometric properties of the 7-item unidimensional Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories Scale across three convenience samples from Australia, Iran, and the Philippines. This measure then forms the basis for the subsequent empirical exploration in *Chapters 3–5*. In Study 2, utilizing convenience samples from five societies (i.e., Australia, Iran, the Philippines, the US, and Hungary), media conspiracy beliefs significantly predicted future anxiety in the Australian, Iranian, and Hungarian samples. With the exception of the Iranian sample, media conspiracy beliefs were positively

associated with xenophobia in all other samples. Media conspiracy beliefs were consistently linked to perceptions of a breakdown in the social fabric and to a dangerous and threatening social worldview across all samples. These results suggest that media conspiracy beliefs, similar to many widely recognized conspiracy beliefs (e.g., COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs), may be associated with hostile attitudes and worldviews. In Study 3, using convenience samples from Australia, Iran, and the Philippines, sociodemographic factors, personality traits, and thinking styles demonstrated very weak or non-significant associations with media conspiracy beliefs. These results suggest that media conspiracy beliefs may not be significantly predictable based on the factors typically discussed in the literature regarding their contribution to conspiracy beliefs. However, notably, mindful use of social media consistently emerged as a negatively correlated factor across all samples. In Study 4, conducted with a sample of Iranian social media users, the online educational intervention promoting mindful social media use effectively reduced both media conspiracy beliefs and general conspiracism. This result suggests that the way users approach social media—an important source of information and an environment conducive to the circulation of conspiracy theories—may influence their level of conspiracism. Overall, my findings suggest that the media is not merely a channel for conspiracy beliefs but could itself become the target of conspiracy theories. Media conspiracy beliefs may be associated with negative sociopolitical consequences, akin to those associated with prominent conspiracy beliefs, such as COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs. Media conspiracy beliefs may not be easily predicted based on the factors commonly discussed in the literature as predictors of conspiracy beliefs (e.g., personality traits). However, the quality of social media use—rather than the time spent—may be a contributing factor, with improvements in this area could reduce both media conspiracy beliefs and general conspiracism. In this thesis, I aimed to move beyond the bias of collecting data exclusively from WEIRD countries. However, I did not engage in cross-cultural statistical analysis or interpretation. By studying the underexplored domain of media conspiracy beliefs, I sought to provide a preliminary understanding of the topic and contribute to the literature on conspiracism and specific conspiracy beliefs, the measurement of conspiracy beliefs, the relationship between media and conspiracism, the correlates of conspiracy beliefs, and interventions aimed at reducing conspiracism.

Keywords: Conspiracy, conspiracy belief, conspiracy theories, media, conceptualisation, measurement, mental health, sociopolitical outcome, sociodemographics, personality, thinking styles, media use, mindful use of social media, intervention, Australia, Iran, the United States, the Philippines, Hungary

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis:

1. does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university

2. and the research within will not be submitted for any other future degree or diploma without the permission of Flinders University; and

3. to the best of my knowledge and belief, does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Reza Shabahang (May, 2025)

Date:

May 2025

I acknowledge the contribution of an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship to the completion of this thesis.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My Ph.D. journey at Flinders University has been a truly enriching and transformative experience, filled with opportunities for growth and learning. I am deeply grateful to the Australian Government for awarding me the Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship–International. Coming from an underprivileged family with limited resources, this scholarship made it possible for me to pursue my studies abroad, an opportunity I could not have otherwise afforded. It allowed me to study in Australia, experience life in a new culture and society, and gain exposure to democratic values, academic freedom, and high-quality research environments. These experiences have been instrumental in shaping both my personal and professional development.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all those who supported me throughout my Ph.D. journey. I am deeply grateful to Professor Emma Thomas, my Principal Supervisor, for her unwavering support and guidance throughout this journey. Her encouragement and mentorship have helped me deepen my academic understanding, strengthen my research and writing skills, and complete my research project within my planned timeline. I am also thankful to Dr. Ryan Balzan, my Co-Supervisor, for his constructive feedback at various stages of my thesis, and to Professor Daniel King, the program coordinator, for his thoughtful reviews and guidance, which extended beyond this thesis. I would like to thank the College of Education, Psychology, and Social Work, as well as Flinders University officials, for their support throughout my studies. I am also grateful to my research colleagues who contributed to this project and to the members of the Social Influence and Social Change Lab for their encouragement and moral support.

Throughout my Ph.D. journey, I prioritized productivity and focused on making meaningful contributions to the field of Psychology and Flinders University. Despite facing personal and external challenges—such as adapting to a new culture and unfamiliar systems, concerns regarding my parents' medical conditions, and worries about the impact of the difficult sociopolitical situation in my home country on my people—I remained committed to my academic and professional goals. During this time, I published several articles in academic journals, participated in interviews with well-known news outlets, and collaborated with leading scholars in my field. These achievements were made possible by the skills I developed during the program and the support of my principal supervisor, colleagues, and the university.

In my Ph.D. thesis, I aimed to produce research of the highest quality within my abilities and resources. I sought to highlight the understudied domain of belief in media conspiracy theories by providing preliminary findings on its conceptualisation, measurement, contributing factors, associated consequences, and a possible novel intervention, thereby paving the way for more focused and detailed future research. I sincerely hope this research contributes to the understanding of the complex relationships between individuals and the media, the interplay between media and conspiracism, specific conspiracy beliefs, the dynamics of media usage and conspiracist thinking, and potential interventions to address conspiracy beliefs.

My Ph.D. journey has helped me grow personally and academically, enhancing my abilities in research design, writing, analysis, and interpretation. It allowed me to better understand my strengths, recognize areas for improvement, learn from scholars across various disciplines, communicate and collaborate with leading academics, and enhance the quality of my publications. These experiences have been invaluable to my overall growth. I will always be grateful to Prof. Emma Thomas, to everyone who supported me during this period, to Flinders University, and to the Australian Government.

Sincerely yours,

Reza

Notes about the Format and Presentation of the Thesis

In this thesis, I employ the pronoun “I” in several instances to maintain an active voice, in accordance with commonly accepted conventions for thesis writing. However, I must acknowledge that this work is the product of contributions from many individuals, including my supervisors, colleagues, reviewers at various stages, lab members, and others with whom I discussed my research. Their insights have significantly shaped the development of this thesis.

The thesis has been prepared as a series of papers to be submitted for publication. There is a general introduction (*Chapter 1*) to explain how the elements are connected, and a general discussion (*Chapter 6*), where I reflect on the implications of the work as a whole. However, I have made minor alterations to the numbering of sections, figures, tables, and studies to allow for consistency across the thesis. I have also created a single reference list at the back of the thesis to avoid repetition.

Publications

During my PhD candidature, I published seven papers, none of which were derived from the content of this thesis at the time of its submission. These publications were produced under my affiliation with Flinders University, with my PhD supervisor collaborating on two of them. Manuscripts directly related to this thesis are currently in preparation and are expected to be submitted for publication in the near future.

The manuscripts published during my PhD candidature include the following:

Shabahang, R., Reyes, M. E. S., Brewer, M. B., Pacquing, M. C. T., Buvár, Á., Gömbicz, K., Aruguete, M. S., Orosz, G., & Zsila, Á. (2025). Media trust and perceived media stress among Filipino, Hungarian, and Iranian LGBTQ+ people: A cross-cultural comparative study. *Journal of Homosexuality*. https://doi.org/1.1080/00918369.2025.2452458

Shabahang, R., Kim, S., Chen, X., Aruguete, M. S., & Zsila, Á. (2024). Mukbang watching in Iran: A brief report validating the Persian version of the mukbang addiction scale and its relationship with disordered eating decisions and habits. *Current Psychology, 43*, 29296–29301. https://doi.org/1.1007/s12144-024-06440-4

Shabahang, R., Hwang, H., Thomas, E. F., Aruguete, M. S., McCutcheon, L. E., Orosz, G., Hosseinkhanzadeh, A. A., & Mokhtari Chirani, B. (2024). Doomscrolling evokes existential anxiety and fosters pessimism about human nature? Evidence from Iran and the United States. *Computers in Human Behavior Reports*, *15*, 100438. https://doi.org/1.1016/j.chbr.2024.100438

McCutcheon, L. E., Hwang, H., Mokhtari Chirani, B., Shabahang, R., Aruguete, M. S., & Thomas, E. F. (2024). Is doomscrolling related to celebrity worship? A cross-cultural study. *International Journal of Psychology*, 59(6), 885-89. https://doi.org/1.1002/ijop.13159

Shabahang, R., Brewer, M. B., Reyes, M. E. S., Pacquing, M. C. T., Buvár, Á., Aruguete, M. S., Orosz, G., & Zsila, Á. (2024). How much do LGBTQ+ Filipinos perceive media as threatening? First steps in the development of the Perceived Media Threat Scale. *Sexuality and Culture*, 28, 2519–2536. https://doi.org/1.1007/s12119-024-10240-0

Shabahang, R., Kim, S., Chen, X., Aruguete, M. S., & Zsila, Á. (2024). Downloading appetite? Investigating the role of parasocial relationship with favorite social media food influencer in followers'

disordered eating behaviors. *Eating and Weight Disorders - Studies on Anorexia, Bulimia and Obesity*, *29*, 28. https://doi.org/1.1007/s40519-024-01658-4

Shabahang, R., Kim, S., Aruguete, M. S., Azadimanesh, P., Ghaemi, Z., Hosseinkhanzadeh, A. A., Kakabaraee, K., & Zsila, Á. (2024). Social media-related nightmare — a potential explanation for poor sleep quality and low affective well-being in the social media era? *BMC Psychology*, *12*, 14. https://doi.org/1.1186/s40359-024-01605-z

The manuscripts derived from this thesis that are currently in preparation for submission are as follows:

Chapter 2 and 3 will be published as: Shabahang, R., Thomas, E., Reyes, M. E. S., Zsila, Á., & Huynh, H. P. (in preparation). Conceptualisation, measurement, and associated outcomes of media conspiracy beliefs. [Unpublished manuscript]. Note: I am the primary author of these two chapters and the corresponding manuscript. I conceptualised and designed the studies, with guidance and advice from my principal supervisor (Emma Thoams). I collected data in Iran and Australia and coordinated data collection in the Philippines, the United States, and Hungary, which was undertaken by the co-authors (Marc Eric Santos Reyes, Ágnes Zsila, and Ho Phi Huynh). I conducted the data analyses with assistance from the co-authors. I drafted the entire chapters and manuscript and incorporated revisions and editorial suggestions provided by my supervisor and co-authors. Percentage of contributions: Reza Shabahang: 80%; Emma Thomas: 8%; Marc Eric Santos Reyes: 4%; Ágnes Zsila: 4%.; Ho Phi Huynh: 4%.

Chapter 4 will be published as two papers:

Shabahang, R., Thomas, E., Reyes, M. E. S., Zsila, Á., & Huynh, H. P. (in preparation). Contributing factors of media conspiracy beliefs. [Unpublished manuscript].

Shabahang, R., Thomas, E., Reyes, M. E. S., Zsila, Á., Douglas, K. M., Weber, R., Billieux, J., Demetrovics, Z., & Huynh, H. P. (in preparation). Mindful use of social media is associated with weaker conspiracy beliefs [Unpublished manuscript].

Note: I am the primary author of this chapter and the corresponding manuscripts. I conceptualised and designed the study, with guidance and advice from my principal supervisor (Emma Thomas). I collected data in Iran and Australia and coordinated data collection in the Philippines, which was undertaken by the co-authors. I conducted the data analyses with assistance from the co-authors. I drafted the entire chapter and manuscript and incorporated revisions and editorial suggestions provided by my supervisor and co-authors (Marc Eric Santos Reyes, Ágnes Zsila, Karen M. Douglas, René Weber, Joël Billieux, Zsolt Demetrovics, and

Ho Phi Huynh). Percentage of contributions: Reza Shabahang: 74%; Emma Thomas: 5%; Marc Eric Santos Reyes: 3%; Ágnes Zsila: 3%.; Karen M. Douglas: 3%; René Weber: 3%, Joël Billieux: 3%; Zsolt Demetrovics: 3%; Ho Phi Huynh: 3%.

Chapter 5 will be published as: Shabahang, R., Thomas, E., & Balzan, R. (in preparation). An online educational intervention promoting mindful use of social media may reduce media conspiracy beliefs—A pilot interventional study. [Unpublished manuscript]. Note: I am the primary author of this chapter and the corresponding manuscript. I conceptualised and designed the study, with guidance and advice from my principal and associate supervisors (Emma Thomas and Ryan Balzan). I designed the intervention, provided the intervention, and collected data in Iran. I conducted data analysis independently. I drafted the entire chapter and manuscript and incorporated revisions and editorial suggestions provided by my supervisors. Percentage of contributions: Reza Shabahang: 85%; Emma Thomas: 10%; Ryan Balzan: 5%.

I have included an authorship statement at the start of each of the chapters to clarify my primary role in the production of this work.

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER 1

Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories: An Underexplored Domain

"Whoever controls the media, controls the mind" (Jim Morrison, 1969)

Authorship statement: I am the primary author of this chapter. I wrote the chapter with guidance and advice from my principal and associate supervisors (Emma Thomas and Ryan Balzan). Percentage of contributions: Reza Shabahang: 85%; Emma Thomas: 10%; Ryan Balzan: 5%.

Conspiracist thinking is pervasive in the contemporary world (Kużelewska & Tomaszuk, 2022; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). With recent formidable challenges—such as military conflicts, sociopolitical instabilities, and economic hardships—we appear to be experiencing an age conducive of conspiracism, as conspiracy beliefs tend to proliferate during times of crisis (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). When conventional explanations for events are lacking, many find themselves drawn to the allure of conspiracy theories, which may provide a sense of meaning, purpose, and even excitement (van Prooijen, 2022; van Prooijen & van Vugt, 2018). These theories, which may offer cognitive closure by resolving concerns and addressing unresolved assumptions or questions (Marchlewska et al., 2018), can target a wide range of subjects. The media—including platforms, figures, and products—can be a target for conspiracy claims (e.g., conspiracy beliefs about celebrities and commercials; Ballinger, 2014; Furnham, 2013). Media conspiracy beliefs appear to exist and is believed by some individuals (Ballinger, 2014; Furnham, 2013; Uscinski et al., 2022b), however, remains insufficiently explored and warrant comprehensive investigation.

The media are often seen as vehicles for conspiracy theories, and it is less recognized that they can themselves be the targets of conspiracy theories. In this thesis, I aim to investigate belief in media conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories are assertions that the public is being systematically deceived about certain aspects of reality, enabling specific groups of people to pursue harmful and self-serving agendas (Douglas et al., 2019; Nera and Schöpfer, 2023). Among the various entities that can be targeted by conspiracy beliefs, the media is one such target. The term "media" serves as a broad umbrella encompassing a diverse array of components (e.g., television, film, social media, music, media figures; see Merskin, 2020). The media may be perceived as threatening by some individuals (Appel & Weber, 2017; Shabahang et al., 2024a;

Ramasubramanian & Yadlin-Segal, 2017), and conspiracy claims may be directed at media (Ballinger, 2014; Furnham, 2013). For example, some may believe that media advertisements use subliminal techniques to implant interest in a product in the minds of viewers (Furnham, 2013). Others may believe that there are hidden reasons behind the deaths of media figures—for example, some people believe that Rupert Murdoch and George Soros are using the media to control and manipulate the public (e.g., see Uscinski et al., 2022).

Based on conceptualisation of conspiracy beliefs (Douglas et al., 2019; Nera and Schöpfer, 2023), media conspiracy beliefs can include the notion that the media is manipulated by malevolent elites to advance covert and insincere agendas (e.g., controlling the human race and programming them for future plans) that corrosively affect people's lives. It is important to note that, in this thesis, the media refers specifically to mass media, particularly the most widely consumed forms. Given that the media is a collective and multifaceted term, providing a clear and universally accepted definition is inherently challenging. In this thesis, the media refers to mass media that reach a broad audience and where its purpose is to create and transmit information to the public (e.g., see Fischoff, 2005; Potter, 2013; Voci et al., 2019).

In this thesis, I focus on conspiracy beliefs related to media components that recent surveys and reports suggest are more regularly consumed and receive greater attention from society (see Merskin, 2020), including social media, news, movies, video games, and media figures. It should be noted that, in this thesis, the term media figures refers specifically to individuals who work for media organizations and whose professional roles are centered around media production and communication (e.g., see Alperstein & Vann, 1997). The literature on conspiracy theories targeting media figures includes examples in which the individual is not originally a media professional—for instance, political figures who are also considered media figures due to their media visibility or coverage (e.g., Princess Diana). Such cases have been categorized under conspiracy beliefs directed at media figures (see Ballinger, 2014). These examples are referenced in this thesis. However, in this thesis, media figures specifically refer to individuals who are professionally involved in the media industry (e.g., those engaged in the creation of media content; see Alperstein & Vann, 1997).

I aim to offer an introductory understanding of conspiracy perspectives toward media—particularly social media, news, movies, video games, and media figures—a topic not systematically addressed in the literature, alongside evidence-based findings. To date, I am not aware of a comprehensive investigation that has explored what constitutes media conspiracy beliefs, how they can be measured, their correlates, or how they can be addressed.

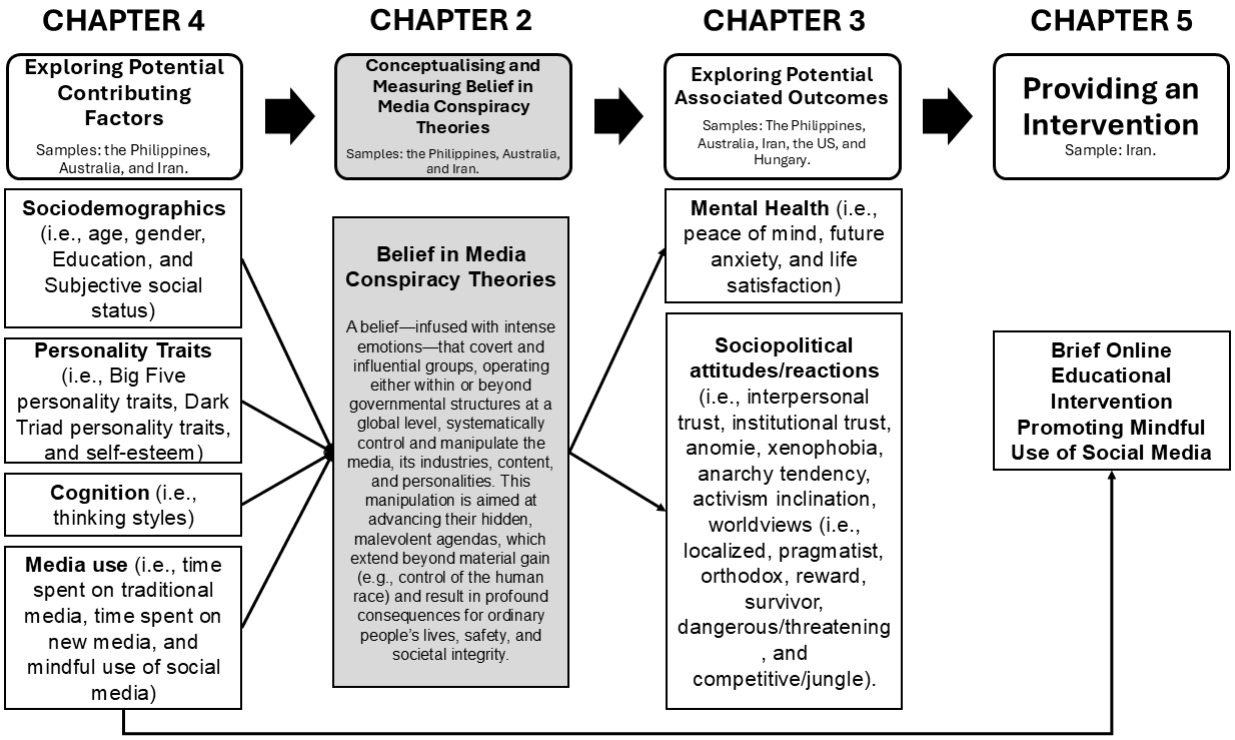
Conspiracy beliefs and their correlates cannot be simply regarded as equivalent. These beliefs should not be viewed as uniform; rather, conspiracy beliefs may vary in tone, origin, target, contributing factors, and impact (Enders et al., 2021; Hartman et al., 2021; Jolley et al., 2024; Oleksy et al., 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2024; Wang & Kim, 2021). For example, different conspiracy beliefs about the same target may be associated with distinct consequences (see Oleksy et al., 2021), or a conspiracy belief may be linked to an effect in one population but not others (see Wang & Kim, 2021). Furthermore, not all conspiracy beliefs are equally strongly linked to the conspiracy mindset—defined as an enduring individual disposition to interpret the world and events through a conspiratorial lens (Imhoff et al., 2022); some may exhibit a weaker association with this mindset (Strömbäck et al., 2024). Indeed, the intensity of conspiracist thinking may differ across different conspiracy beliefs. Given these potential variations, it is important to identify and explore specific conspiracy beliefs, particularly those that remain understudied, such as media conspiracy beliefs. A focused exploration of each distinct conspiracy belief is necessary to generate precise findings and interpretations.

My research addresses the questions: How can we conceptualise and measure belief in media conspiracy theories? What are the mental health and sociopolitical consequences associated with belief in media conspiracy theories? What contributions do sociodemographic factors, personality traits, thinking styles, and media use patterns have for belief in media conspiracy theories? And, finally, can an online educational intervention on mindful social media use effectively reduce media conspiracy beliefs? In what follows below, I describe each of these questions in detail.

In this thesis, I approach these questions through the lens of the Psychology of Conspiracy Theories—the psychological literature on conspiracy theories and beliefs (e.g., see Douglas et al., 2017)—and, more broadly, through the lens of Media Psychology. Media Psychology is a relatively young field that incorporates insights from psychological science to explore how people perceive, use, interact with, and are influenced by the media. In this thesis, I examine an underexplored area at the intersection of Media Psychology and the Psychology of Conspiracy: conspiracy beliefs directed at the media itself.

One benefit of adopting this approach is that it allows me to draw holistically on insights from across the various sub-disciplines of Psychology – for example, I draw upon cognitive psychology (analytical thinking), personality psychology, clinical psychology (well-being, anxiety) and social psychology (threat, worldviews), as well as constructs from within media psychology itself (quality and quantity of media use). *Figure 1* provides an overview of the aims of the thesis overall.

Figure 1. Thesis's Aims



Conceptualisation and Measurement of Media Conspiracy Beliefs (*Chapter 2*)

Conspiracy theories can be challenging to define, but they are generally conceptualized as claims that the public is being systematically deceived about certain aspects of reality, allowing specific groups to pursue harmful and self-serving agendas (Douglas et al., 2019; Douglas & Sutton, 2023; Nera & Schöpfer, 2023). Like others (Keeley, 1999; Pinkleton & Austin, 2004; Quiring et al., 2021; Uscinski, 2018; Uscinski & Enders, 2023), I suggest that these beliefs are conceptually distinct from scepticism, which involves a healthy questioning process without rushing to conclusions, and cynicism, which reflects a negative judgment grounded in reality but lacking a fully formed narrative. Instead, they represent intense negative judgments with an imaginative, often uncommon, quality and a nearly complete story (Pinkleton & Austin, 2004; Quiring et al., 2021; see *Table 1*). Despite the non-falsifiable nature of conspiracy theories—where the line between conspiracy theories and truth is often blurred, and while some theories are incorrect, others may be could-be-true or even are-true (Uscinski & Enders, 2023; Uscinski, 2018)—belief in conspiracy theories needs to be studied.

Beyond the debate over whether a conspiracy theory belongs in the realm of fact or fiction (see Uscinski, 2018; Uscinski & Enders, 2023), I am interested in measuring media conspiracy beliefs and understanding the potential reasons behind their formation and acceptance, as well as their possible impacts.

In fact, in many cases, the critical issue is not whether media conspiracy beliefs are objectively true or false. Rather, the key concern is that these theories can be *perceived* as true and real by their believers. This perception may have mental health, social, and political consequences, influencing individuals' attitudes and behaviours.

Table 1. Scepticism, Cynicism, Conspiracy Belief, and Conspiracy Mindset

Term	Definition	Example
Scepticism (Scepticism toward the Media)	A healthy process of questioning without rushing to conclusions.	Thoughtfully questioning and seeking additional information on why specific standards are applied to certain content on social media.
Cynicism (Cynicism toward the Media)	A negative judgment rooted in reality but lacking a fully developed narrative.	A reality-based negative judgment that views social media as merely a tool to promote potentially useless or harmful products for corporate profit.
Conspiracy Belief (i.e., Media Conspiracy Belief)	An intense negative judgment with an imaginative, often uncommon, quality and a nearly complete story.	A strong, imagination-based belief that social media is being used for mind control and programming by powerful, secretive elites with malevolent intentions.
Conspiracy Mindset (Mentality)	A relatively stable tendency to interpret the surrounding environment and its events as being caused by secret plots, whereas specific conspiracy beliefs are then manifest indicators.	A general willingness to believe in conspiracy theories, which may include media conspiracy beliefs, but not necessarily.

Conspiracy theories about the media are commonly discussed in everyday conversations, political speeches, social media, and news outlets, often claiming that the media is harmful and serves malicious purposes. Yet, while belief in media conspiracy theories appears to be increasing (see Uscinski et al., 2022b),

these theories and the beliefs surrounding them have received relatively little attention in academic research. Given the possible mental health, social, cultural, and political consequences associated with conspiracy beliefs (Douglas et al., 2015; Liekefett et al., 2023; Jolley et al., 2022; Thomas et al., 2024), it is important to investigate whether media conspiracy beliefs can be similarly associated with negative mental health and sociopolitical outcomes for individuals who endorse them.

To date, a few studies (see Ballinger, 2014; Bruder and Manstead, 2009; Furnham, 2013) have touched on the topic. However, none have undertaken a comprehensive investigation into these beliefs or their correlates. The construct of media conspiracy beliefs remains poorly defined, with a lack of conceptual clarity regarding its meaning and scope. Furthermore, no standardized instrument has been developed to assess susceptibility to media conspiracy beliefs. The conceptualisation of media conspiracy beliefs and the development of a measurement tool to assess belief in such theories represent pivotal steps toward fostering a deeper understanding of this construct. At present, there remains a gap in understanding the consequences associated with these beliefs, the factors that may predispose individuals to adopt them, and the approaches that may reduce susceptibility to such beliefs.

Understanding media conspiracy beliefs, along with their contributing factors and associated consequences, is particularly critical given that conspiracy beliefs may exhibit unique content, tone, origin, targets, correlates, and intensity in relation to the conspiracy mindset. Conspiracy beliefs should not be regarded as monolithic or interchangeable, as each type may pose distinct characteristics that shape their potential correlates and consequences. While many conspiracy beliefs share similarities and exhibit features of a belief system, they should not be treated as uniform. Each type of conspiracy belief may have distinct dimensions (see Enders et al., 2021) and may hold different meanings for various groups (see Jolley et al., 2024). The specific content of conspiracy beliefs also plays a crucial role, as evidenced by the different correlates of general COVID-19 conspiracies versus government-related COVID-19 conspiracies (Oleksy et al., 2021) and the varied correlates of different conspiracy theories regarding the origin of COVID-19 (Wuhan lab conspiracy theory, meat market conspiracy, and 5G conspiracy theory; Hartman et al., 2021). Moreover, conspiracy beliefs may lead to unexpected outcomes in certain groups and cultures, such as the paradoxical impact of COVID-19 conspiracies on increasing preventive actions in Korea (Wang & Kim, 2021).

Additionally, while there is evidence indicating a association between a conspiracy mindset and conspiracy beliefs (e.g., Freeman et al., 2022; Sutton & Douglas, 2020), a conspiracy mindset and specific

conspiracy beliefs are not always inherently strongly correlated and may be conceptualized as somewhat distinct constructs (see *Table 1*; Imhoff et al., 2022; Nera, 2024; Strömbäck et al., 2024; Sutton & Douglas, 2020; Sutton et al., 2024). The conspiracy mindset may exhibit stronger associations with certain specific conspiracy beliefs while being less related to others (Strömbäck et al., 2024).

Given the potential diversity in conspiracy beliefs' nature, the possible variation in their correlates, and the potential differences in the intensity with which they are associated with the broader conspiracy mindset, it is necessary to investigate individual conspiracy beliefs in depth rather than generalizing findings from research on conspiracy mindset or other specific beliefs. As discussed by Imhoff and Lamberty (2020), both a general/meta approach and a focused approach to studying conspiracy beliefs offer valuable insights. They often reveal many similarities (e.g., the direction of effects). However, slight differences are also possible (e.g., the strength of effects). My thesis adopts an approach focused on belief in media conspiracy theories specifically, rather than generalized conspiracy endorsement. I aim to generate findings about these specific beliefs that may align with or diverge from existing results on other specific conspiracy beliefs, or even general conspiracism. By focusing on a particular type of conspiracy belief—belief in media conspiracy theories—my thesis offers an understanding of its concept and measurement. In *Chapter 2*, I conceptualise media conspiracy beliefs and construct a brief self-report assessment tool for measuring belief in media conspiracy theories.

Potential Mental Health and Sociopolitical Consequences of Media Conspiracy Beliefs (*Chapter 3*)

Exploring the consequences of conspiracy beliefs has been a central focus in the psychological study of conspiracy beliefs (see Douglas et al., 2015; Liekefett et al., 2023; Jolley et al., 2022). As noted earlier, findings regarding the impacts of generic conspiracy mindsets or specific conspiracy theories cannot be directly generalized to other beliefs due to potential variations in their content, tone, scope, correlates, and intensity of their relationship with conspiracy mindset (see Hartman et al., 2021; Imhoff et al., 2022; Nera, 2024; Oleksy et al., 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2024; Sutton et al., 2024; Wang & Kim, 2021). Moreover, while research has predominantly emphasized the negative outcomes of conspiracy beliefs, some research has revealed and discussed certain potential benefits and unexpected consequences, such as promoting health-protective behaviours and fostering a sense of meaning and purpose (see van Prooijen, 2022; Wang & Kim, 2021). However, it is important to note that the literature on the link between conspiracy beliefs and positive outcomes (e.g., positive social change) is still nascent, and some speculate that these gains are short-term, with negative

outcomes expected to outweigh them in the long run (van Prooijen, 2022). Therefore, considering the potentially varied associated outcomes that some conspiracy beliefs may demonstrate, it is important to empirically investigate the consequences of specific novel conspiracy beliefs, such as media conspiracy beliefs, to provide precise and reliable findings.

This need is especially pressing given the apparent rise in media conspiracy beliefs. A recent study by Uscinski et al. (2022b), which examined changes in conspiracy beliefs over time, included two items about media conspiracy beliefs. The first item, *"Billionaire George Soros is behind a hidden plot to destabilize the American government, take control of the media, and put the world under his control,"* showed an increase of 7 percentage points in magnitude from 2011 to 2021 ($p < .001$). The second item, *"Do you believe media or the government adds secret mind-controlling technology to television broadcast signals, or not?"* exhibited a 2 percentage points in magnitude increase from 2013 to 2021 ($p = .132$). Accordingly, investigating the consequences associated with media conspiracy beliefs is both timely and necessary. In *Chapter 3* of this thesis, I explore the mental health (i.e., peace of mind, future anxiety, life satisfaction) and sociopolitical (i.e., interpersonal and institutional trust, anomie, xenophobia, tendencies toward anarchy, activism, and pessimistic worldviews) outcomes associated with media conspiracy beliefs.

Mental health outcomes associated with media conspiracy beliefs

Conspiracy beliefs are widely recognized as detrimental to mental health (see Freeman & Bentall, 2017; Jolley et al., 2022; van Mulukom et al., 2022). Research has shown that individuals who endorse conspiracy theories tend to experience higher rates of suicidal ideation, diminished social networks, and an increased likelihood of meeting criteria for psychiatric disorders (Freeman & Bentall, 2017). These beliefs have also been linked to elevated psychological distress, symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder, and reduced life satisfaction (Chen et al., 2020). Additionally, an increase in conspiracy beliefs has been associated with heightened anxiety, intolerance of uncertainty, and a sense of existential threat (Liekefett et al., 2023). In explaining the negative impact of conspiracy beliefs on mental health, studies suggest that these beliefs foster uncertainty, hypervigilance, and heightened threat perception, which exhaust psychological resources and adversely affect mental well-being.

While conspiracy beliefs are often connected to lower well-being and higher levels of depression (Freeman & Bentall, 2017; van Prooijen et al., 2023; Green et al., 2023), other studies report non-significant associations between conspiracy beliefs, life satisfaction, and quality of life (Leibovitz et al., 2021; Pekárová,

2021). These null effects suggests that the psychological impact of conspiracy beliefs are not uniformly detrimental to well-being. Such variability highlights the importance of further empirical investigation into the mental health consequences of specific conspiracy beliefs, particularly in light of the inherent differences they may exhibit (e.g., content, tone, intensity) and their distinctive characteristics. In *Chapter 3*, I examine the relationships between media conspiracy beliefs and internal peace of mind, anticipatory anxiety about the future, and positive evaluations of quality of life.

Sociopolitical outcomes associated with media conspiracy beliefs

In addition to potential associated consequences for individuals, *Chapter 3* also examines the potential sociopolitical outcomes associated with media conspiracy beliefs. Previous studies have identified and discussed non-normative and harmful attitudes and behaviours as probable consequences associated with conspiracy beliefs (Jolley et al., 2019; Pummerer, 2022). Research has suggested that these beliefs may trigger impulsive actions, such as hoarding supplies or using harmful substances for treatment (van Mulukom et al., 2022). Moreover, conspiracy beliefs have been reported to be linked to increased feelings of powerlessness, mistrust, and uncertainty (Jolley & Douglas, 2014), and are associated with diminished institutional trust (Einstein & Glick, 2015) and strained intergroup relations (Bilewicz et al., 2013; de Zavala & Cichocka, 2012; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). These beliefs have also been found to contribute to discrimination, prejudice, racism, violence, and extremism (Bilewicz et al., 2013; de Zavala & Cichocka, 2012; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Jolley et al., 2022; van Mulukom et al., 2022). Conspiracy beliefs may provoke both action, such as protest, and inaction, such as political disengagement, depending on the specific theory, the believer's characteristics, and the emotions evoked (see Jolley et al., 2020). Conspiracy theories serve as alarms, signaling perceived threats, vulnerability, violations of rules, and abuses of power (Palecek & Hampel, 2024; Uscinski, 2018; van Prooijen & van Vugt, 2018). Depending on individuals' perceived control over these threats, responses may range from active engagement to passive resignation.

However, the sociopolitical consequences associated with conspiracy beliefs are not uniform. Conspiracy beliefs, due to their content, tone, scope, and target, may be associated with a range of reactions that can differ from one another in some cases. For example, Oleksy et al. (2021) found that, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, general conspiracy beliefs (focused on malevolent groups) were linked to xenophobic attitudes and support for discriminatory policies, while government-related conspiracy beliefs (focused on malevolent governments) were associated with reduced use of preventive measures such as social

distancing. Likewise, Imhoff and Lamberty (2020) found that conspiracy beliefs describing COVID-19 as a hoax were more strongly associated with reduced adherence to containment measures (e.g., physical distancing), whereas conspiracy beliefs suggesting that sinister forces had intentionally created the virus were linked to an increase in self-centered preparatory behaviors (e.g., hoarding). Additionally, contrary to common expectations, conspiracy beliefs may be associated with positive outcomes in some cases. These beliefs may be linked to positive social change behaviors, such as engaging in protests aimed at driving constructive societal change (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). These beliefs may also be associated with engagement in preventive actions. For instance, Wang and Kim (2021) found that COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs were unexpectedly associated with an increase in preventive behaviors. Thus, the sociopolitical impact of conspiracy beliefs cannot be universally categorized as having a specific directional effect (e.g., negative impacts) without empirical investigation. In *Chapter 3*, I investigate the relationship between media conspiracy beliefs and several constructs in five different convenience national samples: trust in others, skepticism toward authority, perceptions of societal erosion, dislike or prejudice against foreigners, tendencies toward anarchy, inclination toward activism, and pessimistic worldviews.

Chapter 3 offers an exploration of the mental health and sociopolitical consequences that may be associated with media conspiracy beliefs. This analysis aids in understanding the possible impact of these beliefs and helps determine whether this specific type of conspiracy belief may be associated with consequences comparable to those of more prominent conspiracy theories (e.g., COVID-19 conspiracy theories).

Contributing Factors of Media Conspiracy Beliefs (*Chapter 4*)

Considering the potential consequences associated with any conspiracy belief, a critical question always arises with regard to each conspiracy theory: Why do individuals subscribe to that conspiracy theory? *Chapter 4* adopts a broad approach to identify the potential predictors of media conspiracy beliefs across a range of variables, including sociodemographics, personality traits, thinking styles, and media use patterns.

Contribution of sociodemographics to media conspiracy beliefs

Sociodemographics and socioeconomic status have been found to be associated with conspiracy beliefs (Enders et al., 2024; Salvador Casara et al., 2022), with various explanations proposed to account for these associations. Age and gender, with their influence on individuals' life experiences and perceptions, may affect susceptibility to conspiracy beliefs (e.g., see Enders et al., 2024; for a meta-analysis, see Bordeleau &

Stockemer, 2024). Moreover, access to enriched environments and education may play a role in developing coping mechanisms and analytical skills (Brewster et al., 2014), which are vital in relation to conspiracism (Gagliardi, 2023). Furthermore, socioeconomic status may influence cognition and mental health through factors such as nutrition quality and chronic stress, which may affect brain development and functioning (Hackman et al., 2010) and may, in turn, impact susceptibility to conspiracy beliefs. Additionally, traumatic experiences, particularly among lower socioeconomic groups, may exacerbate chronic distress and diminish the ability to manage anxiety (Pyszczynski & Kesebir, 2011), potentially increasing the likelihood of adopting a conspiracy mindset. Therefore, the impacts of demographics and socioeconomic status on individuals, both directly and indirectly, may contribute to the endorsement of conspiracy theories—a relationship that warrants further investigation, particularly in relation to specific types of conspiracy theories, such as media conspiracy beliefs.

Contribution of personality traits to media conspiracy beliefs

Personality traits have been widely studied in relation to conspiracy beliefs (Stasielowicz, 2022). Agreeableness has consistently shown a negative correlation with belief in conspiracy theories, as individuals who exhibit higher disagreeableness, suspicion, and antagonism tend to endorse such beliefs more strongly (Swami et al., 2010). Openness to experience has also been linked to conspiracist thinking, with individuals high in openness being more inclined to entertain unconventional ideas (Swami et al., 2010, 2011, 2013, 2016). Narcissism, characterized by an inflated sense of self-importance, has been associated with conspiracy beliefs, as narcissists may feel they possess unique insights others lack (Cichocka et al., 2016). Similarly, traits like Machiavellianism and psychopathy, marked by cynicism, hypersensitivity to power dynamics, and manipulative behaviors, have been found to positively predict conspiracy beliefs (March & Springer, 2019). The link between self-esteem and conspiracy beliefs remains less clear, with conflicting studies suggesting both negative and positive associations, as conspiracy beliefs may either serve as a coping mechanism for low self-esteem or reflect the rejection of mainstream views by individuals with high self-esteem (Stasielowicz, 2022). Despite extensive research, the relationship between personality traits and conspiracy beliefs still requires further investigation (Goreis & Voracek, 2019), particularly with regard to specific understudied conspiracy theories, such as media conspiracy beliefs.

Contribution of thinking styles to media conspiracy beliefs

Research into cognitive capacities suggests that individuals who endorse conspiracy theories often exhibit biases such as the conjunction fallacy, proportionality bias, and agency detection bias. Brotherton and French (2014) found that conspiracy believers frequently make conjunction errors, while Pytlik et al. (2020) highlighted the influence of the jumping to conclusions bias and intuitive thinking. van der Wal et al. (2018) identified a tendency to forge implausible causal connections as another contributing factor. Conspiracy beliefs have also been found associated with cognitive errors and a propensity for belief systems lacking empirical support, including supernatural, superstitious, and pseudo-scientific viewpoints (Barron et al., 2014; Darwin et al., 2011; Georgiou et al., 2019). Additionally, cognitive-perceptual factors such as schizotypy and delusional ideation have been found to contribute to these beliefs (Dagnall et al., 2015; Georgiou et al., 2021). Narmashiri et al. (2023) found a correlation between conspiracy beliefs and decreased beta frequency power, which impacts cognitive control. Swami et al. (2014) suggested that analytic thinking reduces susceptibility to conspiracy beliefs by enhancing cognitive bias recognition and critical thinking. Recent meta-analyses have reported small-to-medium contributions of cognitive styles and abilities (e.g., automatic thinking style, poor reasoning ability) to conspiracy beliefs, suggesting that thinking styles should be considered and further investigated in studies on conspiracy beliefs (e.g., Biddlestone et al., 2024; Bowes et al., 2023; Stasielowicz, 2022).

Therefore, understanding cognitive capacities and thinking styles is important for elucidating how conspiracy beliefs are accepted. It is important to explore whether similar thinking patterns are evident across different conspiracy theories, as each may have its own specific characteristics and logic. For instance, many COVID-19 conspiracy theories revolve around tangible threats, such as population control or selective depopulation through immediate harm. In contrast, media conspiracy theories seem to be more symbolic and indirect, often positing that the media serve as a tool for psychological manipulation rather than causing immediate physical harm, with potential consequences unfolding over time rather than in the present (e.g., influencing thoughts and programming people for the future purposes). These slight differences may influence the potential correlates of conspiracy beliefs, such as associated thinking styles. For example, in the second study of Abadi et al.'s (2024) research, realistic threat appraisal (e.g., threat to health) was more strongly associated with conspiracy mentality compared to symbolic threat appraisal (e.g., threat to culture). Examining the link between thinking styles and media conspiracy beliefs may offer valuable insights.

Contribution of media use pattern to media conspiracy beliefs

The relationship between media use and conspiracy beliefs has garnered attention in recent years. Research has suggested that individuals who consume less credible media sources, such as blogs and tabloids, are more inclined to endorse conspiracy theories, whereas those who rely on reputable media outlets tend to exhibit lower levels of such beliefs (Stempel et al., 2007). Stecula and Pickup (2021) found that relying on platforms like Facebook and YouTube for news was associated with higher levels of conspiracy belief, particularly among individuals with low cognitive reflection. In a three-wave panel survey study (2017–2019), Valenzuela et al. (2023) reported a reciprocal, lagged relationship between the frequency of social media usage and conspiracy thinking. While users who in general use social media more often were not more conspiracist in their thinking when compared to users who use social media less often (between-person results), those who increased their social media use from one wave to another reported more conspiracy thinking, and vice versa (within-person results). Likewise, Enders et al. (2023a) found that individuals who frequently use social media for news report stronger conspiracist beliefs; however, this association was intensified for those predisposed to conspiracy thinking.

Explaining the relationship between media use and conspiracy beliefs, media exposure may introduce individuals to conspiracy theories, conditioning them to be more receptive to such beliefs. Additionally, media platforms may foster the creation of echo chambers and feedback loops, potentially amplifying these beliefs (see Cinelli et al., 2022). Investigating how specific types of media engagement contribute to the endorsement of particular conspiracy beliefs, especially those intrinsically embedded within media content (i.e., media conspiracy beliefs), can be an informative area of study. Exploring the relationships between quality and quantity of social media use may be particularly worthwhile because of the potential for interventions, as I explain below.

In *Chapter 4* of this thesis, I investigate the contributions of sociodemographic variables (i.e., age, gender, education, subjective social status), personality variables (i.e., Big Five traits and Dark Triad traits), cognitive variables (i.e., thinking styles), and media use patterns (i.e., traditional and new media consumption, mindful social media use) as predictors of media conspiracy beliefs. Understanding the underlying reasons why individuals may draw to media conspiracy beliefs can illuminate the processes of belief absorption and inform strategies for addressing them.

Considering the emerging literature suggesting the importance of the quality of social media use (e.g., mindful awareness during social media use) versus the quantity of social media use (e.g., time spent on social

media) in many cases (see Shabahang et al., 2024), and my findings in *Chapter 4*, the final study (*Chapter 5*) investigates the contribution of higher-quality engagement with social media to conspiracism via an intervention.

An Educational Intervention to Support Mental Well-being during Engagement with Social Media (*Chapter 5*)

How conspiracy beliefs should be tackled and what types of interventions should be provided remains a critical area within the psychology of conspiracy beliefs, one that still requires significant progress (see O'Mahony et al., 2023; Stasielowicz, 2024). As a final objective of this thesis, I propose a novel intervention aimed at addressing media conspiracy beliefs. To date, various interventions have been employed to combat conspiracy beliefs and mindset. These include strategies such as enhancing critical thinking, using rational and empathetic counterarguments, ridiculing beliefs, applying fact- and logic-based inoculation and meta-inoculation, analytical priming, promoting scientific reasoning, encouraging regulatory focus and personal control, priming resistance to persuasion, utilizing both anti- and pro-conspiracy arguments, and labeling conspiracies (for review, see O'Mahony et al., 2023).

Despite the success of some interventions designed to address conspiracy beliefs, others have proven ineffective or only partially effective in certain studies. Moreover, some potential challenges exist regarding the narrow applicability and negative content and tone of some interventions. Some studies have indicated non-significant effects of their developed intervention on conspiracy beliefs and thinking. For example, in Orosz et al.'s study (2016), the empathetic counterarguments had no significant effect on conspiracy beliefs. Additionally, some interventions, such as ridiculing or devaluing beliefs (e.g., see Orosz et al., 2016), directly target individuals' perspectives with negative tone, making them challenging to administer in many cases. Some interventions are also limited by their focus on specific content, such as targeted arguments against particular conspiracy narratives (e.g., arguments against vaccination conspiracy beliefs; see Jolley & Douglas, 2017), limiting their applicability to other types of conspiracy beliefs. Therefore, despite significant progress in developing interventions for conspiracy beliefs, there is still a need for additional approaches to address these beliefs (Stasielowicz, 2024).

Drawing from the proposed association between social media usage patterns (see *Chapter 4*) and the development of conspiracy beliefs (Cinelli et al., 2022; Enders et al., 2023; Stecula & Pickup, 2021; Valenzuela et al., 2023), an intervention centered on fostering a more positive and mindful engagement with social media

may present a promising new direction. This approach may provide a novel, indirect solution for addressing conspiracy beliefs, including media conspiracy beliefs, without directly confronting or engaging with them.

Indeed, mindfulness in many activities has the potential to strengthen individuals' intellectual and social resources, enhancing their overall functioning and resilience (see Fredrickson, 2001; Schuman-Olivier et al., 2020). Mindful awareness can foster positive change through internal attunement (Siegel, 2009). By regulating how users engage with activities and process information, mindful awareness may promote a balanced flow of information processing in the mind, potentially enabling active evaluation and reducing overreliance on pre-existing personal schemas and assumptions. These aspects have been reported as related to conspiracy beliefs (e.g., see Biddlestone et al., 2024). Instead of habitually absorbing information without reflection (see Langer, 1992), mindful awareness may enhance users' ability to observe and evaluate incoming content. Given the potential empowering effects of mindful awareness, investigating the impact of promoting mindful social media use on media conspiracy beliefs and general conspiracism can represent a valuable area of research. Such an inquiry has the potential to offer novel insights and practical solutions to address conspiracy beliefs, including media conspiracy beliefs. I examine the efficacy of this intervention in *Chapter 5*, building on the premise that mindful awareness during social media use has the potential to empower individuals.

Empirical Approach

A final aspect of my approach is that I collect and report data from five distinct societies (the Philippines, Australia, Iran, the United States, Hungary). Given the need to broaden the study of conspiracy theories across diverse societies (see Stojanov & Douglas, 2022), particularly beyond Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) contexts, and in societies where limited information exists regarding conspiracy beliefs (e.g., Iran), data are collected from participants across five distinct societies, including non-WEIRD societies. This is also being done in recognition that using data from different societies can provide preliminary insights into the generalizability of findings (e.g., similar patterns of association). The samples are from: *The Philippines* (a blended Western-Eastern culture with a homogeneous society in South Asia), *Australia* (a Western, individualistic, multicultural society in Oceania), *Iran* (an Eastern, collectivistic culture with a homogeneous society in the Middle East), *the United States* (a Western, individualistic, multicultural society in North America), and *Hungary* (a Western, individualistic culture with a homogeneous society in Central Europe). These countries, spanning Oceania, the Middle East, North America, South Asia, and Central Europe,

represent a diverse range of cultural and societal contexts. They also represent diverse levels of cultural orientation (Western, Eastern, or blended), development status (stable/developed, stable/developing, unstable/developing), and societal homogeneity/diversity (e.g., see Pae, 2020).

This cross-national approach can offer broader understanding of the relationship between media conspiracy beliefs and their potential predictors and consequences. However, it's important to clarify that in this thesis, I do not engage in cross-sample inferential comparisons nor cross-cultural interpretation (e.g., relating to different cultural dimensions that could explain differences). I collect data from multiple societies, including non-WEIRD populations (i.e., Iran, the Philippines, Hungary), with the aim to move beyond the bias of studying conspiracy beliefs exclusively within WEIRD countries.

The thesis has three empirical phases. The first phase consists of administering a comprehensive survey, which includes the developed measure of belief in media conspiracy theories, along with measures of sociodemographics (i.e., measures of age, gender, education, and subjective socioeconomic status), conspiracism (i.e., Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire, Single-Item Conspiracy Belief Scale, and Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale–5), personality traits (i.e., Ten-Item Personality Inventory, Dark Triad Dirty Dozen, and Single-Item Self-Esteem Scale), thinking styles (i.e., Rational Experiential Multimodal Inventory-13), media use (i.e., measure of time spent on traditional media, measure of time spent on new media, and Mindful Use of Social Media Scale), mental health (i.e., Peace of Mind Scale, Single-Item Life Satisfaction Scale, and Dark Future Scale), and sociopolitical attitudes (i.e., Interpersonal Trust Short Scale, Institutional Trust Measure, Perception of Anomie Scale, Xenophobia Scale, Anarchy and Activism Inclination Measures, Worldviews Measures, one item from the Dangerous Worldview Scale, and one item from the Competitive Worldview Scale). This survey was administered to samples from Australia, Iran, and the Philippines. The resulting data are reported in *Chapters 2*, *Chapter 3*, and *Chapter 4*.

To provide broader findings, samples from the United States and Hungary are also included in the thesis (second empirical phase). However, due to limited funding, the survey for these two samples was shortened. This version consists of the validated measure of belief in media conspiracy theories (the final scale validated in the first empirical phase) and measures of sociodemographics (i.e., measures of age, gender, education, subjective socioeconomic status), mental health (i.e., Peace of Mind Scale, Single-Item Life Satisfaction Scale, Dark Future Scale), and sociopolitical attitudes (i.e., Interpersonal Trust Short Scale, Institutional Trust Measure, Perception of Anomie Scale, Xenophobia Scale, Anarchy and Activism

Inclination Measures, Worldviews Measures, one item from the Dangerous Worldview Scale, and one item from the Competitive Worldview Scale). Consequently, the data from the United States and Hungary are reported only in *Chapter 3*.

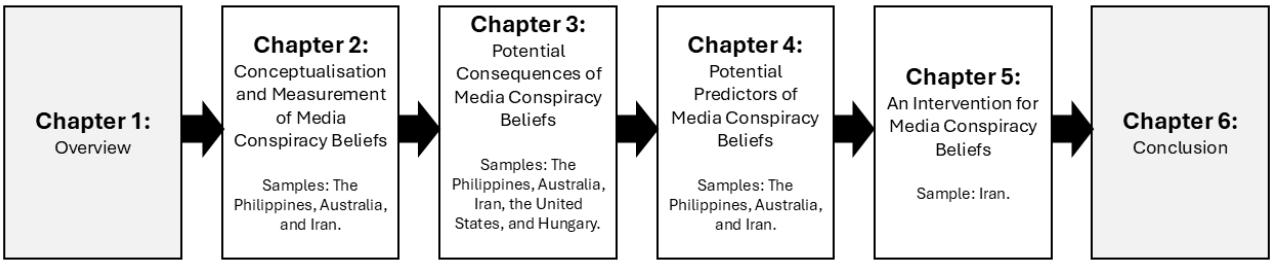
In the final empirical phase (third empirical phase), a small sample of Iranian social media users is used for the interventional study. The survey consists of the validated measure of belief in media conspiracy theories (the final scale validated in the first empirical phase) and the Single-Item Conspiracy Belief Scale. The resulting data are used in *Chapter 5*.

Overview of the Thesis

In this thesis, I aim to (a) conceptualise and measure belief in media conspiracy theories (*Chapter 2*), (b) explore their potential association with mental health and sociopolitical consequences (*Chapter 3*), (c) investigate the potential contribution of sociodemographic factors, personality traits, thinking styles, and media use patterns to these beliefs (*Chapter 4*), and (*d*) develop and evaluate the effectiveness of an online educational intervention on mindful social media use to reduce media conspiracy beliefs (*Chapter 5*). I address these questions through the framework of Psychology of Conspiracy (e.g., see Douglas et al., 2017), and, where applicable, through the lens of Media Psychology (e.g., *Chapter 5*).

Figure 2 provides an overview of the various Chapters of my thesis. It can be seen that I address consequences (*Chapter 3*) before the contributing factors (*Chapter 4*). This approach is informed by the psychological literature on conspiracy beliefs, which often prioritizes the study of outcomes associated with conspiracy beliefs as an initial step (e.g., see Jolley et al., 2022). This focus can offer insight into the intensity and significance of a particular set of conspiracy beliefs. For example, a set of conspiracy beliefs with no significant associated outcomes may suggest less need for further exploration of its contributing factors. Additionally, examining potential associated outcomes first may help shape the interpretation of the results related to the contributing factors of those beliefs. For instance, unexpected positive outcomes may influence how the predictors of those conspiracy beliefs need to be explained.

Figure 2. Thesis's Chapters



More specifically, *Chapter 2* focuses on the conceptualisation and measurement of media conspiracy beliefs. It begins by reviewing the literature on conspiracism, encompassing its concept, domain, and correlates. The Chapter also addresses the non-falsifiability of conspiracy theories and discusses two similar constructs: scepticism and cynicism. Additionally, the existing literature on media conspiracy beliefs is explored. Building on these foundations and drawing on the four defining characteristics of conspiracy theories identified by Nera and Schöpfer (2023)—collective nature, intentionality, secrecy, and malevolence—and the four key attributes (i.e., universal, social, emotional, and consequential) articulated by van Prooijen and Douglas (2018), the concept of media conspiracy belief is developed. Conceptual distinctions are made between conspiracy beliefs (imagination-based negative judgments, such as an extreme distrust of social media as a tool for mind control), cynicism (reality-based negative judgments, such as viewing social media primarily as a vehicle for corporate profit), and skepticism (critical questioning, such as inquiring why certain content is algorithmically prioritized on one's social media feed). Following this theoretical framework, a brief and easy-to-use scale is developed to measure media conspiracy beliefs. Using data from three samples (i.e., The Philippines, Australia, and Iran), the main psychometric properties of the scale are assessed, including construct validity, internal consistency, and convergent validity. Convergent validity is examined through correlations with the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (Bruder et al., 2013), the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale–5 (Kay & Slovic, 2023), and the Single-Item Conspiracy Belief Scale (Lantian et al., 2016).

Chapter 3 examines the potential consequences associated with media conspiracy beliefs, focusing on the expected mental health and sociopolitical outcomes associated with these beliefs. Existing research suggest that conspiracy beliefs may amplify negative emotions and create social, political, and cultural disruptions at personal, interpersonal, and societal levels (Douglas et al., 2015; Liekefett et al., 2023; Jolley et al., 2022; Thomas et al., 2024). While conspiracy beliefs are often regarded as detrimental to mental health and sociopolitical stability (Freeman & Bentall, 2017; Jolley et al., 2022; van Mulukom et al., 2022; Swami et al., 2016), some studies report weak or negligible associations between conspiracy beliefs and life satisfaction or

quality of life (Leibovitz et al., 2021; Pekárová, 2021), alongside varied or even positive behavioural responses (Oleksy et al., 2021; Wang & Kim, 2021). Given the different consequences that various conspiracy theories may have (see Enders et al., 2021), examining the consequences of each particular conspiracy belief is essential for drawing reliable conclusions. Utilizing self-report assessment tools and data from five samples (The Philippines, Australia, Iran, the United States, and Hungary), *Chapter 3* investigates the relationships between media conspiracy beliefs and various indicators of mental health (i.e., peace of mind, future anxiety, and life satisfaction) and sociopolitical attitudes (i.e., interpersonal trust, institutional trust, perceived anomie, xenophobia, anarchist tendencies, activist inclinations, and worldviews).

In *Chapter 4*, the focus shifts to the potential predictors of media conspiracy beliefs. Demographics and life experiences may play a role in shaping individuals' perceptions of risk and threat (see Öhman, 2017; Savage, 1993). Prior research has highlighted the relationship between sociodemographics and conspiracy beliefs, but the findings have been inconsistent. For instance, some studies report no gender effect (Farhart et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2016), while others suggest either a higher conspiracy belief in males (Freeman & Bentall, 2017) or elevated belief among females (Federico et al., 2018). Moreover, personality traits have also been extensively studied in relation to conspiracy beliefs, yet the exact nature of these associations remains unclear due to conflicting results in the literature (see Goreis & Voracek, 2019). Additionally, cognitive capacity, particularly how individuals process and interpret information, is another dimension have explored in relation to conspiracy beliefs (see Brotherton & French, 2014; Dagnall et al., 2015; Gagliardi, 2023; van der Wal et al., 2018), although the evidence in this area is still emerging. The relationship between media use and conspiracy beliefs has also recently garnered attention. Existing research has discussed the influence of media use on conspiracy beliefs (Ender et al., 2023; Stecula & Pickup, 2021; Valenzuela et al., 2023), but findings on this association remain limited. Studies have primarily focused on the time spent on media (screen-time; how much media is used), while aspects such as the quality of media use (e.g., mindful awareness during social media use; how media is used) have not been considered. Utilizing self-report assessment tools and data from three samples (The Philippines, Australia, and Iran), the Chapter investigates the relationships between sociodemographics (i.e., age, gender, education, and subjective social status), personality traits (i.e., neuroticism, extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, openness to experience, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, narcissism, and self-esteem), thinking styles (i.e., rationality, experientiality-imagination,

experientiality-intuition, and experientiality-emotionality), and media use (i.e., time spent on traditional media, time spent on new media, and mindful use of social media) with media conspiracy beliefs.

In *Chapter 5*, building on existing studies that have identified an association between media use, particularly social media, and conspiracy beliefs (Stecula & Pickup, 2021; Valenzuela et al., 2023), I investigate the effectiveness of an educational intervention designed to promote mindful engagement with social media as a means of reducing media conspiracy beliefs (as a pilot study). Mindful use of social media, a positive usage pattern that has gained increasing attention, is argued to have the potential to reduce vulnerabilities to the negative consequences of social media (Shabahang et al., 2024b). Mindfulness awareness in any activity may facilitate positive change through internal attunement (Siegel, 2009). By regulating how individuals engage with activities and process information, mindful awareness may create a balanced flow of information processing, potentially enabling active evaluation and reducing overreliance on pre-existing personal schemas and assumptions (Langer, 1992). My final empirical Chapter develops and pilot-tests an educational program aimed at promoting mindful social media use, examining the potential effectiveness of this intervention on media conspiracy beliefs and general conspiracism with a small sample of Iranian social media users.

My thesis offers novel insights and sketches several potential avenues for future research. It investigates a type of conspiracy theory—media conspiracy beliefs— that, despite its presence among people (Uscinski et al., 2022b), have not been thoroughly explored. Understanding and exploring this type of conspiracy belief is important, given the variations that may exist in the distribution, content, tone, strength of association with the conspiracy mindset, and correlates of different types of conspiracy beliefs (Enders et al., 2021; Hartman et al., 2021; Jolley et al., 2024; Oleksy et al., 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2024; Wang & Kim, 2021). The concept of media conspiracy beliefs can offer insights into how individuals (and society as a whole) perceive themselves as threatened by the media, providing a new frame for understanding the dynamics between users, the media, and society. The newly developed scale measuring media conspiracy beliefs can facilitate the investigation of this understudied type of conspiracy beliefs and help assess the gap that may exist between individuals and the media (perceiving media as a threat).

Furthermore, my thesis provides evidence on the potential mental health and sociopolitical implications of media conspiracy beliefs and explores how specific sociodemographic, psychological, and media use profiles may contribute to the acceptance of these beliefs. Media conspiracy beliefs may offer an

additional perspective on why individuals may develop maladaptive sociopolitical attitudes and reactions in today's world, characterized by excessive media reliance. Finally, the thesis evaluates the effectiveness of a novel interventional approach that promotes mindful social media use as a potential strategy for addressing conspiracy beliefs.

Overall, this thesis aims to present preliminary findings and insights into the understudied phenomenon of media conspiracy beliefs. It seeks to offer an initial exploration of their associated consequences, the factors that may increase susceptibility to such beliefs, and a strategy for addressing them. I conclude that, while the media are often studied as well as discussed as vehicles for dissemination and engagement with other conspiracy beliefs, the media themselves (e.g., social media, media figures) can also themselves be targets of rich conspiratorial thinking and theorising—a domain that warrants scholarly attention.

CHAPTER 2

Look Behind the Screen! Conceptualisation and Measurement of Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories

Authorship statement: I am the primary author of this chapter and the corresponding manuscript. I conceptualised and designed the study, with guidance and advice from my principal supervisor (Emma Thoams). I collected data in Iran and Australia and coordinated data collection in the Philippines (Marc Eric Santos Reyes, Ágnes Zsila, and Ho Phi Huynh). I conducted the data analyses with assistance from the co-authors. I drafted the entire chapter and manuscript and incorporated revisions and editorial suggestions provided by my supervisor and co-authors. Percentage of contributions: Reza Shabahang: 80%; Emma Thomas: 8%; Marc Eric Santos Reyes: 4%; Ágnes Zsila: 4%.; Ho Phi Huynh: 4%.

Abstract

Conspiracy beliefs appear to be flourishing and so is the literature on them. One relatively underexplored category involves media conspiracy beliefs. *Chapter 2* offers conceptualisation and measurement of this understudied set of conspiracy beliefs. I review the psychological literature on conspiracy theories and beliefs—including definitions, characteristics, targeted topics, and measurement instruments—and incorporating insights from two related constructs, scepticism and cynicism, along with the limited existing studies on conspiracy perspective toward media conspiracy beliefs to define media conspiracy beliefs. Media conspiracy beliefs are defined as the beliefs that powerful groups manipulate and control media platforms, content, and personalities to further their malevolent agendas, which are believed to be extreme (e.g., programming people) and harmful to the public. Surveying convenience samples of media users from Australia (n = 246; M_{age} = 36.35, SD_{age} = 7.792), Iran (n = 237; M_{age} = 31.68, SD_{age} = 9.637), and the Philippines (n = 729; M_{age} = 23.04, SD_{age} = 6.885), the 7-item Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories Scale (BMCTS) demonstrated a unidimensional structure with good psychometric properties across the samples. Scores on the BMCTS showed moderate-to-strong correlations with the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (CMQ), the Single-Item Conspiracy Belief Scale (SCBS), and Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale–5 (GCBS-5), supporting

the convergent validity of BMCTS as well as the partial overlap of media conspiracy beliefs and generic conspiracy mentality. The construct of media conspiracy beliefs offers a novel framework for understanding the quality of the user-media relationship and may signify the conflict between certain individuals and the media. This construct can contribute to the literature on conspiracism and specific conspiracy beliefs, the measurement of conspiracy beliefs, and the relationship between media and conspiratorial thinking.

Keywords: Conspiracy, conspiracy belief, conspiracy theories, media, conceptualisation, measurement, Australia, Iran, the Philippines

Introduction

Conspiracist thinking seems pervasive in the contemporary world (Kużelewska & Tomaszuk, 2022; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). Conspiracy theories may serve as an evolutionary response, potentially activated by heightened threat detection in the face of challenging or uncertain circumstances (Palecek & Hampel, 2024; van Prooijen & van Vugt, 2018). These theories may exist across all sociopolitical perspectives, offering alternative interpretations (Bergmann, 2018). They add a second layer of information to events, discussing an invisible plot (Meuer et al., 2023). As explained by van Prooijen and Douglas (2018), conspiracy theories may have consequences, impacting people's health, relationships, and safety (i.e., they are consequential). They may be pervasive, manifesting across various times, cultures, and social settings (i.e., they are universal). These theories may be emotionally charged, often arising from and fueling negative, irrational emotions (i.e., they are emotional). Additionally, they may have a social dimension, closely tied to the psychological motivations that underlie intergroup conflict (i.e., they are social; see van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018). Indeed, in comparison to non-conspiracist information, conspiracy theories may contain less evidence-based information, more emotional content, and a higher proportion of threat-related information (Meuer et al., 2023). These theories can target a wide array of subjects, with the media—including platforms, figures, and products—serving as a target for such claims (e.g., conspiracy theories about celebrities' deaths and subliminal advertisements; Ballinger, 2014; Furnham, 2013). Media conspiracy beliefs, though present and held by some individuals (Ballinger, 2014; Furnham, 2013; Uscinski et al., 2022b), remains underexplored and warrants scholarly attention.

In *Chapter 2*, I seek to conceptualise and measure media conspiracy beliefs in response to four relevant needs. First, conspiracy theories about the media are commonly discussed in everyday conversations, political

speeches, social media, and news outlets. For example, there are numerous discussions in social media forums (e.g., "What celebrity conspiracy theory do you absolutely, 100%, believe is true?"; Millypilly83, 2019) and articles on websites such as Infowars (e.g., "Just like the Simpsons predicted, deep state mainstream media propaganda says next pandemic will spread through house cats"; Infowars, 2024) covering conspiracy theories about media companies, products, and personalities, claiming that the media is conspiratorial and serves malicious purposes. Not only do media conspiracy theories seem to exist and attract followers, but beliefs in these theories also appear to be increasing. In a recent longitudinal study of conspiracy beliefs on various topics from 2012 to 2021 (Uscinski et al., 2022b), two conspiracy beliefs about the media (e.g., *"Billionaire George Soros is behind a hidden plot to destabilize the American government, take control of the media, and put the world under his control,"*) were among those that showed an increase. Thus, it is both rational and timely to investigate media conspiracy beliefs.

Second, correlates of different conspiracy beliefs cannot simply be regarded as the same. Findings and conclusions from studies on conspiracy mentality and general or specific conspiracy beliefs cannot be generalized to other specific conspiracy beliefs without empirical evidence. Conspiracy beliefs may function differently across populations (e.g., unexpected positive associations of COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs with preventive behaviors in a population), have different contributing factors (e.g., distinct contributing factors with varying intensities of association for different conspiracy beliefs about the origin of COVID-19), be associated with different consequences (e.g., different associated outcomes of general COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs and government-related COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs), and be linked to general conspiracism and conspiracy mentality with varying intensity (see Enders et al., 2021; Hartman et al., 2021; Jolley et al., 2024; Imhoff et al., 2022; Nera, 2024; Oleksy et al., 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2024; Sutton et al., 2024; Wang & Kim, 2021). Therefore, a focused exploration of each distinct conspiracy belief is necessary to generate precise findings and interpretations.

Third, to date, no comprehensive study has been conducted to explore media conspiracy beliefs or to develop a specific measure for assessing openness to these beliefs. Although there have been some studies related to media conspiracy theories, they have been limited in scope—qualitative (Ballinger, 2014), concentrated on a very specific domain such as advertising (Furnham, 2013), or examined within the broader context of conspiracy thinking (Bruder & Manstead, 2009; see Darwin et al., 2011). There has been no focused effort to conceptualise and measure media conspiracy beliefs in a comprehensive manner. This gap prevents a

deeper understanding of why certain individuals subscribe to these beliefs and the potential consequences associated with them. Therefore, a focused investigation is required to address these questions and advance our understanding of media conspiracy beliefs.

Fourth, conspiracy beliefs may have consequences for both the believers and society. They may be associated with a greater likelihood of psychological challenges for individual people, including meeting criteria for psychiatric disorders (Freeman & Bentall, 2017). These beliefs may also be linked to pessimistic views of others and societal systems, prejudices, non-normative behaviors such as tax refusal, a higher risk of violence, justification of violent actions, and support for extremist views (Douglas et al., 2015; Jolley et al., 2022; Thomas et al., 2024). Given their potential wide-ranging implications, it is crucial to understand and investigate the potential consequences of various conspiracy beliefs, especially the specific and understudied ones. Such an investigation necessitates conceptualisation and measurement as foundational steps, facilitating the development of evidence-based insights into the outcomes these beliefs may be associated with. Therefore, the conceptualisation and measurement of conspiracy beliefs targeting the media are necessary for comprehensively understanding their nature and the potential impacts they may be associated with. Taken together, *Chapter 2*, through the conceptualisation and development of an assessment tool, sought to facilitate the investigation of the understudied domain of media conspiracy beliefs and paves the way for understanding their possible contributing factors and consequences, as well as exploring potential interventions to address these beliefs.

To effectively conceptualise media conspiracy beliefs, it is essential to consider several key aspects: the defining characteristics of conspiracy beliefs, the nature of conspiracy theories, constructs similar to conspiracy beliefs and their distinctions, existing assessment tools developed to measure these beliefs, the range of topics addressed in conspiracy belief research, and the studies specifically focused on media conspiracy beliefs. In this context, I now review and discuss each of these aspects, integrating them into the conceptualisation process and subsequently informing the development of a scale for measuring media conspiracy beliefs.

Key Characteristics of Conspiracy Theories

Paying attention to the potential key characteristics of conspiracy theories is an important aspect of understanding them. Conspiracy theories typically involve collective actions, focusing on groups rather than individuals, and may result in collective outcomes (Douglas et al., 2019; Nera & Schöpfer, 2023). Even when

a conspiracy belief targets a specific event or individual, such as the belief that Elvis is alive, the underlying idea often involves the notion of groups orchestrating the event (e.g., faking his own death to go undercover due to associations with the Mob and his role as an FBI informant; see Ballinger, 2014). Additionally, they imply deliberate intentionality, secretive operations by the alleged conspirators, and often attribute malevolent intentions to them (Douglas et al., 2019; Nera & Schöpfer, 2023). Other characteristics frequently discussed in relation to conspiracy theories include their consequential nature, universality, emotionality, and social dimension (Nera & Schöpfer, 2023; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018). Conspiracy theories may have consequences. They may be pervasive, manifesting across various times, cultures, and social settings. These theories may be emotionally charged, often arising from and fueling negative, irrational emotions. Additionally, they may have a social dimension, closely tied to the psychological motivations that underlie intergroup conflict (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018). Considering these characteristics is essential in the conceptualisation and development of measurement tools for conspiracy beliefs.

Figure 3. Characteristics of Conspiracy Theories (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018)

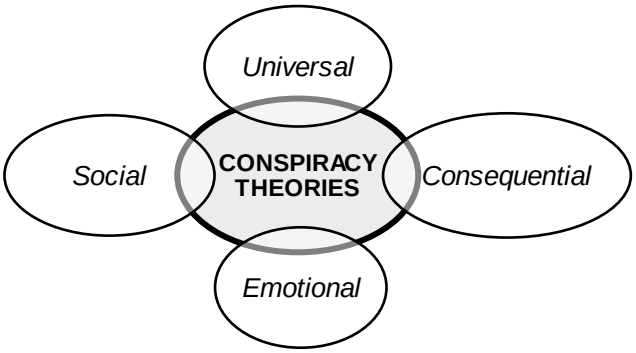
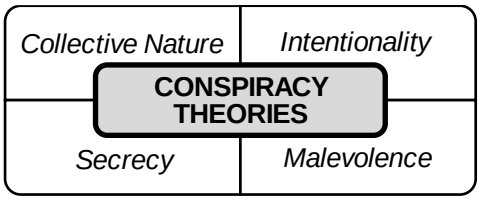


Figure 4. Characteristics of Conspiracy Theories (Nera & Schöpfer, 2023)



Non-Falsifiable Nature of Conspiracy Theories

The non-falsifiable nature of conspiracy theories is an important aspect that needs to be considered when studying conspiracy theories and belief in them. Conspiracy theories often cannot be easily tested or disproven due to their vagueness or lack of clear connections to verifiable evidence (Keeley, 1999; Uscinski, 2018; Uscinski & Parent, 2014). The veracity of conspiracy theories is a central aspect of the discussion, along with

their definitions and characteristics. The boundary between conspiracy theories and truth is often ambiguous, fueling ongoing debates among believers and non-believers regarding the veracity of such theories, as well as among some scholars concerning whether the truthfulness of conspiracy theories should be considered when studying belief in them (see Uscinski & Enders, 2023). While many conspiracy theories are false, others are "could-be-true" or even "are-true" (Uscinski, 2018).

In line with this perspective, research mainly emphasizes the importance of investigating these theories rather than focusing exclusively on their truthfulness (Uscinski & Enders, 2023). Whether a conspiracy theory is evidence-based, fictional, or falls somewhere in between, this is important to study such beliefs scientifically, examining their underlying factors and potential impacts to develop an informed response. This approach ensures that we do not dismiss potentially valid concerns outright while also maintaining a sceptical stance towards claims lacking credible evidence (see Keeley, 1999; Pelkmans & Machold, 2011; Uscinski, 2018).

Therefore, beyond the debate over whether a conspiracy theory belongs in the realm of fact or fiction, one of the important aspects is understanding the possible reasons for its formation and acceptance, as well as its probable impacts. Considering the non-falsifiable nature of conspiracy theories can be helpful in the conceptualisation and development of a measure for conspiracy beliefs. This approach helps maintain the conceptual and measurement framework focused on the intensity of conspiracy beliefs, rather than on their validity and the assessment of them based on validation. What matters is that some people believe them to be true and it is the variation in the endorsement of those beliefs that is of interest here.

Scepticism, Cynicism, and Conspiracy Theories: From Questioning to Answers

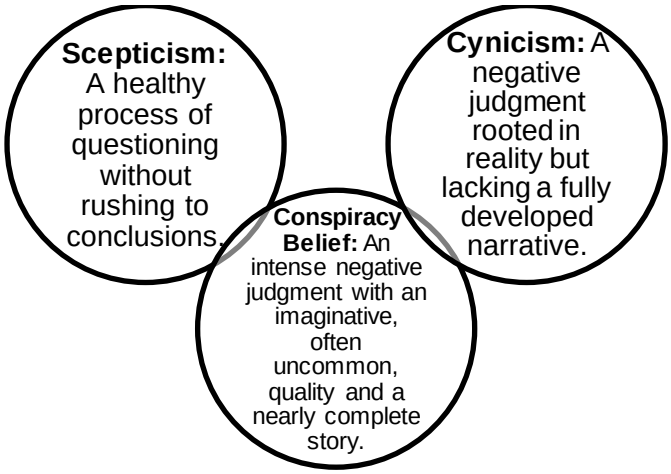
To deconstruct conspiracy beliefs more effectively and improve the conceptualisation and measurement of these beliefs, it is essential to consider constructs that are similar to conspiracy beliefs. Specifically, scepticism and cynicism are two constructs that bear resemblance to conspiracy beliefs and warrant careful attention. Extant studies have discussed the link between scepticism, cynicism, and conspiracy beliefs (e.g., Bensley et al., 2022; Papaioannou et al., 2022).

Scepticism and cynicism are aspects of trust evaluation (see Cappella and Jamieson, 1996; Pinkleton et al., 2012; Quiring et al., 2021; Yamamoto & Kushin, 2014). *Scepticism* refers to the critical evaluation of information and the need for further confirmation, whereas *cynicism* involves mistrust and a belief in corruption and inefficiency (see also Table 1). Indeed, scepticism is more about doubt, while cynicism is more about negative judgment (see Pinkleton & Austin, 2004). Scepticism is based on observable signs (e.g., error,

dysfunction, malperformance) while cynicism is based on allegations (see Quiring et al., 2021). Akin to conspiracy theories, cynicism and scepticism are shaped in response to perceived threats and loss of control; however, there are distinctions that warrant attention. While scepticism is about asking questions about the perceived threat, cynicism and conspiracy theories already have the answers, but these answers are specific. Scepticism and cynicism do not paint a complete picture as conspiracy theories do. They lack the definitive narrative behind the perceived threat. Conspiracy theories, on the other hand, offer a clear villain and a motive, weaving a complete narrative. Conspiracy theories often take on a more imaginative quality compared to cynicism. These theories are somehow ingenious fabrications of the human mind (Bonetto & Arciszewski, 2021). Thus, conspiracy theory (an intense negative judgment with an imaginative [uncommon] quality and a nearly complete story) needs to be distinguished from scepticism (a healthy questioning process) and cynicism (a negative judgment within the domain of reality, but lacking a complete story; see Bensley et al., 2022; Cappella and Jamieson, 1996; Papaioannou et al., 2022; Pinkleton et al., 2012; Quiring et al., 2021; Yamamoto & Kushin, 2014).

Based on these explanations, it can be asserted that while media scepticism is about a healthy process of questioning the media without jumping to conclusions, and media cynicism is about a negative judgment of the media rooted in observable reality but lacking a fully developed narrative, media conspiracy belief can be about an intense negative judgment of the media with an imaginative, often uncommon quality and a nearly complete story. Paying attention to such distinctions can be helpful for more accurately conceptualising and measuring conspiracy beliefs.

Figure 5. Scepticism, Cynicism, and Conspiracy Belief



Themes and Measures of Conspiracy Beliefs

Reviewing the topics of conspiracy beliefs that have been studied thus far and the measures developed for these beliefs can provide valuable insights. This review can help to understand how conspiracy beliefs about various topics have been conceptualised and how they have been operationalized in measurement scales. To date, a vast array of conspiracy beliefs has been explored across multiple topics, such as conspiracy beliefs about natural disasters (Stammler and Ivanova, 2020), climate change (van der Linden, 2015), infectious diseases (e.g., population control through the Zika virus; Mitchell, 2019), vaccinations (Jolley and Douglas, 2017), global affairs (e.g., Putin's Russia and the new world order; Yablokov, 2020), ethnicities and races (e.g., about Jewish people; Swami, 2012), religions (e.g., about Islam; Swami et al., 2018), terrorist attacks (e.g., 9/11 and 7/7; Brotherton et al., 2013; Swami et al., 2010; Swami et al., 2011), terrorist leaders and organizations (e.g., Osama bin Laden; Wood et al., 2012), technological advancements (e.g., contribution of 5G mobile telephony to the formation of COVID-19; Bruns et al., 2020), extraterrestrial visitations (Brotherton et al., 2013), and even areas such as sporting events (e.g., about video assistant referee; Bertin et al., 2022).

To date, several assessment tools have been developed to capture conspiracy thinking and beliefs, which have significantly advanced the field of conspiracy psychology. These tools can be categorized into those measuring conspiracy thinking or general conspiracy beliefs and those focused on specific conspiracy theories. General assessments include scales such as the Generic Conspiracist Belief Scale (GCBS; Brotherton et al., 2013), Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (CMQ; Bruder et al., 2013), Generalized Conspiracy Belief Scale (GCB; Rose, 2017), Conspiracy Theory Questionnaire (CTQ; Darwin et al., 2011), Single-Item Conspiracy Belief Scale (SCBS; Lantian et al., 2016), and the General Measure of Conspiracism (GMC; Drinkwater et al., 2012). Specific assessments include scales such as the Belief in Conspiracy Theories Inventory (BCTI; Swami et al., 2010), Conspiracy Theory Belief Scale (CTBS; Douglas & Sutton, 2011), Specific Conspiracy Belief Scale (SCBS; Rose, 2017), Flexible Inventory of Conspiracy Suspicions (FICS; Wood, 2017), Endorsement of Specific Conspiracy Theories (ESCT; Irwin et al., 2015), and the Belief in Commercial Conspiracy Theories Inventory (Furnham, 2013).

These studies and measures have contributed significantly to the understanding of the psychology behind conspiracist thinking and conspiracy beliefs, as well as their operationalization (for review, see Goreis & Voracek, 2019). However, despite the extensive body of research on various conspiracy beliefs, a gap remains: conspiracy beliefs specifically targeting the media. Surprisingly, there is not a comprehensive study dedicated to investigating beliefs in media conspiracy theories. Also, there is a need for a dedicated measure

to capture and quantify belief in media conspiracy theories, which would enable focused investigation and exploration of media conspiracy beliefs and its correlates.

Reviewing and considering the topics of conspiracy beliefs that have been studied thus far, along with the ways they have been conceptualised and operationalized, can improve the quality of conceptualisation and measurement for a novel set of conspiracy beliefs. This process provides valuable insights into the style of conceptualisation in existing studies, as well as the structure and content of existing measures, which can guide the development of a refined and accurate concept and measure for an understudied set of conspiracy beliefs.

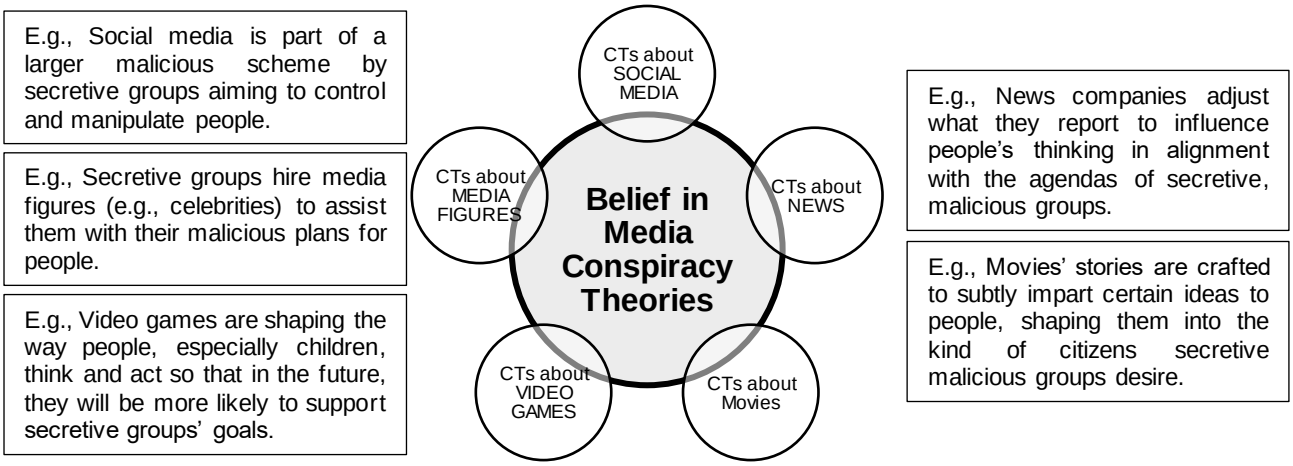
Media Conspiracy Beliefs: An Underexplored Domain

The media appear to be not only a channel for the dissemination of conspiracy theories but also a target of such beliefs. Conspiracy beliefs may exist concerning various components of media, including social media platforms, news outlets, movies, video games, and media figures (see *Figure 6*). The term media serves as a broad umbrella encompassing a diverse range of components, such as television, movies, social media, music, and media figures (see Merskin, 2020; Rössler, 2017). Among the various components of media, social media, news, movies, video games, and media figures are widely engaged with by society and exert significant societal influence. Studies have reported high levels of engagement with, and even problematic engagement with, these media (see e.g., Bastos et al., 2024; Brooks, 2021; McLaughlin et al., 2023; Meng et al., 2022; Stevens et al., 2021). As a result, scholarly attention has increasingly focused on how users engage with these media and the perceptions they form toward them (see Merskin, 2020; Rössler, 2017). However, scant attention has been given to how individuals perceive these media as conspiratorial.

Conspiracy beliefs about media extend beyond media scepticism and cynicism, representing strongly negative judgments infused with imaginative elements and complete narratives. These beliefs seem to be pervasive, appearing in social media discussions, the accounts of conspiracy theorists (e.g., Alex Jones's X account), conspiracy-focused podcasts (e.g., The Joe Rogan Experience), and alternative news platforms (e.g., Infowars news website). Examples include claims that social media facilitates mind control, news organizations stage fictitious events (e.g., Sandy Hook elementary school shooting conspiracy theories), movies engage in predictive programming to manipulate audiences (e.g., The Simpsons conspiracy theories), video games contain hidden messages or serve as crowdsourcing experiments, and media figures fake their deaths, secretly belong to cults, have inhuman lifestyles and interests, and contribute to societal control (e.g.,

reptilian conspiracy theory, Pizzagate conspiracy theory; for examples, see Supplementary Material, Appendix 1).

Figure 6. Major Components of Media with High User Interaction



So far, a few studies have studied media conspiracy beliefs. In Ballinger's qualitative investigation (2014), the study explored celebrity death conspiracies, including those surrounding around Marilyn Monroe ("Assassination by US intelligence agencies. Private life threat to status of high-ranking figures in the American government"), Elvis Presley ("Faked own death to escape pressures of fame, and/or to go undercover due to associations with the Mob and his role as FBI informant"), John Lennon ("Assassinated by US intelligence agency 'mind-control' operative as a 'psychological operation' (psy-ops) attack against the counterculture and its values"), Princess Diana Spencer ("Assassinated by UK intelligence agencies as her personal life deemed a threat to the integrity of the British monarchy"). Additionally, Ballinger (2014) explored conspiracy beliefs surrounding Michael Jackson's death, including theories that suggest he "faked his own death" or "was killed by various groups to divert public attention from political maneuvers". The study concluded that such conspiracies serve to immortalize iconic figures. In another relevant study, Furnham's research (2013) examined beliefs in commercial conspiracy theories by developing a scale—the Belief in Commercial Conspiracy Theories Inventory—to measure conspiracy beliefs about advertisements (including media advertisements). The results revealed four themes: sneakiness (e.g., "Placing the word 'sex' very subtly in advertisements to attract your attention"), manipulative (e.g., "Drug companies falsifying their data on the effectiveness of their drugs"), change-the-Rules (e.g., "Tobacco companies trying to get around the advertising laws in every country"), and suppression/prevention (e.g., "Jews working in high-power jobs in the media spreading propaganda to gain support for Israel"). Regressions indicated that individuals who were less

religious, more left-wing, more pessimistic, less wealthy, less neurotic, and less open to experience exhibited stronger beliefs in commercial conspiracy theories. Furthermore, the Conspiracy Theory Questionnaire (CTQ; Bruder & Manstead, 2009; see Darwin et al., 2011) includes items relevant to media conspiracy theories. The items include suspicions about the deaths of notable figures, such as Princess Diana ("I think Princess Diana's death was an assassination rather than an accident."), Martin Luther King ("I think US governmental agencies were involved in the assassination of Martin Luther King."), and former US President John F. Kennedy ("I think there was a conspiracy behind the assassination of former US President John F. Kennedy."). They also cover scepticism toward media narratives ("I think there are many public figures that are actually murdered, although the media reports that they have been killed in accidents or by illness."), and beliefs in the impact of subliminal advertising ("I think subliminal advertising [ads being shown so fast that we do not notice them] exists and influences people to a large extent."). Additionally, Brotherton et al. (2013) developed items related to media and media personalities in the initial (though not the final, validated) version of the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale (GCBS; Brotherton et al., 2013). These items included beliefs such as celebrities staging their deaths, government agencies monitoring public figures, and the manipulation of information by the media.

In this Chapter, I assess the acceptance toward media conspiracy theories. I develop a conceptualisation and measure of media conspiracy beliefs. This development draws on the psychological literature on conspiracy theories and beliefs (including definitions, characteristics, common topics, and measurement instruments), insights from two related constructs of scepticism and cynicism, and the limited existing research on conspiracy perspectives toward media. I propose the following definition and conceptualisation of media conspiracy belief:

> *A belief that covert and influential groups systematically control and manipulate the media, its industries, content, and personalities. This manipulation is aimed at advancing their hidden, malevolent agendas, which are believed to be extreme (e.g., control of the human race) and to result in profound consequences for the lives, safety, and social cohesion of the general population.*

The definition is designed to align with the existing literature. In accordance with studies that discuss malevolence, intentionality, and the actions of secretive groups within the context of conspiracy theories (e.g.,

Douglas & Sutton, 2023; Nera & Schöpfer, 2023), these aspects are incorporated into the definition of belief in media conspiracy theories. Additionally, I include the speculative reasoning and the attribution of extreme purposes (e.g., programming people). This approach is consistent with prior discussions on conspiracy beliefs, which emphasize their emotional intensity, reliance on speculative judgment, and perceived broad-reaching implications (e.g., Douglas & Sutton, 2023; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018). This conceptualisation can pave the way for the next step: developing a measurement tool for media conspiracy beliefs, which may enable the understanding of these beliefs, their correlates, and how to respond to them.

Moreover, I focus on the media components of social media, news, movies, video games, and media figures, with which many individuals engage frequently (see Merskin, 2020; Rössler, 2017). A substantial amount of online content (e.g., Infowars, 2024; Millypilly83, 2019; see Supplementary Material, Appendix 1) and existing scholarly literature (e.g., see Ballinger, 2014) suggest that these media components are frequent targets of conspiracy theories about media. However, perceptions of individual media components can coalesce, shaping a broader, generalized perception of media as a whole (e.g., see Shabahang et al., 2024a). The use of the term "media" in items measuring media conspiracy beliefs may be problematic, as its broad and ambiguous nature can elicit a wide range of interpretations among respondents. For instance, one respondent may primarily consider their conspiracy beliefs about social media when responding to the items, while another may focus on their conspiracy beliefs about musicians (e.g., Elvis). This variability could influence response patterns. Therefore, adopting a specific item formulation approach in the measurement of belief in media conspiracy theories may provide a more consistent and reliable means of capturing these beliefs. However, as recent studies on media perception suggest (e.g., see Shabahang et al., 2024a), such perceptions can coalesce and shape a generalized perception of media.

Conspiracy theories are difficult to capture in a single item because there are multidimensional and therefore inherently triangulate via distinct claims. Many existing measures capture generic conspiracism (e.g., items about terrorist attacks, alien contact, and new technology in the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale; Kay & Slovic, 2023) and specific conspiracism (e.g., items about technological contributions, financial benefits, and false information in the COVID-19 Conspiratorial Beliefs Scale; Dębski et al., 2022) through items addressing different aspects. Similarly, in this thesis, I measure belief in media conspiracy theories by incorporating items that address various media components, with the expectation that these items collectively form a cluster representing belief in media conspiracy theories.

Overall, the measurement of belief in media conspiracy theories focuses on social media, news, movies, video games, and media figures. While the measure focuses on individual media components, for the reasons outlined above, it is not assumed that perceptions of these components are independent. Rather, they are expected to coalesce and contribute to a broader, generalized perception of media (see Shabahang et al., 2024a). Therefore, the items related to social media, news, film, video games, and media figures are expected to collectively contribute to a single, overarching construct of belief in media conspiracy theories, consistent with many existing conceptualizations and measures in the literature that treat related conspiracy theories about a single target, regardless of specific focus, as belonging to a single, broader construct/cluster.

Media Conspiracy Beliefs across Samples from Three Countries: Australia, Iran, and the Philippines

I develop a measure of media conspiracy beliefs and examine its main psychometric characteristics in three different countries (i.e., Australia, Iran, and the Philippines). The need for cross-societal investigation into belief in conspiracy theories has been emphasized (Stojanov & Douglas, 2022). To date, research on conspiracy beliefs has predominantly focused on European cultures (Plich et al., 2023) and has largely been conducted among WEIRD populations. Additionally, many existing cross-societal investigations often center on countries with similar cultural values and societal conditions. For example, Bruder et al. (2013) examined Germany, Turkey, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Ireland, while Caycho-Rodríguez et al. (2022) focused on Latin American countries. The cultural similarity within these populations may limit our understanding of how conspiracy beliefs manifest across a broader range of societies, especially between societies with fundamentally distinct cultural foundations, such as Western versus Eastern cultures (Pae, 2020).

In this regard, obtaining data for a conspiracy belief study from societies with diverse cultural backgrounds and societal conditions may provide additional insights. While there are potential challenges, such as significant differences in sociodemographics across samples or variations in how measures are interpreted (lack of measurement invariance), such a study can still offer an initial understanding of the beliefs within these societies (e.g., general similarities in the direction of associations). This knowledge can then inform more nuanced, cross-cultural comparisons and future research in the field.

I collect data from three societies: Australia (a Western, individualistic, multicultural society in Oceania), Iran (an Eastern, collectivistic culture with a homogeneous society in the Middle East), and the Philippines (a blended Western-Eastern culture with a homogeneous society in South Asia). They have some

variations in terms of cultural orientation (Western vs. Eastern vs. blended Western-Eastern), societal development (stable, developed society vs. stable, developing society vs. unstable, developing society), and societal homogeneity versus heterogeneity (e.g., see Pae, 2020). However, the primary aim of this data collection is to move beyond exclusively WEIRD samples and provide broader results, without engaging in cross-cultural investigation or interpretation per se.

The Current Study

Conspiracy beliefs can emerge around the media and attract followers (see Uscinski et al., 2022b). These beliefs warrant focused investigation, as findings from studies on various types of conspiracy beliefs and their correlates cannot be easily generalized across different contexts with no empirical evidence. Different conspiracy beliefs may be associated with distinct contributing factors and outcomes (see Enders et al., 2021; Hartman et al., 2021; Jolley et al., 2024; Oleksy et al., 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2024; Wang & Kim, 2021). While a limited number of studies have been conducted on media conspiracy beliefs, their scope has been narrow (Ballinger, 2014; Furnham, 2013; Bruder & Manstead, 2009). In *Chapter 2*, I aim to conceptualise and measure media conspiracy beliefs. I define media conspiracy belief as a conviction that powerful, clandestine groups systematically manipulate media to achieve hidden, harmful agendas that are believed to have significant negative consequences for individuals and society.

Based on this conceptualisation, I developed a measurement tool, the *Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories Scale* (*BMCTS*), is developed to assess belief in media conspiracy theories. Scale development was informed by triangulating the psychological literature on conspiracy theories and beliefs, the limited existing research on conspiracy perspectives toward media, and via examination of online content related to media conspiracy theories (see Supplementary Material, Appendix 1). I followed Karic and Medevoic's (2021) example by formulating items based on popular conspiracies found on the internet and rhetoric present in online discussion/sharing platforms.

Accordingly, and consistent with the "real world" presentation of such beliefs, the BMCTS focuses on beliefs about social media, news, movies, video games, and media figures. These components represent key aspects of media that engage a large number of individuals (see Merskin, 2020; Rössler, 2017) and appear to be more commonly targeted by conspiracy theories (see Supplementary Material, Appendix 1).

In this Chapter, the main psychometric characteristics of the BMCTS (i.e., construct validity, convergent validity, and internal consistency) are examined in samples from Australia, Iran, and the Philippines.

Methods

Design and Participants

This study (*Chapter 2*) is cross-sectional and survey-based. The participants included 1,212 adult active social media users aged between 18 and 50 years old from Australia (n = 246), Iran (n = 237), and the Philippines (n = 729). The inclusion criteria were being between 18 to 50 years and actively engaged in media. The rationale for these criteria was that, given the generally lower engagement with media, especially new media, among older adults, the population under 50 years old (above 18) was selected to target individuals who could be more accurately identified as active media users. An active media user was defined as an individual who has accounts on at least one social media platform, uses social media for an average of at least 30 minutes per day over the last 30 days, follows news on at least one medium (e.g., social media, TV, radio) for an average of at least 30 minutes per day over the last 30 days, and watches an average of at least 30 minutes of media shows (e.g., movies, series, documentaries) per day over the last 30 days. A minimum time spent on media engagement was set to exclude participants who are on digital diets, undergoing digital detoxes, or practicing media disconnection (i.e., reduced or complete abstinence from using media and digital technologies; Skivko et al., 2020).

In this investigation, I aimed to examine active media users, as I assumed they would be a more appropriate target group than non-active media users or media avoiders. Engagement with media appears to be a necessary condition for awareness of conspiracy theories (e.g., Cinelli et al., 2022), particularly those related to the media itself, since media serves as a primary channel through which such beliefs are accessed. Despite holding conspiracy beliefs about the media, I expect that many users continue to engage with media platforms—because they can find channels that align with their views (e.g., podcasts discussing media-related conspiracies). Furthermore, media engagement may allow them to refine, update, strengthen, and even enjoy their theories (e.g., see hate-watching; Madison et al., 2025), aspects that can be observable in the process of forming and reinforcing conspiracy beliefs, as well as among conspiracy believers (for a discussion on the

rabbit hole syndrome of conspiracy beliefs, see Sutton & Douglas, 2022). Accordingly, I investigated active media users.

Recognizing the politically sensitive nature of the research topic and the probable repercussions for Iranian participants, the use of virtual private networks (VPNs) was established as an inclusion criterion for the Iranian sample. This ensured the anonymity and untraceability of the collected data by encrypting personal information and masking participants' IP addresses.

The recruitment strategy was based on convenience sampling based on the resources available to conduct the research, and differed by the distinct countries. Participants from Australia were recruited through The Online Research Unit (ORU), an Australian data collection agency. To recruit the Iranian sample, online advertisements were placed in Iranian non-governmental online psychology magazines. Filipino participants were recruited through online advertisements on the social media channels of the University of Santo Tomas. Except for the Iranian sample, for which Google Forms was more accessible, the surveys for the Australian and Filipino samples were administered using Qualtrics (see *Table 2*).

Table 2. Details on Sampling Procedures

Sample	Language of Survey	Survey Platform	Recruitment Platform	Promotion/Advertising Method	Compensation
Australian Sample	English	Qualtrics	ORU	By ORU	AUD 14
Iranian Sample	Persian	Google Form	No recruitment platform	Advertised by Iranian non-governmental online psychology magazines	Gift code (with a value of appx. AUD 5)
Filipino Sample	English	Qualtrics	No recruitment platform	Advertised on the University of Santo Tomas social media channels	No compensation

A detailed overview of sample characteristics across the samples is presented in *Table 3*. Statistically significant differences were identified among the samples in terms of demographics and subjective socioeconomic status. Specifically, the highest mean age was observed regarding the Australian sample, followed by the Iranian, and the Filipino samples. The proportion of women was lower in the Australian sample, compared to the two other samples. By contrast, the proportion of men was higher in the Australian

sample in comparison with the other two samples. Additionally, the proportion of non-binary individuals was higher among Filipinos than among Australian participants. Most participants had bachelor's degree in the Australian sample, while the majority of Filipino participants completed high school or less. Most Iranian participants reported having either a bachelor's or a master's degree. Iranian participants reported lower subjective social status than Australian and Filipino participants (see *Table 3*).

Table 3. Demographics and Subjective Socioeconomic Statues across the Samples

Sociodemographics	Australian Sample	Iranian Sample	Filipino Sample	χ^2 / *F*
Age *Mean* (*SD*)	36.35 (7.792)a	31.68 (9.637)b	23.04 (6.885)c	349.26***
Gender				
Female *n* (%)	103 (41.9%)a	160 (67.5%)b	440 (6.4%)b	68.16***
Male *n* (%)	142 (57.7%)a	71 (30%)b	237 (32.5%)b	–
Non-binary *n* (%)	0 (0%)a	4 (1.7%)a, b	33 (4.5%)b	–
Transgender *n* (%)	1 (.4%)a	2 (.8%)a	4 (.5%)a	–
Another term *n* (%)	0 (0%)a	0 (0%)a	15 (2.1%)a	–
Educational Level				
High school diploma or less *n* (%)	58 (23.6%)a	28 (11.8%)b	435 (59.7%)c	325.53***
Bachelor's degree *n* (%)	132 (53.7%)a	86 (36.3%)b	253 (34.7%)b	–
Master's degree *n* (%)	48 (19.5%)a	88 (37.1%)b	30 (4.1%)c	–
Doctoral degree *n* (%)	8 (3.3%)a	35 (14.8%)b	11 (1.5%)a	–
Subjective Social Status *Mean* (*SD*)	6.26 (2.094)a	5.59 (1.857)b	6.14 (1.543)a	12.26***

Note. ***$p < .001$; **$p < .01$. Different letters in the same row indicate significant difference ($p < .01$) across samples, while identical letters indicate nonsignificant difference according to the post-hoc Tukey (ANOVA) or z-test (chi-square test).

Online written consent was required prior to participation, and participants' rights, confidentiality, and privacy were ensured. The study received approval from Flinders University's Human Research Ethics

Committee (HREC Project No.: 7726). Additional ethics approvals were obtained from the University of Santo Tomas and Pázmány Péter Catholic University (Project No.: 2024_33). The ethical practices were adhered to in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki, and American Psychological Association Ethics Code.

Measures

Demographics

To assess demographic characteristics, participants reported their age, gender (i.e., woman, man, non-binary, transgender, and another term), and educational attainment (i.e., high school diploma or less, bachelor's degree, master's degree, or doctoral degree).

Subjective Socioeconomic Status

Subjective socioeconomic status was measured using the *MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status* (*MSSS*; Adler et al., 2008). This single-item scale presents a 10-rung ladder (1 = *Lowest social position* [bottom rung], 10 = *Highest social position* [top rung]). Participants were asked to select the rung that best represents their perceived social standing relative to others in society. The MSSS score reflects an individual's sense of belonging to a higher or lower social class based on factors like income, education, and occupation.

Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories

To assess inclination toward media conspiracy beliefs, the *Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories Scale (BMCTS)* was developed. Established methodologies for item and scale construction, development, and validation were carefully followed (Boateng et al., 2018; Morgado et al., 2018; Tsang et al., 2017). The process began with a review of scientific literature on definitions, characteristics (e.g., Douglas & Sutton, 2023; Nera & Schöpfer, 2023), and intersecting constructs of conspiracy theories and beliefs, such as scepticism and cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1996; Pinkleton et al., 2012; Quiring et al., 2021; Yamamoto & Kushin, 2014). Additionally, the conceptualisation was informed by insights from existing research on both general and specific conspiracy beliefs and their measurement (e.g., Brotherton et al., 2013; Bruder et al., 2013; Darwin et al., 2011; Douglas & Sutton, 2011; Drinkwater et al., 2012; Irwin et al., 2015; Lantian et al., 2016; Rose, 2017; Swami et al., 2010; Wood, 2017), as well as discussions in news outlets and podcasts regarding conspiratorial media (e.g., Alex Jones's X account, The Joe Rogan Experience podcast, Infowars news website; for examples, see Supplementary Material, Appendix 1), and empirical studies on media conspiracy beliefs (Ballinger, 2014; Furnham, 2013; Bruder & Manstead, 2009). Based on these insights, I conceptualised belief

in media conspiracy theories and developed initial items for its measurement. The conceptualisation and items were designed to extend beyond scepticism and cynicism, incorporating the key characteristics necessary for beliefs to be classified as conspiracy beliefs.

The developed items focus on social media, news, movies, video games, and media figures. These components represent key aspects of media with broad public engagement (see Merskin, 2020; Rössler, 2017) and appear to be frequent targets of conspiracy theories (see Supplementary Material, Appendix 1). While the items address individual media components, I do not assume that perceptions of these components are independent. Perceptions of different media components can converge, shaping a broader, generalized perception of media (see Shabahang et al., 2024a). Consistent with many existing conceptualisations and measures of conspiracy beliefs, which treat related conspiracy theories about a single target (regardless of specific focus) as belonging to a single, broader construct or cluster, beliefs in media conspiracy theories concerning social media, news, film, video games, and media figures are expected to collectively contribute to a unified construct of belief in media conspiracy theories.

The items were translated into Persian (for the Iranian sample) using a forward-translation and back-translation procedure, following the standard guidelines for questionnaire translation recommended in the literature (e.g., see Tsang et al., 2017). The items on the BMCTS (see *Table 4*) are rated on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 6 = *Strongly agree*), with higher scores indicating a stronger inclination to endorse conspiracist viewpoints regarding media. The construct validity, internal consistency, and convergent validity of the BMCTS were examined in this study.

Table 4. Initial Items of the Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories Scale (BMCTS) Prior to Statistical Psychometric Evaluations

Items
Item 1) Social media have hidden malicious functions and purposes intended for secretive groups. *[Social Media]*
Item 2) It is implausible that a small number of computer programmers built social media without support from secretive groups and malicious plans. *[Social Media]*
Item 3) Social media is part of a larger malicious scheme by secretive groups aiming to control and manipulate people. *[Social Media]*

Item 4) Social media is used by secretive groups to closely monitor people and manipulate their behaviour for sinister purposes. *[Social Media]*
Item 5) Social media algorithms are designed to gradually expose people to certain sinister subjects, shaping them into the kind of individuals that secretive groups want them to be. *[Social Media]*
Item 6) Certain scientific studies on the effects of social media are suppressed from publication, and their researchers are silenced by secretive groups. *[Social Media]*
Item 7) Many scientists align with the agendas of secretive, malicious groups, manipulating, fabricating, or withholding evidence regarding the impacts of social media, all to deceive the public. *[Social Media]*
Item 8) Social media is preparing people for specific future events planned by secretive, malicious groups, conditioning us to be more open and accepting of them. *[Social Media]*
Item 9) News companies adjust what they report to influence people's thinking in alignment with the agendas of secretive, malicious groups. *[News]*
Item 10) Numerous news stories are made up and staged by news companies for malicious purposes to aid secretive groups. *[News]*
Item 11) Vital news is omitted by news channels to appease secret groups with sinister plans. *[News]*
Item 12) Some journalists who discuss topics that secret groups oppose are stopped or killed in suspicious ways, such as accidents or suicides. *[News]*
Item 13) The movie industry is part of a big plan orchestrated by secretive groups with dark goals, such as controlling and programming people. *[Movie]*
Item 14) Secret signs and messages are inserted into movies for malicious reasons to facilitate the plans of secretive groups. *[Movie]*
Item 15) Movies' stories are crafted to subtly impart certain ideas to people, shaping them into the kind of citizens secretive malicious groups desire. *[Movie]*
Item 16) Movies prepare people to accept certain beliefs that secretive, malicious groups plan for us to adopt in the future. *[Movie]*
Item 17) Video games have hidden motives beyond just being entertaining, facilitating the plans that secretive, malicious groups have, especially for children. *[Video Games]*

Item 18) The stories and characters in video games are crafted with sinister intentions, following the plans of secret groups. *[Video Games]*
Item 19) Video games are shaping the way people, especially children, think and act so that in the future, they will be more likely to support secretive groups' goals. *[Video Games]*
Item 20) Secretive groups hire media figures (e.g., celebrities) to assist them with their malicious plans for people. *[Media Figures]*
Item 21) Media figures (e.g., celebrities) who possess characteristics admired by secretive malicious groups and are loyal to those groups become famous, even if they're not exceptionally talented. *[Media Figures]*
Item 22) Media figures (e.g., celebrities) play a significant role in secretive malicious groups' plans for mind control over people. *[Media Figures]*
Item 23) Media figures (e.g., celebrities) have dark habits and lifestyles, and there are secret dark ceremonies that take place among them. *[Media Figures]*
Note. The development of the items was informed by four defining characteristics of conspiracy theories identified by Nera and Schöpfer (2023)—collective nature, intentionality, secrecy, and malevolence—as well as the four key attributes outlined by van Prooijen and Douglas (2018): universality, sociality, emotionality, and consequentiality. The items were specifically designed to capture a conspiracist perspective toward media (imagination-based negative judgment; e.g., an extreme negative attitude toward social media as a tool for engineering human minds and programming them), rather than cynicism (reality-based negative judgment; e.g., viewing social media as a tool for encouraging consumer behavior to benefit specific companies) or scepticism (healthy questioning and seeking further information; e.g., critically examining the reasons behind specific content presented in the explorer section of social media). The relationship between political orientations and conspiracism depends on the characteristics of the specific conspiracy beliefs under investigation and the socio-political context in which these beliefs are considered (see Enders et al., 2023b). In light of this, the items were deliberately designed using generic language and context to ensure applicability across diverse cultures and languages, as well as to resonate with individuals holding various ideologies. This approach enables the items to effectively capture conspiracist attitudes toward media among respondents with differing sociopolitical perspectives. For

example, instead of formulating a culturally specific item such as "Social media is founded and run by Jews", a broader item, "Social media is part of a larger malicious scheme by secretive groups aiming to control and manipulate people", was created. This phrasing accommodates varying beliefs, allowing respondents to project their specific conspiracy narratives onto the item, whether they perceive the controlling group to be Jewish, Chinese, Russian, or another entity.

Respondents were informed that terms such as "malicious groups" and "malicious plans" in the items are about more than just financial motives, encompassing more complex agendas such as the manipulation or programming of humans.

Respondents were informed that the term "secretive groups" in the items was not limited to entities within their own country. These groups could operate within governmental structures globally or exist outside them (e.g., shadow governments).

The scale uses a 6-point Likert scale with the following response options: *Strongly Disagree* (1), *Disagree* (2), *Slightly Disagree* (3), *Slightly Agree* (4), *Agree* (5), *Strongly Agree* (6). Similar to some measures of conspiracy beliefs (e.g., GCBS-5), this response format is selected to encourage respondents to actively provide a response with a clear direction, thereby minimizing the likelihood of choosing neutral responses.

This table presents the initial item pool prior to conducting statistical analysis and subsequent item refinement.

Conspiracy Mentality

to assess conspiracy mentality, the unidimensional *Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire* (CMQ; Bruder et al., 2013) was employed (e.g., "I think many very important things happen in the world, which the public is never informed about."). The scale uses Likert-type response options ranging from 0 (*0%, Certainly not*) to 10 (*100%, Certain*). Higher scores indicate a greater endorsement of conspiracy mentality. Reliability was good across the samples in the current study ($\alpha_{Australian\ sample}$ = .88, $\alpha_{Iranian\ sample}$ = .88; $\alpha_{Filipino\ sample}$ = .78).

Generic Conspiracism

To measure general propensity to believe in conspiracy theories, the *Single-Item Conspiracy Belief Scale* (SCBS; Lantian et al., 2016) was administered. The single item (i.e., "I think that the official version of the events given by the authorities very often hides the truth.") is scored on a 9-point scale (1 = *Completely false*, 9 = *Completely true*), with higher scores indicating a stronger generic conspirational attitude. The preamble of the scale was presented prior to the item.

To assess the extent of belief in generic conspirational explanations, the *Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale–5* (GCB-5; Kay & Slovic, 2023) was used (e.g., "The government permits or perpetrates acts of terrorism on its own soil, disguising its involvement."). The scale uses Likert-type response options ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 6 (*Strongly agree*), with higher scores indicating a greater acceptance of generic conspiracism beliefs. The GCB-5 demonstrated good internal consistency across the samples in the current study ($\alpha_{Australian\ sample}$ = .90, $\alpha_{Iranian\ sample}$ = .81; $\alpha_{Filipino\ sample}$ = .75).

Procedure

The survey included the BMCTS alongside a comprehensive set of measures assessing personality, cognitive capabilities, media use routine, mental health, and sociopolitical attitudes. This study (*Chapter 2*) focuses solely on responses to the following measures from the survey: Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories Scale (BMCTS), Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (CMQ; Bruder et al., 2013), Single-Item Conspiracy Belief Scale (SCBS; Lantian et al., 2016), and Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale–5 (GCB-5; Kay & Slovic, 2023).

The survey was administered in Qualtrics for the Australia and Filipino samples (in English) and Google Forms for the Iranian sample (in Persian). The previously validated and utilized Persian versions of the scales were employed (see Atari et al., 2019; Shabahang et al., 2024). Given that English is an official language in the Philippines and spoken by a large portion of the population, the Filipino sample completed the survey in English, in line with previous research that recruited English-speaking Filipino participants (e.g., Shabahang et al., 2024a). The Australian sample was recruited through a data collection agency/panel (ORU). Due to the sensitive sociopolitical nature of the survey, alternative recruitment strategies were employed for the Iranian sample. Domestic media channels and crowdsourcing platforms were deemed unsuitable because of potential distrust in local sources, which could have deterred participation. To address this, the survey was advertised on non-governmental Persian-language online psychology magazines located outside of Iran, but accessible to Iranian residents. The Filipino sample was recruited through social media channels of the University of Santo Tomas.

To avoid triggering defensive reactions and to create a more inclusive environment for respondents, the purpose of the survey was communicated in broader terms in the information sheet. The focus was framed as examining attitudes toward media institutions and media figures. People who hold conspiracy theory beliefs may feel ostracized due to the existence and dominance of anti-conspiracy theory sentiment and societal labels attached to such beliefs (Lantian et al., 2018; see Spiral of Silence Theory; Noelle-Neumann, 1974). This

approach aimed to encourage honest participation and prevent the impression that those with these beliefs were not welcome in the study. At the end of the survey, participants were debriefed about the true purpose of the study and were given the option to withdraw their responses.

Completion of all survey items was mandatory, ensuring complete datasets with no missing data. Participants from Australia received financial compensation. Given the sensitive nature of the survey topic and the sociopolitical climate in Iran, Iranian participants were offered anonymous, non-identifiable gift codes for online shopping as compensation. There was no compensation for the Filipino sample due to a lack of funding for the survey conducted in the Philippines. I acknowledge that this was not ideal and represents a limitation during the implementation stage of the survey in the Philippines.

Data Analyses

The factor structure of the BMCTS was evaluated via Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) using Mplus 7.4 (Muthén & Muthén, 2016). In the current investigation, the EFA employed a geomin rotation technique, while CFA was executed using maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors (MLR). To ensure robust factor analysis results, the recommended practice of conducting EFA and CFA on separate samples was followed (Lorenzo-Seva, 2022). Given the larger sample size of the Filipino participants, a random split was employed to create subsamples for EFA and CFA. Once the factor structure was explored using the Filipino sample's EFA results, a CFA was conducted on the Filipino (the second subsample), Australian, and Iranian samples. This aimed to assess whether the identified unidimensional or multidimensional structure of the BMCTS could be replicated across the other samples. Considering recommendations on sample size for factor and structural analyses (see, e.g., de Winter et al., 2009; Kyriazos, 2018), which suggest 200 responses as adequate, all our samples exceeded this requirement. The following cutoff points were considered for the fit indices of both the EFA and the CFA (Bentler, 1990; Bentler and Bonnet, 1980; Browne & Cudeck, 1993; Hair et al., 2003): a comparative fit index (CFI) of $\geq .90$, a Tucker Lewis index (TLI) of $\geq .90$, a root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) of $\leq .08$, and a standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) of $\leq .1$.

Using SPSS statistical software (IBM SPSS Statistics 21.0), the item-total correlations were computed to assess the internal consistency of the BMCTS. Additionally, Cronbach's alpha (α) and McDonald's omega (ω)—which is considered a more sensitive measure of reliability compared to α, particularly when the tau-equivalent assumption is violated (Hayes & Coutts, 2020)—were calculated to evaluate internal consistency.

Values exceeding .70 for Cronbach's alpha (Nunnally, 1978) and .80 for McDonald's omega (Feißt et al., 2019) are regarded as acceptable.

Finally, the convergent validity of the BMCTS was also evaluated by examining its correlation (partial correlation coefficient) with the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (CMQ), Single-Item Conspiracy Belief Scale (SCBS), and Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale–5 (GCB-5).

Results

Psychometric Properties of the Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories Scale (BMCTS) across the Samples

In the initial step, the factor structure of the developed scale and the interrelationships between the developed items were preliminarily explored using the full Filipino sample (n = 729), the largest sample in this study. This aimed to provide a preliminary understanding of whether the items formed a unidimensional structure and to identify overlaps (redundancy), particularly among items within the same group (media components of social media, news, movies, video games, and media figures), in order to produce a refined and brief version for further analysis. EFA showed that only the unidimensional structure yielded an eigenvalue above 1, suggesting that the items related to conspiracy beliefs about media components—social media, news, movies, video games, and media figures—are best considered holistically. CFA was then conducted, specifying five factors (i.e., media components of social media, news, movies, video games, and media figures), to examine whether the items for each media component can form a distinct factor. The fit indices were very poor (χ^2=1981; df=220; p= .005; CFI= .815, TLI= .787, RMSEA= .105 [90% C.I. .101– .109], SRMR= .073), suggesting that the items for each media component do not form distinct factors. This finding aligns with the conceptual discussions presented earlier in this Chapter, which posit that conspiracy beliefs about these media components collectively contribute to a unified construct of belief in media conspiracy theories.

Inter-item correlations were then computed. The correlations between all items were positive and statistically significant, with no non-significant, negative, or weak correlations (see *Table 5*). This indicates that all items are closely related to both the items within their respective groups and those from other groups. Such high correlations suggest that these items are similar to each other and measure the same construct (Clark & Watson, 1995; Clark & Watson, 2019). Based on these initial statistical evaluations—indicating that items

load onto a single dimension and exhibit moderate-to-strong intercorrelations—and consistent with the conceptual discussion presented earlier in this Chapter, I decided to proceed with the unidimensional structure for the scale. To reduce redundancy and create a straightforward measure, I developed a brief scale by selecting one item for each media component. This approach ensures that conspiracy perspectives toward various media components are represented in the scale while maintaining brevity, aligning with existing brief measures of conspiracy beliefs, which typically comprise a small number of items (e.g., CMQ, Bruder et al., 2013; GCB-5, Kay & Slovic, 2023).

One item was selected from each group of items, except for the social media group, where two items (3 and 5) were moderately correlated with each other but strongly correlated with other items in the group, and the movies group, where two items (13 and 15) were also moderately correlated with each other but strongly correlated with other items in the group. While items 3 and 5 capture conspiracy beliefs about social media, responses to them were not exactly the same, and there may be slight differences in content. The same situation applies to items 13 and 15 from the movies group. Therefore, the two items from each of these groups were retained for further analysis. Accordingly, seven items were selected (items 3, 5, 9, 13, 15, 19, 20), and the psychometric characteristics of the BMCTS with these seven items were statistically examined in the subsequent analysis.

Table 5. Inter-item Correlations of Initial Items of BMCTS in the Filipino Sample

Items	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23
1	1																						
2	.58	1																					
3	.56	.51	1																				
4	.55	.50	.61	1																			
5	.54	.53	.47	.53	1																		
6	.51	.52	.50	.52	.55	1																	
7	.52	.51	.48	.51	.50	.54	1																
8	.50	.46	.55	.53	.56	.50	.58	1															
9	.40	.40	.40	.40	.41	.43	.50	.51	1														
10	.41	.40	.40	.34	.40	.40	.40	.48	.56	1													
11	.41	.40	.41	.40	.43	.41	.40	.45	.53	.62	1												
12	.40	.40	.40	.40	.41	.40	.40	.40	.50	.51	.50	1											
13	.42	.41	.46	.41	.45	.44	.47	.54	.41	.44	.45	.40	1										
14	.41	.40	.41	.41	.41	.41	.43	.51	.41	.45	.43	.40	.68	1									
15	.40	.40	.40	.40	.41	.42	.45	.48	.43	.45	.42	.40	.43	.69	1								
16	.41	.42	.41	.40	.41	.41	.40	.53	.41	.42	.41	.41	.62	.66	.74	1							
17	.42	.40	.42	.41	.40	.40	.41	.46	.40	.40	.40	.41	.57	.58	.53	.62	1						
18	.43	.40	.40	.41	.40	.40	.39	.45	.40	.43	.40	.40	.53	.56	.57	.58	.76	1					
19	.40	.43	.41	.43	.41	.41	.40	.41	.41	.40	.41	.40	.48	.52	.52	.57	.69	.69	1				
20	.48	.41	.40	.44	.40	.40	.40	.40	.40	.40	.42	.40	.44	.44	.50	.45	.40	.40	.41	1			

21	.40	.41	.40	.41	.41	.41	.40	.44	.44	.40	.43	.47	.45	.47	.46	.45	.40	.40	.41	.68	1		
22	.41	.40	.41	.40	.44	.40	.42	.43	.42	.42	.43	.42	.47	.51	.50	.46	.40	.42	.40	.64	.73	1	
23	.42	.40	.43	.41	.40	.42	.41	.40	.40	.43	.40	.40	.42	.44	.41	.40	.41	.42	.46	.55	.58	.57	1
Note. All correlations are significant at $p < .001$.																							

In the next step, the psychometric properties of the 7-item BMCTS were explored in detail across the Filipino, Australian, and Iranian samples using EFA, CFA, and item analyses. The analyses began with the Filipino sample, which was the largest sample of this study. The sample was randomly split into two halves for EFA and CFA. EFA was performed on the first randomly split half of the Filipino sample (n = 365). Only the unidimensional structure yielded an eigenvalue above 1 (3.704). For the unidimensional structure, the fit indices demonstrated acceptable fit (χ^2=39.739; df=14; p<.001; *CFI*=.957, *TLI*=.936, *RMSEA*=.071 [90% C.I. .046–.098], *SRMR*=.039) with factor loadings above .5. To validate the single-factor structure, CFA was conducted on the remaining half of the Filipino sample (n = 364). The analysis confirmed the EFA results, with the unidimensional BMCTS demonstrating a satisfactory fit (*χ2=43.827; df=14; p<.001; CFI=.946, TLI=.919, RMSEA=.076 [90% C.I. .051–.103], SRMR=.041*). All factor loadings were above .5. After inspection of the modification indices, an error covariance term was inserted between item 3 and item 5, resulting in further improvement in the model fit (*χ^2=29.795; df=13; p=.005; CFI=.970, TLI=.951, RMSEA=.059 [90% C.I. .031–.088], SRMR=.036*). Factor loadings were still above .5 (see *Table 6*).

To extend the analysis beyond the Filipino sample, the same single-factor CFA model identified in the Filipino cohort was applied to the Australian and Iranian samples. This unidimensional structure did not fit well either the Australian (*χ^2=71.845; df=14; p<.001; CFI=.924, TLI=.886, RMSEA=.130 [90% C.I. .101–.160], SRMR=.048*), or the Iranian (*χ^2=66.295; df =14; p<.001; CFI=.921, TLI=.881, RMSEA=.126 [90% C.I. .096–.157], SRMR=.046*) samples. However, modification indices suggested high error covariances between items 3 and 5 consistently across the samples. Therefore, an error covariance term was added to the models between these items, which resulted in acceptable model fit indices for both the Australian (*χ^2=26.037; df=13; p=.017; CFI=.983, TLI=.972, RMSEA=.064 [90% C.I. .026–.099], SRMR=.026*), and the Iranian (*χ2=23.019; df=13; p=.042; CFI=.985, TLI=.976, RMSEA=.057 [90% C.I. .011–.094], SRMR=.028*) samples, thus supporting the unidimensional factor structure observed in the Filipino sample (see *Table 6*). Regarding the addition of an error covariance term between item 3 (the item about news) and item 5 (the item about movies), it appears that the residuals of these two items may share variance beyond what is explained by the overall factor structure. One plausible explanation is that both items relate to storytelling, as they involve the presentation of narratives and stories, albeit through different media formats. This covariance may suggest that, in addition to general conspiracy beliefs about news and movies as media entities, individuals may also hold conspiracy beliefs specifically about the content they produce and the narratives they construct.

Subsequently, the item characteristics of BMCTS were evaluated. In all samples (i.e., half-split Filipino sample for EFA, half-split Filipino sample for CFA, Australian sample, and Iranian sample), item-total correlations (range: $r_{Half\text{-}split\ Filipino\ sample\ for\ EFA}$=.56 to .70; $r_{Half\text{-}split\ Filipino\ sample\ for\ CFA}$=.50 to .69; $r_{Australian\ sample}$=.72 to .82; $r_{Iranian\ sample}$=.72 to .77) were consistently good. Cronbach's alphas and McDonald's omega values for all versions of the BMCTS were high, ranging from .83 to .93. All versions surpassed the recommended benchmarks, confirming the high internal consistency of the BMCTS in these samples (see *Table 6*).

Table 6. Results Of the EFA, CFA, and Further Psychometric Properties of the BMCTS across the Samples

Item	Factor loadings			
	EFA, Filipino sample	CFA, Filipino sample	CFA, Australian sample	CFA, Iranian sample
1. Social media is part of a larger malicious scheme by secretive groups aiming to control and manipulate people. *[Social Media]*	.591*	.584*	.690*	.691*
2. Social media algorithms are designed to gradually expose people to certain sinister subjects, shaping them into the kind of individuals that secretive groups want them to be. *[Social Media]*	.592*	.611*	.693*	.693*
3. News companies adjust what they report to influence people's thinking in alignment with the agendas of secretive, malicious groups. *[News]*	.647*	.505*	.802*	.747*
4. The movie industry is part of a big plan orchestrated by secretive groups with dark	.767*	.779*	.834*	.819*

goals, such as controlling and programming people. *[Movie]*				
5. Movies' stories are crafted to subtly impart certain ideas to people, shaping them into the kind of citizens secretive malicious groups desire. *[Movie]*	.775*	.785*	.870*	.797*
6. Video games are shaping the way people, especially children, think and act so that in the future, they will be more likely to support secretive groups' goals. *[Video Games]*	.623*	.613*	.838*	.837*
7. Secretive groups hire media figures (e.g., celebrities) to assist them with their malicious plans for people. *[Media Figures]*	.689*	.524*	.859*	.753*
Model fit indices for the single-factor structure				
χ^2 (df)	39.739 (14)*	29.795(13)*	26.037 (13)*	23.019 (13)*
CFI	.957	.970	.983	.985
TLI	.936	.951	.972	.976
RMSEA (90% CI)	.071 (.046; .098)	.059 (.031; .088)	.064(.026; .099)	.057(.011; .094)
SRMR	.039	.036	.026	.028
Descriptive statistics				
Range	7–42	7–42	7–42	7–42

Mean (*M*)	26.21	25.55	25.28	27.74
Standard deviation (*SD*)	6.44	6.21	8.02	8.47
Skewness	-.22	-.22	-.25	-.25
Kurtosis	.09	.13	-.37	-.45
Reliability indices				
Cronbach's alpha (α)	.85	.83	.93	.91
McDonald's omega (ω)	.85	.83	.93	.91
Item-total correlations (range; minimum – maximum)	.56–.70	.50–.69	.72–.82	.72–.77

Note. Values of χ^2 for model fit, factor loadings, and item-total correlations are all significant at $p < .05$. CFI = comparative fit index. TLI = Tucker Lewis index. RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation. SRMR = standardized root mean square residual. An error covariance was added between items 3 and 5 for the CFAs consistently based on the modification indices.

Taking these results into the account, psychometric analyses confirmed a consistent factor structure and good psychometric characteristics for the BMCTS across the investigated samples. However, comparisons were not made across the samples, as the measurement invariance analysis indicated that the measure was not been fully interpreted in the same way across groups (see Supplementary Material, Table S1), and cross-sample analyses involving samples with significant sociodemographic differences could present interpretative challenges (e.g., see Buil et al., 2012). The measurement invariance analysis (see Supplementary Material, Table S1) provided partial support for configural invariance but no support for metric, scalar, or strict invariance. Configural invariance was partially supported, as evidenced by generally acceptable fit indices—with the exception of the Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI). All items loaded significantly ($p < .001$) onto the latent factor across samples. However, full measurement invariance was not established. While partial configural invariance may be considered adequate when the primary aim is to examine the overall research model within groups separately—rather than to conduct direct cross-group comparisons (e.g., Luong & Flake, 2023)—the lack of full invariance indicates that the measurement properties of the BMCTS were not fully equivalent across samples. Accordingly, I did not apply a cross-sample comparative approach in the analysis or discussion.

The Correlation between the BMCTS, the CMQ, the SCBS, and the GCB-5 across the Samples

To assess the convergent validity of the BMCTS and explore the association between media conspiracy beliefs and a conspiracy mentality and generic conspiracism, correlations were examined between the BMCTS and three established measures of conspiracism: the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (CMQ), the Single-Item Conspiracy Belief Scale (SCBS), and the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale–5 (GCB-5). Age, gender, education, and subjective socioeconomic status were controlled in the analysis. Statistically significant positive correlations were found between the BMCTS and the CMQ ($r_{Australian\ sample}=.53$; $r_{Iranian\ sample}=.54$; $r_{Filipino\ sample}=.30$), the SCBS ($r_{Australian\ sample}=.50$; $r_{Iranian\ sample}=.50$; $r_{Filipino\ sample}=.26$), and the GCB-5 ($r_{Australian\ sample}=.68$; $r_{Iranian\ sample}=.57$; $r_{Filipino\ sample}=.43$). These results support the convergent validity of the BMCTS, demonstrating an overlap between belief in media conspiracy theories and a general disposition towards conspiracist thinking. However, the overlap between media conspiracy beliefs and general conspiracy beliefs seems to be weaker in the Filipino sample compared to the Australian and Iranian samples (see *Table 7*)

Table 7. Partial Correlations between the BMCTS, CMQ, GCB-5, and SCBS across the Samples

Measure	CMQ	SCBS	GCB-5	BMCTS
Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (CMQ)	–			
Single-Item Conspiracy Belief Scale (SCBS)	.73; .68; .54	–		
Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale–5 (GCB-5)	.67; .63; .54	.65; .58; .50	–	
Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories Scale (BMCTS)	.53; .54; .30	.50; .50; .26	.68; .57; .43	–

Note. All correlations significant at $p < .001$. The first values represent *r*-coefficients of the Australian sample, the second values represent *r*s for the Iranian sample, the third values represent *r*s for the Filipino sample.

Discussion

In this Chapter, I empirically studied belief in media conspiracy theories by conceptualizing the construct and developing a corresponding measurement tool. The findings showed good psychometric properties of the Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories Scale (BMCTS) across three independent samples from Australia, Iran, and the Philippines. Furthermore, media conspiracy beliefs were found to overlap with constructs of conspiracy mentality and general conspiracism.

I conceptualised and measured media conspiracy beliefs, a domain of conspiracy beliefs that has not been comprehensively explored, to facilitate a focused investigation of this construct. I define media conspiracy belief as a belief that powerful, secretive groups are manipulating media to advance hidden, harmful agendas—agendas that are believed to have devastating consequences for ordinary individuals and society. Consistent with the literature (e.g., Douglas & Sutton, 2023; Nera & Schöpfer, 2023), which describes conspiracy beliefs as inherently collective, my conceptualisation of media conspiracy beliefs centers on groups (groups that control the media). In my conceptualization, these groups are malevolent and secretive, two characteristics frequently highlighted in the literature (malevolence and secrecy; e.g., Douglas & Sutton, 2023; Nera & Schöpfer, 2023). I also incorporate the notion of intentionality (conspiratorial media act deliberately) another key characteristic identified in the literature (e.g., Douglas & Sutton, 2023; Nera & Schöpfer, 2023). Furthermore, I consider strong emotionality, imaginary judgment (beyond scepticism and cynicism), and the attribution of motivations involving extreme purposes (e.g., programming users) in my conceptualisation of media conspiracy beliefs. These aspects align with previous discussions on conspiracy beliefs, which emphasize their emotionally charged nature, reliance on speculative reasoning, and far-reaching implications (see e.g., Douglas & Sutton, 2023; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018). This conceptualisation, incorporating these aspects, is reflected in the items of the BMCTS.

Additionally, considering discussions on the universality of conspiracy beliefs and the importance of measuring them without ideological bias (e.g., the tendency to focus only on conspiracy beliefs associated with specific political or social orientations while neglecting others; see Enders et al., 2023b; Douglas & Sutton, 2023; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018), the items of BMCTS are formulated in a generalizable manner. The items are not aligned with any specific sociopolitical ideology, allowing for the inclusion of conspiracism toward the media rooted in different sociopolitical standpoints. This ensures the BMCTS's applicability to respondents from diverse societies with varying ideologies and worldviews.

The resulting scale, the BMCTS, demonstrated a unidimensional structure and good construct validity and internal consistency properties across samples from Australia, Iran, and the Philippines. Despite being tested in distinct societal contexts, the scale performed good across all the samples. This suggests that the BMCTS may function consistently across different languages and societies. The similar means on the BMCTS across the samples (ranging from 25.28 to 27.74) also suggest that media conspiracy beliefs may be held to a somewhat similar extent across societies. Unlike many other conspiracy theories, which may resonate with certain societies but remain less understood in others, I speculate that media conspiracy beliefs may be more universally comprehensible and relatable to individuals from diverse cultural and societal backgrounds because of the relatively universal presence of the global and social media. However, these assumptions must be tested statistically, as samples from only three societies were surveyed in this study, and this study did not engage in cross-sample analysis and investigation. It must be noted that there were statistically significant sociodemographic differences across the studied samples. The sociodemographic differences across the samples (sample non-equivalence) represent a problem for cross-sample analysis and interpretation (e.g., see Buil et al., 2012).

Regarding another psychometric characteristic of the BMCTS, the results showed moderate to strong correlations between the BMCTS and established measures of conspiracy mentality and general conspiracy beliefs in the Australian and Iranian samples. However, these correlations were weaker, ranging from weak to moderate, in the Filipino sample. Overall, these findings supported the convergent validity of the BMCTS, but one important consideration must be noted. As prior research has discussed (see Imhoff et al., 2022; Nera, 2024; Sutton et al., 2024), specific conspiracy beliefs may not necessarily correlate strongly with conspiracy mentality or general conspiracy beliefs. Some individuals may believe in one or several specific conspiracy theories without exhibiting a general conspiracy mentality, or the conspiratorial nature of certain specific beliefs may be less pronounced. In this regard, media conspiracy beliefs in the Filipino sample may possess additional characteristics that slightly weaken their association with general conspiracism (e.g., these theories may be perceived as more acceptable and less conspiratorial within this population). Such assumptions require further investigation. Overall, the BMCTS demonstrated good convergent validity on average.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has important limitations. I acknowledge that these limitations may affect the findings, and the findings should be considered and interpreted cautiously, taking these limitations into account. The use of

convenience samples may limit the generalizability of the findings to the broader populations of the studied countries. These samples may not be precisely representative of the populations from which they were drawn. Furthermore, the sampling methods differed across samples due to variations in available methods and resources. Additionally, statistically significant differences were observed between the samples in terms of their sociodemographic characteristics. Sample non-equivalence in studies with samples from different cultures is a major problem that hinders precise cross-sample investigations and can lead to misinterpretations (e.g., see Buil et al., 2012). Also, measurement invariance for the BMCTS across the samples was not fully established (see Supplementary Material, Table S1). Therefore, I did not engage in comparison of media conspiracy beliefs across the samples, as well as a cross-cultural discussion and interpretation of the levels of media conspiracy beliefs within the samples. To address these issues, future studies are recommended to use sociodemographically comparable samples from different societies and to establish full measurement invariance of the BMCTS in order to enable valid comparative findings and interpretations.

Moreover, this investigation focused on active media users, based on the assumption that media engagement may be an important factor in both exposure to and the reinforcement or updating of conspiracy beliefs—particularly those concerning the media itself. Engagement with conspiratorial content might contribute to the development and persistence of such beliefs, particularly among individuals who are inclined to endorse conspiracy theories (e.g., see Sutton & Douglas, 2022). However, it is important to acknowledge that concentrating solely on active media users may overlook individuals who hold strong media conspiracy beliefs but have disengaged from media platforms due to concerns about their perceived harmfulness. Future research is therefore encouraged to include participants across varying levels of media engagement, including those who are minimally active or entirely disengaged.

Furthermore, additional psychometric evaluation of the BMCTS is warranted, as the current study focused primarily on core psychometric properties—those typically examined during the initial development and preliminary validation of a new scale (e.g., see Kyriazos & Stalikas, 2018; Morgado et al., 2018; Stefana et al., 2025). Future research is recommended to conduct additional psychometric testing, including the assessment of test-retest reliability, divergent validity, and other advanced forms of construct validation.

Moreover, in the current investigation, I did not examine in depth the relationship between media conspiracy beliefs and other conspiracy beliefs. I provided preliminary evidence based on a limited set of related constructs—namely, conspiracy thinking and general conspiricism. Considering Goertzel's (1994)

monological belief system model—which posits that for some individuals, endorsing one conspiracy theory may increase the likelihood of believing in others—the relationship between belief in media conspiracy theories and belief in other conspiracy theories warrants attention. Some empirical evidence has supported the co-occurrence of various conspiracy beliefs (e.g., Williams et al., 2022, 2025). In the present investigation, I examined only the association between belief in media conspiracy theories, conspiracy mentality, and general conspiracism. The relationship between belief in media conspiracy theories and other specific conspiracy beliefs (e.g., COVID-19-related conspiracy theories and those concerning mass immigration) was not explored. Future research should further investigate the relationship between media conspiracy beliefs and other conspiracy beliefs to shed light on whether these beliefs co-occur or operate independently.

Concluding Comments

Despite its limitations, *Chapter 2* explored a set of conspiracy beliefs that has not been thoroughly examined. Media conspiracy beliefs can present a new area of research within the psychology of conspiracy theories and the psychology of the relationship between individuals and media. This study suggests that the media can be a target of conspiracy beliefs and is not merely a channel for them. The exploration of media conspiracy beliefs, and their quantification, can offer insights into the gap between individuals and the media from the perspective of the individuals. This can deepen our understanding of the relationship between individuals, society, and the media. The way individuals perceive media is important, as modern life is often dependent on media (e.g., for obtaining information, building connections), and a well-functioning media is necessary for societal improvement (e.g., media's contribution to raising awareness during crises). Negative perceptions of media have the potential to affect users' engagement with media and their well-being, and also hinder media's effectiveness (e.g., see Shabahang et al., 2024a).

Given the potential differences in the nature and the correlates of various conspiracy beliefs (Hartman et al., 2021; Oleksy et al., 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2024; Wang & Kim, 2021), understanding the correlates of media conspiracy beliefs warrants further attention, which could also enhance our understanding of the similarities and differences between specific conspiracy beliefs. Additionally, there is potential for expanding the exploration of media conspiracies, such as investigating conspiracy beliefs about artificial intelligence. Overall, this study aimed to contribute to the literature on conspiracism and specific conspiracy beliefs, the measurement of conspiracy beliefs, the relationship between media and conspiracism, and the negative

relationship between individuals and the media, by conceptualising and measuring the underexplored domain of media conspiracy beliefs.

CHAPTER 3

I Am Not the Media's Puppet! Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories, Mental Health, and Sociopolitical Attitudes

Authorship statement: I am the primary author of this chapter and the corresponding manuscript. I conceptualised and designed the study, with guidance and advice from my principal supervisor (Emma Thoams). I collected data in Iran and Australia and coordinated data collection in the Philippines, the United States, and Hungary, which was undertaken by the co-authors (Marc Eric Santos Reyes, Ágnes Zsila, and Ho Phi Huynh). I conducted the data analyses with assistance from the co-authors. I drafted the entire chapter and manuscript and incorporated revisions and editorial suggestions provided by my supervisor and co-authors. Percentage of contributions: Reza Shabahang: 80%; Emma Thomas: 8%; Marc Eric Santos Reyes: 4%; Ágnes Zsila: 4%.; Ho Phi Huynh: 4%.

Abstract

Conspiracy beliefs may be linked to mental health, societal perspectives, and political attitudes. One apparently common but underexplored domain of conspiracism relates to media conspiracy beliefs—that is, beliefs about media being conspiratorial and having malicious purposes. Little is known about the potential outcomes associated with these beliefs. Investigating the consequences of a specific understudied set of conspiracy beliefs can offer insights into their nature and inform how these beliefs should be understood and addressed. In this Chapter, I investigate the association of media conspiracy beliefs with mental health and sociopolitical attitudes of media users across samples from five societies: Australia (n = 246; M_{age} = 36.35, SD_{age} = 7.792), Iran (n = 237; M_{age} = 31.68, SD_{age} = 9.637), the United States (n = 216; M_{age} = 33.74, SD_{age} = 9.494), the Philippines (n = 729; M_{age} = 23.04, SD_{age} = 6.885), and Hungary (n = 320; M_{age} = 38.65, SD_{age} = 8.961). Media conspiracy beliefs predicted future anxiety (in Australian, Iranian, and Hungarian samples), but not peace of mind or life satisfaction. Media conspiracy beliefs were linked to interpersonal trust (in Iranian and United States samples), and to some aspects of governmental trust (in United States, Filipino, and Hungarian samples). These beliefs also were associated with tendencies toward anarchism and activism in the Australian and

Filipino samples. Media conspiracy beliefs were associated with xenophobia in all samples, except the Iranian sample. Additionally, these beliefs predicted various worldviews across the samples, such as the Orthodox worldview in the Iranian sample. Notably, media conspiracy beliefs were consistently associated with the perceived breakdown in social fabric (a component of perceived anomie) and the dangerous and threatening social worldview across all samples. Based on these results, media conspiracy beliefs appear to be associated with negative and destabilizing perceptions and reactions in individuals who hold them. Belief in media conspiracy theories may have consequences similar to those of more widely recognized (big-name) conspiracy theories, highlighting the need for attention from media institutions, academics, and policymakers.

Keywords: Conspiracy, conspiracy belief, conspiracy theories, media, mental health, sociopolitical attitude, Australia, Iran, the United States, the Philippines, Hungary

Introduction

Conspiracy theories challenge publicly accepted understandings of events, adopting an oppositional stance to accepted or "conventional" explanations. They mainly attribute malevolent actions to specific individuals or groups. Epistemically, conspiracy theories carry significant risks: while individual conspiracy theories may not always be false or implausible, collectively, they are more likely to be false compared to other types of beliefs. Moreover, conspiracy theories function as social constructs, not merely adopted by individuals but shared with the aim of achieving social objectives. They possess the dual capacity to interpret and represent reality while simultaneously shaping new social realities (see Douglas & Sutton, 2023). Compared to non-conspiracist information, conspiracy theories typically feature less evidence-based content, greater emotional appeal, and a higher prevalence of threat-related narratives (Meuer et al., 2023). Their scope is broad, targeting diverse subjects. Media—spanning platforms, personalities, and products—can be one of the target of conspiracy theories. For instance, conspiracy theories about celebrity deaths and subliminal advertisements (Ballinger, 2014; Furnham, 2013). Although media conspiracy beliefs appear to exist and be held by some individuals (Ballinger, 2014; Furnham, 2013; Uscinski et al., 2022b), they remain relatively underexplored, and there is little information on their associated consequences.

In this Chapter, I aim to provide preliminary insights into the outcomes associated with media conspiracy beliefs. Such inquiry is particularly significant, given the apparent rise in some conspiracy beliefs about the media (e.g., "Billionaire George Soros is behind a hidden plot to destabilize the American

government, take control of the media, and put the world under his control"; see Uscinski et al., 2022b) and the necessity of conducting focused investigations into specific types of conspiracy beliefs to ensure reliable conclusions about their potential consequences (Enders et al., 2021; Jolley et al., 2024; Oleksy et al., 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2024; Wang & Kim, 2021). Conspiracy theories about the media—such as the belief that the media serve as a mass mind control tool to make the population more accepting of planned future events (predictive programming via media; e.g., see Beaver, 2018)—can be found circulating in everyday conversations, on the internet, and within the media itself. However, little understanding exists regarding the outcomes associated with these conspiracy beliefs. Such an empirical investigation is necessary, as findings on the possible impacts of other conspiracy beliefs cannot be directly generalized to media conspiracy beliefs in the absence of specific evidence. The outcomes associated with conspiracy beliefs are not always predictable or consistent with common expectations regarding their associated consequences. Conspiracy beliefs about the same topic may be linked to different consequences (see Oleksy et al., 2021), and even a single conspiracy belief may be associated with opposing effects across different populations (see Wang & Kim, 2021). Moreover, some conspiracy beliefs may be less inherently conspiracist and show weaker associations with conspiracy thinking (see Imhoff et al., 2022; Nera, 2024; Strömbäck et al., 2024; Sutton et al., 2024).

In this Chapter, I investigate the potential effects of media conspiracy beliefs on two broad sets of outcomes: mental health and sociopolitical attitudes. Given that one of the key aspects of conspiracy beliefs is their potential consequences (consequentiality; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018), and that nearly all conspiracy beliefs may have some degree of impact, particularly on mental health and sociopolitical attitudes (Douglas et al., 2015; Freeman & Bentall, 2017; Jolley et al., 2022; Thomas et al., 2024), it is important to investigate outcomes associated with these beliefs.

Conspiracy Beliefs and Their Associated Mental Health Outcomes

Conspiracy beliefs are widely acknowledged for their potential adverse effects on mental health (Jolley et al., 2022; van Mulukom et al., 2022). Beliefs such as the claim that the moon landing was fabricated by Hollywood, that a New World Order is emerging, that information is being systematically controlled, and that hidden motives underlie various global events have been associated with negative psychological states, including higher levels of stress and anxiety, as well as lower levels of life satisfaction (e.g., Dagnall et al., 2025; Freeman & Bentall, 2017; Georgio et al., 2019; Swami et al., 2016). Research suggests that individuals endorsing conspiracy theories are more likely to experience higher rates of suicidal ideation, reduced social networks,

and an increased risk of meeting criteria for psychiatric disorders (Freeman & Bentall, 2017). These beliefs have also been associated with greater psychological distress, symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder, and lower life satisfaction (Chen et al., 2020). Furthermore, heightened conspiracy beliefs correlate with increased anxiety, intolerance of uncertainty, and feelings of existential threat (Liekefett et al., 2023). The potential detrimental effects of conspiracy beliefs on psychological well-being are often attributed to their tendency to amplify uncertainty, hypervigilance, and threat perception, which can deplete psychological resources and negatively affect mood.

Yet, while conspiracy beliefs are frequently linked to reduced psychological well-being and elevated mental health problems (Freeman & Bentall, 2017; van Prooijen et al., 2023; Green et al., 2022), some studies have reported non-significant relationships between conspiracy beliefs, life satisfaction, and quality of life (Leibovitz et al., 2021; Pekárová, 2021). For instance, in the study by Georgiou et al. (2020), while COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs were associated with broader conspiracy beliefs and negative attitudes toward governmental responses, no significant relationship was observed between COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs and self-reported stress. Similarly, Krüppel et al. (2023) found no association between conspiracy beliefs and state anxiety (situational anxiety). Likewise, Leibovitz et al. reported no significant relationship between COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs and quality of life. These null findings suggest that there is still a need for further empirical research on the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and mental health, particularly with regard to specific conspiracy beliefs that may vary in tone, intensity, and potential impacts.

I focus here on the relationships between media conspiracy beliefs and peace of mind, life satisfaction, and future anxiety. Peace of mind is defined as a state of calmness and tranquility (e.g., see Lee et al., 2013). Life satisfaction is often conceptualized as a positive evaluation of one's overall life (e.g., see Jovanović & Lazić, 2020). Future anxiety refers to worries about the future (e.g., see Zaleski et al., 2019). These aspects have been explored and discussed in the literature concerning conspiracy beliefs, which suggests that such beliefs may, in some cases, be associated with heightened worry, increased anxiety, and lower levels of mental well-being (e.g., see Freeman & Bentall, 2017; van Prooijen et al., 2023; Green et al., 2022). These constructs are selected to capture different dimensions of mental well-being, providing preliminary insights into how media conspiracy beliefs may relate to a state of mental calmness, overall positive life assessment, and concerns about the future.

Conspiracy Beliefs and Their Associated Sociopolitical Outcomes

In addition to mental health consequences, the potential sociopolitical consequences of conspiracy beliefs have been another major area of research on the impacts of conspiracy beliefs (e.g., see Jolly et al., 2022). A significant body of studies has reported negative sociopolitical outcomes associated with conspiracy beliefs. Previous studies have highlighted various non-normative and harmful attitudes and behaviors associated with conspiracy beliefs (Jolley et al., 2019; Pummerer, 2022). These beliefs have been shown to be associated with impulsive and misguided actions for protection, such as hoarding supplies or consuming harmful substances like methanol in response to COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs (van Mulukom et al., 2022). Research has shown a link between conspiracy beliefs and increased feelings of powerlessness, mistrust, and uncertainty (Jolley & Douglas, 2014). Additionally, they have been associated with lower institutional trust (Einstein & Glick, 2015) and increased intergroup hostility (Bilewicz et al., 2013; de Zavala & Cichocka, 2012; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). Conspiracy beliefs have also been associated with maladaptive behaviors and attitudes, such as discrimination, prejudice, racism, violence, and extremism (Bilewicz et al., 2013; de Zavala & Cichocka, 2012; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Jolley et al., 2022; van Mulukom et al., 2022).

Despite a substantial body of research indicating that conspiracy beliefs are associated with negative sociopolitical outcomes, the direction of these outcomes is not always predictable. Depending on the specific conspiracy theory, the characteristics of the believer, and the emotions evoked, conspiracy beliefs may lead to both action, such as protests, and inaction, such as political disengagement (Jolley et al., 2020). Conspiracy theories often function as alarms, signaling perceived threats, vulnerabilities, rule violations, or abuses of power (Palecek & Hampel, 2024; Uscinski, 2018; van Prooijen & van Vugt, 2018). Individual responses to these signals vary based on the nature of the perceived threat and the individual's sense of control over it, ranging from active engagement to passive resignation. In some contexts, conspiracy beliefs may even inspire positive social change, such as protests aimed at constructive societal transformation (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014).

Different conspiracy beliefs may be associated with distinct sociopolitical reactions and outcomes in certain contexts. For example, Oleksy et al. (2021) observed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, general conspiracy beliefs targeting malevolent groups were associated with xenophobia and support for discriminatory policies, whereas conspiracy beliefs about malevolent governments were not linked to these two outcomes. Wang and Kim (2021) found that COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs in Korea were unexpectedly associated with an increase in preventive behaviors. Uscinski et al. (2022a) found that partisanship and ideological extremity were inconsistently associated with different conspiracy beliefs. They suggested that

conspiracy beliefs related to partisan and ideological issues (e.g., beliefs about election fraud) and those amplified by partisan or ideological media and elites may be linked to sociopolitical factors such as partisanship and ideological extremity. However, non-partisan and non-ideological conspiracy theories (e.g., beliefs about cell phones causing cancer) do not appear to be associated with partisanship or ideological extremity. These findings underscore the complexity of the sociopolitical outcomes associated with conspiracy beliefs, highlighting the need for caution when making generalizations about their possible effects. They also emphasize the importance of further empirical investigations into the potential sociopolitical consequences of specific conspiracy beliefs, given that the context and content of different specific conspiracy beliefs may lead to varying sociopolitical outcomes.

I focus here on the relationships between media conspiracy beliefs and interpersonal trust, governmental trust (i.e., trust in representative government, governing bodies, and security forces), perceived anomie, xenophobia, anarchist and activism inclinations, and worldviews (i.e., localized, pragmatist, orthodox, reward, survivor, dangerous and threatening, and competitive jungle). Interpersonal trust refers to the belief in the reliability of others, while governmental trust pertains to the belief in the reliability of governmental institutions (e.g., see Mari et al., 2022; Nießen et al., 2020). Perceived anomie is commonly conceptualised as the perception that society is in a state of breakdown (e.g., see Teymoori et al., 2016). Xenophobia is defined as a dislike or prejudice against individuals from other countries (e.g., see Wilson-Daily et al., 2018). Anarchist and activist inclinations reflect the degree to which individuals identify with anarchist and activist ideologies. Anarchism is primarily characterized by opposition to hierarchical structures and capitalism, aiming to establish a society free from domination and exploitation. In contrast, activism involves direct action to raise public awareness of a particular cause (e.g., see Desjardins et al., 2024). Worldviews encompass an individual's conceptualisation of the world. In this Chapter, both philosophical worldviews (views on life) and social worldviews (views on society and people) are considered (e.g., see Perry et al., 2013; Sammut et al., 2022). These constructs are commonly studied in relation to conspiracy beliefs, which have frequently been associated with interpersonal and institutional distrust, maladaptive responses, negative perceptions of society and foreigners, and pessimistic worldviews (e.g., Jolly et al., 2022; Pummerer, 2022; van Mulukom et al., 2022). I have selected them to capture different aspects of sociopolitical attitudes and reactions, providing preliminary insights into how media conspiracy beliefs may be linked to various sociopolitical dimensions.

The Current Study

In this Chapter, I aim to address the question: What are the mental health and sociopolitical outcomes associated with endorsing media conspiracy theories? Given the inconsistent findings (see Douglas & Sutton, 2023) regarding the consequences of conspiracy beliefs (e.g., some studies suggest a negative association between conspiracy beliefs and mental health, while others report no association; Georgiou et al., 2020; Krüppel et al., 2023; Leibovitz et al., 2021; Pekárová, 2021) and the potential for varied sociopolitical outcomes (e.g., different conspiracy beliefs—or even the same belief—may be associated with distinct sociopolitical consequences; see Oleksy et al., 2021; Uscinski et al., 2022b; Wang & Kim, 2021), it is essential to continue investigating the possible effects of specific conspiracy beliefs. Following recommendations to include findings from diverse societies, particularly non-WEIRD societies, in studies of conspiracy beliefs (Douglas & Sutton, 2023; Stojanov & Douglas, 2022), this study sampled participants from five societies: Australia (a Western, individualistic, multicultural society in Oceania), Iran (an Eastern, collectivistic culture with a homogeneous society in the Middle East), the United States (a Western, individualistic, multicultural society in North America), the Philippines (a blended Western-Eastern culture with a homogeneous society in South Asia), and Hungary (a Western, individualistic culture with a homogeneous society in Central Europe). These societies represent different world regions (including non-WEIRD societies), with variations in cultural orientation (Western, Eastern, or blended), country development status (stable/developed, stable/developing, unstable/developing), and societal homogeneity/diversity (e.g., see Pae, 2020). This diverse sample provides an opportunity to observe the link between media conspiracy beliefs and mental health, as well as sociopolitical outcomes, across different societal contexts. In this Chapter, I investigate the association of media conspiracy beliefs with mental health (i.e., internal peace of mind, positive assessments of quality of life, and anticipatory anxiety about the future) and sociopolitical attitudes (i.e., trust in others and authorities, perceptions of societal erosion, prejudice against foreigners, tendencies toward anarchy and activism, and worldviews) in samples from five societies, without engaging in cross-sample statistical analysis or interpretation.

Considering the large number of outcome variables, associations are first investigated through correlation analysis to provide an initial understanding of the connections between variables and identify those that warrant further exploration (see Bewick et al., 2003). Subsequently, statistically significant correlations are examined in regression models to assess the contribution of media conspiracy beliefs to mental health and sociopolitical outcomes. This chapter presents preliminary findings and interpretations of the outcomes

associated with media conspiracy beliefs, aiming to highlight the significance of this belief type and establish a foundation for future advanced and focused research.

Methods

Design and Participants

This study (*Chapter 3*) is cross-sectional and survey-based. The participants included 1,748 adult active media users aged between 18 and 50 years old from Australia (n = 246), Iran (n = 237), the United States (n = 216), the Philippines (n = 729), and Hungary (n = 320). According to Green's (1991) recommendations and rule of thumb for regression analyses, the sample sizes are sufficient to detect small to medium effect sizes.

The inclusion criteria were being between 18 to 50 years and actively engaged in media. Participants were selected based on the following inclusion criteria: being between 18 and 50 years old and actively engaged in media consumption. The age range was specifically chosen to focus on individuals who are more likely to be active media users, given the generally lower engagement with media, particularly new media, among older adults. An active media user was defined as an individual who has accounts on at least one social media platform, uses social media for an average of at least 30 minutes per day over the last 30 days, follows news on at least one medium (e.g., social media, TV, radio) for an average of at least 30 minutes per day over the last 30 days, and watches an average of at least 30 minutes of media shows (e.g., movies, series, documentaries) per day over the last 30 days. This minimum media engagement threshold was established to exclude participants who were on digital diets, undergoing digital detoxes, or practicing media disconnection (Skivko et al., 2020). In this investigation, I focused on active media users, based on the assumption that they constituted a more appropriate target group than non-active users or media avoiders for the purposes of this study (as discussed in Chapter 2). For the Iranian sample, the use of virtual private networks (VPNs) was established as an inclusion criterion due to the politically sensitive nature of the research topic and probable risks for participants. This ensured the anonymity and untraceability of the collected data by encrypting personal information and masking participants' IP addresses.

A detailed overview of sample characteristics across the samples is presented in *Table 8*. Statistically significant differences were identified among the samples regarding demographics and subjective socioeconomic status. For example, the Filipino sample had the lowest average age, which was significantly

lower than the mean age observed in the other samples. Participants from Australia, the Philippines, and Hungary reported higher levels of subjective social status, whereas those from Iran and the US reported significantly lower subjective social status (see *Table 8*).

Table 8. Demographics and Subjective Socioeconomic Statues across the Samples

Sociodemographics	1. Australian Sample	2. Iranian Sample	3. The United States Sample	4. Filipino Sample	*5. Hungarian Sample*	χ^2 / *F*
Age *Mean* (*SD*)	36.35 (7.792)[2,4]	31.68 (9.637)[4,5]	33.74 (9.494)[4,5]	23.04 (6.885)[1,2,3,5]	38.65 (8.961)[2,3,4]	272.33***
Gender						
Female *n* (%)	103 (41.9%)[2,3,4,5]	160 (67.5%)[1]	138 (63.9%)[1,5]	440 (6.4%)[1,5]	237 (74.1%)[1,4]	114.71***
Male *n* (%)	142 (57.7%)[2,3,4,5]	71 (30%)[1]	71 (32.9%)[1,5]	237 (32.5%)[1,5]	76 (23.8%)[1,4]	–
Non-binary *n* (%)	0 (0%)[3,4]	4 (1.7%)	7 (3.2%)[1]	33 (4.5%)[1]	4 (1.3%)	–
Transgender *n* (%)	1 (.4%)	2 (.8%)	0 (0%)	4 (.5%)	0 (0%)	–
Another term *n* (%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	15 (2.6%)	3 (.8%)	–
Educational Level						
High school diploma or less *n* (%)	58 (23.6%)[2,3,4]	28 (11.8%)[1,3,4,5]	85 (39.4%)[1,2,4,5]	435 (59.7%)[1,2,3,5]	76 (23.8%)[2,3,4]	437.00***
Bachelor's degree *n* (%)	132 (53.7%)[2,3,5]	86 (36.3%)[1]	92 (42.6%)	253 (34.7%)[1]	112 (35.0%)[1]	–
Master's degree *n* (%)	48 (19.5%)[2,3,5]	88 (37.1%)[1,3,4]	28 (13.0%)[2,4,5]	30 (4.1%)[1, 2,3,5]	115 (35.9%)[1,3,4]	–

Doctoral degree *n* (%)	8 (3.3%)[2]	35 (14.8%)[1,3,4,5]	11 (5.1%)[2,4]	11 (1.5%)[2,3,5]	17 (5.3%)[2,4]	–
Subjective Social Status *Mean* (*SD*)	6.26 (2.094)[2,3]	5.59 (1.857)[1,4]	5.22 (1.832)[1,4,5]	6.14 (1.543)[2,3]	6.06 (1.375)[3]	17.55***

Note. ***$p < .001$; **$p < .01$. Superscript numbers in the rows represent significant difference from the sample indicated by the respective number. Superscript numbers represent the numbering in the first row (samples).

Online written consent was required prior to participation, and participants' rights, confidentiality, and privacy were ensured. The study received approval from Flinders University's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC Project No.: 7726). Additional ethics approvals were obtained from the University of Santo Tomas and Pázmány Péter Catholic University (Project No.: 2024_33). The ethical practices were adhered to in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki, and American Psychological Association Ethics Code.

Measures

Demographics

To assess demographic characteristics, participants reported their age, gender (i.e., woman, man, non-binary, transgender, and another term), and educational attainment (i.e., high school diploma or less, bachelor's degree, master's degree, or doctoral degree).

Subjective Socioeconomic Status

Subjective socioeconomic status was measured using the *MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status* (*MSSS*; Adler et al., 2008). This single-item scale presents a 10-rung ladder (1 = *Lowest social position* [bottom rung], 10 = *Highest social position* [top rung]). Participants were asked to select the rung that best represents their perceived social standing relative to others in society. The MSSS score reflects an individual's sense of belonging to a higher or lower social class based on factors like income, education, and occupation.

Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories

To assess inclination toward media conspiracy beliefs, the unidimensional 7-item *Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories Scale (BMCTS)* was used (see *Chapter 2*). The items of the BMCTS were designed to capture media conspiracy beliefs rather than media scepticism or cynicism. The language used in the BMCTS is deliberately kept generic to ensure its applicability across different languages, societies, and among individuals with

varying sociopolitical perspectives. The BMCTS includes items addressing conspiracy beliefs about various media components: *social media* (e.g., “Social media is part of a larger malicious scheme by secretive groups aiming to control and manipulate people.”), *news* (i.e., “News companies adjust what they report to influence people’s thinking in alignment with the agendas of secretive, malicious groups.”), *movies* (e.g., “The movie industry is part of a big plan orchestrated by secretive groups with dark goals, such as controlling and programming people.”), *video games* (i.e., “Video games are shaping the way people, especially children, think and act so that in the future, they will be more likely to support secretive groups’ goals.”), and *media figures* (i.e., “Secretive groups hire media figures (e.g., celebrities) to assist them with their malicious plans for people.”). Consistent with many existing conceptualizations and measures of conspiracy beliefs, which treat related conspiracy theories about a single target as a unified construct (e.g., COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs, which address various aspects such as technological contributions to COVID-19 and financial benefits and cluster them together in a measure; e.g., Dębski et al., 2022), the items in the BMCTS address individual media components but collectively contribute to a singular construct of belief in media conspiracy theories. Statistical analyses (*Chapter 2*) demonstrated good psychometric characteristics for the one-factor BMCTS. The BMCTS consists of 7 items, with respondents evaluating statements using a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 6 (*Strongly agree*). Higher scores indicate a stronger inclination toward media conspiracy theories. For the Iranian and Hungarian samples, the items were translated into Persian and Hungarian, respectively, using a forward-translation and back-translation procedure, following standard guidelines for questionnaire translation as recommended in the literature (e.g., Tsang et al., 2017). The internal consistency of the BMCTS was good to excellent across the Australian (α = .93), Iranian (α = .91), US (α = .93), Filipino (α = .84), and Hungarian (α = .93) samples.

Mental Health

To assess participants' sense of internal peace, the unidimensional 7-item *Peace of Mind Scale* (*PoM*; Lee et al., 2013) was used (e.g., "My mind is free and at ease"). Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*Not at all*) to 5 (*All of the time*), with two items reverse-scored (items 5 and 7). The Cronbach's alphas indicated acceptable internal consistency for most samples, except for the Filipino and Hungarian samples ($\alpha_{Australian\ sample}$ = .75, $\alpha_{Iranian\ sample}$ = .90; $\alpha_{United\ States\ sample}$ = .63; $\alpha_{Filipino\ sample}$ = .52; $\alpha_{Hungarian\ sample}$ = .51). Considering the low reliability of the measure in Filipino and Hungarian samples, I selected a single item—“My mind is free and at ease”—to retain this construct within the models for these samples. To ensure

consistency across all models (e.g., avoiding situations in which one model used a single item while another used multiple items to assess the same construct), this single item was used uniformly across all models. The item was chosen based on its higher face validity in these two samples, as well as its correlation with other items and its performance in terms of explained variance in the original study that developed the scale. The explanations and recommendations regarding the use of multi-item and single-item scales were considered (e.g., see Diamantopoulos et al., 2012). However, interpretations of the results should be made with caution.

To assess life satisfaction, participants completed the *Single-Item Life Satisfaction Scale* (Jovanović & Lazić, 2020), which asked: "Thinking about your own life and personal circumstances, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole?" Responses were recorded on an 11-point scale, ranging from 0 (*No satisfaction at all*) to 10 (*Completely satisfied*).

To assess apprehension regarding the future, the 5-item *Dark Future Scale* (DFS; Zaleski et al., 2019) was utilized (e.g., "I am afraid that, in the future, my life will change for the worse"). Responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (*Decidedly false*) to 6 (*Decidedly true*). Cronbach's alpha coefficients indicated good internal consistency for all samples, with values of .92 for the Australian sample, .87 for the Iranian sample, .91 for the United States sample, .84 for the Filipino sample, and .84 for the Hungarian sample.

Sociopolitical Attitudes

To assess interpersonal trust as a psychological trait, the unidimensional 3-item *Interpersonal Trust Short Scale* (Nießen et al., 2020), which is the English-language version of the Kurzskala Interpersonelles Vertrauen (KUSIV3), was employed (e.g., “I am convinced that most people have good intentions.”). Responses were provided on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*Do not agree at all*) to 5 (*Completely agree*). The Cronbach’s alphas were low for all samples and acceptable only for the Iranian and US samples ($\alpha_{Australian\ sample}$ = .21, $\alpha_{Iranian\ sample}$ = .68; $\alpha_{United\ States\ sample}$ = .67; $\alpha_{Filipino\ sample}$ = .49; $\alpha_{Hungarian\ sample}$ = .47). For the Australian, Filipino, and Hungarian samples, I selected a single item from the measure (i.e., “I am convinced that most people have good intentions.”) to retain this construct in the models of these samples. To ensure consistency across all models (e.g., avoiding situations in which one model used a single item while another used multiple items to assess the same construct), this single item was also used in the Iranian and US samples. The item was chosen based on its higher face validity in these samples, as well as its correlation with other items and its performance in terms of explained variance in the original study that developed the scale. The interpretations of the results should be made with caution.

To assess trust toward authorities and fundamental state institutions, the 9-item *Institutional Trust Measure* used in Mari et al.'s study (2022) was employed. Participants were instructed: "Please rate your feelings of trust towards the following people and organizations using the scale below." The items encompass trust in three categories: Trust in Representative Government (3 items; i.e., National government, Local government, Prime Minister/President [partisan governing bodies]), Trust in Governing Bodies (4 items; Judiciary, Government surveillance agencies, election outcomes, tax system [nonpartisan government bodies]), and Trust in Security Forces (2 items; Police and Military). Responses were provided on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*Do not trust at all*) to 7 (*Trust completely*). Satisfactory internal consistency was found for the Trust in Representative Government Subscale ($\alpha_{Australian\ sample}$ = .93, $\alpha_{Iranian\ sample}$ = .90; $\alpha_{United\ States\ sample}$ = .91; $\alpha_{Filipino\ sample}$ = .84; $\alpha_{Hungarian\ sample}$ = .72), the Trust in Governing Bodies Subscale ($\alpha_{Australian\ sample}$ = .90, $\alpha_{Iranian\ sample}$ = .91; $\alpha_{United\ States\ sample}$ = .85; $\alpha_{Filipino\ sample}$ = .86; $\alpha_{Hungarian\ sample}$ = .84), and the Trust in Security Forces Subscale ($\alpha_{Australian\ sample}$ = .88, $\alpha_{Iranian\ sample}$ = .88; $\alpha_{United\ States\ sample}$ = .86; $\alpha_{Filipino\ sample}$ = .84; $\alpha_{Hungarian\ sample}$ = .82) in this study.

The 12-item *Perception of Anomie Scale* (*PAS*; Teymoori et al., 2016) was utilized to measure anomie, encompassing two dimensions: the Breakdown in Social Fabric Subscale (6 items; e.g., "Most of the people think that honesty doesn't work all the time; dishonesty is sometimes a better approach to get ahead.") and the Breakdown of Leadership Subscale (lack of legitimacy and effectiveness; 6 items; e.g., "Politicians don't care about the problems of average person."). Participants rated their agreement on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*), where higher scores indicated higher perceived anomie. The Breakdown in Social Fabric Subscale ($\alpha_{Australian\ sample}$ = .75, $\alpha_{Iranian\ sample}$ = .80; $\alpha_{United\ States\ sample}$ = .81; $\alpha_{Filipino\ sample}$ = .76; $\alpha_{Hungarian\ sample}$ = .69) and the Breakdown of Leadership Subscale ($\alpha_{Australian\ sample}$ = .73, $\alpha_{Iranian\ sample}$ = .86; $\alpha_{United\ States\ sample}$ = .81; $\alpha_{Filipino\ sample}$ = .79; $\alpha_{Hungarian\ sample}$ = .58) showed good to adequate internal consistency across the samples.

To assess xenophobic attitudes, the 7-item single-factor *Xenophobia Scale* (Wilson-Daily et al., 2018) was employed. Participants were prompted to envision a peer expressing opinions about "people who have arrived from other countries" and to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 5 = *Strongly agree*) with the seven statements (e.g., "They are a burden; they take advantage of the welfare system"). Higher scores show stronger xenophobic attitudes. The Cronbach's alphas suggested good internal

consistency for all samples ($\alpha_{Australian\ sample}$ = .78, $\alpha_{Iranian\ sample}$ = .82; $\alpha_{United\ States\ sample}$ = .90; $\alpha_{Filipino\ sample}$ = .71; $\alpha_{Hungarian\ sample}$ = .70).

The item used in Desjardins et al.'s study (2024) to measure the extent to which respondent consider themselves to be an "*anarchist*" was used. After reading the provided definition of being an anarchist (i.e., "Simply put, an anarchist is someone who opposes hierarchy and capitalism, and whose goal is to build a society without domination or exploitation, where government is replaced by cooperation and direct democracy."), participants were asked, "To what extent do you consider yourself to be an anarchist, on a scale of 0–10? (0 = *I do not consider myself an anarchist at all*, 10 = *I consider myself an anarchist*).

The item used in Desjardins et al.'s study (2024) to assess the extent to which respondent consider themselves to be an "*activist*" was employed. After reading the provided definition of being an anarchist (i.e., "Simply put, an activist is someone who takes direct action to raise people's awareness of a cause that matters to him/her, to protest against what he/she perceives as injustice and to put an end to everything that causes and maintains injustices. This action is direct in that the person acts independently to change a situation, without delegating the power to an intermediary (as opposed to an indirect or political action). Examples of direct actions include participation in or organization of a demonstration, civil disobedience, vandalism, destruction of property, occupying an area to defend, protection of protesters targeted by the police, and entering a private property to secretly film there."), participants were asked, "To what extent do you consider yourself to be an activist, on a scale of 0–10? (0 = *I do not consider myself an activist at all*, 10 = *I consider myself an activist*").

For measuring worldviews, the measure from the Sammut et al. study (2022) was used. Respondents were presented with a series of five vignettes representing different worldviews: Localised ("The future depends on us and the choices we make. Every problem has a solution. Each and every one of us can make an effort to fix the laws and institutions so that they can be just and equal for everyone. Like this we can better address the needs of people and society."), Pragmatist (i.e., "In life we must adapt ourselves to our circumstances and sometimes we need to go with the flow in order to avoid trouble. The rich and powerful protect their own interests, whereas the kind-hearted suffer. Sometimes you have to work around the rules to help your loved ones."), Orthodox (i.e., "To succeed in life, we need to follow the rules and local customs in order to maintain social order. We also need to show respect to each other and carry out our duties. Like this we can help others in our community."), Reward (i.e., "In life, you get what you deserve. Life's challenges are overcome with the efforts we make, and these may offer new opportunities. One must co-operate with others,

respect authority, and carry out one's duties. Our efforts will eventually lead to success."), Survivor (i.e., "In life, things rarely end up well. People are what they are, and good people usually suffer and are exploited. It is best for one to keep his/her head down and get on with it."). Participants rated their endorsement of each worldview on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*).

One of the items of the *Dangerous Worldview Scale* (Perry et al., 2013; i.e., "My knowledge and experience tells me that the social world we live in is basically a dangerous and unpredictable place, in which good, decent and moral people's values and way of life are threatened and disrupted by bad people.") and one of the items of the *Competitive Worldview Scale* (Perry et al., 2013; i.e., "My knowledge and experience tells me that the social world we live in is basically a competitive "jungle" in which the fittest survive and succeed, in which power, wealth, and winning are everything, and might is right.") were used to assess dangerous worldview and competitive worldview, respectively. These two items were selected based on their high statistical explanatory value. Responses were provided on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*).

Procedure

In this Chapter, data of the BMCTS and outcome measures (i.e., measures of mental health and sociopolitical attitudes) were derived from the comprehensive survey employed in this project, which included samples from Australia, Iran, and the Philippines.

Additionally, data from the United States and Hungary were also collected and analysed for this study within the thesis to provide broader findings. Data from the US and Hungary were specifically collected to investigate how media conspiracy beliefs are associated with mental health and sociopolitical outcomes in these samples, alongside those from Australia, Iran, and the Philippines. The survey for the US and Hungarian samples included the 7-item validated measure of belief in media conspiracy theories (the final scale validated in the first empirical phase) as well as the same measures of sociodemographics, mental health, and sociopolitical attitudes used for the Australian, Iranian, and Filipino samples.

The survey was conducted using Qualtrics, except for the Iranian sample, which used Google Forms. The English-language survey for the Australian sample was administered by The ORU. The United States respondents were recruited through Prolific and completed the survey in English. Filipino participants were recruited via the University of Santo Tomas social media channels, with the survey provided in English, in line with prior research (e.g., Shabahang et al., 2024a) given English's status as an official language in the

Philippines and its widespread use. The Hungarian survey was promoted through Facebook channels related to Hungarian media news, targeting participants in Hungary. Due to the sensitive sociopolitical situation and general distrust of local sources in Iran, the survey for Iranian participants in Persian was promoted through non-governmental Persian-language online psychology magazines based outside Iran but accessible to Iranian residents. The previously validated and utilized Persian and Hungarian versions of the scales were used (e.g., see Shabahang et al., 2024; Tan et al., 2025).

The study's objective was presented to participants in a broad, non-specific manner via the information sheet. Rather than explicitly highlighting a focus on belief in conspiracy theories, the study was framed as an investigation into attitudes toward media. This approach was deliberately chosen to minimize the risk of eliciting defensive reactions and to avoid any impression that individuals with conspiracy beliefs might be subject to judgment or marginalization (Lantian et al., 2018; see Spiral of Silence Theory, Noelle-Neumann, 1974), given that such beliefs are often perceived as unpopular. Following the completion of the survey, participants were briefed on the true nature of the study and provided with the opportunity to withdraw their responses if desired.

Completion of all survey items was mandatory, and there were no missing responses in the recorded, completed data sets. Participants from Australia and the United States received financial compensation for their involvement. Due to the sensitive sociopolitical climate in Iran and the nature of the study, Iranian participants were provided with anonymous, non-identifiable gift codes for online shopping to minimize any potential risks of identification. No compensation was offered to participants from the Philippines or Hungary due to a lack of funding for the surveys conducted in those countries. I acknowledge that this was not ideal and represents a limitation of the survey implementation for these two samples.

Data Analyses

Initially, correlates of belief in media conspiracy theories were explored among peace of mind, life satisfaction, future anxiety, interpersonal trust, institutional trust, perceived anomie, xenophobia, anarchist tendency, activist inclination, and worldviews (i.e., localized, pragmatist, orthodox, reward, survivor, dangerous and threatening, and competitive jungle). Zero-order correlations (Pearson) were conducted on samples. Subsequently, multivariate regression models were constructed across the samples to explore the predictive power of belief in media conspiracy theories for mental health and sociopolitical attitudes. Only those variables that were found to be correlated with belief in media conspiracy theories, based on the preceding correlation

analysis in the respective samples, were included in these models. I conducted separate regression models for each group, and no cross-sample statistical analyses were performed. Given that previous research suggests demographic factors may contribute to conspiracy beliefs (Enders et al., 2024), demographic variables were controlled. The multivariate regressions were conducted using a robust maximum likelihood estimator (MLR). Bonferroni correction was applied for multiple group comparisons, so the p-value was set at $p < .01$ consistently in this study. Post hoc sensitivity analyses indicated that, given the number of variables, a power level of .80, and an α error probability of .05, the model had sufficient power to detect small to medium effects across the samples (ranging from $f^2 = .02$ to .13). Data analysis was conducted using SPSS statistical software (IBM SPSS Statistics 21.0) and Mplus 7.4 (Muthén & Muthén, 2016).

Results

The Correlation between Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories, Mental Health, and Sociopolitical Attitudes across the Samples

Descriptive statistics of the variables, including means and standard deviations, are available in the Supplementary Material (see Table S2). Zero-order correlations (Pearson) were conducted to explore the correlation between media conspiracy beliefs with mental health and sociopolitical attitudes (see *Table 9*). Mental health was not correlated with media conspiracy beliefs in general; only future anxiety was weakly correlated with stronger beliefs in media conspiracy theories in the Australian, Iranian, and Hungarian samples. Regarding sociopolitical attitudes, lower interpersonal trust was weakly correlated with media conspiracy beliefs in the Iranian and US samples. Stronger trust in representative government was positively associated with media conspiracy beliefs in the Hungarian sample, while this association was negative in the US and Filipino samples. Lower trust in governing bodies was moderately correlated to media conspiracy beliefs in the US sample and weakly in the Filipino sample. Breakdown in social fabric was consistently positively associated with stronger beliefs in media conspiracy theories across the samples. However, breakdown of leadership was positively associated with these beliefs only in the US and Hungarian samples. Xenophobia was consistently, positively correlated to stronger media conspiracy beliefs across the samples, except for the Iranian sample. Anarchist tendency and activist inclination were weakly and positively correlated to media conspiracy beliefs in the Australian sample. Moreover, anarchist tendency was weakly and positively

correlated with these beliefs in the Filipino sample. Some worldviews were weakly associated with media conspiracy beliefs across some samples. However, dangerous and threatening as well as competitive jungle social worldviews were weakly and positively associated with media conspiracy beliefs in most samples, except for the Iranian sample.

Table 9. Zero-Order (Pearson) Correlations Between Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories, Mental Health, and Sociopolitical Attitudes across the Samples

Mental Health and Sociopolitical Attitudes	Belief in media conspiracy theories				
	Australian Sample	Iranian Sample	United States Sample	Filipino Sample	Hungarian Sample
Peace of mind	.15	-.06	.04	.10	.02
Life satisfaction	.05	-.02	.04	-.02	-.08
Future anxiety	.30***	.17*	-.06	.03	.14*
Interpersonal trust	-.10	-.19**	-.21**	-.11	-.06
Trust in Representative Government	.07	.01	-.37***	-.12**	.23***
Trust in Governing Bodies	.02	.12	-.45***	-.11**	-.001
Trust in Security Forces	.02	.12	-.10	-.07	.05
Breakdown in Social Fabric	.50***	.29***	.27***	.22***	.22***
Breakdown of Leadership	.00	-.07	.39***	.04	.18**
Xenophobia	.33***	.12	.27***	.23***	.27***
Anarchist tendency	.36***	.12	.15	.19***	-.01
Activist inclination	.29***	.03	.04	.05	.02
Localised Worldview	.11	.10	-.11	-.02	-.17**
Pragmatist Worldview	.25***	.16	.19**	.12**	.20***
Orthodox Worldview	.06	.25***	.07	.10*	.06
Reward Worldview	.11	.19**	.23**	.18***	.17**
Survivor Worldview	.35***	.10	.19*	.17***	.14*

Dangerous and Threatening Social Worldview	.34***	.31***	.39***	.18***	.35***
Competitive Jungle Social Worldview	.27***	.12	.36***	.18***	.26***
Note. ***$p < .001$; **$p < .01$, *$p = .01$					

The Association of Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories with Identified Statistically Significant Mental Health and Sociopolitical Correlates in Regression Models across the Samples

In the final step, multivariate regression analyses were performed with the statistically significant correlates of media conspiracy beliefs across samples. These analyses aimed to assess the predictive effects of media conspiracy beliefs on mental health and sociopolitical attitudes (see *Table 10*). In these models, control variables were age, gender, education, and social status across all samples. The strongest predictive power of belief in media conspiracy theories was found in relation to breakdown in social fabric in the Australian sample. Belief in media conspiracy theories was the strongest predictor of dangerous and threatening social worldview in the Iranian sample. Media conspiracy beliefs were found to be the strongest predictor of lower trust in governing bodies in the US sample. In the Filipino sample, the predictor roles of these beliefs in sociopolitical attitudes were generally weak. Media conspiracy belief was the strongest predictor of dangerous and threatening social worldview in the Hungarian sample. Overall, belief in media conspiracy theories predicted breakdown in social fabric as well as dangerous and threatening social worldview consistently across all samples, while these beliefs predicted xenophobia, reward worldview, and competitive jungle social worldview in four of the five examined samples. The contribution of belief in media conspiracy theories to explain sociopolitical attitudes was consistently small across all samples.

Table 10. Multivariate Regression Analysis Predicting Mental Health and Sociopolitical Attitudes Based on Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories across the Samples

Mental Health and	Predictor variable: Belief in media conspiracy theories *β (SE)*

Sociopolitical Attitudes	Australian Sample	Iranian Sample	United States Sample	Filipino Sample	Hungarian Sample
Future anxiety	.32 (.06)***	.19 (.07)*	–	–	.15 (.06)*
Interpersonal trust	–	-.18 (.07)*	-.20 (.08)**	–	–
Trust in Representative Government	–	–	-.39 (.06)***	-.14 (.04)***	.26 (.07)***
Trust in Governing Bodies	–	–	-.47 (.06)***	-.13 (.04)**	–
Breakdown in Social Fabric	.50 (.06)***	.31 (.06)***	.28 (.08)***	.23 (.04)***	.21 (.06)***
Breakdown of Leadership	–	–	.40 (.06)***	–	.17 (.07)*
Xenophobia	.35 (.08)***	–	.26 (.07)***	.21 (.04)***	.26 (.06)***
Anarchist tendency	.32 (.07)***	–	–	.19 (.04)***	–
Activist inclination	.21 (.06)**	–	–	–	–
Localised Worldview	–	–	–	–	-.15 (.06)
Pragmatist Worldview	.23 (.07)**	–	.18 (.07)	.13 (.04)**	.19 (.06)**
Orthodox Worldview	–	.26 (.06)***	–	.09 (.04)	–
Reward Worldview	–	.19 (.07)**	.22 (.07)**	.17 (.04)***	.18 (.06)**

Survivor Worldview	.36 (.06)***	–	.19 (.07)*	.19 (.04)***	.10 (.06)
Dangerous and Threatening Social Worldview	.34 (.07)***	.33 (.07)***	.39 (.06)***	.19 (.04)***	.34 (.05)***
Competitive Jungle Social Worldview	.24 (.07)**	–	.36 (.07)***	.18 (.04)***	.24 (.06)***

Note. ***$p < .001$; **$p < .01$; *$p = .01$

Age (βs ranging from .02 to .04 across models), gender (βs ranging from -.05 to .02), and education (βs ranging from -.10 to .03) were included as control variables.

Discussion

In this Chapter, I aimed to examine the mental health and sociopolitical outcomes associated with media conspiracy beliefs across samples from five societies. The findings showed that, while media conspiracy beliefs exhibited weak or non-significant associations with mental health, belief in media conspiracy theories were able to predict various sociopolitical outcomes across the samples, although there was variation in the pattern such that some factors were predictive in some samples but not others.

Contribution of media conspiracy beliefs to mental health

The results indicated that media conspiracy beliefs were not significantly negatively associated with the mental health outcomes in these data. The only statistically significant association observed was between belief in media conspiracy theories and future anxiety in the Australian, Iranian, and Hungarian samples. These beliefs appear to contribute to an increased sense of future anxiety, likely due to the perception that if conspiratorial media is connected to various issues, these effects may intensify over time, potentially fostering long-term concerns about what lies ahead. However, the relationship between media conspiracy beliefs and future anxiety seems to be relatively weak, which may render the relationship non-significant in some different populations.

While much of the existing literature highlights the adverse mental health outcomes associated with conspiracy beliefs (e.g., Dagnall et al., 2025; Freeman & Bentall, 2017; Jolley et al., 2022; van Mulukom et al., 2022), the findings of this study align with studies reporting non-significant associations between conspiracy beliefs and certain aspects of mental health (e.g., Georgiou et al., 2020; Krüppel et al., 2023; Leibovitz et al., 2021; Pekárová, 2021). The results suggest that belief in media conspiracy theories may have a limited or even negligible association with negative mental health outcomes. However, these findings and assumptions are preliminary and require further investigation in future studies. Also, it is important to note that this study used a limited set of mental health measures. Future research using a broader range of mental health assessments (e.g., measures of generalized anxiety, mood disorders, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, psychosomatic complaints) is recommended to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of associated mental health outcomes.

Contribution of media conspiracy beliefs to sociopolitical outcomes

Moreover, the analyses showed some associations between belief in media conspiracy theories and various sociopolitical attitudes across the samples. While some consistent associations were observed, many associations were not uniformly consistent across samples. Aligned with previous studies that have reported and discussed sociopolitical outcomes associated with conspiracy beliefs (e.g., Bilewicz et al., 2013; de Zavala & Cichocka, 2012; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Jolley et al., 2022; van Mulukom et al., 2022), the current study similarly suggests that media conspiracy beliefs may be linked to sociopolitical outcomes. However, these results and assumptions should be interpreted with caution and require further investigation.

The results indicated that belief in media conspiracy theories were negatively associated with trust—both interpersonal trust and trust in governmental systems (institutional trust)—although this association was not consistent across all samples. The negative relationship between media conspiracy beliefs and *interpersonal trust* was observed only in the Iranian and United States samples. Media conspiracy beliefs may lead believers to assume that those around them are manipulated by conspiratorial media, potentially affecting their trust in others. However, this link may not be strong enough to be consistently observed.

Regarding the link between media conspiracy beliefs and *institutional trust*, in the United States and Filipino samples, media conspiracy beliefs were negatively associated with trust in representative government and trust in governing bodies. However, no statistically significant relationship was found in the Australian and Iranian samples. Surprisingly, belief in media conspiracy theories was positively associated with trust in

representative government in the Hungarian sample. It seems that in Hungary, individuals who hold media conspiracy beliefs may perceive a greater alignment with the government. This may be due to the content of media conspiracy theories aligning with the existing policies and perspectives of the government in Hungary (see Plenta, 2020). Additionally, consistent results were found regarding the non-significant link between media conspiracy beliefs and trust in security forces. It appears that media conspiracy theories do not significantly affect believers' perceptions toward security forces (e.g., police and military). This may be because media conspiracy theories are less related to military matters and more relevant to politics, laws, and government.

Overall, in line with studies suggesting a link between conspiracy beliefs and trust (e.g., Einstein & Glick, 2015), media conspiracy beliefs appear to be associated with trust in interpersonal trust and institutional aspects in some cases; however, the association seem to be stronger with institutional trust, and these relationships are not consistently observed across samples. Future studies that employ a broader range of trust measures and control for potential cultural and societal factors can yield more refined insights into the relationship between belief in media conspiracy theories and trust.

The results showed a significant association between media conspiracy beliefs and perceived breakdown in social fabric aspect of anomie across all samples. This finding aligns with previous research highlighting the link between conspiracy beliefs and anomie (e.g., see Jetten et al., 2022). It seems that individuals who hold media conspiracy beliefs may perceive a weakening of social cohesion and trust within their societies, creating feelings of disconnection and alienation. However, another aspect of anomie, perceived breakdown of leadership, was significantly associated with media conspiracy beliefs only in the United States and Hungarian samples. Interestingly, while belief in media conspiracy theories was positively associated with higher trust in representative government in Hungary, it was also positively associated with higher perceived breakdown of leadership, which refers to viewing leaders as incapable. This may reflect a distinction between trust in the government and perceptions of the competence of its leaders. Individuals may trust the government and its policies but view the leaders as ineffective, expecting more from them. In Hungary, believers in media conspiracy theories may view the government and its ideological framework favorably but perceive the leaders as incapable. Overall, in line with studies suggesting the link between conspiracy beliefs and anomie (e.g., McCarthy et al., 2021), belief in media conspiracy theories appears to be associated with anomie, particularly the breakdown of social fabric, a relationship that was found across all samples. Future studies focusing

specifically on the link between media conspiracy beliefs and trust in society's integration and regulation could yield more refined findings and provide deeper insights.

The results also revealed a significant association between media conspiracy beliefs and xenophobia across the samples, with the exception of Iran. Individuals with media conspiracy beliefs may perceive their country and society as vulnerable to change and manipulation by foreigners. One of the main aspects of mainstream media in recent decades has been the reduction of xenophobia and the increasing welcoming of foreigners in society. Individuals who hold media conspiracy beliefs may view such policies as misguided (since these policies are seen as influenced by conspiratorial media in their perspective), which may fuel a counterreaction against the media's approach. The lack of a significant association between media conspiracy beliefs and xenophobia in Iran may be attributed to the relatively low presence of foreign nationals in the country. The measure used in this study focused on xenophobic attitudes toward foreigners within the country, and the limited presence of diverse foreign populations could reduce the likelihood of xenophobic sentiments. Without a significant out-group to target, media conspiracy theories may have less influence on xenophobic attitudes within the Iranian population. Overall, in line with studies reporting the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and xenophobia (e.g., Oleksy et al., 2021), media conspiracy beliefs appear to be associated with xenophobia. However, this relationship seems to be absent in more homogenous societies with fewer foreign residents, such as Iran.

The analysis provided partial support for an association between media conspiracy beliefs and tendencies toward anarchy and activism, particularly within the Australian and Filipino samples. No statistically significant association was found between media conspiracy beliefs and tendencies toward anarchy and activism in other samples. For media conspiracy believers in Australia and the Philippines, activism and anarchistic actions may be perceived as essential outlets for expressing discontent or challenging perceived threats from conspiratorial media. In line with studies discussing the link between conspiracy beliefs and activist movements, as well as the rejection of the status quo and the desire for alternative systems (e.g., Imhoff et al., 2021; Papaioannou et al., 2024), media conspiracy beliefs appear to be associated with a desire for change through activism or anarchism. However, this link may not be consistently observed across different societies. It is important to recognize that many personal and societal factors may influence the link between media conspiracy beliefs and tendencies toward anarchy and activism. Further research that takes into account various personal and societal factors is needed to better understand this relationship.

The results demonstrated an association between media conspiracy beliefs and a diverse range of worldviews across the samples. Belief in media conspiracy beliefs was found to negatively predict the localized worldview (i.e., the belief in one's ability to create change and solve problems) but only among Hungarian participants. The pragmatist worldview (i.e., the belief in adapting to circumstances to avoid conflict) was predicted by media conspiracy beliefs in Australian, Filipino, and Hungarian samples. In the Iranian sample, beliefs in media conspiracy theories predicted the orthodox worldview (i.e., the belief in adherence to rules and customs to preserve social order). Additionally, belief in media conspiracy theories associated with the reward worldview (i.e., the belief that life outcomes are deserved) across all samples except Australia, and the survivor worldview (i.e., the belief that life outcomes are often unfavorable) across all samples except for Iran and the Philippines. Consistent with research discussing the association between conspiracy beliefs and worldviews (e.g., the link between conspiracy beliefs and belief in a just world; O'Brien et al., 2025), these results suggest that media conspiracy beliefs may be linked to various worldviews, particularly those that are pessimistic or focus on personal benefits (e.g., pragmatist and survivor worldviews). The strength of these associations may vary, with certain worldviews being more prominent in specific societies. This variation may stem from factors such as cultural values, societal challenges, perceived personal control, and hope for positive change. For example, the orthodox worldview, which is about belief in adherence to rules to preserve social order, was uniquely predicted by media conspiracy beliefs in the Iranian sample—the sample form a society under severe governmental repression. Living in such circumstances may foster a sense that meaningful change is unattainable and that compliance with the existing framework is the safest option. Consequently, in response to a perceived dangerous entity, such as conspiratorial media, many individuals who believe in media conspiracy theories from a country like Iran may perceive maintaining rules and order as a functional effective strategy against conspiratorial media.

Overall, in line with studies suggesting a link between conspiracy beliefs and worldviews (e.g., O'Brien et al., 2025), media conspiracy beliefs appear to be associated with worldviews, particularly those that are pessimistic, personal-belief-oriented, and protective or cautious in nature (e.g., pragmatist and survivor worldviews). However, these associations seem to vary in strength (though not necessarily in direction) across different societies. Future studies focusing on the association between media conspiracy beliefs and worldviews are recommended, with a more targeted approach to better understand this relationship.

In addition to examining the relationship between media conspiracy beliefs and philosophical worldviews (i.e., general perspectives on life), this study also investigated the potential connection between media conspiracy beliefs and social worldviews, which focus on perceptions of the social world. With the exception of a non-significant relationship between media conspiracy beliefs and the competitive jungle social worldview in the Iranian sample, media conspiracy beliefs consistently predicted both the dangerous and threatening worldview and the competitive jungle worldview across all samples. In line with studies suggesting a link between conspiracy beliefs and negative social worldviews (e.g., perceiving the world as threatening and lacking predictability or justice; e.g., Furnham, 2023; Moulding et al., 2016), media conspiracy beliefs appear to be associated with disrupted and pessimistic social worldviews. This link may be observable across various societies. However, this assumption requires further investigation.

Taking all these results into consideration, media conspiracy beliefs appear to be associated with a pessimistic outlook toward society, human nature (particularly regarding individuals categorized as outgroup members), and the world. This association might be relatively independent of the individual's societal context. Perceiving the media as conspiratorial may lead believers to assume that a significant portion of society and governmental institutions are influenced, manipulated, or misled by conspiratorial media. This perception could foster a sense of distrust and pessimism toward people and the world, potentially prompting some individuals to contemplate the necessity of reactive measures. Future research is encouraged to explore "*how*" perceiving the media as conspiratorial may shape specific attitudes and responses.

Limitations and Future Directions

The present study has several limitations. I did not engage in cross-sample comparisons statistically or in the interpretation of the findings. Statistically significant sociodemographic differences were present among the samples (e.g., differences in socioeconomic status). Sample differences across societies pose a threat to the validity of cross-sample analyses, potentially leading to misinterpretations of the data (e.g., Buil et al., 2012). The samples were also convenience-based and may represent specific subgroups within each society. Future research involving representative samples with non-significant sociodemographic differences could yield reliable and nuanced findings regarding the consequences associated with media conspiracy beliefs across samples from different societies. Moreover, full measurement invariance was not established for the primary measure (BMCTS) used in this investigation. According to the results of the measurement invariance analysis (see Supplementary Material, Table S3), the BMCTS did not demonstrate full invariance across samples. Thus,

I did not engage with cross-sample statistical analysis and discussions. Future research that ensures measurement invariance will be better positioned to conduct valid cross-sample comparisons and interpretations. Furthermore, the use of cross-sectional data limits the ability to infer causal relationships, as the observed associations can be interpreted in the opposite direction. Longitudinal and experimental designs in future studies would help clarify these relationships and identify causal pathways.

This investigation was designed to detect small to medium effect sizes, which should be taken into account when interpreting the findings. It is also important to note that, due to variations in sample size, a relationship may reach statistical significance in one sample but not in another—not because the underlying relationship differs, but because the disparity in sample sizes affects statistical power. This investigation was exploratory in nature, and confirmatory research is needed. Future studies should aim to ensure more balanced sample sizes and/or consider adopting alternative approaches—potentially theory-driven rather than purely empirically driven—for comparing effects.

Additionally, it is important to note that a non-significant effect does not necessarily imply the absence of an effect (see Gelman & Stern, 2006). Some associations in this Chapter were found to be non-significant. Future replication studies are recommended. Furthermore, some of the measures employed in this study exhibited low internal consistency in certain samples, leading to the inclusion of only a single item from these measures in the models. This may affect the validity of these measures and, consequently, the observed relationships between media conspiracy beliefs and these constructs. Additionally, the measures used in this study captured only certain aspects of mental health and sociopolitical attitudes. Some of the measures were also single-item measures. Broader and more comprehensive measures are recommended in future studies. Despite these limitations, this study offered preliminary evidence regarding the mental health and sociopolitical outcomes associated with belief in media conspiracy theories, an understudied set of specific conspiracy beliefs.

Concluding Comments

The findings suggests that while media conspiracy beliefs may contribute to mental health issues for individual people, such as increased future anxiety, their contribution may be less pronounced or less visible than that of other conspiracy beliefs associated with more severe mental health outcomes (e.g., the link between COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs and mental health, psychological distress, and physical well-being; Juárez et al., 2024; van Prooijen et al., 2021). Nonetheless, media conspiracy beliefs may contribute to negative sociopolitical

outcomes that are similarly significant to those associated with more prominent conspiracy beliefs (e.g., the link between COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs and mistrust, violence, and maladaptive views and reactions; for a review, see van Mulukom, 2022). Indeed, despite not being taken seriously by users, media institutions, academics, and policymakers, belief in media conspiracy theories may have associated sociopolitical outcomes comparable to those associated with famous conspiracy beliefs (e.g., COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs), and thus warrant greater attention.

This Chapter serves as an initial attempt to provide insight into the mental health and sociopolitical consequences associated with belief in media conspiracy theories across a variety of samples from different societies, with the aim of drawing attention to this understudied subset of conspiracy beliefs and open avenues for more focused and detailed future research.

CHAPTER 4

Contributing Factors of Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories: Mindful Use of Social Media May be Negatively Associated with Media Conspiracy Beliefs

Authorship statement: I am the primary author of this chapter and the corresponding manuscripts. I conceptualised and designed the study, with guidance and advice from my principal supervisor (Emma Thomas). I collected data in Iran and Australia and coordinated data collection in the Philippines, which was undertaken by the co-authors. I conducted the data analyses with assistance from the co-authors. I drafted the entire chapter and manuscripts and incorporated revisions and editorial suggestions provided by my supervisor and co-authors (Marc Eric Santos Reyes, Ágnes Zsila, Karen M. Douglas, René Weber, Joël Billieux, Zsolt Demetrovics, and Ho Phi Huynh). Percentage of contributions: Reza Shabahang: 74%; Emma Thomas: 5%; Marc Eric Santos Reyes: 3%; Ágnes Zsila: 3%.; Karen M. Douglas: 3%; René Weber: 3%, Joël Billieux: 3%; Zsolt Demetrovics: 3%; Ho Phi Huynh: 3%.

Abstract

Conspiracy beliefs may be associated with negative psychological, social, and political consequences, and recent evidence suggests that media conspiracy beliefs are no exception. In this Chapter, I aim to provide an initial assessment of the contributions of sociodemographics, personality, thinking style, and media use patterns to media conspiracy beliefs. Convenience samples of active adult media users from Australia (n = 246; M_{age} = 36.35, SD_{age} = 7.792), Iran (n = 237; M_{age} = 31.68, SD_{age} = 9.637), and the Philippines (n = 729; M_{age} = 23.04, SD_{age} = 6.885) were surveyed. Sociodemographic variables were not significantly associated with media conspiracy beliefs. Personality traits, including the Big Five and Dark Triad traits, did not exhibit significant associations with media conspiracy beliefs. In terms of thinking styles, only the experiential-imaginative thinking style demonstrated a significant positive relationship within the Iranian sample in the regression analyses. Mindful use of social media was negatively correlated with media conspiracy beliefs across all samples. This association remained statistically significant in the regression models for the

Australian and Filipino samples. The findings suggest that media conspiracy beliefs may not be straightforwardly associated with specific sociodemographics, cognitive profiles, or personality traits. Individuals from diverse sociodemographic backgrounds, personality dispositions, and cognitive styles may endorse and believe in media conspiracy theories, potentially making it more challenging to identify clear predictors of such beliefs. The quality of media engagement, particularly mindful use of social media, appears to be a factor warranting further attention in relation to media conspiracy beliefs. These findings may provide a foundation for future targeted research.

Keywords: Conspiracy, conspiracy belief, conspiracy theories, media, sociodemographics, personality, thinking styles, media use, Australia, Iran, the Philippines

Introduction

"The Simpsons predicted the COVID-19 pandemic, Nobel Prize winners, OceanGate's Titan submarine accident, and more. The media are programming us!" (e.g., see Snierson & Mercadante, 2024). The question now is: how do people come to believe such claims? In this Chapter, I aim to investigate the role of a number of psychological and behavioural aspects, discussed related to conspiracy beliefs in previous research, in predicting media conspiracy beliefs. Conspiracy beliefs may vary in their underlying contributing factors. For instance, Oleksy et al. (2020) found that while a sense of collective control positively predicted general COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs, it negatively predicted government-related COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs. Likewise, Hartman et al. (2021) found that political-psychological predispositions (e.g., right-wing authoritarianism, social dominance orientation, distrust in scientists) were associated with belief in conspiracy theories about COVID-19, although the direction and effect sizes of these predictors varied depending on the specific content of each origin theory (i.e., the theory that COVID-19 originated in a meat market in Wuhan, the theory that COVID-19 was developed in a lab in Wuhan, and the theory that COVID-19 is caused by 5G mobile networks). For example, conspiracy ideation was more strongly associated with the conspiracy theory regarding the Wuhan lab than with the other two conspiracy beliefs. Additionally, compared to believers in the Wuhan lab conspiracy and the 5G conspiracy, believers in the meat market conspiracy belief were older and from higher economic classes.

Moreover, conflicting findings exist regarding the possible predictors of conspiracy beliefs. For example, while some studies found no significant gender difference in conspiracy beliefs, others reported

higher rates among either males or females (Farhart et al., 2020; Federico et al., 2018; Freeman & Bentall, 2017; Miller et al., 2016).

Considering the potential variation and conflicting findings regarding the contributing factors of different conspiracy beliefs, this Chapter aims to provide preliminary insights into the potential predictors of media conspiracy beliefs—an understudied subset of conspiracy beliefs that appear to be growing in prevalence (Uscinski et al., 2022b). Specifically, in this Chapter, I examine the contributions of sociodemographic characteristics, personality traits, thinking styles, and media use in shaping the acceptance of media conspiracy beliefs.

Sociodemographic Factors and Conspiracy Beliefs

Prior research has explored the relationship between sociodemographic factors and conspiracy beliefs; however, the findings remain inconsistent. Age has received particular attention (for a meta-analysis, see Bordeleau & Stockemer, 2024), with some studies suggesting that younger individuals exhibit stronger conspiracy beliefs (Galliford & Furnham, 2017; Swami et al., 2012; Swami et al., 2016), but others show null effects (e.g., Uscinski and Parent, 2014). Regarding the non-significant relationship between age and conspiracy beliefs, Smallpage et al. (2014) suggest that such beliefs are "relatively flat across age groups" (p. 267). Gender has also been examined, though the results are mixed: while some studies report no significant gender differences (Farhart et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2016), others indicate higher levels of conspiracy beliefs in either males (Freeman & Bentall, 2017) or females (Federico et al., 2018). Similarly, education has been investigated as a potential factor influencing conspiracy beliefs (Douglas et al., 2016; Galliford & Furnham, 2017; Green & Douglas, 2018; van Prooijen, 2017), along with social status (Mao et al., 2020). Despite these efforts, contradictory evidence persists, with some studies failing to establish consistent associations between conspiracy beliefs and age (Buturoiu et al., 2021; Bird & Bogart, 2005), gender (Green & Douglas, 2018), or social status (Swami et al., 2016). Therefore, further research is needed to explore the relationship between sociodemographics and conspiracy beliefs, particularly when examining specific subsets of conspiracy beliefs.

Thus far, various perspectives have been proposed to explain the potential relationship between sociodemographic factors and conspiracy beliefs. Younger individuals are considered more susceptible to conspiracy beliefs due to their heightened exposure to media coverage, which may increase their likelihood of encountering such beliefs, compared to older adults. It has been suggested that older individuals, with their accumulated life experience and reflective maturity, are more likely to engage in critical deliberation regarding

their beliefs, potentially reducing their vulnerability to conspiracy beliefs (Galliford & Furnham, 2017). The engagement of females with conspiracy beliefs is often linked to their adoption of self-protective behaviors aimed at reducing uncertainty (Casses et al., 2020). In contrast, males' inclination toward conspiracy beliefs has been attributed to their greater openness to novel ideas and concepts (Galliford & Furnham, 2017). The association between education and conspiracy beliefs has been explained through the influence of psychological factors closely related to educational attainment, such as analytical thinking (van Prooijen, 2017). Finally, the link between social status and conspiracy beliefs has been explained as a means by which individuals with lower social status seek to achieve a sense of order and control in their lives by adopting conspiracy beliefs (Salvador Casara et al., 2022). In some contexts, it seems that conspiracy beliefs gain greater traction among certain demographic groups, such as younger individuals and those with lower socioeconomic status (e.g., Douglas et al., 2016; Federico et al., 2018; Galliford & Furnham, 2017; Green & Douglas, 2018; van Prooijen, 2017), whereas in other contexts, their prevalence remains relatively stable across demographic groups (e.g., Uscinski & Parent, 2014; Farhart et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2016). Various explanations have been proposed to account for these patterns—such as the potential influence of younger individuals' lower accumulated life experience and reflective maturity, which may heighten their vulnerability to conspiracy beliefs (e.g., Galliford & Furnham, 2017)—underscoring the complexity of sociodemographic influences on conspiracy beliefs and the need for further empirical investigation (see Bordeleau & Stockemer, 2024).

Here, I investigate the relationship between sociodemographic factors (i.e., age, gender, education, and subjective social status) and media conspiracy beliefs. Given that media is consumed by individuals across diverse sociodemographic backgrounds and encompasses a wide range of content domains that may fuel conspiracy-oriented attitudes toward media, these beliefs may resonate with individuals from various sociodemographic groups. For instance, some women may perceive media as undermining their agency by selectively portraying certain narratives, while some men may view media as diminishing their power when exposed to feminist content. Since media content can be interpreted as conspiratorial from multiple perspectives, depending on one's sociodemographic background, sociodemographic factors may not exhibit strong associations with media conspiracy beliefs.

Personality Traits and Conspiracy Beliefs

Personality traits have been extensively examined in relation to conspiracy beliefs. Research has indicated that agreeableness is negatively associated with belief in conspiracy theories (e.g., Swami et al., 2010). This

relationship is explained by the idea that individuals with lower levels of agreeableness, characterized by higher levels of suspicion, antagonism, and a lack of trust toward others, may be more inclined to endorse conspiracy beliefs. Additionally, studies have highlighted a connection between openness to experience and conspiracy beliefs (e.g., Swami et al., 2010, 2011, 2013, 2016). Higher openness to experience has been suggested to predispose individuals to entertain novel and unconventional ideas, thus increasing susceptibility to conspiracy beliefs. Narcissism has also been found to be linked to conspiracy beliefs (e.g., Cichocka et al., 2016). The exaggerated self-importance characteristic of narcissism may lead individuals to embrace conspiracist explanations, driven by a belief that they are the center of attention and possess unique insights that others lack. Furthermore, studies (e.g., March & Springer, 2019) have reported that Machiavellianism and psychopathy positively predict conspiracy beliefs. These traits, associated with cynical worldviews, hypersensitivity toward authority figures, and manipulative behaviors, may contribute to a predisposition for conspiracy beliefs. Individuals high in these traits may feel immune to manipulation and believe they possess exclusive access to the truth. Studies have also explored the relationship between self-esteem—another aspect of personality—and belief in conspiracy theories, though the findings regarding the direction of this association have been inconsistent. Some research reveals a negative link, proposing that individuals with low self-esteem may use conspiracy theories as a coping mechanism. In contrast, other research suggests a positive association, explaining that individuals with high self-esteem may reject commonly accepted beliefs as overly simplistic and seek more intricate, alternative explanations, while also being less open to revising their initial perspectives (see Stasielowicz, 2022). Thus, this evidence suggests that some facets of personality may be relevant to explaining who endorses conspiracy beliefs; however, the direction of these relationships is not always consistent.

Despite extensive investigation into the relationship between personality traits and conspiracy beliefs, the nature of these associations remains unclear, with conflicting results evident in the literature (see Goreis & Voracek, 2019). For instance, Teličák et al. (2024) found inconsistent relationships between Dark Triad personality traits and both COVID-19-related and general conspiracy beliefs across three distinct samples within the same country (Facebook users, university students, and a nationally representative sample). This underscores the importance of further examining how personality traits contribute to the acceptance of conspiracy beliefs, especially when investigating understudied sets of conspiracy beliefs.

Investigating the personality correlates of different conspiracy beliefs is important, as personality traits may be associated with distinct conspiracy beliefs in the same individuals. For example, in wave two of Halama and Teličák's (2024) longitudinal study, while openness was associated with COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs, it was not associated with Russian-Ukrainian war conspiracy beliefs. Similarly, while psychoticism was not associated with COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs, it was associated with Russian-Ukrainian war conspiracy beliefs. Considering that the content of media conspiracy theories may not appear as extreme (e.g., compared to COVID-19 conspiracy theories) and are less likely to carry the same negative labels (in contrast to the widespread stigmatization of COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs), individuals with varying personality traits may approach these theories, not just those with specific traits (e.g., higher psychoticism). This could reduce the likelihood of finding clear associations between personality traits and media conspiracy beliefs. Here, I investigate the association between Big Five personality traits (i.e., neuroticism, extraversion, conscientiousness, openness to experience), Dark Triad personality traits (i.e., Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism), and self-esteem with media conspiracy beliefs.

Thinking Style and Conspiracy Beliefs

Cognitive capacity and the ways in which individuals think and interpret information have been extensively studied in relation to conspiracy beliefs. Research has shown that individuals who endorse conspiracy theories are more likely to exhibit a higher prevalence of cognitive biases, such as the conjunction fallacy, proportionality bias, and agency detection bias (e.g., see Brotherton & French, 2014; Pytlik et al., 2020; Van der Wal et al., 2018). Conspiracy beliefs appear to arise at least partially from a series of systematic cognitive errors (Gagliardi, 2023).

Individuals prone to conspiracy theories often gravitate toward belief systems that lack empirical support. These beliefs can span a wide range of ideas, from supernatural and superstitious beliefs to spiritualistic, paranormal ideologies, and pseudo-scientific viewpoints, as well as paranoid and schizotypal thought patterns (Barron et al., 2014; Darwin et al., 2011; Georgiou et al., 2019; Lobato et al., 2014). Cognitive-perceptual factors, such as schizotypy, delusional ideation, and proneness to hallucinations, have been identified as contributors to conspiracy beliefs (Dagnall et al., 2015). Narmashiri et al. (2023) found that belief in conspiracy theories is correlated with decreased power in the beta frequency band, which is closely associated with cognitive control, flexibility, attention, and working memory. Swami et al. (2014) noted that engaging in analytic thinking promotes careful and intentional information processing, which helps individuals

recognize and mitigate their cognitive biases, reducing the likelihood of endorsing conspiracy beliefs. The lack of engagement in analytic thinking—characterized by a deliberate and careful examination of information to minimize biases and attain an objective understanding of facts—along with deficiencies in critical thinking and scientific reasoning, may be linked to heightened tendencies toward embracing conspiracy beliefs (Gjoneska, 2021). Therefore, cognitive aspects, particularly thinking styles, seem to play a role in the acceptance and endorsement of conspiracy beliefs and should be considered when investigating such beliefs.

Meanwhile, considering that the content and rationale of conspiracy theories may differ, and that the cognitions and attitudes associated with different conspiracy beliefs may vary (e.g., see Hartman et al., 2021; Uscinski et al., 2022a), the association of thinking styles with different conspiracy beliefs may also differ. Here, I investigate the association between thinking styles—rationality, experientiality-imagination, experientiality-intuition, and experientiality-emotionality—and media conspiracy beliefs.

Media Use and Conspiracy Beliefs

Media use has garnered increasing attention as a potential antecedent to conspiracy beliefs in recent years. Stempel et al. (2007) found that consumers of less reputable media sources, such as blogs and grocery store tabloids, were more likely to believe in 9/11 conspiracy theories. In contrast, consumers of reputable media outlets, such as daily newspapers and network TV news, were less likely to believe in these conspiracies. Strömbäck et al. (2023) reported that the consumption of right-wing political alternative media can contribute to the development of conspiracy beliefs. Stecula and Pickup (2021) found that relying on platforms like Facebook and YouTube for news (measured ranging from ‘never’ to ‘often’) associated with higher levels of conspiracy belief, particularly among individuals with low cognitive reflection. In a three-wave panel survey study (2017–2019), Valenzuela et al. (2023) reported a reciprocal, lagged relationship between the frequency of social media usage (measured ranging from ‘less than 1 hour a day’ to ‘more than 6 hours per day’) and conspiracy thinking. While users who in general use social media more often were not more conspiracist in their thinking when compared to users who use social media less often (between-person results), those who increased their social media use from one wave to another reported more conspiracy thinking, and vice versa (within-person results). Valenzuela et al. (2023) suggested that enhancing the quality of social media use (e.g., improving social media literacy) could reduce vulnerability to conspiracy beliefs. Likewise, Enders et al. (2023) found that individuals who frequently use social media for news (measured ranging from ‘not at all’ to

'everyday' in a typical week) exhibit stronger conspiracist beliefs; however, this association is intensified for those predisposed to conspiracy thinking.

A number of explanations have been proposed to explain the link between media use and conspiracy beliefs. These include the ready accessibility of conspiracy theories, minimal content moderation, and algorithm-driven polarization and echo chambers, which are especially prominent on new and interactive media like social media (Cinelli et al., 2022). Given the recent focus on the role of media use in the spread of conspiracy beliefs, it is important to investigate the relationship between media use and conspiracy beliefs, particularly when examining understudied conspiracy beliefs about media itself.

Meanwhile, in studies exploring the link between social media use and conspiracy beliefs, the primary focus has been on the *frequency of social media use* (i.e., time spent on media; screen-time), with no attention given to the *quality of social media use* (e.g., awareness during media use). I suggest that constructs such as time spent on social media and problematic social media use—primarily concerned with the frequency or excessive use of media and including components like tolerance (i.e., the increasing need for more frequent use to achieve previous levels of satisfaction)—do not fully capture the complexities of the user–social media relationship.

Recent research has highlighted the need to consider the quality of engagement with social media (how it is use) as a critical dimension, in addition to the quantity of use (how much it is used). In particular, the concept of mindful use of social media, a framework recently discussed by Shabahang et al. (2024b), emphasizes the quality of engagement, focusing on users' awareness of their intentions, sensations, thoughts, and feelings during social media use. As a form of positive engagement, mindful social media use may empower users to interact with social platforms in a more optimal manner. Shabahang et al. (2024b) found that mindful social media use is associated with lower social media use intensity, fewer symptoms of social media addiction, and improved subjective mental health, suggesting that mindful engagement may mitigate vulnerabilities linked to social media use. Indeed, Mindfulness, when applied to various activities such as social media use, has the potential to enhance individuals' intellectual and social resources, improving their overall functioning and resilience (Fredrickson, 2001; Schuman-Olivier et al., 2020). Mindful awareness can foster positive change through internal attunement (Siegel, 2009), potentially promoting a balanced flow information processing in the mind by regulating how we engage with activities and process information. This active evaluation may reduce reliance on pre-existing personal schemas and assumptions. Given the lack of

attention to the quality of social media use, such as mindful social media use, in the relationship between social media use and conspiracy beliefs in exiting studies, investigating the potential contribution of mindful social media use to a set of conspiracy beliefs can offer preliminary insights into how the quality of social media use, rather than just its quantity, influences susceptibility to conspiracy beliefs. Here, I investigate the association between time spent on traditional as well as new media, and mindful use of social media with media conspiracy beliefs.

The Current Study

In this Chapter, I aim to provide a preliminary answer to the question of which demographic, psychological, and behavioral aspects may contribute to the acceptance of media conspiracy beliefs. To date, research on the predictors of conspiracy beliefs has been limited, and the findings have been inconsistent in some cases (for reviews, see Douglas & Sutton, 2023; Goreis & Voracek, 2019). This underscores the importance of continuing to investigate possible predictors of conspiracy beliefs, particularly when the target belief is both specific and understudied, such as media conspiracy beliefs.

Following recommendations to incorporate findings from diverse societies, particularly non-WEIRD societies, in studies of conspiracy beliefs (Douglas & Sutton, 2023; Stojanov & Douglas, 2022), this study sampled participants from three societies: Australia (a Western, individualistic, multicultural society in Oceania), Iran (an Eastern, collectivistic culture with a homogeneous society in the Middle East), and the Philippines (a blended Western-Eastern culture with a homogeneous society in South Asia). This diverse sample (see Pae, 2020) offers an opportunity to observe the potential contribution of the studied variables to media conspiracy beliefs across different societal contexts. In this Chapter, I investigate the associations between sociodemographic factors (i.e., age, gender, education, and subjective social status), personality traits (Big Five traits and Dark Triad traits), thinking styles, and media use (i.e., time spent on traditional media, time spent on new media, and mindful social media use) with media conspiracy beliefs in samples from three societies, without engaging in cross-sample statistical analysis or interpretation. These variables are selected based on the existing literature discussing their potential contributions to conspiracy beliefs.

Due to the large number of variables and the exploratory nature of the research, I conducted the analyses in two steps. First, correlations were initially examined to provide a preliminary understanding of interrelationships and identify potential predictors of media conspiracy beliefs for further analysis (see Bewick et al., 2003). Second, statistically significant correlated variables were then examined in regression models to

assess their contribution to media conspiracy beliefs. That is, while initial correlations were used to determine association within clusters of predictors (step 1), I subsequently examined the unique association of the variables that were significant in a regression model (step 2).

Methods

Design and Participants

This Chapter utilizes the same samples from Australia, Iran, and the Philippines as those used in *Chapter 2* and *Chapter 3*. It includes 1,212 adult active media users aged 18 to 50 years, comprising participants from Australia (n = 246), Iran (n = 237), and the Philippines (n = 729). The respondents completed a comprehensive survey that assessed belief in media conspiracy theories and conspiracism, along with two sets of measures: (1) those examining the potential consequences of media conspiracy beliefs (for *Chapter 3*) and (2) those investigating potential contributing factors (for *Chapter 4*). Significant differences were observed among the samples in terms of demographics and subjective socioeconomic status. For instance, Iranian participants reported a lower subjective social status compared to those in Australia and the Philippines. A detailed overview of the sample characteristics of the groups is provided in *Table 3* in *Chapter 2*. All participants provided informed written consent online before participating. The study was approved by the Flinders University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC Project No.: 7726), the University of Santo Tomas (Project No.: 2024_33), and Pázmány Péter Catholic University. Ethical practices complied with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, the Declaration of Helsinki, and the APA Ethics Code.

Measures

Demographics

To assess demographic characteristics, participants provided information on their age, gender (i.e., woman, man, non-binary, transgender, and another term), and educational attainment (i.e., high school diploma or less, bachelor's degree, master's degree, or doctoral degree).

Subjective Socioeconomic Status

Subjective socioeconomic status was assessed using the *MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status* (*MSSS*; Adler et al., 2008). This single-item scale presents a 10-rung ladder (1 = *Lowest social position* [bottom rung], 10 = *Highest social position* [top rung]). Participants were asked to select the rung that best represents their

perceived social standing relative to others in society. The MSSS score reflects an individual's sense of belonging to a higher or lower social class based on factors like income, education, and occupation.

Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories

Belief in media conspiracy theories was assessed using the 7-item Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories Scale (BMCTS), detailed in *Chapter 2*. This unidimensional scale includes items addressing conspiracy beliefs about various media components: *social media* (e.g., "Social media is part of a larger malicious scheme by secretive groups aiming to control and manipulate people."), *news* (i.e., "News companies adjust what they report to influence people's thinking in alignment with the agendas of secretive, malicious groups."), *movies* (e.g., "The movie industry is part of a big plan orchestrated by secretive groups with dark goals, such as controlling and programming people."), *video games* (i.e., "Video games are shaping the way people, especially children, think and act so that in the future, they will be more likely to support secretive groups' goals."), and *media figures* (i.e., "Secretive groups hire media figures (e.g., celebrities) to assist them with their malicious plans for people."). The BMCTS focuses on media conspiracy beliefs rather than media scepticism or cynicism. Its generic language ensures applicability across diverse languages, societies, and sociopolitical perspectives. While items address individual media components, they collectively contribute to a single construct of belief in media conspiracy theories. *Chapter 2* details the scale's good psychometric properties for on-factor solution, including good to excellent internal consistency across the Australian (α = .93), Iranian (α = .91), and Filipino (α = .84) samples. Respondents rated the 7 items on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 6 = *Strongly agree*), with higher scores indicating stronger belief in media conspiracy theories.

Personality

To assess Big Five personality traits, the study employed the *Ten-Item Personality Inventory* (*TIPI*; Gosling et al., 2003). This inventory encompasses five dimensions: neuroticism (e.g., "I see myself as anxious, easily upset"), extraversion (e.g., "I see myself as extraverted, enthusiastic"), conscientiousness (e.g., "I see myself as dependable, self-disciplined"), agreeableness (e.g., "I see myself as critical, quarrelsome"), and openness to experience (e.g., "I see myself as open to new experiences, complex"). Each dimension consists of two items rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *Disagree strongly*, 7 = *Agree strongly*), with higher scores indicating a greater prominence of the respective personality trait. Cronbach's alphas of the subscales of TIPI indicated generally low reliability in this study ($\alpha_{Australia}$ = ranging from .06 to .41; α_{Iran} = ranging from .48 to .63; $\alpha_{The\ Philippines}$ = ranging from -.07 to .59). Only the extraversion subscale in the Iranian sample demonstrated adequate

reliability in its entirety (both two items of the subscale). To ensure consistency across all models (e.g., avoiding discrepancies in which one model employed a single item while another relied on multiple items to assess the same construct), a single representative item was selected from each subscale (e.g., "I see myself as anxious, easily upset" for the neuroticism subscale). This strategy aimed to retain the constructs within the models while ensuring uniformity across samples. This approach was informed by methodological recommendations on multi-item and single-item scales (e.g., Diamantopoulos et al., 2012) and considerations for the internal consistency of two-item scales (e.g., Eisinga et al., 2013). Item selection was based on face validity, correlation with other items, and explained variance from the scale's original development study. However, results should be interpreted cautiously.

To evaluate three maladaptive personality traits, the *Dark Triad Dirty Dozen* (*DTDD*; Jonason & Webster, 2010) was utilized. This scale encompasses the three dark personality dimensions: Machiavellianism (e.g., "I tend to manipulate others to get my way."), psychopathy (e.g., "I tend to be unconcerned with the morality of my actions."), and narcissism (e.g., "I tend to want others to pay attention to me."). Each dimension consists of four items, rated on a nine-point Likert scale (1 = *Disagree strongly*, 9 = *Agree strongly*). Higher scores on each dimension indicate a greater propensity towards that particular maladaptive trait. Cronbach's alpha values for the DRDD in the present study were good for the Australian ($\alpha_{Machiavellianism}$ = .93; $\alpha_{Psychopathy}$ = .92; $\alpha_{Narcissism}$ = .93), Iranian ($\alpha_{Machiavellianism}$ = .84; $\alpha_{Psychopathy}$ = .60; $\alpha_{Narcissism}$= .88), and Filipino ($\alpha_{Machiavellianism}$ = .85; $\alpha_{Psychopathy}$ = .84; $\alpha_{Narcissism}$ = .88) samples.

To assess self-esteem, the *Single-Item Self-Esteem Scale* (*SISE*; Robins et al., 2001) was employed. This scale comprises a single item: "I have high self-esteem." Participants rated their agreement with this statement on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = *Not very true of me*, 7 = *Very true of me*). A higher score on the scale suggests greater levels of self-esteem.

Thinking Styles

For assessing rational and experiential thinking styles, the *Rational Experiential Multimodal Inventory-13* (*REIm-13*; McGuiness et al., 2019) was administered. This 13-item brief scale consist of four subscales of rationality (4 items; e.g., "I enjoy problems that require hard thinking."), experientiality-imagination (3 items; e.g., "I can clearly picture or remember some sculpture or natural object (not alive) that I think is very beautiful."), experientiality-intuition (3 items; e.g., "I often go by my instincts when deciding on a course of action."), and experientiality-emotionality (3 items; e.g., "When I have a strong emotional experience, the

effect stays with me for a long time."). Participants rate their agreement on a 5-point scale (1 = *Definitely not true of myself*, 5 = *Definitely true of myself*), with higher scores on each subscale indicating a higher propensity for that particular thinking style. Cronbach's alpha values for the REIm rationality and experientiality-imagination subscales in the present study were acceptable, but generally poor for the experientiality-intuition and experientiality-emotionality subscales for the Australian ($\alpha_{Rationality}$ = .64; $\alpha_{Experientiality\text{-}Imagination}$ = .70; $\alpha_{Experientiality\text{-}Intuition}$ = .35; $\alpha_{Experientiality\text{-}Emotionality}$ = .34), Iranian ($\alpha_{Rationality}$ = .74; $\alpha_{Experientiality\text{-}Imagination}$ = .62; $\alpha_{Experientiality\text{-}Intuition}$ = .30; $\alpha_{Experientiality\text{-}Emotionality}$ = .52), and Filipino ($\alpha_{Rationality}$ = .66; $\alpha_{Experientiality\text{-}Imagination}$ = .68; $\alpha_{Experientiality\text{-}Intuition}$ = .31; $\alpha_{Experientiality\text{-}Emotionality}$ = .51) samples. Therefore, only the rationality and experientiality-imagination subscales were used with all their items. For the remaining subscales, a single representative item was selected (e.g., "When I have a strong emotional experience, the effect stays with me for a long time" for the experientiality-emotionality subscale) to retain those constructs in the models. To ensure consistency across all models (e.g., avoiding discrepancies where one model employed a single item while another used multiple items to assess the same construct), the same single items were used consistently across all models. This approach was informed by methodological recommendations on multi-item and single-item scales (e.g., Diamantopoulos et al., 2012). Items were selected based on face validity, alpha if removed, correlation with other items, and explained variance from the scale's original study. However, results should be interpreted cautiously.

Media Use

The time spent on traditional media was measured through the following item: "*In the last 30 days, what has been your average daily engagement with traditional media, encompassing both weekends and weekdays? Traditional media includes television, radio, and print media (such as newspapers and magazines).*" Respondents were presented with response options structured on a 7-point scale: 0 = *0 hour or less than 1 hour*, 1 = *1-2 hours*, 2 = *2-3 hours*, 3 = *3-4 hours*, 4 = *4-5 hours*, 5 = *5-6 hours*, 6 = *6-7 hours*, 7 = *+7 hours*.

The item assessing the time spent on new media was framed as follows: "*In the last 30 days, what has been your average daily duration of engagement with new media, encompassing both weekends and weekdays? New media encompasses internet-related activities (such as online streaming), video games, and social media.*" Respondents were provided with response options structured on a 7-point scale: 0 = *0 hour or less than 1 hour*, 1 = *1-2 hours*, 2 = *2-3 hours*, 3 = *3-4 hours*, 4 = *4-5 hours*, 5 = *5-6 hours*, 6 = *6-7 hours*, 7 = *+7 hours*.

To evaluate participants' mindful awareness during social media use, the *Mindful Use of Social Media Scale* (*MUSMS*; Shabahang et al., 2024b) was employed. This unidimensional scale comprises seven items (e.g., "It seems I am running on automatic during social media use, without much awareness of what I am doing in social media."). The items are rated on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *Almost never*, 6 = *Almost always*). As the items are formulated negatively, they need to be reverse-scored. Higher scores on the scale indicate a greater level of mindful use of social media. The MUSMS exhibited high reliability in the Australian (α = .93), Iranian (α = .89), and Filipino (α = .88) samples.

Procedure

The survey incorporated the BMCTS, along with a comprehensive set of measures assessing personality, cognitive abilities, media use routines, mental health, and sociopolitical attitudes. In this Chapter, data from the BMCTS and measures of potential contributing factors (i.e., sociodemographics, personality, thinking style, and media use) were used. This data constituted the last portion of the extensive survey data used in this project, which included samples from Australia, Iran, and the Philippines. Sampling procedures are detailed in the Procedure section of *Chapter 2*, as the data used in this Chapter comes from the comprehensive survey, which included Australian, Iranian, and Filipino samples.

Date Analysis

Initially, the potential role of sociodemographics in predicting media conspiracy beliefs was examined using linear regression analysis. For the purposes of interpretation, gender (1 = women, 2 = men) and education (1 = high school diploma or less, 2 = bachelor's, master's, or doctoral degree) were dichotomized. Next, the relationships between personality traits, thinking styles, and media use (limited to those measures exhibiting acceptable internal consistency within the sample) and media conspiracy beliefs were explored through zero-order Pearson correlations (step 1). In a second step, linear regression models were developed for each sample to identify the most significant predictors of belief in media conspiracy theories overall. Only predictors that demonstrated significant correlations with media conspiracy beliefs in the preceding correlation analysis (i.e., at step 1) were included in these models at step 2. Multicollinearity was assessed in all regression models, with variance inflation factors (VIFs) remaining within acceptable thresholds (VIF < 10; see O'Brien, 2007), the highest observed being 5.5. Bonferroni correction was applied to adjust for multiple comparisons, thereby setting the p-value threshold at $p < .01$. Post hoc sensitivity analyses indicated that, given the number of variables, a power level of .80, and an α error probability of .05, the model had sufficient power to detect small

to medium effects across the samples (ranging from f^2 = .02 to .12). Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 21.0) and the ggplot2 package (Wickham, 2016) in RStudio (Version 4.2.3).

Results

The Association of Sociodemographics with Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories across the Samples

None of the demographics were found to be significant predictors of belief in media conspiracy theories, except for subjective social status in the Australian sample. However, this association was very weak, and the overall regression model was only marginally significant. Moreover, education had a marginally significant association with media conspiracy beliefs in the Iranian sample, suggesting that lower levels of education may predict slightly stronger beliefs in media conspiracy theories. However, the overall model was not statistically significant (see *Table 11*). Overall, the explanatory power of the sociodemographics across the samples was consistently negligible (below 4%).

Table 11. Regression Analysis Predicting Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories Based on Sociodemographics across the Samples

Predictor variables	Belief in media conspiracy theories *β (SE)*		
	Australian Sample	Iranian Sample	Filipino Sample
Age	.03 (.08)	.02 (.07)	.04 (.04)
Gender (1 = Women, 2 = Men)	-.10 (.01)	.01 (.004)	-.04 (.001)
Education (1 = High school diploma or less, 2 = Bachelor's, Master's, or Doctoral degree)	.03 (1.28)	-.20 (2.12)*	.10 (.56)
Subjective Social Status	.22 (1.27)**	.03 (.33)	.01 (.16)
F	3.39*	2.03	2.95
Adj. R^2	3.9%	1.9%	1.1%
Note. ***p < .001; **p < .01, *p = .01			

The Correlation of Personality Traits, Thinking Styles, and Media Use with Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories across the Samples

Descriptive statistics of the variables, including means and standard deviations, are available in the Supplementary Material (see Table S4). No significant correlation was found between Big Five personality traits and belief in media conspiracy theories across the samples. However, Dark Triad personality traits, including Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism, were moderately and positively correlated with belief in media conspiracy theories in the Australian sample. Narcissism was weakly and positively correlated with media conspiracy beliefs among Iranian participants, while a weak, positive correlation was found between psychopathy and media conspiracy beliefs in the Filipino sample. Moreover, self-esteem was weakly and positively correlated with media conspiracy beliefs in the Australian and Filipino samples. Regarding thinking styles, the experientiality-imagination thinking style was positively correlated with media conspiracy theories in Australian and Iranian samples. A negative weak correlation was found between rationality thinking style and media conspiracy beliefs in the Australian sample. With regard to media use, a weak positive correlation was found between time spent on traditional media and media conspiracy beliefs, as well as a weak negative correlation between time spent on new media and media conspiracy beliefs in the Filipino sample. Consistently negative correlations were found between mindful social media use and belief in media conspiracy theories across the samples (see *Table 12*). The variables with statistically significant correlations with media conspiracy beliefs were investigated in the regression models.

Table 12. Zero-Order (Pearson) Correlations Between Personality Traits, Thinking Styles, Media Use, and Belief in Media Conspiracy Beliefs across the Samples

Correlates	Belief in media conspiracy theories		
	Australian Sample	Iranian Sample	Filipino Sample
Neuroticism	-.15	-.09	-.02
Extraversion	.12	-.01	.09
Conscientiousness	-.14	.14	.06
Agreeableness	-.13	.07	-.07
Openness to experience	-.17	.13	.007
Machiavellianism	.41***	.07	.09

Psychopathy	.41***	.03	.14***
Narcissism	.44***	.22**	.09
Self-esteem	.26***	.05	.13**
Rationality	-.18*	.07	-.06
Experientiality-Imagination	.20**	.37***	.10
Experientiality-Intuition	.03	.09	.11
Experientiality-Emotionality	-.06	.13	-.01
Time Spent on Traditional Media	.10	.11	-.13**
Time Spent on New Media	.04	.15	.10*
Mindful Use of Social Media	-.42***	-.20**	-.18***
Note. ***$p < .001$; **$p < .01$, *$p = .01$			

The Association of Identified Statistically Significant Correlates of Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories in Regression Models across the Samples

In the Australian sample, mindful use of social media was the only statistically significant predictor. Mindful use of social media was negatively associated with media conspiracy beliefs (see *Figure 7*). In the Iranian sample, experientiality-imagination thinking style was the only statistically significant predictor. Experientiality-imagination thinking style was positively associated with media conspiracy beliefs (see *Figure 8*). In the Filipino sample, self-esteem was positively associated, time spent on traditional media was negatively associated, time spent on new media was positively associated, and mindful use of social media was negatively associated with media conspiracy beliefs (see *Figure 9*).

Figure 7. Linear Regression Analysis Predicting Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories in the Australian Sample

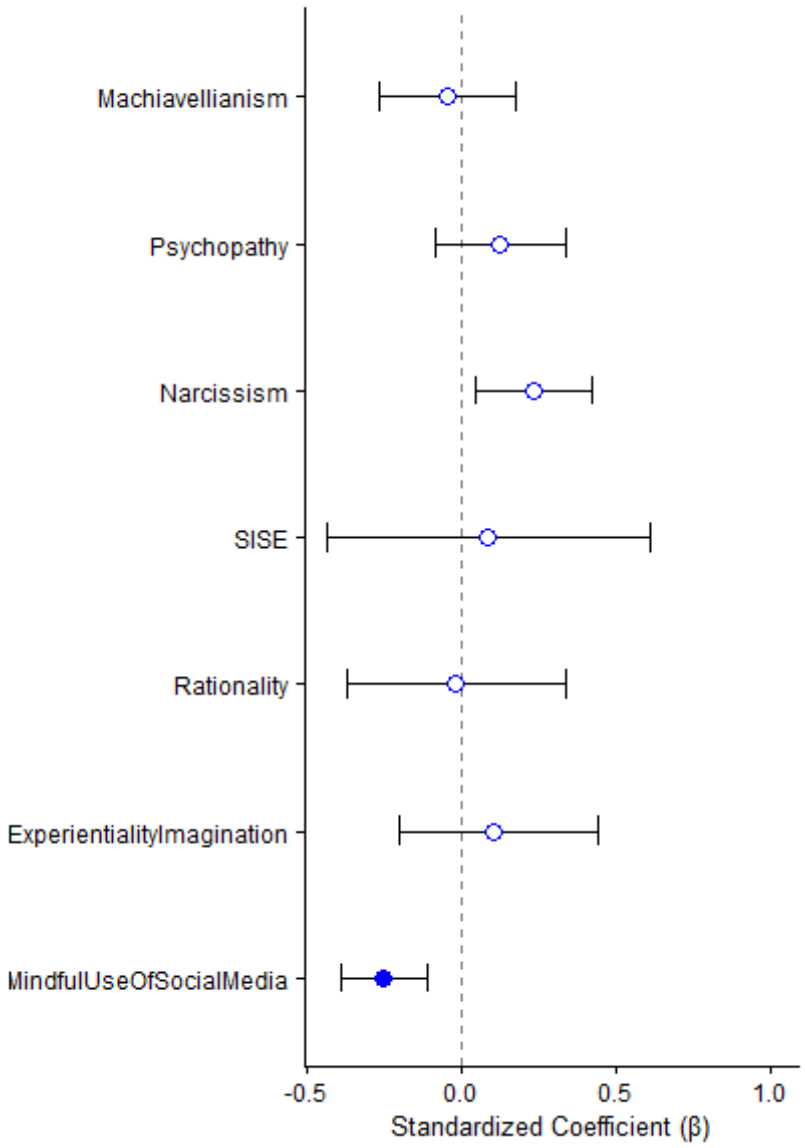


Figure 8. Linear Regression Analysis Predicting Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories in the Iranian Sample

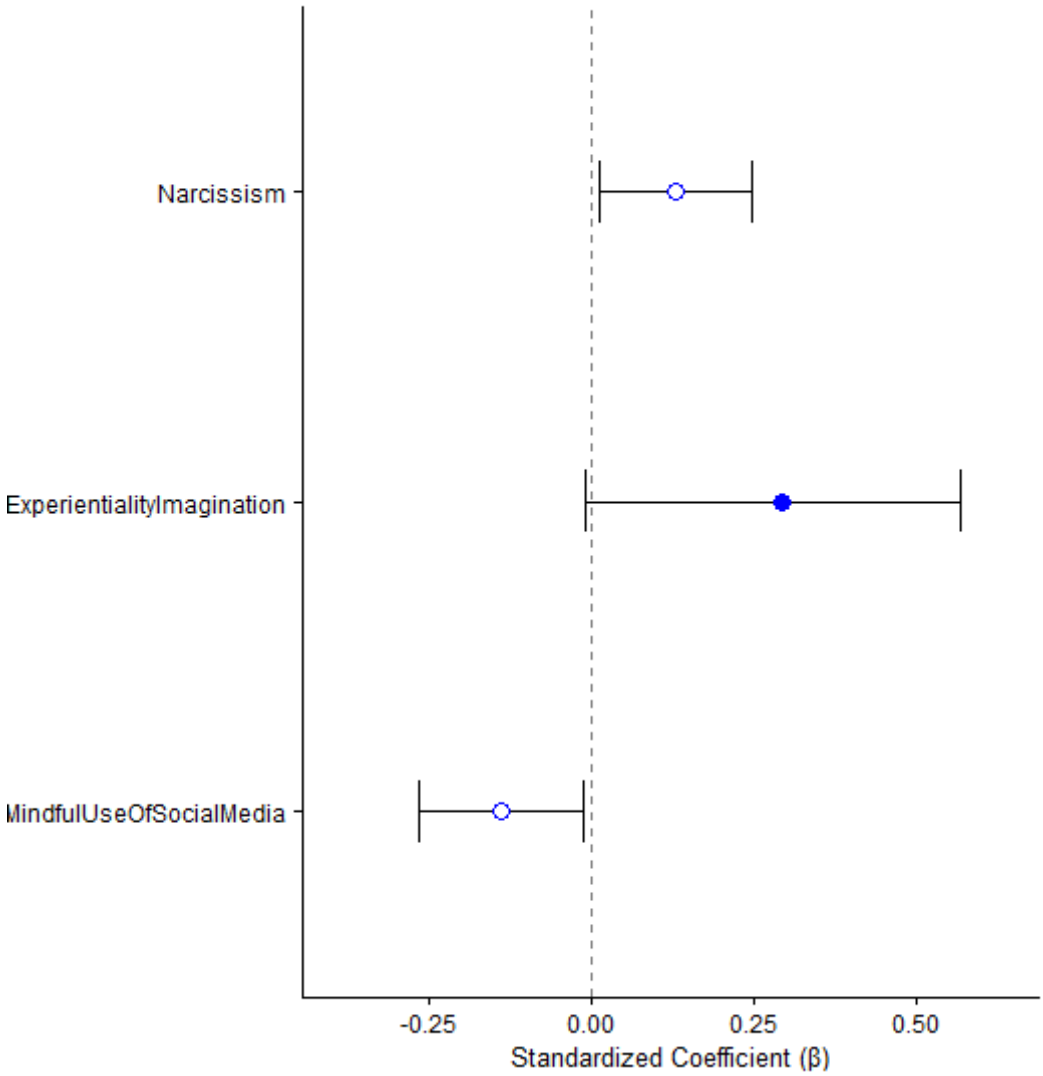
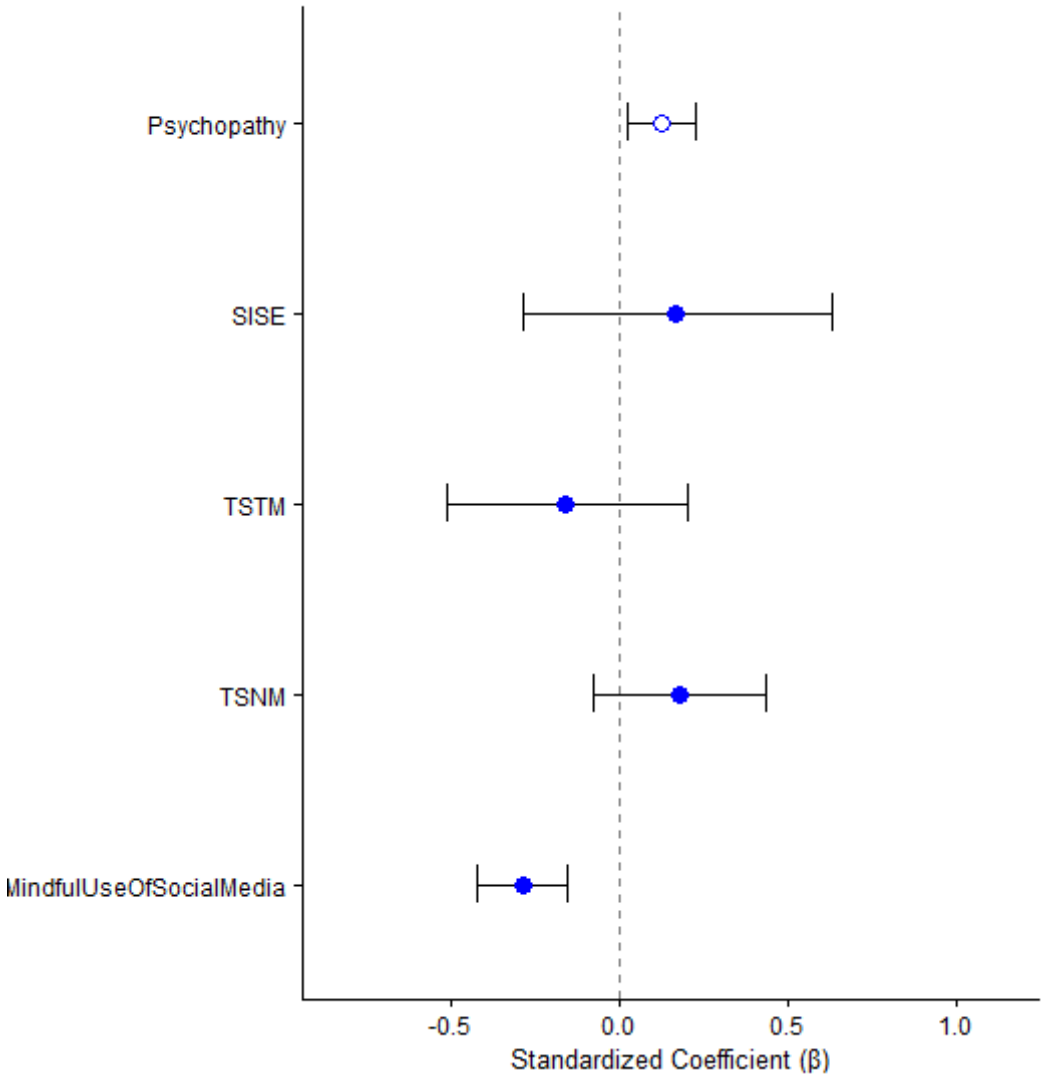


Figure 9. Linear Regression Analysis Predicting Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories in the Filipino Sample



Discussion

In this Chapter, I aimed to identify the contributing factors of media conspiracy beliefs. Inconsistencies in the existing literature regarding the contributing factors of conspiracy beliefs (Douglas & Sutton, 2023) underscore the need for focused investigations into specific types of conspiracy beliefs, particularly those that are little understood. The results of this study showed that sociodemographic factors, personality traits, and cognitive styles were largely unrelated to media conspiracy beliefs, with only a few exceptions. However, mindful use of social media—as mindful awareness during social media use and an indicator of the quality of media engagement—emerged as the most consistently associated factor with media conspiracy beliefs across the samples.

Contribution of sociodemographics to media conspiracy beliefs

Except for two associations—one negative (education with media conspiracy beliefs in the Iranian sample, though the overall regression model was non-significant) and one positive (subjective social status with media conspiracy beliefs in the Australian sample, with the regression model significant but with almost negligible explanatory power)—no significant relationships were found between sociodemographics and media conspiracy beliefs across the samples. These findings diverge from much of the existing literature, which has often identified sociodemographic contributions to conspiracy beliefs (e.g., Douglas et al., 2016; Farhart et al., 2020; Furnham, 2017; Miller et al., 2016; Galliford & Furnham, 2017; Galliford & Swami et al., 2012; Green & Douglas, 2018; Swami et al., 2016; van Prooijen, 2017).

Previous studies have offered varied explanations for sociodemographic effects on conspiracy beliefs. For example, individuals with greater age or higher social status may, due to increased life experience and more effective coping strategies, be less inclined to endorse conspiracy beliefs (Galliford & Furnham, 2017). However, the present findings suggest that media conspiracy beliefs may not depend on specific sociodemographic characteristics. Instead, individuals from a wide range of demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds appear equally likely to adopt and endorse such beliefs. This study contributes to the limited body of research suggesting non-significant links between sociodemographic factors and conspiracy beliefs (e.g., Buturoiu et al., 2021; Swami et al., 2016; Uscinski and Parent, 2014). Media conspiracy beliefs may not be confined to specific age groups, genders, educational levels, or socioeconomic statuses; rather, they may resonate broadly across diverse populations. The content of media conspiracy theories may play a role in shaping perceptions across different socioeconomic groups. For example, individuals from lower socioeconomic classes may perceive the media as conspiratorial, believing it serves to uphold hierarchical structures and protect the interests of the wealthy. Conversely, individuals from higher socioeconomic classes may view the media as conspiratorial in a different way, seeing it as a force that seeks to diminish their power and impose greater pressure on them to contribute resources toward addressing societal challenges. Considering that the media can be interpreted as conspiratorial from multiple perspectives, conspiracy beliefs may be endorsed by various sociodemographic groups. However, this remains an assumption, as no empirical support for it is provided in this study. Alternatively, it is possible that media conspiracy beliefs are more prevalent among individuals with specific combinations of sociodemographic characteristics (e.g., males with low socioeconomic status). This, too, is a possibility that warrants empirical investigation in future studies.

Contribution of personality traits to media conspiracy beliefs

The relationship between personality traits and media conspiracy beliefs also did not demonstrate strong or consistent patterns across the samples. Specifically, no significant correlations were observed between media conspiracy beliefs and the Big Five personality traits. It seems that the extent to which individuals are, for example, extraverted or neurotic are unrelated to their likelihood of endorsing media conspiracy beliefs. This fails to support studies that have reported a link between Big Five personality traits and conspiracy beliefs (e.g., Swami et al., 2010, 2011, 2013, 2016). However, it aligns with the review and meta-analysis conducted by Goreis and Voracek (2019), which found no significant association between Big Five personality traits and conspiracy beliefs when effect sizes were aggregated. It should be noted, however, that the assessment tool used in the current study had low internal consistency, and single items were used to measure some personality traits in some cases.

Although initial analyses suggested correlations between Dark Triad traits—Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism—and media conspiracy beliefs (notably in the Australian sample), these relationships did not remain statistically significant in regression models. This suggests that while Dark Triad traits may have some association with media conspiracy beliefs, their effects may be limited. This aligns with findings from some studies that have reported inconsistent, non-significant, or weak associations between Dark Triad traits and conspiracy beliefs (e.g., Teličák et al., 2024).

Self-esteem emerged as a personality trait with potential relevance. Positive correlations between self-esteem and media conspiracy beliefs were observed in the Australian and Filipino samples, with the relationship remaining significant in the Filipino regression model. These findings suggest that individuals with higher self-esteem may be more inclined to accept media conspiracy beliefs, although this association is neither strong nor consistent across samples. Considering the distinction between narcissism and self-esteem (Hyatt et al., 2018)—where self-esteem is an adaptive trait negatively associated with internalizing psychopathology and unrelated to externalizing behaviors, in contrast to narcissism—it appears that positive self-evaluations associated with self-esteem, rather than narcissism, might play a role in media conspiracy beliefs. In alignment with Stasielowicz (2022), who suggested that higher self-esteem may be related to certain conspiracy beliefs depending on their content, higher self-esteem may be associated with media conspiracy beliefs.

Overall, personality traits appear to have a limited influence on media conspiracy beliefs. Among the traits examined in this study, self-esteem was the only one that demonstrated a weak but inconsistent

association with these beliefs in regression models. This suggests that media conspiracy beliefs can be endorsed by individuals with diverse personality profiles, with no single trait strongly predisposing individuals to such beliefs. The content of media conspiracy theories may play a role in shaping who is drawn to them, as different types of conspiracy theories may appeal to individuals with distinct personality traits. For instance, in the second wave of Halama and Teličák's (2024) longitudinal study, openness was associated with COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs but not with Russian-Ukrainian war conspiracy beliefs. Conversely, psychoticism was not associated with COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs but was linked to Russian-Ukrainian war conspiracy beliefs.

Considering that media conspiracy theories may not appear as extreme as other conspiracy theories (e.g., COVID-19 conspiracy theories) and are less likely to carry the same negative stigma (at least, as of today), individuals with varying personality traits—not just those with specific characteristics (e.g., higher psychoticism)—may engage with them. This aligns with Stasielowicz's (2022) argument that the association between personality traits and conspiracy beliefs may vary depending on the content of the conspiracy theory. Future research is needed to further explore the relationship between personality and media conspiracy beliefs. Employing broader and more psychometrically robust personality measures would help clarify the potential connections between personality traits and media conspiracy beliefs.

Contribution of thinking styles to media conspiracy beliefs

The analysis showed a negative correlation between the rationality thinking style and media conspiracy beliefs in the Iranian sample, as well as a positive correlation between the experientiality-imagination thinking style and media conspiracy beliefs in both the Australian and Iranian samples. However, only the association between experientiality-imagination thinking style and media conspiracy beliefs in the Iranian sample remained statistically significant in regression models. This suggests that individuals who are more open to speculative, imaginative, and less evidence-based narratives may be more inclined to accept media conspiracy beliefs. Nonetheless, this relationship was not consistent across the samples, though it was relatively strong in the Iranian sample.

The findings suggest that media conspiracy beliefs may not be strongly influenced by thinking styles. This is noteworthy given that much of the existing literature has reported associations between thinking styles and conspiracy beliefs (e.g., Gligorić et al., 2021). However, thinking styles are not always linked to conspiracy beliefs. For example, Baruh et al. (2025) found that time pressure, designed to induce intuitive thinking, increased belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theories but not general conspiracy theories. It seems that the content

of conspiracy beliefs may determine which thinking styles are associated with them. Media conspiracy theories may possess characteristics (e.g., arguments that are understandable to individuals with varying thinking styles) that make them accessible to people with different thinking styles. However, this remains an assumption requiring empirical investigation. Future research is needed to further examine the link between thinking styles and media conspiracy beliefs, as this could offer valuable insights into the cognitive processes underlying belief formation and acceptance. Future studies should employ more comprehensive and objective measures of cognition, capturing various dimensions of cognitive functioning, to clarify these relationships and deepen our understanding of the cognitive basis of media conspiracy beliefs.

Contribution of media use to media conspiracy beliefs

The results indicated that while the amount of *time spent* on media (both traditional and new) may not have a consistent relationship with media conspiracy beliefs, the *quality* of social media use appears to be a more reliable predictor. Specifically, aside from the Filipino sample—where time spent on traditional media was negatively correlated, and time spent on new media was positively correlated with media conspiracy beliefs—these associations were non-significant in the Iranian and Australian samples. Consumption of traditional media, where content typically adheres to established standards, undergoes review processes, and where conspiratorial narratives are often limited or critically discussed, may have a negative association with media conspiracy beliefs. Also, time spent on new media—characterized by the ease of accessing conspiracy content, unregulated information sharing, and existence of conspiracy-related accounts and discussion groups—may have a positive association with media conspiracy beliefs. However, such associations were not robust or consistent across samples.

By contrast, the quality of social media use—specifically mindful use—was consistently and negatively correlated with media conspiracy beliefs across the samples. These associations remained significant in regression models, except for the Iranian sample. While the Iranian sample's association did not meet the significance threshold applied in this study ($p < .01$), it was still statistically significant at the conventional $p < .05$ level. Indeed, strikingly, quality of social media use (i.e., mindful use of social media) was the only factor to emerge as an important predictor in all samples.

We can speculate as to why mindful social media use has an ostensibly buffering effect on media conspiracy beliefs. Mindful social media use may be associated with less susceptibility to media conspiracy beliefs by limiting exposure to conspiratorial content, disrupting algorithmic information bubbles, fostering

deeper offline engagement, enhancing self-reflection, and preserving cognitive resources. Social media provides fertile ground for the circulation, exposure, and learning of conspiracy theories (see Abdalla Mikhaeil & Baskerville, 2024). By curbing aimless browsing, mindful engagement may minimizes encounters with conspiracy theories, including media conspiracy beliefs. Additionally, by preventing excessive reliance on social media, a contributor to algorithms that reinforce pre-existing beliefs (see Van Bavel et al., 2021), mindful use of social media may mitigate polarization in suggested content by social media and foster exposure to diverse perspectives. This mindful approach may also discourage escapism through social media (see Whiting & Williams, 2013), potentially encouraging individuals to engage more fully with their offline experiences. This increased engagement may foster resourcefulness, potentially strengthening problem-focused coping strategies (see Akgun, 2004) and reducing reliance on conspiratorial thinking. Furthermore, by potentially preventing cognitive overload and burnout by excessive social media use (see Montag & Markett, 2023), mindful use of social media may preserve cognitive resources essential for evaluating information and resisting misleading narratives. However, these remain assumptions, and this study is unable to provide empirical evidence to support them.

Overall, it appears that while the quantity of media consumption (time spent)—whether traditional or new media—is not necessarily associated with media conspiracy beliefs, the quality of engagement, particularly mindful use of social media, demonstrates a consistent relationship with these beliefs. This finding is novel within the context of the relationship between media use and conspiracy beliefs, as existing research has primarily focused on the quantity of media use, with limited evidence addressing the effects of the quality of use. Future research should further explore the relationship between the quality of media engagement and conspiracy beliefs, including media conspiracy beliefs.

Taking all these results into consideration, sociodemographic factors, personality traits, and thinking styles do not appear to be strongly related to media conspiracy beliefs. Media conspiracy theories may be structured in such a way that individuals from different ages, genders, education levels, socioeconomic backgrounds, and with various personality traits and thinking styles may feel a resonance with these ideas. It seems we cannot conclusively assert, for example, that only individuals with more negative personality traits (e.g., antisociality) find these theories acceptable. However, among all these variables, interestingly, the quality of engagement with social media (i.e., mindful social media use) was consistently linked to media conspiracy beliefs.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The present study has several limitations that should be considered. Statistically significant sociodemographic differences, such as variations in socioeconomic status, were observed across the samples. These sample differences across societies may threaten the validity of cross-sample analyses and could potentially lead to misinterpretations of the data (e.g., Buil et al., 2012). Furthermore, the samples were convenience-based, which may mean they represent specific subgroups within each society. I did not conduct statistical cross-sample comparisons or interpret the findings from the cross-sample perspective. Future research using representative samples with non-significant sociodemographic differences, along with the control of measurement invariance, could provide more reliable and nuanced insights into the potential factors contributing to media conspiracy beliefs across different societies. Moreover, some measures in this study exhibited low internal consistency, which resulted in the inclusion of only a single item from these measures in the models. This limitation may impact the validity of these measures and, as a result, potentially influence the observed relationships under investigation. Also, this study assessed only limited aspects of personality and cognition, with some measures being single-item. Future research should consider broader and more comprehensive assessments. Furthermore, this investigation was designed to detect small to medium effect sizes, which should be taken into account when interpreting the findings. It is also important to note that, due to variations in sample size, a relationship may reach statistical significance in one sample but not in another—not because the underlying relationship differs, but because the disparity in sample sizes affects statistical power. This investigation was exploratory in nature, and confirmatory research is needed. Future studies should aim to ensure more balanced sample sizes and/or consider adopting alternative approaches—potentially theory-driven rather than purely empirically driven—for comparing effects. Additionally, it is important to note that a non-significant effect does not necessarily indicate the absence of an effect (see Gelman & Stern, 2006). Many associations in this Chapter were found to be non-significant. Future replication studies are recommended to support or refute the assumption that belief in media conspiracy theories may be less related to sociodemographic factors, personality traits, and thinking styles. Despite these limitations, this study offers preliminary evidence on predictors of belief in media conspiracy theories.

Concluding Comments

The findings of this Chapter suggests that media conspiracy beliefs may not be easily predictable. Following Smallpage et al. (2024), I purpose that belief in media conspiracy theories may be “relatively flat” across

sociodemographic groups, personality traits, and thinking styles. The content of media conspiracy theories may be designed in such a way that it attracts the attention of individuals from diverse sociodemographic backgrounds, personality traits, and thinking styles. This is a possibility that warrants further empirical investigation.

However, how individuals engage with media may play a role. Beyond the time spent on traditional and new media (quantity of use; how much media is used), the quality of media use (how media is used)—particularly mindful use of social media—may be associated with media conspiracy beliefs. It appears that users who are more inclined to believe in media conspiracy theories are also more likely to engage with media, particularly social media, in a mindless and uncritical manner. It might be posited that people who believe that the media are involved in a conspiracy would be more likely to consume media content in a highly engaged and critical manner – however, my data do not support this idea. Rather, it appears that believers in conspiracy theories, such as media conspiracy theories, engage with information in a relatively mindless manner. Further research is needed to better understand the relationship between media use (including mindful use of social media) and conspiracy beliefs (such as media conspiracy beliefs).

This Chapter also offers a novel perspective by investigating the relationship between media use and conspiracy beliefs through the lens of mindful social media use, a first in the literature. This information contributes to the literature on predictors of media conspiracy beliefs and offers preliminary insights into why individuals may accept media conspiracy beliefs, which could be valuable for addressing and mitigating these beliefs and future relevant studies.

Future research should continue to explore the underlying factors contributing to media conspiracy beliefs. To answer the question of why people believe in claims such as "The Simpsons are programming people," further investigation is necessary.

CHAPTER 5

An Online Educational Intervention Promoting Mindful Use of Social Media May Reduce Media Conspiracy Beliefs—A Pilot Interventional Study

Authorship statement: I am the primary author of this chapter and the corresponding manuscript. I conceptualised and designed the study, with guidance and advice from my principal and associate supervisors (Emma Thomas and Ryan Balzan). I designed the intervention, provided the intervention, and collected data in Iran. I conducted data analysis independently. I drafted the entire chapter and manuscript and incorporated revisions and editorial suggestions provided by my supervisors. Percentage of contributions: Reza Shabahang: 85%; Emma Thomas: 10%; Ryan Balzan: 5%.

Abstract

Conspiracy beliefs may give rise to detrimental consequences at both the individual and societal levels, making it crucial to address them. Although various psychological interventions have been developed to address such beliefs, some interventions have limitations (e.g., the limited generalizability of some counter-argumentative interventions targeting specific conspiracy beliefs to other conspiracy beliefs). There is still a need for additional intervention approaches. Recent studies have suggested that social media use may play a role in fostering conspiracy beliefs. In this Chapter, I aim to pilot-test how improving the quality of social media use might influence media conspiracy beliefs and general conspiracism. This was one of the first attempts in the literature to reduce conspiracism by targeting the social media usage pattern. An educational intervention promoting mindful social media use was designed. This program aimed to help individuals increase their awareness of intentions, thoughts, and emotions during social media use. Sixty Iranian adult social media users were randomly assigned to either the intervention group (n = 30) or a waitlist control group (n = 30). The intervention group participated in the online group-based educational intervention promoting mindful social media use, consisting of nine sessions held three times a week over a three-week period. The results indicated statistically significant, small-to-moderate effects of the program in reducing media conspiracy beliefs and

general conspiracism. This study suggests that, beyond targeting deep-rooted cognitive capabilities and biases, interventions aimed at individuals' behavior patterns—particularly their engagement with information sources like social media—may also be effective in combating conspiracy beliefs. This Chapter introduces a potentially promising novel interventional approach to addressing conspiracy beliefs by promoting mindful use of social media.

Keywords: Conspiracy, conspiracy belief, conspiracy theories, media, social media use, mindful use of social media, intervention, Iran

Introduction

Conspiracy beliefs may be associated with psychological, social, and political consequences. Research shows that individuals who endorse conspiracy theories are at a higher risk for suicidal ideation, reduced social connections, and meeting the criteria for psychiatric disorders (Freeman & Bentall, 2017). These beliefs are also linked to increased psychological distress, symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder, and lower life satisfaction (Chen et al., 2020). Additionally, conspiracy beliefs are associated with feelings of powerlessness, mistrust, uncertainty, prejudice, racism, violence, and extremism (Bilewicz et al., 2013; de Zavala & Cichocka, 2012; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Jolley & Douglas, 2014; Jolley et al., 2022; van Mulukom et al., 2022). Given these potential negative associated outcomes, it is crucial to explore effective methods for reducing conspiracy beliefs. In this Chapter, I aim to investigate the effectiveness of a novel intervention focused on enhancing the social media usage pattern. This intervention aimed to increase the quality of social media engagement by enhancing user awareness during social media use. The study focused on addressing a specific set of conspiracy beliefs—media conspiracy beliefs—and general conspiracism.

So far, various interventions have been designed and implemented to address conspiracy beliefs. These include reinforcing critical thinking, using rational and empathetic counterarguments, ridiculing beliefs, applying fact- and logic-based inoculation and meta-inoculation, analytical priming, promoting scientific reasoning, encouraging a regulatory focus and personal control, priming resistance to persuasion, employing both anti- and pro-conspiracy arguments, and labeling conspiracies (for review, see O'Mahony et al., 2023). For example, Orosz et al. (2016) found that exposing individuals to rational counter-arguments against conspiracy theories reduced conspiracy beliefs. Georgiou et al. (2023) identified a scientific reasoning intervention as effective in reducing COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs.

Despite the success of some interventions designed to address conspiracy beliefs, others have proven ineffective or only partially effective in certain studies (e.g., see O'Mahony et al., 2024). Moreover, some challenges exist regarding the narrow applicability and negative content and tone of some interventions. Findings from a recent meta-analysis by Stasielowicz (2024), which included 273 effect sizes from 56 samples, showed that interventions targeting conspiracy beliefs show modest to small effectiveness. Stasielowicz (2024) emphasized the need for further advancements in interventions targeting conspiracy beliefs.

Some studies have indicated non-significant effects of their developed intervention on conspiracy beliefs and thinking. For example, in Orosz et al.'s study (2016), the empathetic counterarguments had no significant effect on conspiracy beliefs. Similarly, O'Mahony et al. (2024) reported that the priming intervention—where participants were warned about the dangers of believing in conspiracy theories—did not significantly reduce susceptibility to novel implausible conspiracy theories. Furthermore, none of the four interventions examined—Priming, Inoculation (i.e., debunking conspiracy beliefs), Active Inoculation (i.e., debunking conspiracy theories with active participant involvement), and Discernment (i.e., educating participants on the importance of discernment)—significantly reduced general conspiracy ideation or meaningfully influenced likelihood judgments regarding hypothetical conspiracy theories.

Additionally, some interventions, such as ridiculing or devaluing beliefs (e.g., see Orosz et al., 2016), directly target individuals' perspectives with negative tone, making them challenging to administer in many cases. Many interventions are also limited by their focus on specific content, such as targeted arguments against particular conspiracy narratives (e.g., arguments against vaccination conspiracy beliefs; see Jolley & Douglas, 2017), limiting their applicability to other types of conspiracy beliefs.

Another concern is the longevity of intervention effects, as some may yield only short-term positive impacts due to various factors, such as their focus on specific counterarguments and the particular content of conspiracy theories, which may evolve over time. Interventions that enhance individuals' cognitive abilities are encouraged, as they may have the potential to produce more sustained effects (e.g., see O'Mahony et al., 2023; Stasielowicz, 2024). Therefore, considering these potential challenges in some cases, despite significant progress in developing interventions for conspiracy beliefs, there remains a need for additional approaches.

Considering the link between social media use and conspiracy beliefs reported in recent investigations, improving social media use routine may be a potential approach to addressing conspiracy beliefs. Research has indicated that frequent social media use may contribute to conspiracy thinking and beliefs. Stecula and

Pickup (2021) found that relying on platforms like Facebook and YouTube for news is associated with higher levels of conspiracy belief, particularly among individuals with low cognitive reflection. In a three-wave panel survey study (2017–2019), Valenzuela et al. (2023) reported a reciprocal, lagged relationship between the frequency of social media usage and conspiracy thinking. Users who increased their social media use from one wave to another reported more conspiracy thinking, and vice versa (within-person results). Valenzuela et al. (2023) suggested that enhancing the quality of social media use (e.g., improving social media literacy) could reduce vulnerability to conspiracy beliefs. Likewise, Enders et al. (2023) found that individuals who frequently use social media for news reported stronger conspiracist beliefs; however, this association was intensified for those predisposed to conspiracy thinking. In explaining how social media may contribute to conspiracy beliefs, factors such as the ready accessibility of conspiracy theories, minimal content moderation, and algorithm-driven polarization and echo chambers have been highlighted (for a review, see Cinelli et al., 2022).

While studies suggest that social media use may contribute to conspiracy beliefs, they have primarily focused on usage *frequency* (i.e., time spent on social media; screen-time), with little attention given to the potential contribution of the *quality* of social media use. The quality of engagement with social media (how social media is used) has recently garnered attention in the literature as a concept distinct from the quantity of engagement (how much social media is used; see Przybylski & Weinstein, 2017). Research indicates that users may engage in new media activities (e.g., gaming) for extended periods without experiencing negative consequences (Billieux et al., 2019). Additionally, a recent longitudinal study suggests that the relationship between time spent on social media and mental health issues may be negligible, underscoring the importance of factors beyond mere usage duration in shaping users' vulnerability to social media's adverse effects (see Coyne et al., 2020). Moreover, studies have demonstrated only a weak association between time spent on social media and the development of problematic usage patterns (e.g., Peng & Liao, 2023). Thus, while constructs such as time spent on social media and problematic social media use—which predominantly focus on the frequency or excessive use of social media and encompass components like tolerance (i.e., the escalating need for more frequent use to achieve prior levels of satisfaction)—have been widely studied, they do not fully capture the nuances of the user–social media relationship. To address this gap, recent research emphasizes the need to explore the quality of engagement with social media, such as mindful awareness during social media use, as an equally critical dimension.

The mindful use of social media is a recently introduced framework that emphasizes the quality of engagement, focusing on users' awareness of their intentions, thoughts, and feelings during their interaction with social media (Shabahang et al., 2024b). Mindful use of social media has the potential to enable users to interact with social platforms in a more intentional and effective manner. Research by Shabahang et al. (2024b) showed that mindful social media use is linked to lower social media use intensity, fewer symptoms of social media addiction, and improved subjective mental health. These findings suggest that mindful engagement may alleviate the vulnerabilities typically associated with social media.

Mindfulness in many activities has the potential to enhance intellectual and social resources, contributing to better overall functioning and resilience (see Fredrickson, 2001; Schuman-Olivier et al., 2020). Research suggests that mindful engagement in activities such as eating, sports performance, and reading may lead to positive outcomes (Nilsson, 2021; Kaufman et al., 2009; Rhoder, 2002; Tapper, 2022). Mindful awareness may foster positive change through internal attunement (Siegel, 2009), potentially regulate how we engage with activities and process information. By potentially balancing the flow of information processing in the mind, mindful awareness may promote active evaluation, minimizing reliance on ingrained personal schemas and assumptions. Instead of absorbing information passively, mindful awareness may encourage a reflective approach, potentially enhancing the ability to evaluate and engage with new content (Langer, 1992).

In a study by Kingston et al. (2019), mindfulness training was found to be effective in reducing state paranoia. The training included brief body scans, mindful breathing, and choiceless awareness. Participants were guided in adopting a non-judgmental attitude toward their experiences. Kingston et al. (2019) suggested that learning mindful awareness and mindful engagement with experiences may help individuals avoid applying a paranoid lens when interpreting their experiences and surrounding environment. Indeed, sustained concentration and vigilance has the potential to prevent automatic treatment of information, allowing for a conscious engagement with the information (see Garland et al., 2015). Conversely, low mindful awareness may lead to mental saturation, where unfiltered information may overwhelm the mind, potentially resulting in uncritical absorption and acceptance without adequate observation and evaluation (see discussions on mindfulness and de-automatization, e.g., Kang et al., 2013; Kang et al., 2014).

The results in *Chapter 4* suggest a negative association between mindful use of social media and media conspiracy beliefs. Given this finding, along with the possible positive effects of mindful awareness during activities (e.g., Nilsson, 2021; Kaufman et al., 2009; Rhoder, 2002; Tapper, 2022) and the contribution of

increased general mindful awareness in reducing paranoid thoughts (see Kingston et al., 2019), it is informative to explore whether enhancing the quality of social media use—specifically through increasing mindful social media engagement—could serve as an effective intervention for reducing conspiracy beliefs. In other words, can increasing mindful awareness in the specific behavior of social media use—which is part of our knowledge-building process and may foster conspiracism (e.g., see Cinelli et al., 2022)—help mitigate conspiracism?

The Current Study

In this Chapter, I aim to pilot-test the potential effectiveness of an online, group-based educational intervention promoting mindful use of social media on media conspiracy beliefs and general conspiracism among a small convenience sample of Iranian social media users. I select this sample for its convenience and to minimise attrition, as it aligns with the available funding for this Chapter, and because I am able to provide psychological interventions in my home country. This decision is also based on the high use and acceptance of positive psychological interventions (e.g., mindfulness interventions) in Iran, as well as the fact that recruiting participants for interventional studies in Iran is typically done without compensation. This pilot study seeks to provide empirical evidence on the potential role of social media use in shaping conspiracy beliefs and to examine whether the quality of social media engagement has the potential to influence the contribution of social media use to these beliefs. This study is one of the first to develop a specific program focused on promoting mindful social media use. It is also the first to target the social media usage pattern as a means of reducing conspiracy beliefs, an approach that has not been previously applied in this context.

The intervention aims to educate and encourage users to engage with social media mindfully, fostering awareness and active intention, while reducing automaticity and impulsivity. It seeks to promote the harmonious (versus passionate) use of social media and emphasizes the importance of maintaining control over usage, rather than allowing social media to dictate it. The intervention is online-based and group-oriented, consisting of nine sessions held three times a week over a three-week period.

The intervention is expected to reduce conspiracism by disrupting the upward spiral of excessive social media use that fuels conspiracy beliefs (see Cinelli et al., 2022; Valenzuela et al., 2023). This intervention is expected to enhance users' information processing flow (see Garland et al., 2015; Kang et al., 2013, 2014) during social media use, potentially helping them avoid becoming entrenched in algorithm-driven polarization (see Cinelli et al., 2022), which may, in turn, reduce their susceptibility to conspiracy beliefs.

In this Chapter, piloting a small number of users, I aim to provide an initial understanding of the role of the quality of social media use (versus quantity of social media use), particularly mindful awareness during social media engagement, in susceptibility to specific conspiracy beliefs (media conspiracy beliefs, here) and general conspiracism.

Methods

Design and Participants

This study was a pilot randomized controlled trial (randomized, pretest/post-test experimental design). A convenience sample of 60 adult active social media users from Iran (M_{age} = 2.63, SD_{age} = .86) were recruited. The rule of thumb of 30 participants per intervention and waiting list group for pilot intervention studies was followed (see Teresi et al., 2023). The a priori G*Power analysis indicated that a total sample size of 60 participants would be sufficient to detect a medium effect size with 80% power at the .05 significance level (Faul et al., 2007). Inclusion criteria required participants to be active social media users aged between 18 and 5. Active social media users were defined as individuals who have accounts on at least one social media platform and have used social media for an average of at least 30 minutes per day over the past 30 days. A minimum threshold of media engagement was set to exclude participants who engaged in disconnection practices (Skivko et al., 2020). Individuals aged below 50 years were considered for participation in this study to focus on individuals with higher engagement levels, as older adults typically use social media less frequently (e.g., see Tammisalo et al., 2022). Given that the intervention aimed to enhance social media use, this age range was selected to maximize relevance and potential impact. Additional inclusion were that participants should not have severe physical impairments (e.g., significant visual or hearing deficits), should not be receiving ongoing psychological or physical treatment, must have reliable access to a personal computer with internet service, and were required to provide online written consent. The exclusion criteria included missing two or more sessions (i.e., attending fewer than eight out of nine sessions) or failure to complete the post-test survey. No dropouts occurred.

Ethical approval for the study was granted by Flinders University's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC project No.: 7896). The study adhered to ethical standards outlined in the National Statement on Ethical

Conduct in Human Research, the World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki, and the American Psychological Association Ethics Code.

Procedure

An advertisement (see Supplementary Material, Appendix 2) was posted on a number of Iranian social media psychology channels, inviting users to participate in an online interventional study focused on promoting adaptive social media use. 83 individuals who expressed interest in participating were briefly interviewed to assess their eligibility, provide an overview of the study, explain the procedure, and answer their questions. The study's objective was intentionally framed in broad terms, described as assessing the effectiveness of an educational program aimed at promoting mindful social media use and its impact on attitudes toward media and sociopolitical events, rather than explicitly addressing conspiracy beliefs related to these topics. This approach was chosen to minimize defensive reactions and avoid creating the impression that individuals with conspiracy beliefs might be judged or marginalized, given the often-negative perception of such beliefs (Lantian et al., 2018; see Spiral of Silence Theory, Noelle-Neumann, 1974). 60 participants who met the inclusion criteria and provided online written consent were randomly assigned to either the experimental group (n = 30; 15 males and 15 females; M_{age} = 2.70, SD_{age} = .95) or the waitlist control group (n = 30; 15 males and 15 females; M_{age} = 2.57, SD_{age} = .77).

Both groups initially completed a pre-test survey. This survey included questions about age, gender, and measures of conspiracy beliefs: the Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories Scale (BMCTS; developed and validated in this thesis) and the Single-Item Conspiracy Belief Scale (SCBS; Lantian et al., 2016). Following the pre-test, the experimental group received the intervention promoting mindful use of social media. Subsequently, both groups completed a post-test survey using the same measures. The waitlist control group did not receive the intervention during the data collection period. They received the intervention after completing the post-test survey. After completing the post-test survey, participants were fully debriefed about the true nature of the study. They were also given the option to withdraw their participation and have their data removed from the study.

Measures

Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories

Belief in media conspiracy theories was measured using the 7-item Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories Scale (BMCTS), described in *Chapter 2*. This unidimensional scale covers conspiracy beliefs about social media,

news, movies, video games, and media figures (e.g., "Social media is part of a larger malicious scheme by secretive groups aiming to control and manipulate people."). While items target specific media components, they form a single construct. The BMCTS items are designed to capture more than media skepticism or cynicism. The items use generic language for broad applicability. *Chapter 2* details the BMCTS's good psychometric properties. The BMCTS uses a six-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 6 (*Strongly agree*). Higher scores indicate a stronger inclination toward media conspiracy theories. The internal consistency of the BMCTS was good in this study for the experimental group ($\alpha_{Pre\text{-}test}$ = .90, $\alpha_{Post\text{-}test}$ = .89) as well as for the waitlist control group ($\alpha_{Pre\text{-}test}$ = .90, $\alpha_{Post\text{-}test}$ = .90).

General Conspiracism

To measure general propensity to believe in conspiracy theories, the *Single-Item Conspiracy Belief Scale* (SCBS; Lantian et al., 2016) was used. The single item (i.e., "I think that the official version of the events given by the authorities very often hides the truth.") is scored on a 9-point scale (1 = *Completely false*, 9 = *Completely true*), with higher scores indicating a stronger general conspiracism.

Intervention: The Online Group-Based Educational Intervention Promoting Mindful Use of Social Media

The educational intervention consisted of three sessions per week for three weeks, totaling nine sessions. Each session lasted 30 minutes, followed by a 15-minute therapist-led question-and-answer and discussion period. The intervention was developed specifically for this study based on a review of literature on mindfulness (e.g., Kabat-Zinn, 2005), mindful awareness (Brown & Ryan, 2003), mindful use and consumption (Garg et al., 2024), mindful use of technologies (Thatcher et al., 2018), and mindful use of social media (Shabahang et al., 2024b). This educational program aimed to inform and teach participants about several key aspects: the essence of mindfulness, its potential benefits, its potential applications in various contexts, and how it can be integrated into their use and consumption behaviors (specifically, social media use). The program defined mindful use and consumption and extended these principles to social media use, offering strategies to promote mindful social media use.

Key concepts covered in the program included the distinction between awareness and automaticity or impulsivity, structuring versus destructuring, and the differences between active and passive engagement, emphasizing proactive involvement versus reactive involvement. The program informed participants about mindfulness in various contexts, such as social mindfulness (being present and attentive to others and their

needs; Van Doesum et al., 2013), mindful eating (focusing on the sensory experience of eating and the thoughts and feelings associated with food; Nelson, 2017), and mindful driving (involving attentiveness to the road and the movement of other vehicles; Koppel et al., 2019). After learning about the concept, procedure, and possible impacts of mindfulness and mindful use, participants were educated on the importance of maintaining high awareness and active engagement in their social media activities.

They were taught and encouraged to take control of their social media use rather than allowing platforms to dictate their usage patterns. Guidance was provided on enhancing attention and focus capacities. Participants were encouraged to reduce over-sensitivity to social media feedback, the prevailing social media culture and norms, and feelings of missing out. Additionally, they received suggestions for non-social media alternatives to fulfill the needs or interests that typically drive their social media engagement (see *Table 13*). A more detailed table further describing the intervention is available in the Supplementary Material (see Appendix 3).

Table 13. The Online Group-Based Educational Intervention Promoting Mindful Use of Social Media

Session 1	This session explained the foundational principles of mindfulness, focusing on its definition and what it entails. The session also highlighted mindfulness' benefits, including improved physical health, cognitive functioning, emotional regulation, and behavioral responses. Participants were encouraged to view mindfulness as a tool for stress reduction, emotional stability, focus, resilience, and overall well-being.
Session 2	This session introduced participants to mindful use and consumption, emphasizing how mindfulness has the potential to enhance daily behaviors, including technology engagement. The session explained how mindfulness applies to digital spaces, especially social media, with recent studies showing its potential to reduce addiction, improve focus, and enhance well-being. Participants learned how mindfulness could transform their digital interactions and help maintain balance in their online lives.
Session 3	Building on two previous sessions, this session focused on social media use, introducing participants to the various needs it fulfills, such as social interaction and information seeking. They reflected on their motivations for using social media and were introduced to mindful social media use, which involves a conscious, deliberate approach that reduces automatic

	behaviors. Participants practiced increasing awareness of their engagement to align their use with genuine needs, fostering greater control over their social media habits.
Session 4	This session taught participants the difference between mindful awareness and impulsive behavior in social media use, emphasizing proactive, intentional engagement over reactive usage. Participants were encouraged to identify their motivations before using social media, observe their thoughts and emotions during use, and reflect on whether their needs were met. This exercise aimed to build self-assessment skills and foster mindful, intentional choices in social media use.
Session 5–8	These sessions focused on discussing problematic social media use, including excessive and addictive behaviors, and the underlying states, such as fear of missing out and dependency, that promote mindless engagement. Participants were guided to enhance mindful, intentional use, fostering flow, balance, and awareness over impulsivity. They practiced setting intentions, conducting mindful check-ins, and reflecting on their emotions and satisfaction, helping them gain control over their habits and use social media in ways that support well-being and align with authentic goals.
Session 9	In this final session, participants guided about alternative ways to fulfill needs typically met through social media, such as connecting with others, engaging in hobbies, or physical exercise. Through guided discussions, they reflected on how these offline activities can provide meaningful experiences and reduce dependency on social media. Participants were also encouraged to practice self-reflection techniques before, during, and after using social media. The session concluded with a recap of key concepts and the distribution of a pamphlet summarizing the program's highlights to support continued mindful social media use.

Data Analysis

Due to the small sample size, the Shapiro-Wilk test was employed to assess the normality of the data distribution. Parametric analyses were conducted when the data met the condition for normality, while non-parametric analyses were applied when this condition was violated (see, e.g., Ondrejková et al., 2022). Data analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 21.

Results

The Effectiveness of the Online Educational Intervention Promoting Mindful Use of Social Media on Media Conspiracy Beliefs and General Conspiracism

In terms of age, gender, and pre-test scores, there were no statistically significant differences between the experimental group and the waitlist control group. Mean and standard deviation scores for Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories Scale and Single-Item Conspiracy Belief Scale at pre-test and post-test for the experimental and waitlist control groups are presented in *Table 14*. Correlations between these measures at pre-test and post-test across groups are available in the Supplementary Material (Table S5). The Shapiro-Wilk test values indicated that the data for media conspiracy beliefs followed a normal distribution ($W_{\text{Experimental group, Pre-test, Belief in media conspiracy}} = .971$, $p > .05$; $W_{\text{Experimental group, Post-test, Belief in media conspiracy}} = .964$, $p > .05$; $W_{\text{Waitlist control group, Pre-test, Belief in media conspiracy}} = .980$, $p > .05$; $W_{\text{Waitlist control group, Pre-test, Belief in media conspiracy}} = .982$, $p > .05$). However, the condition for normal distribution was violated for the data on general conspiracism ($W_{\text{Experimental group, Pre-test, General conspiracism}} = .865$, $p < .05$; $W_{\text{Experimental group, Post-test, General conspiracism}} = .828$, $p < .05$; $W_{\text{Waitlist control group, Pre-test, General conspiracism}} = .891$, $p < .05$; $W_{\text{Waitlist control group, Pre-test, General conspiracism}} = .889$, $p < .05$).

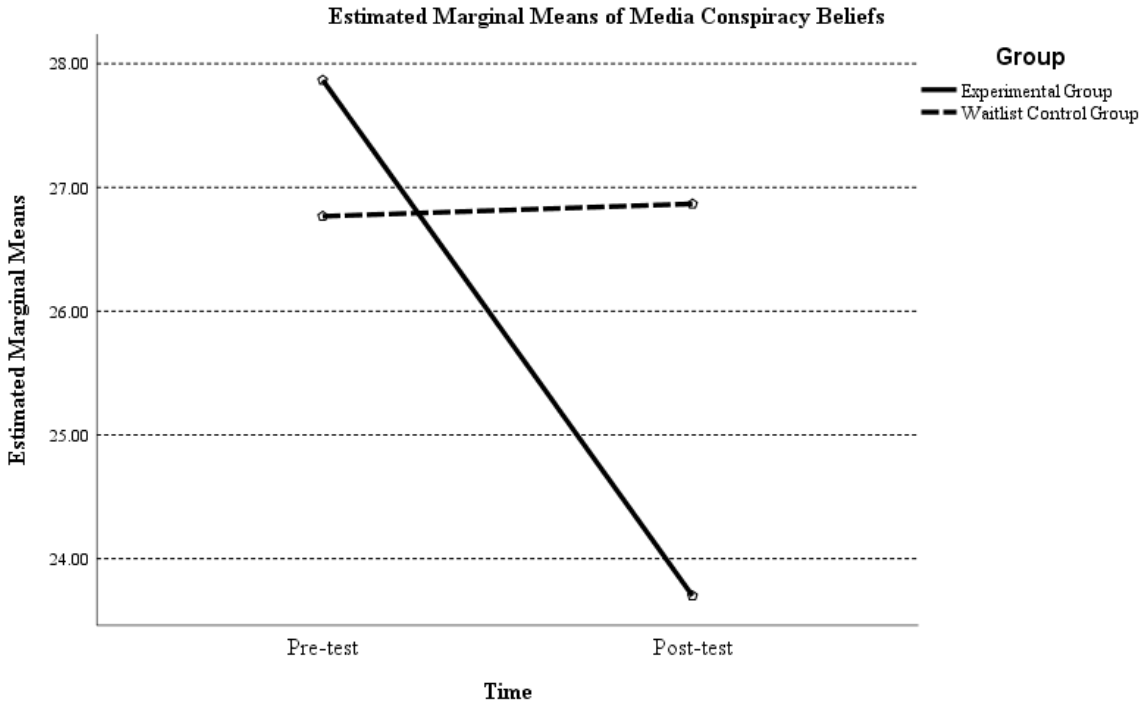
Based on the normality condition, parametric or non-parametric tests were applied as appropriate. An independent t-test indicated no significant differences between the experimental group and the waitlist control group regarding media conspiracy beliefs in the pre-test ($t_{(58)} = .516$, $p = .608$). The Mann-Whitney U test indicated no significant differences between the experimental group and the waitlist control group regarding general conspiracism in the pre-test ($U = 422.00$, $p = .673$).

Table 14. Mean and Standard Deviation Scores for Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories Scale and Single-Item Conspiracy Belief Scale in the Experimental and Waitlist Control Groups

Group	Pre-test		Post-test	
	Media Conspiracy Beliefs *M (SD)*	General Conspiracism *M (SD)*	Media Conspiracy Beliefs *M (SD)*	General Conspiracism *M (SD)*
Experimental group	27.86 (8.45)	6.90 (1.93)	24.96 (7.59)	6.56 (1.54)
Waitlist control group	26.76 (8.07)	6.70 (2.03)	26.86 (8.10)	6.76 (1.88)

Regarding the effect of the intervention on media conspiracy beliefs, a 2 (Group: Experimental group, Waitlist control group) × 2 (Time: Pre-test, Post-test) mixed-design ANOVA was conducted. The assumption of sphericity was met. This assumption is relevant only when there are at least three levels of the repeated-measures variable; with only two conditions, sphericity is automatically satisfied (see Field, 2013). Homogeneity of variances was not violated, as assessed by Levene's test for equality of variances ($p > .05$). The main effect of Time was statistically significant, $F(1, 58) = 32.784$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2p = .361$, indicating that media conspiracy belief scores changed significantly from pre-test to post-test. However, this main effect was qualified by a significant interaction between Time × Group, $F(1, 58) = 36.088$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2p = .384$, suggesting that the intervention had a differential effect on media conspiracy beliefs levels compared to the control condition. Follow-up pairwise comparisons using a Bonferroni correction revealed that media conspiracy beliefs significantly decreased from pre-test to post-test in the experimental group ($p < .001$) but not the waitlist control group ($p > .05$).

Figure 10. Levels of Media Conspiracy Beliefs Across Experimental and Waitlist Control Groups in Pre-test and Post-test



Regarding the effect of the intervention on general conspiracism, the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test indicated that participants in the experimental group reported statistically significantly lower general conspiracism in the post-test compared to the pre-test ($Z = -2.887$, $p < .001$, $r_m = -.52$). The effect size was

moderate (r_m = -.52). No statistically significant difference was found in the scores of the waitlist control group on general conspiracism between the pre-test and post-test (Z = -.632, p = .527, r_m = .08).

Overall, the results demonstrated statistically significant small-to-moderate effects (see Sullivan & Feinn, 2012) of the intervention in reducing media conspiracy beliefs and general conspiracism in the experimental group.

Discussion

In this Chapter, I sought to examine the potential positive contribution of mindful social media use to the reduction of conspiracy beliefs through a pilot study. The results suggest that the educational program promoting mindful use of social media may reduce belief in media conspiracy theories and general conspiracy.

The results indicated a small-to-moderate effect of the online educational intervention promoting mindful use of social media on both media conspiracy beliefs and general conspiracism. The intervention was designed to encourage individuals to learn to monitor their intentions, thoughts, and feelings during social media use. Participants were encouraged to be less reactive to social media feedback, such as likes and notifications, and to overcome the fear of missing out. They were guided to actively manage their social media usage, taking control rather than allowing the platforms to dictate their habits. Participants were encouraged and taught to engage with social media in a deliberate and structured manner, rather than passively consuming content.

Explaining how the intervention had a potential positive effect, several assumptions may be considered. First, mindful social media use may reduce exposure to conspiracy-related content, including media conspiracy beliefs, by curbing aimless browsing. Social media platforms, known for fostering the spread of conspiracy theories, provide easy access to such content and host rapidly growing communities that discuss and amplify these ideas (see Abdalla Mikhaeil & Baskerville, 2024). Engaging in excessive and purposeless scrolling may increase the likelihood of encountering conspiracy theories, such as media conspiracy theories, which may influence one's beliefs. Mindful engagement may help minimize exposure to these narratives, potentially lowering the risk of adopting conspiracy beliefs, by encouraging users to interact with social media in a harmonious and purposeful manner, with sufficient awareness and intentionality during use.

Second, mindful social media use may mitigate the creation of information bubbles by algorithms, reducing the risks of polarization and radicalization. Social media platforms, through a combination of social,

cognitive, and technological processes—including partisan selection (which funnels users into echo chambers and encourages intergroup conflicts), message content (which places greater emphasis on divisive posts due to their higher potential to capture attention), and platform design and algorithms (which amplify content that reinforces one's social identity and pre-existing beliefs)—may influence polarization (see Van Bavel et al., 2021). Mindful users, who engage with social media purposefully in brief but deliberate sessions and in harmony with their intentions and goals, may disrupt the algorithmic patterns that often create information bubbles resulting from prolonged and aimless use. This disruption may reduce algorithmic reinforcement, potentially decreasing the likelihood of self-radicalization and increasing the chances of encountering diverse perspectives from a variety of sources.

Third, mindful social media use, by reducing unreflective time on these platforms, may create space for users to engage more deeply with the offline world, themselves, and their personal challenges. The intervention encourages participants to value time spent away from social media and to reduce their sensitivity to the fear of missing out when there is no immediate and clear reason for using them. One primary motivation for social media use is often to escape reality (see Whiting & Williams, 2013). For instance, instead of using social media as a means of temporarily avoiding anxious states throughout the day, a mindful approach discourages such avoidance, as it lacks an actual purposeful reason for use of social media. This may increase their awareness of the nature and characteristics of these experiences. Such engagement in offline life and self-reflection may enhance hands-on experiences and nurtures resourcefulness. Resourceful individuals often exhibit higher self-efficacy and employ problem-focused coping strategies rather than escape-avoidance techniques (Akgun, 2004). Thus, mindful social media use may foster users' resourcefulness by potentially reducing reliance on social media for escapism and encouraging encounters with their thoughts, emotions, and real-life situations (valuing both time away from social media when there is no clear reason for use and time spent on social media when used purposefully). This, in turn, may decrease susceptibility to conspiracy theories, which are often viewed as anxiety-coping mechanisms.

Fourth, mindful social media use, by limiting mindless scrolling, may open up valuable opportunities for positive solitude and self-reflection. The intervention encourages participants to refrain from using social media when there is no clear reason or plan, prompting them to consider alternative offline activities that could replace those typically done on social media. It also encourages them to spend time reflecting on their thoughts, including considering why they want to use social media in the first place. Excessive social media use may

disrupt the experience of solitude, diminishing its benefits (see Burnell et al., 2021). When users habitually turn to social media during any free moment, they miss the chance to simply be alone with their thoughts. Periods of solitude, however, are essential for self-reflection and exploration, fostering personal insight, enhanced coping skills, self-regulation, and a stronger sense of agency (Leavitt et al., 2021; Palgi et al., 2021). Mindful social media engagement encourages abstaining from use when there is no clear intention or genuine need, allowing for moments free from digital engagement. These intervals may provide users with the opportunity to deepen self-awareness and reflection, potentially enhancing emotional resilience and offering space to process personal thoughts and reactions to online content, including conspiracist information.

Fifth, mindful social media use may help individuals conserve psychological and cognitive resources, both critical for evaluating information and managing misinformation. The intervention encourages participants to keep their engagement with social media in harmony with their psychological states. Continuous, unmoderated integration with social media may lead to overload and burnout, resulting in dysregulated psychological states and maladaptive behaviors (e.g., see Li et al., 2024). Given that cognitive capacity is inherently limited (Buschman et al., 2011), cognitive overload may reduce the quality of decision-making and reacting, potentially leading individuals to make decisions based on limited information or to rely on simple heuristics rather than nuanced strategies (see Alister, 2024). Excessive social media use may overstimulate the mind, inundating the mind with an overwhelming amount of bite-sized information that diminishes cognitive clarity and drains mental resources. A recent study has showed that disordered social media use was associated with frequent cognitive failures in daily life, such as forgetting appointments, overlooking information, or clumsy errors (Montag & Markett, 2023). By potentially minimizing cognitive expenditure and reducing the risk of cognitive overload or social media-induced burnout, mindful social media use may help preserve cognitive resources. Given the importance of cognitive resources for effective information processing, this preservation could, in turn, reduce the likelihood of accepting media conspiracy beliefs.

Overall, promoting mindful use of social media seems to have the potential to reduce conspiracism. Some assumptions were provided regarding potential pathways between mindful social media use and reduced conspiracy beliefs. However, these are assumptions that require focused studies to determine *how* the promotion of mindful social media use has the potential to reduce conspiracism (*the mechanisms*). Nevertheless, this study provides initial evidence that mindful use of social media may be an effective approach

to addressing conspiracy beliefs. Future studies could provide empirical insights into the mechanisms underlying the potential mitigating effect of mindful social media use on conspiracy beliefs.

Promoting mindful use of social media may be an effective approach to addressing conspiracy beliefs. Programs that encourage mindful social media use, such as the educational program in this study, has the potential to be brief, easy to understand, easy to implement, and low-cost. These programs may not only be cost-effective but may also be time-efficient, as they do not require the extensive development of deep-rooted skills like critical thinking. Instead, they focus on fostering a simple habit change—using social media mindfully. This simplicity in both the nature of the intervention and its content has the potential to make these programs accessible and scalable, even for individuals with low cognitive ability or educational attainment. Such an educational program aimed at enhancing mindful social media use could be implemented in a group format in captive-audience settings, such as schools, to provide large-scale benefits within a relatively short period of time. Furthermore, these programs can target multiple conspiracy beliefs simultaneously, without needing to be tailored to specific types of conspiracy theories, unlike some interventions that must be customized based on the targeted beliefs (e.g., counter-argument interventions; Swami et al., 2013). Additionally, unlike many confrontational interventions that label or attempt to discredit conspiracy beliefs (e.g., ridiculing interventions; e.g., Orosz et al., 2016), these programs are indirect and non-threatening.

The relationship between technology, media, and conspiracy beliefs is attracting increasing attention. How technology and media could be leveraged to address conspiracy beliefs, as well as how the use of technology and media could be improved to reduce vulnerability to conspiracy theories, are areas of increasing interest. For example, a recent study by Costello et al. (2024) found that an AI chatbot, by engaging participants with persuasive arguments, tailored counterarguments, and personalized, in-depth conversations, was able to lead to a lasting reduction in conspiracy beliefs for several months. This suggests that technology and media have the potential to be valuable tools in addressing conspiracy beliefs. By enhancing the quality of engagement with these platforms, there may be promising opportunities to mitigate susceptibility to conspiracy beliefs.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The present investigation has several limitations, including a small sample size, medium statistical power, lack of control over various factors (e.g., baseline anxieties, baseline mindfulness awareness or practicing, cognitive abilities, baseline social media use intensity), reliance on self-report measures, the limited number of outcome

measures in the domain of conspiracism (e.g., measures of conspiracy mindset and delusional thinking), and the absence of a follow-up assessment. Moreover, the investigation did not explore the mechanisms through which the intervention may have contributed to the observed reduction in conspiracy beliefs. For instance, in addition to enhancing the quality of social media use, the intervention may have also led to a significant decrease in the amount of time participants spent on social media. This potential reduction in usage frequency may have contributed to the decline in conspiracy belief endorsement. It is also possible that the intervention fostered a greater sense of belonging and reduced feelings of loneliness—factors that the existing literature suggests as being associated with lower endorsement of conspiracy beliefs—which, in turn, may have contributed to the observed effects in the experimental group. Future studies with greater control over research design, confounding variables (e.g., factors such as loneliness, which may contribute to conspiracy belief endorsement), intervention parameters (e.g., number and duration of sessions), and participant characteristics (e.g., focusing on individuals with high levels of conspiracism to examine whether enhancing mindful social media use has a protective or mitigating effect) are recommended. Additionally, the intervention needs to be investigated in samples from other societies, as it was delivered to a sample of Iranian users who may have a tendency to be receptive to positive psychological interventions and might engage with social media with a distinct intensity and manner in some cases compared to some other societies (e.g., Shabahang et al., 2024). Furthermore, in this Chapter, the focus was on increasing mindful awareness in the specific behavior of social media use. The association between general mindful awareness and mindful awareness in specific behaviors (e.g., social media use) and their interventions in relation to conspiricism needs further exploration. Despite these limitations, *Chapter 5* contributes to intervention research on conspiracy beliefs. Improving the quality of individuals' social media engagement may offer a novel approach to addressing conspiracism.

Concluding Comments

Chapter 5 highlights that strategies targeting factors beyond cognitive processes may prove effective. In particular, improving the social media usage pattern with a focus on fostering mindful engagement, may be a promising alternative. By emphasizing the quality (how social media is used), rather than just the quantity (how much social media is used), of social media use, the study underscores the potential role that engagement quality plays in shaping conspiracy beliefs. This pilot study provided preliminary evidence for a new, behavior-focused, and indirect approach to reducing conspiracy beliefs. The research suggests a possible new answer to the longstanding question of how conspiracy beliefs can be addressed. However, further studies are necessary

to substantiate the role of increased mindful social media use in reducing conspiracism and to provide empirical evidence on *how* an increase in mindful social media use affects the reduction of conspiracism.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion: The Negative Sociopolitical Outcomes Associated with Media Conspiracy Beliefs and the Contribution of Mindful Social Media Use

Authorship statement: I am the primary author of this chapter. I wrote the chapter with guidance and advice from my principal and associate supervisors (Emma Thomas and Ryan Balzan). Percentage of contributions: Reza Shabahang: 85%; Emma Thomas: 10%; Ryan Balzan: 5%.

Why do some people believe that social media controls their minds? Why do they think that news is staged? Why do they believe that movies are designed to program human thought? Why do they suspect that media figures are implanting specific ideas in their minds? My thesis explores these questions within the broader framework of *media conspiracy beliefs*. More formally, I have sought to provide preliminary answers to the following questions: What outcomes are associated with these beliefs? What characteristics may predispose individuals to adopt such theories? How might these beliefs be effectively addressed?

Conspiracy theories and the beliefs surrounding them are pervasive in contemporary life, with the potential to be associated with psychological, social, and political consequences at both personal and collective levels (e.g., see Freeman & Bentall, 2017; Jolley et al., 2022; van Mulukom et al., 2022; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018). Conspiracy theories can target a wide range of subjects, and the media—encompassing platforms, figures, and products—can be one of those targets (e.g., conspiracy theories regarding celebrity deaths and subliminal advertisements; Ballinger, 2014; Furnham, 2013). While media conspiracy beliefs are present and held by some people (Ballinger, 2014; Furnham, 2013; Uscinski et al., 2022b), they remain underexplored and warrant comprehensive investigation. In this thesis, I suggest that the media are not just vehicles for the dissemination and promulgation of other conspiracy theories; rather they are themselves also the source of conspiratorial ideation.

I have argued that there are several reasons why studying media conspiracy beliefs is important. First, conspiracy theories about the media are frequently discussed in everyday conversations, political speeches,

social media, and news outlets. For example, the video game Polybius was part of a government-run crowdsourced psychology experiment designed to induce intense psychoactive and addictive effects in players (e.g., Booker, 2017), and many media figures running a massive child trafficking ring to harvest adrenochrome for youth and Satanic rituals (e.g., see Murray, 2023; for more examples, see Supplementary Material, Appendix 1). Not only do these media conspiracy theories exist and attract followers, but beliefs in them also appear to be on the rise (Uscinski et al., 2022). Indeed, understanding media conspiracy beliefs is both relevant and timely.

Second, there has yet to be a comprehensive study specifically exploring media conspiracy beliefs or developing a measure for assessing susceptibility to these beliefs. While some studies have touched the topic, they have been limited in scope—either qualitative (Ballinger, 2014), narrowly focused on domains such as advertising (Furnham, 2013), or examined within the broader context of conspiracy thinking (Bruder & Manstead, 2009; Darwin et al., 2011). This gap prevents a deeper understanding of what media conspiracy beliefs are, how they could be measured, why certain individuals subscribe to these beliefs, and the consequences associated with them.

Third, it is important to recognize that conspiracy beliefs and their correlates cannot be regarded as equivalent across different contexts. These beliefs may vary in terms of contributing factors, potential impacts, and the degree of embedded conspiracism. For example, endorsement of discrete conspiracy theories surrounding the origin of COVID-19—such as the Wuhan lab theory, the meat market theory, and the 5G theory—may have distinct contributing factors (e.g., Hartman et al., 2021). Additionally, general COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs may be associated with different outcomes compared to government-related COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs (e.g., Oleksy et al., 2021). Conspiracy beliefs like those regarding COVID-19 may even be linked to paradoxical outcomes in certain groups and cultures, such as increased preventative actions in South Korea (e.g., Wang & Kim, 2021). Furthermore, different conspiracy beliefs may be associated with conspiracy mindset in varying ways (e.g., Strömbäck et al., 2024). Therefore, there is a need for focused investigations into media conspiracy beliefs to provide reliable, empirical understandings of this specific category of conspiracy beliefs.

Fourth, specific conspiracy beliefs may show distinct characteristics or unique combinations of characteristics. Although limited direct attention has been given to the specific features of individual conspiracy beliefs, existing studies indirectly suggest particular attributes of certain conspiracy theories in

some cases. For instance, some conspiracy beliefs may have darker content and a more sociopathic or immoral tone (e.g., conspiracy beliefs regarding the Russia-Ukraine war; see Halama & Teličák, 2024). Some conspiracy beliefs may be more focused on realistic threats (e.g., many COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs; see Kachanoff et al., 2021). Certain conspiracy beliefs may be more susceptible to change through intervention (e.g., implausible versus plausible conspiracy theories; see Mahony et al., 2024). In this regard, media conspiracy beliefs, as a specific set of conspiracy beliefs, might possess distinct characteristics.

Our perceptions of the world around us—particularly the nature, extent, and type of threat we attribute to various entities—may contribute to the development and intensity of conspiracy beliefs, as well as influence their content and tone (e.g., Heiss et al., 2021; Scrivner & Stubbersfield, 2023). The media, as a target of conspiracy beliefs, may represent a fluid target—perceived as conspiratorial from different perspectives—while also varying in complexity and argumentation. Moreover, media conspiracy beliefs may be less negatively labeled and perceived by the public and may be more symbolic and gradual in their perceived threat.

The media may be considered conspiratorial from various standpoints. For example, some individuals may believe that the media promotes LGBTQ+ representation as a means of population control, while at the same time, LGBTQ+ individuals may perceive the media as attempting to erase their representation, ultimately leading to their societal exclusion under the pretext of non-contribution to population growth. This multiplicity of perspectives regarding media conspiracies may cause these conspiracy beliefs to exist across diverse groups.

Furthermore, the arguments supporting media conspiracy beliefs may be varied. For instance, some individuals may believe that the media manipulates public opinion by selectively presenting specific content, whereas others may argue that such manipulation occurs through subliminal messaging or hypnosis (more imaginary and less plausible). This diversity in explanatory frameworks may lead to media conspiracy beliefs being accepted by different people, each with their own varied arguments.

Additionally, viewing the media as conspiratorial may carry less negative connotations than many other prominent conspiracy beliefs (e.g., those related to COVID-19 or war). The level of negativity embedded within conspiracy theories may influence who finds them appealing; for example, psychoticism has been significantly associated with belief in Russian-Ukrainian war conspiracies but not with COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs (see Halama & Teličák, 2024). The relatively lower degree of negative labeling surrounding media conspiracy beliefs may make them more acceptable to a broader audience, beyond those with traits typically associated with conspiracy belief susceptibility (e.g., Dark Triad personality traits).

Moreover, media conspiracy beliefs may predominantly revolve around symbolic and gradual threats—such as influencing thoughts and conditioning individuals for future agendas—rather than immediate and tangible dangers. The symbolic-threat-related conspiracy beliefs may differ from those centered on realistic threats, such as those related to COVID-19, which emphasize mass casualties. The distinction between symbolic and realistic threat-based conspiracy beliefs may also influence their associations with ideological perspectives and worldviews (see Kachanoff et al., 2021). A focus on symbolic threats with future outcomes may be another potential characteristic of media conspiracy beliefs.

However, these are speculations and require empirical investigation. Nonetheless, given existing discussions on the potential distinct characteristics of specific conspiracy beliefs (see Halama & Teličák, 2024; Imhoff et al., 2022; Kachanoff et al., 2021), each individual conspiracy belief—including media conspiracy beliefs, about which I have briefly speculated on their characteristics—may possess unique attributes that justify focused scholarly examination.

Given these reasons, and recognizing that studies on specific conspiracy beliefs can enrich the literature and offer insights that may not be apparent in research on general or other specific conspiracy beliefs (e.g., see Imhoff et al., 2022; Nera, 2024; Strömbäck et al., 2024; Sutton & Douglas, 2020; Sutton et al., 2024), in this thesis, I have sought to conceptualise, measure, explore associated consequences, investigate contributing factors, and address media conspiracy beliefs via an intervention.

Overview of Findings

What Are Media Conspiracy Beliefs? Conceptualisation and Measurement. In *Chapter 2*, I conceptualised belief in media conspiracy theories and developed a brief self-report assessment tool, the *Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories Scale* (*BMCTS*). I define media conspiracy belief as *a conviction that powerful, secretive groups deliberately manipulate the media to advance hidden, harmful agendas with devastating consequences for ordinary people and society*.

Consistent with existing literature (e.g., Douglas & Sutton, 2023; Nera & Schöpfer, 2023), which discuss conspiracy theories as about groups, my conceptualisation emphasizes the groups as agents in these theories (that is, groups that control the media). The literature frequently highlights malevolence and secrecy as key characteristics of conspiratorial groups (e.g., Douglas & Sutton, 2023; Nera & Schöpfer, 2023), and my conceptualisation reflects this emphasis also (i.e., malevolent and secretive groups control the media). I also consider intentionality a key characteristic, as highlighted in the literature (e.g., Douglas & Sutton, 2023; Nera

& Schöpfer, 2023), and incorporate it into my conceptualisation (i.e., the conspiratorial media deliberately act and follow specific plans). My conceptualisation of media conspiracy beliefs also reflects strong emotionality, imaginary judgment (judgment beyond scepticism/cynicism), and extraordinary motivations (e.g., programming humans). Specifically, such beliefs are accompanied by intense negative emotions (e.g., hatred toward the conspiratorial media). They also exhibit an imaginative nature, often incorporating improbable narratives (e.g., claims that news media orchestrate entire terrorist attacks with fabricated plots and actor, as seen in the Sandy Hook Elementary school shooting conspiracy theory) and attributing unusual motivations to the media (e.g., claims that certain films are intentionally designed to promote homosexuality to reduce reproduction rates and exert global population control, as in the LGBTQ+ grooming conspiracy theory). These aspects align with existing literature emphasizing the emotionally charged nature of conspiracy beliefs, their reliance on imaginative reasoning, and their focus on unconventional concerns (e.g., Douglas & Sutton, 2023; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018). The BMCTS items reflect these conceptual aspects.

Based on this conceptualisation, I developed the BMCTS. In addition to these conceptual aspects, the BMCTS is constructed to be generalizable so that it can be readily adapted across societies and ideologies. There are ongoing discussions about the universality of conspiracy beliefs and the importance of measuring them without ideological bias (e.g., the tendency to focus solely on conspiracy beliefs associated with specific political or social orientations while neglecting others; see Enders et al., 2023b; Douglas & Sutton, 2023; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018). Accordingly, the items of the BMCTS are formulated to be generalizable. For instance, rather than specifying particular groups (e.g., "Social media is part of a larger malicious scheme by '*Jews*' aiming to control and manipulate people." or "Social media is part of a larger malicious scheme by '*Chinese*' aiming to control and manipulate people."), a more inclusive item has been developed: "Social media is part of a larger malicious scheme by '*secretive groups*' aiming to control and manipulate people." This approach enhances the applicability of the BMCTS across diverse individuals and societies with varying ideologies and worldviews.

The BMCTS focuses on social media, news, movies, video games, and media figures. These media components are considered because they appear to be more commonly targeted by conspiracy theories compared to other media elements (see Supplementary Material, Appendix 1). This targeted approach also aims to improve the validity and comprehension of the measure's items for respondents, and to increase the consistency of responses across individuals, as the broader term "the media" could lead to varied

interpretations. While the measure focuses on individual media components, I do not assume that perceptions of these components are entirely independent. Rather, they can coalesce and contribute to a broader, generalized perception of the media (see Shabahang et al., 2024a). Similar to how many existing conceptualisations and measures treat related conspiracy theories about a single target as part of a broader construct or cluster (e.g., items about technological contributions, financial benefits, and false information in the COVID-19 Conspiratorial Beliefs Scale; Dębski et al., 2022), the BMCTS measures conspiracy beliefs about specific media components within the larger cluster of media conspiracy beliefs.

The findings demonstrated good psychometric properties, including construct validity and internal consistency, for the single-factor 7-item BMCTS across three independent samples from Australia, Iran, and the Philippines. Additionally, media conspiracy beliefs were found to overlap with the constructs of conspiracy mentality and general conspiracy beliefs, providing evidence for the measure's convergent validity.

Given the recent scholarly interest in understanding and deconstructing the nature and characteristics of various conspiracy beliefs—and in moving beyond the exclusive treatment of such beliefs as a homogeneous category (see e.g., Halama & Teličák, 2024; Imhoff et al., 2022; Kachanoff et al., 2021; Mao et al., 2024)—I sought to take initial steps toward the focused conceptualization and measurement of media conspiracy beliefs, which may possess some considerable characteristics. Media conspiracy beliefs seem to be fluid and multifaceted, arising from diverse perspectives and supported by a wide array of arguments (e.g., the media may be perceived as conspiratorial by opposing groups with contrasting viewpoints on the same issue). Compared to some other types of conspiracy beliefs (e.g., those concerning terrorist attacks), they may carry fewer negative connotations, potentially rendering them more acceptable to a broader audience. Moreover, such beliefs appear to be more about symbolic and gradual threats rather than immediate harm, which may shape their appeal and the ideological affiliations they attract. Media conspiracy beliefs may be less time-bound and more persistent (for example, compared to some pandemic-related conspiracy beliefs, which typically diminish as the crisis subsides). Media conspiracy beliefs may also exhibit a reduced reliance on specific geographic locations (e.g., in contrast to conspiracy beliefs related to terrorist attacks). Furthermore, these beliefs may be resistant to direct refutation through scientific explanations, as they often lack clearly defined targets and are instead characterized by symbolic content and expansive, overarching domains. Although these are assumptions and I have not provided empirical evidence to support them, these

characteristics may be relevant to the study of media conspiracy beliefs. I propose that media conspiracy beliefs warrant further investigation, and that some considerable characteristics may be hypothesized.

In *Chapter 2*, I examined a set of conspiracy beliefs that had not been thoroughly explored in prior research. This Chapter underscored that the media is not merely a conduit for conspiracy beliefs but can itself become a primary target of such beliefs. By conceptualizing and quantifying media conspiracy beliefs, it provided preliminary insights into the gap between individuals and the media through the lens of conspiracism. The way people perceive the media is important, as modern life heavily relies on it for information and societal progress (e.g., the media's role in raising awareness during crises). Negative perceptions of the media can influence users' engagement, well-being, and the media's effectiveness (e.g., see Shabahang et al., 2024a). This Chapter can contribute to the literature on conspiracism and specific conspiracy beliefs, the measurement of conspiracy beliefs, and the relationship between the media and conspiracism. This Chapter can introduce potential avenues for conceptualising, measuring, and studying media conspiracy beliefs.

What Are the Outcomes of Media Conspiracy Beliefs? Exploring Associated Outcomes. I explained above that one of my primary motivations for studying media conspiracy beliefs was to examine their potential effects on mental well-being and sociopolitical attitudes. Following the conceptualisation and scale development, I investigated the associated consequences of media conspiracy beliefs as the next step. As is common in the literature, an initial examination of the associated outcomes of conspiracy beliefs can provide insight into the overall nature, intensity, and significance of the belief system under study. This step also can inform the interpretation of findings when exploring contributing factors of that conspiracy belief. For example, if a conspiracy belief is associated with positive outcomes, this may help explain why Dark Triad personality traits are unexpectedly negatively associated with that belief. Accordingly, in *Chapter 3*, I explored the mental health and sociopolitical outcomes associated with media conspiracy beliefs across samples from five societies: Australia, Iran, the Philippines, the United States, and Hungary. Given that conspiracy beliefs are often associated with uncertainty, hypervigilance, and heightened threat perception (see Douglas & Sutton, 2023; Jolley et al., 2022; van Mulukom et al., 2022), media conspiracy beliefs were similarly expected to be associated with various mental health and sociopolitical outcomes.

The findings indicated that, although media conspiracy beliefs demonstrated non-significant or relatively weak associations with mental health, they significantly predicted various sociopolitical outcomes across the samples. While some patterns were consistent across samples, others showed variability. The results

showed that media conspiracy beliefs may be associated with mental health issues, such as heightened future anxiety—this effect was evident in Australian, Iranian, and Hungarian samples but not in the United States and Filipino samples. However, overall, media conspiracy theories evidenced less strong and/or reliable associations compared to other conspiracy beliefs known to be profoundly associated with mental health challenges (e.g., COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs; see Juárez et al., 2024; van Prooijen et al., 2021). This suggests that media conspiracy beliefs may be less detrimental to believers' mental health but more influential in shaping their views and perspectives. One possible explanation is that media conspiracy beliefs appear to be more closely associated with symbolic and future-oriented threats, making them more relevant to ideological perspectives and less directly linked to psychological well-being (see the differential relationships between perceived realistic threats and perceived symbolic threats with well-being and ideological perspectives; Kachanoff et al., 2021).

Conversely, the sociopolitical outcomes associated with media conspiracy beliefs seem to be noteworthy. These include perceived break down in social fabric (observed in all samples), xenophobia (absent only in the Iranian sample), the dangerous and threatening social world view (observed in all samples), and the competitive jungle social world view (absent only in the Iranian sample). These outcomes that can be seen associated with prominent conspiracy beliefs in many cases (e.g., the link between COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs and pessimistic views of society, foreigners, and the world), confirming prior research and arguments suggesting that conspiracy beliefs frequently have the potential to contribute to dysfunctional sociopolitical outcomes (e.g., Bilewicz et al., 2013; de Zavala & Cichocka, 2012; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Jolley et al., 2022; van Mulukom et al., 2022).

Media conspiracy beliefs may be more closely associated with individuals' perceptions than with their mental health outcomes. The content and nature of specific conspiracy beliefs have the potential to shape how these conspiracy beliefs influence individuals. For instance, certain conspiracy theories may be more strongly linked to attitudes toward violence or violent intentions than others—particularly those that inherently contain violent narratives (e.g. see Belton et al., 2025). Media conspiracy beliefs may center more on symbolic and future-oriented threats rather than on immediate and tangible dangers. As such, they may be less likely to trigger an urgent need for cognitive closure or evoke acute psychological distress. Instead, they may contribute more to shaping worldviews and ideological perspectives. Emerging evidence suggests that perceived symbolic threats and perceived realistic threats may be differentially associated with psychological well-being

and ideological attitudes (e.g., Kachanoff et al., 2021). The content of certain conspiracy beliefs—such as media conspiracy beliefs—may render them more influential in shaping individuals' perspectives and cognitive frameworks than in producing acute mental health effects. Characteristics such as the degree of aggression embedded in the narrative or whether the belief pertains to an immediate versus a future-oriented issue are important dimensions that warrant closer examination. These content-related features may distinguish specific conspiracy beliefs from other types and should be considered in future investigations, including those focusing on media conspiracy beliefs.

Chapter 3 provides preliminary understanding regarding the potential sociopolitical implications of media conspiracy beliefs. Despite receiving limited attention from media institutions, academics, and policymakers, these beliefs may be linked to substantial consequences. My research serves as an initial attempt to provide insight into the mental health and sociopolitical consequences associated with belief in media conspiracy theories across a variety of samples from different societies, with the aim of drawing attention to this understudied set of conspiracy beliefs and opening avenues for more focused and detailed future research.

Who Believes? Contributing Factors. Having provided evidence that media conspiracy beliefs can be associated with pernicious sociopolitical outcomes and, to a much lesser degree, anxiety about the future, in *Chapter 4*, I investigated the contributing factors of endorsement of media conspiracy beliefs. I surveyed three distinct samples from Australia, Iran, and the Philippines. The selection of variables was informed by existing literature that discusses their potential roles in shaping conspiracy beliefs. I found that sociodemographic factors, personality traits, and cognitive styles were generally unrelated to media conspiracy beliefs, with only a few exceptions (e.g., positive association of self-esteem and media conspiracy beliefs in Filipino sample and positive association of experientiality-imagination thinking style with media conspiracy beliefs in Iranian sample). However, mindful use of social media—awareness during social media engagement—emerged as the most consistently associated factor across the samples. Mindful use of social media was consistently and negatively correlated with media conspiracy beliefs across the samples. These associations remained significant in regression models, except for the Iranian sample. While the Iranian sample's association did not meet the more conservative significance threshold applied in this study ($p < .01$), it was still statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level. These findings suggest that media conspiracy beliefs may not be easily explained by other established predictors. In line with previous studies and arguments that have reported and discussed inconsistent or non-significant associations between sociodemographic

characteristics, personality traits, and cognitive styles with conspiracy beliefs (e.g., Baruh et al., 2025; Buturoiu et al., 2021; Goreis & Voracek, 2019; Stasielowicz, 2022; Swami et al., 2016; Teličák et al., 2024; Uscinski & Parent, 2014), media conspiracy beliefs may not be strongly dependent on these aspects.

The content of media conspiracy beliefs may play a role here. Given that the media is a vast and multifaceted institution with diverse components and publications, it may be perceived as conspiratorial from different perspectives. As a result, individuals with different sociodemographic backgrounds, personality traits, and cognitive styles may endorse media conspiracy beliefs for distinct reasons. For instance, individuals from lower socioeconomic classes may view the media as a tool for maintaining hierarchical structures and protecting the interests of the wealthy. Conversely, those from higher socioeconomic classes might perceive the media as conspiratorial in a different way, believing it seeks to pressure them into allocating more resources toward societal issues. Considering that the media has the potential to be interpreted as conspiratorial from multiple perspectives, media conspiracy beliefs may attract endorsement from a wide range of individuals, regardless of their demographic or psychological profiles. However, this remains speculative and requires focused empirical investigations to better understand the contributing factors of media conspiracy beliefs.

While the results indicated that sociodemographic factors, personality traits, and thinking styles were almost irrelevant to media conspiracy beliefs, the quality of media use was found to be associated with these beliefs. The way individuals engage with the media seems to play an important role. Beyond the quantity of media use—time spent on traditional and new media (screen-time)—the quality of social media engagement, particularly the level of mindful awareness during social media use, may be significantly and negatively associated with media conspiracy beliefs as well as general conspiracism. Mindful social media use may mitigate media conspiracy beliefs by disrupting the upward spiral of excessive social media consumption that amplifies conspiracy beliefs (see Cinelli et al., 2022; Valenzuela et al., 2023) and by enhancing the efficiency of information processing (see Garland et al., 2015; Kang et al., 2013, 2014) during social media engagement. Further research is necessary to fully elucidate the relationship between mindful social media use and media conspiracy beliefs, as well as conspiracism in general, and to draw definitive conclusions.

In this Chapter, I provided preliminary insights into the potential contributing factors of media conspiracy beliefs. By examining the relationship between media use and conspiracy beliefs through the lens of mindful social media engagement, this research offers a novel perspective (quality of use versus quantity of use). This Chapter can provide insights into why individuals might adopt media conspiracy beliefs and

contribute to the broader literature on predictors of conspiracy belief. Consistent with Smallpage's (2014) argument that conspiracy beliefs may be flat across demographic groups, I suggest that belief in media conspiracy theories may be “relatively flat” across sociodemographic, personality, and thinking profiles.

Moreover, I propose that "how media is used" deserves as much attention as "how *much* media is used" when investigating the relationship between media use and conspiracism. These findings on the contributing factors of media conspiracy beliefs could inform strategies for addressing and mitigating such beliefs. This Chapter presents preliminary findings and interpretations of the factors that may contribute to media conspiracy beliefs, offering initial insights into the characteristics that could increase their acceptance. These insights can establish a foundation for future, more focused research on this topic.

Is the Enhancing Quality of Social Media Engagement a Solution? Intervention. Given the evidence (Chapter 4) that quality of media use was a stronger predictor of media conspiracy beliefs, in a final study, I pilot-tested the effectiveness of an online educational intervention aimed at promoting mindful use of social media to reduce media conspiracy beliefs and general conspiracism among a small sample of Iranian media users. This intervention marks the first attempt to target conspiracy beliefs by improving the quality of media consumption behavior, introducing a novel alternative approach to the literature. The intervention, specifically designed for this study, represents one of the first targeted program promoting mindful use of social media in the literature.

I found statistically significant positive effects of the 9-session, 3-week program. Participants in the experimental group exhibited reductions in both media conspiracy beliefs and general conspiracism compared to those in the waitlist control group. This research constitutes an advancement in the domain of intervention research focused on conspiracy beliefs, offering a fresh answer to the question: How can conspiracy beliefs be mitigated? I suggest that enhancing the quality of engagement with social media has the potential to effectively reduce conspiracy beliefs. Specifically, promoting mindful awareness during social media use may serve as a promising additional strategy. This intervention approach could be incorporated into the repertoire of existing interventions for conspiracism and applied to various conspiracy beliefs (not just media conspiracy beliefs), particularly in contexts where a less confrontational strategy is preferable.

Users' mindless use of social media—an important channel for information—may contribute to their endorsement of conspiracy beliefs. Enhancing the quality of social media use may reduce susceptibility to conspiracy beliefs (including media conspiracy beliefs) by limiting unconscious exposure to conspiratorial content, disrupting algorithmically reinforced information bubbles, fostering deeper offline engagement, encouraging self-reflection, and preserving cognitive resources. Social media platforms provide fertile ground for the circulation, exposure, and internalization of conspiracy theories (see Abdalla Mikhaeil & Baskerville, 2024). Mindful engagement may minimize encounters with conspiracy-related content by potentially reducing unconscious and aimless browsing. Mindful social media use may reduce content polarization, promote exposure to diverse viewpoints, and discourage escapism, encouraging more meaningful offline engagement. This could enhance resourcefulness and problem-focused coping, reducing reliance on conspiratorial thinking. Additionally, mindful use may prevent cognitive overload and burnout, preserving cognitive resources essential for critically evaluating information and resisting misleading narratives (see Akgun, 2004; Montag & Markett, 2023; Van Bavel et al., 2021). Enhancing mindful awareness during social media use appears to be a considerable aspect in understanding and addressing conspiracy beliefs, including media conspiracy beliefs.

By emphasizing the quality of social media engagement, this Chapter underscores the important role of how (vs. how much) users interact with social media in shaping their susceptibility to conspiracy beliefs. This Chapter provides preliminary evidence for a novel, potentially effective, behavior-focused approach to reducing conspiracy beliefs, which could pave the way for more comprehensive and inclusive strategies in future research and intervention design. However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this research, and further studies are required to draw definitive conclusions.

Theoretical Implications

In this thesis, I primarily examine media conspiracy beliefs through the lens of the Psychology of Conspiracy (see Douglas et al., 2017), aligning with numerous studies that investigate conspiracy beliefs and their correlates within this framework. Where relevant, I also adopt a Media Psychology perspective (e.g., see Valenzuela et al., 2024)—for instance, in *Chapter 5*, which focuses on the relationship between media use and media conspiracy beliefs. I am confident that the findings of this thesis have theoretical implications for both the Psychology of Conspiracy (e.g., by offering a conceptualisation, measurement, and insights into an

understudied category of conspiracy beliefs) and Media Psychology (e.g., by proposing a new framework to investigate the relationship between users, media use, and perceptions of the media as conspiratorial).

I propose that the media is not merely a channel for the dissemination of conspiracy theories but can also be a direct target of conspiracy thinking. To date, the literature, spanning both the Psychology of Conspiracy and Media Psychology, has predominantly viewed the media as a conduit for conspiracism. However, recognizing that the media can also be a target of conspiracy thinking is important, as it can open new avenues for understanding and explaining user-media interactions and media effects dynamics. For example, the belief in a conspiratorial media may provide a novel explanatory pathway for instances where the media fails to function effectively. Media conspiracy beliefs may erode users' perceived support from the media and diminish their trust in its reliability. This negative attitude may, in turn, undermine the media's functionality for these individuals, particularly in situations where its role is vital, such as the media's contribution to disaster preparedness, management, communication, and recovery (e.g., the link between lower media trust and reduced willingness to follow COVID-19 regulations; see Adam et al., 2023). Indeed, the idea of "the media as conspiratorial" may open new pathways for research, argument, and interpretation within both the Psychology of Conspiracy and Media Psychology. This perspective may offer a novel framework for understanding the relationship between the media and its users, the perceived image of the media in users' minds, and the media's success or failure in in raising awareness and driving change.

I provide a conceptualisation of belief in media conspiracy theories, incorporating various aspects such as the core characteristics of conspiracy beliefs and the need to distinguish them from scepticism (e.g., see Douglas and Sutton, 2023; Nera and Schöpfer, 2023; van Prooijen and Douglas, 2018). This conceptualisation may guide future research in defining other conspiracy beliefs and in identifying the essential characteristics required to capture negative attitudes toward a target specifically within the framework of conspiracism, rather than, for example, cynicism. Furthermore, the conceptualisation of media conspiracy beliefs in this thesis may serve as a foundation for future studies investigating conspiracy beliefs about the media and exploring the disconnection between users and the media through the lens of conspiracism.

I offer a brief and valid self-report assessment tool (BMCTS) specifically designed to measure media conspiracy beliefs. This scale is expected to function effectively across diverse individuals (e.g., with varying ideological perspectives) and societies (e.g., both WEIRD and non-WEIRD contexts). The BMCTS may be utilized in future studies to quantify the endorsement of media conspiracy beliefs and deepen understanding of

this construct. Moreover, this scale can be employed to assess the gap between users and the media, particularly in identifying extreme negative attitudes toward the media. Additionally, this scale may serve as a reference for future research aiming to develop measures for other specific conspiracy beliefs by providing insights into the process of constructing such scales.

I suggest that media conspiracy beliefs share some similarities with other conspiracy beliefs regarding associated outcomes, but they also exhibit distinct characteristics. Media conspiracy beliefs may be associated with problematic sociopolitical outcomes, much like many other conspiracy beliefs (e.g., COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs). However, these beliefs appear to be less strongly linked to mental health issues, particularly when compared to other conspiracy beliefs (e.g., COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs) that are often associated with negative mental health outcomes. Media conspiracy beliefs seem to evoke a more symbolic and gradual sense of threat. For instance, many conspiracy beliefs, such as COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs, often involve direct, tangible threats (e.g., governments are orchestrating mass killings to control populations or that pharmaceutical companies are profiting from the pandemic). In contrast, media conspiracy beliefs seem to focus more on perceived ideological and cultural changes (e.g., the media is increasing interest in homosexuality within society, which clashes with cultural and ideological norms). Moreover, while conspiracy beliefs, such as COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs, center on an immediate and life-threatening crisis (e.g., COVID-19 is killing people right now in mass numbers), media conspiracy beliefs tend to emphasize long-term, cumulative effects (e.g., the media is making children homosexual, which will have future consequences). These differences may influence the psychological and behavioral outcomes associated with media conspiracy beliefs. For example, in the second study of Kachanoff et al. (2021), the perception of realistic COVID-19 threats was significantly associated with lower life satisfaction, whereas symbolic threats related to COVID-19 did not exhibit a similar relationship. Interestingly, symbolic threats were more strongly associated with a heightened belief in a dangerous world. Thus, this thesis highlights the importance of considering different aspects of conspiracy beliefs (e.g., the target and nature of the threat) in scientific research and interpretation. These factors may shape the outcomes associated with conspiracy beliefs (e.g., conspiracy beliefs with more symbolic and temporally distant threats may be associated with weaker or different mental health effects but stronger effects on fundamental attitudes and primal beliefs). Such considerations may open new pathways in the literature for understanding and interpreting conspiracy beliefs and their associated consequences.

I suggest that media conspiracy beliefs appear to have negligible associations with sociodemographic factors, personality traits, and thinking style profiles. The literature often assumes that conspiracy beliefs are more prevalent among specific sociodemographic and personality groups, such as individuals with lower socioeconomic status, lower educational attainment, or heightened dark triad personality traits (e.g., Mao et al., 2020). However, my findings suggest that media conspiracy beliefs may not be confined to specific groups but instead exhibit a more widespread distribution across different groups. Relevantly, a recent study by Roscigno (2024) identified a bimodal (U-shaped) distribution of conspiracy beliefs by socioeconomic status, with high levels of conspiracy belief observed even among individuals with graduate degrees. Furthermore, in Halama and Teličák's (2024) longitudinal study, while the dark triad trait of psychoticism was not associated with COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs, it was linked to conspiracy beliefs regarding the Russian-Ukrainian war.

Regarding why media conspiracy beliefs may be distributed more broadly across sociodemographics, personality traits, and thinking styles, I propose that the nature of the media itself—its pervasive presence, its use across diverse groups with varying characteristics, and its capacity to be perceived differently by different individuals—along with the content of conspiracy theories about the media, may contribute to this pattern. The media appears to be susceptible to conspiratorial interpretations from various perspectives. For instance, individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may perceive the media as a tool for maintaining hierarchical structures and preventing social mobility, while those from higher socioeconomic classes may view it as a force that undermines their influence and imposes societal pressures aimed at restructuring socioeconomic dynamics. Individuals with higher education levels might interpret the media as discouraging intellectual engagement to keep the population passive and controllable, whereas those with lower education levels may see the media as promoting unnecessary academic fields to sustain universities financially. Furthermore, media conspiracy theories seem to be more varied regarding complexity and kind of narratives compared to many other types of conspiracy theories. This may explain their appeal to individuals with varying cognitive and psychological profiles. For instance, some media conspiracy theories may be relatively easy-to-understand (e.g., movies are subtly promoting specific thoughts to the public), which may resonate with particular individuals with specific thinking style, while others may be more intricate (e.g., social media is finding and planning for human neural and behavioral algorithms), which might appeal to a different group of individuals with specific thinking patterns. The varying levels of complexity in these theories could influence how different people engage with them (relatively flat distribution). Therefore, I suggest that multiple factors

(e.g., content) should be considered in the scientific literature when seeking to answer the question: Why do some individuals believe in specific conspiracy theories? Certain conspiracy beliefs, such as media conspiracy beliefs, may be accepted by individuals from diverse sociodemographic, personality, and cognitive style backgrounds. Such considerations may open new avenues for understanding and interpreting how various factors contribute to different conspiracy beliefs, which may vary in direction and intensity.

Finally, I suggest that the quality of media use—how media is engaged with—deserves attention alongside the quantity of media use—how much media is consumed—in examining the relationship between media use and conspiracism. To date, research has primarily focused on the frequency of media use (quantity and how much) and its contribution to conspiracy beliefs (e.g., Enders et al., 2023; Stecula & Pickup, 2021; Valenzuela et al., 2023). This has led many people, including scholars, to assume that media consumption is synonymous with conspiracism. However, I propose that if media use is approached with mindful awareness—characterized by clear intentions, active monitoring of emotions and thoughts, and alignment with one's psychological state and daily routines (harmonious use)—it may not only be unrelated to conspiracism but could even reduce susceptibility to conspiracy beliefs. Enhancing the quality of media engagement—particularly by promoting mindful social media use—may serve as an effective strategy for mitigating conspiracism, adding to existing intervention approaches. Cultivating mindful social media habits may reduce susceptibility to media conspiracy beliefs by potentially limiting exposure to conspiratorial content, disrupting algorithm-driven information bubbles, fostering deeper engagement with offline world and realities, enhancing self-reflection, and preserving cognitive resources. The mechanisms underlying *how* mindful social media use contributes to reduced conspiracism warrant further investigation in future research.

The findings of this thesis, which highlight the negative link between mindful use of social media and conspiricism, could help the literature move beyond an exclusive focus on time spent on media and conspiracism, as well as expand intervention efforts beyond purely cognitive approaches to addressing conspiracy beliefs. These findings suggest that mindfulness and mindful awareness might be influential factors in conspiracism that warrant greater attention. Furthermore, this perspective may open new avenues in both the Psychology of Conspiracy and Media Psychology, fostering greater interdisciplinary contributions. I could also strengthen the role of Media Psychology researchers and psychologists in advancing the Psychology of Conspiracy, both in theoretical research and in clinical applications (e.g., developing media literacy interventions).

On the whole, the field of the Psychology of Conspiracy is still young, with many unexplored areas. It also faces unresolved questions, challenges in conceptualisation and measurement, and inconsistencies in findings (for review, see Douglas & Sutton, 2023). I aimed to contribute to this growing field by conceptualising, measuring, and exploring the potential associated consequences and contributing factors of media conspiracy beliefs. I found studying media conspiracy beliefs important because media plays a significant role, and the way the media is perceived by individuals is influential (e.g., Shabahang et al., 2024). The contribution and importance of media in people's lives are becoming more pronounced (Mediaization of Daily Life; see Bengtsson et al., 2021), and many individuals are in constant engagement with the media (see Permanently Online, Permanently Connected World; Vorderer et al., 2016). Meanwhile, with the growing power and progress of the media, negative thoughts and perceptions about it seem to be emerging in many individuals (e.g., artificial intelligence anxiety and fear; see Lund et al., 2024). This may impact individuals' attitudes, behaviors, and the functioning of media (e.g., reducing media effectiveness in increasing awareness during critical times, such as pandemics because of being perceived as unreliable by some users). Understanding negative perceptions toward the media is necessary, as individuals' dependency on media appears to be rising, making it increasingly crucial to understand the interplay between individuals and media. Media conspiracy beliefs may offer new perspectives on understanding and explaining the relationship between the media and users, media functioning and effects, the connection between the media and conspiracism, as well as the psychological and sociopolitical states of individuals in today's media-dependent world.

Practical Implications

It is important for the media industry and policymakers to recognize that conspiracy theories about the media exist and may influence how individuals engage with them, as well as their attitudes and reactions. Media conspiracy beliefs may contribute to distrust, ultimately diminishing audience engagement and undermining the media's effectiveness. This erosion of trust may, in turn, hinder essential media functions, such as the media's role in disaster preparedness and awareness sharing (e.g., see Adam et al., 2023). Being aware of the existence of such extreme negative attitudes toward the media may help media organizations and policymakers better prepare and implement necessary policy changes to reduce these beliefs, which could otherwise affect media functioning when it is most needed, such as during times of crisis.

The conceptualisation and Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories Scale may provide opportunities for researchers, the media industry, and policymakers to understand and quantify the conflict between users and the media from the perspective of conspiracism. This tool could help assess how 'distant' society feels from the media, identify necessary changes, and evaluate whether those changes have had positive effects (e.g., measuring media conspiracy beliefs before and after changes are made within media institutions).

Moreover, the findings regarding the association between media conspiracy beliefs and negative sociopolitical attitudes may inform academia, the media industry, and policymakers that some portion of maladaptive sociopolitical attitudes and reactions may stem from a negative perception of the media (i.e., viewing the media as conspiratorial). This insight could guide these groups to consider this new aspect when addressing sociopolitical maladaptation in society.

Furthermore, the thesis findings on the relationship between quality of media use and conspiracism, and the effects of improving mindful use on reducing conspiracism, may provide guidance to academia and policymakers in addressing conspiracism. Promoting mindful social media use could serve as an additional intervention strategy to reduce conspiracy beliefs. Given that this intervention is relatively brief, easy to implement, and indirect, as well as potentially having broader positive impacts beyond just reducing conspiracism—such as addressing problematic social media use—it holds promise for application across various contexts (e.g., schools, workplaces) and groups (e.g., adolescents, young adults). This approach could also be considered by social media companies and platforms themselves, for instance, by incorporating regular mindful awareness check-ins at set intervals to help users become more aware of their media engagement and reduce their vulnerabilities, such as susceptibility to accepting conspiracy beliefs. However, this might be annoying for some users who seek uninterrupted connection with social media, as well as for companies that prioritize increasing user engagement with their platforms for profit. This issue is discussed in the context of "screenwashing", where some social media companies feign concern for users' well-being while making minimal genuine efforts to address problematic behaviors (see Koning et al., 2024).

Methodological Reflections and Limitations

In the thesis, I drew on different methods and approaches to develop my claims. I adopted multinational samples, cross-sectional designs (*Chapters 2-4*) as well as an experiment (*Chapter 5*). I investigated media conspiracy beliefs from various angles, including conceptualisation/measurement (*Chapter 2*), potential associated outcomes (*Chapter 3*), possible contributing factors (*Chapter 4*), and an alternative intervention

strategy (*Chapter 5*). I selected and applied appropriate methodological and statistical techniques, considering the cross-sectional nature of the data and the research limitations. Additionally, my research goes beyond the focus on WEIRD populations by including samples from diverse cultural contexts. This allows for an examination of media conspiracy beliefs and their correlates in both WEIRD and non-WEIRD societies, addressing the limited evidence from non-WEIRD societies regarding conspiracy beliefs and providing more inclusive findings.

Nevertheless, my thesis has several important limitations. In this thesis, I did not undertake an in-depth investigation of how belief in media conspiracy theories may be associated with belief in other specific conspiracy theories. According to Goertzel's (1994) monological belief system model, the endorsement of one conspiracy theory may increase the likelihood of endorsing others—a notion supported by empirical findings (e.g., Williams et al., 2022, 2025). In this thesis, I focused solely on examining the relationship between belief in media conspiracy theories, conspiracy mentality, and general conspiracism. Future research should explore the associations between media conspiracy beliefs and other specific conspiracy theories (e.g., the Great Replacement theory) to provide deeper insights into the potential interconnectedness of these beliefs.

In this thesis, I did not engage in cross-sample comparisons statistically or in the interpretation of the findings. Instead, my aim was to provide preliminary insights that extend beyond a WEIRD population, without focusing on direct comparisons or interpretations between different samples. Statistically significant sociodemographic differences were also present among the samples (e.g., differences in socioeconomic status). Sample differences across societies pose a threat to the validity of cross-sample analyses, potentially leading to misinterpretations of the data (e.g., Buil et al., 2012). Although I did not engage in cross-sample analysis and interpretation, societal and cultural aspects may influence the results in some cases. For example, in the Iranian sample, the orthodox worldview, which emphasizes belief in adherence to rules to preserve social order, was uniquely predicted by media conspiracy beliefs. This may be due to the society's severe governmental repression, where living under such circumstances fosters a sense that meaningful change is unattainable, and compliance with the existing framework feels like the safest option. In contrast, in other samples where personal and societal freedom is significantly higher and change is perceived as attainable (e.g., through protests), the link between media conspiracy beliefs and the orthodox worldview was non-significant. Although this thesis does not engage in cross-cultural analysis or interpretations, I acknowledge the contribution that societal and cultural dimensions—such as economic inequality, authoritarian regimes, and

collective cultures—may have on media conspiracy beliefs and their correlates. Future studies on media conspiracy beliefs, with consideration and control of societal and cultural aspects, are highly recommended.

Moreover, the samples were convenience-based and may represent specific subgroups within each society. Future research involving representative and sociodemographically equivalent samples are recommended. Also, measurement invariance of the Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories Scale—the primary measure of this research project—was not fully established. Although partial configural invariance may be considered sufficient when the primary objective is to examine the research model within groups separately rather than to conduct direct cross-group comparisons (e.g., Luong & Flake, 2023), full measurement invariance (i.e., metric, scalar, or strict) was not supported. Therefore, I did not engage in cross-sample analyses or interpretations. Future research that establish full measurement invariance for the BMCTS will be better positioned to employ a cross-sample comparative approach.

It is also the case that the use of cross-sectional data limited the ability to infer causal relationships in this thesis. While I have considered and modelled some constructs as predictors and others as outcomes, these variables could easily be reversed. My approach to the variables is grounded in existing literature on the Psychology of Conspiracy, which typically attributes specific roles to the constructs used in this thesis (e.g., investigating sociopolitical attitudes often as outcomes of conspiracy beliefs). However, I am aware that causal interpretations cannot be definitively drawn from these observed relationships. Longitudinal and experimental designs in future studies would help clarify the relationships and identify causal pathways. It is also important to note that the analyses in this thesis were with medium effect sizes, and some samples may have medium to low statistical power. Variations in sample size may also result in a relationship reaching statistical significance in one sample but not in another—not due to differences in the underlying relationship, but rather due to disparities in statistical power. These aspects highlight the importance of conducting confirmatory studies to validate the findings.

From a measurement point of view, some measures demonstrated low internal consistency, leading to the inclusion of only a single item from these measures in the models. This may affect the validity of these measures and, consequently, the observed relationships between media conspiracy beliefs and these constructs. Future studies should consider using alternative measures, particularly those with longer formats, to enhance the reliability of the measured constructs.

Furthermore, this thesis assessed a broad range of traits, attitudes, and behaviors relevant to media conspiracy beliefs. This approach aligns with many introductory and preliminary studies in the Psychology of Conspiracy, where the goal is often to provide a general picture of the correlates of a specific conspiracy belief. Similarly, it is consistent with many investigations in Media Psychology, where a media-related phenomenon (media conspiracy belief in this thesis) is explored through various aspects to offer a comprehensive view of the related factors, without delving deeply into specific categories of constructs and theoretical frameworks.

Despite these limitations, this thesis contributed several novel findings to the literature, offering preliminary insights into media conspiracy beliefs as an understudied set of conspiracy beliefs, as well as contributing to a broader understanding of conspiracism generally. This thesis may pave the way for focused and comprehensive studies in the future.

Concluding Comments

I sought to conceptualise media conspiracy beliefs for the first time in the literature and developed the first specific measure to assess belief in media conspiracy theories. I have provided preliminary findings regarding the possible associated outcomes and contributing factors of media conspiracy beliefs. Additionally, I introduced a specific interventional program for promoting mindful use of social media and, for the first time, offered an intervention to reduce conspiracy beliefs by targeting media use behavior.

My thesis examined the gap between individuals and the media through the lens of conspiracy ("the media as a target of conspiracy beliefs"). My findings highlighted the potential sociopolitical implications associated with media conspiracy beliefs. This investigation was particularly essential given the significant lack of attention from academics and policymakers to this subset of conspiracy beliefs, despite their seemingly rapid growth (see Uscinski et al., 2022b). Furthermore, this research contributed to the broader literature on potential predictors of conspiracy beliefs, offering insights into the characteristics of individuals who may adopt media conspiracy beliefs. By examining the relationship between media use and conspiracy beliefs through the lens of mindful social media engagement, my thesis introduced a novel perspective on the relationship between media use and conspiracy beliefs, suggesting the importance of considering "quality and how" in addition to "quantity and how much" when studying the relationship between media use and conspiracism. Finally, I provided preliminary evidence for a novel and potentially promising approach to reducing conspiracy beliefs by promoting mindful use of social media, suggesting a new alternative direction for future research and intervention strategies.

The media is a fundamental aspect of contemporary life, with billions of individuals engaging with it on a regular basis. Its significance arises from its various functions, including information dissemination, opinion formation, facilitation of public discourse, and surveillance of society and government. However, a negative perception of the media—such as viewing it as conspiratorial—may foster a conflicted relationship between users and the media, potentially leading to serious consequences (e.g., diminishing the media's role in raising public awareness during crises). Given the media's accessibility, conspiracy theories targeting it may also be easily accessible. Furthermore, as societal dependence on the media continues to grow and significant technological advancements occur (e.g., the development of AI), the prevalence of media conspiracy beliefs may increase in the near future. I also speculate that media conspiracy beliefs could serve as a gateway to the acceptance of other specific conspiracy theories. Since many individuals construct their understanding of reality through the media (see Mediated Construction of Reality; Couldry & Hepp, 2016), adopting a conspiratorial attitude toward the media (representer)—viewing it as manipulative or deceptive—may heighten the likelihood of accepting conspiracy theories about the events it represents (e.g., reports on political events). Media conspiracy theories and the beliefs surrounding them may have distinct characteristics and implications that make them stand out from many other conspiracy theories and beliefs. Overall, in this thesis, I aimed to provide preliminary empirical evidence and offer assumptions and discussions to underscore the importance of media conspiracy beliefs as a subject of consideration for academics, policymakers, media institutions, and the general public.

My thesis is an attempt to draw attention to media conspiracy beliefs (a subsets of negative perceptions of media) and pave the way for future focused, complementary, and comprehensive studies. I sincerely hope my thesis contributes to the literature on the complex relationships between individuals and the media, conspiracism and specific conspiracy beliefs, the measurement of conspiracy beliefs, the interplay between media use and conspiracism, and interventions designed to address conspiracy beliefs.

REFERENCE LIST

Abadi, D., Willem van Prooijen, J., Krouwel, A., & Fischer, A. H. (2024). Anti-establishment sentiments: Realistic and symbolic threat appraisals predict populist attitudes and conspiracy mentality. *Cognition & Emotion, 38*(8), 1246–126. https://doi.org/1.1080/02699931.2024.2360584

Abdalla Mikhaeil, C., & Baskerville, R. L. (2024). Explaining online conspiracy theory radicalization: A second-order affordance for identity-driven escalation. *Information Systems Journal, 34*(3), 711-735. https://doi.org/1.1111/isj.12427

Adam, S., Urman, A., Arlt, D., Gil-Lopez, T., Makhortykh, M., & Maier, M. (2023). Media trust and the COVID-19 pandemic: An analysis of short-term trust changes, their ideological drivers and consequences in Switzerland. *Communication Research, 50*(2), 205–229. https://doi.org/1.1177/00936502221127484

Adler, N., Singh-Manoux, A., Schwartz, J., Stewart, J., Matthews, K., & Marmot, M. G. (2008). Social status and health: A comparison of British civil servants in Whitehall-II with European- and African-Americans in CARDIA. *Social Science & Medicine, 66*(5), 1034–1045. https://doi.org/1.1016/j.socscimed.2007.11.031

Akgun, S. (2004). The effects of situation and learned resourcefulness on coping responses. *Social Behavior and Personality: An International Journal, 32*(5), 441–448. https://doi.org/1.2224/sbp.2004.32.5.441

Alister, M., Herbert, S. L., Sewell, D. K., Neal, A., & Ballard, T. (2024). The impact of cognitive resource constraints on goal prioritization. *Cognitive Psychology, 148*, 101618. https://doi.org/1.1016/j.cogpsych.2023.101618

Appel, M., & Weber, S. (2021). Do mass mediated stereotypes harm members of negatively stereotyped groups? a meta-analytical review on media-generated stereotype threat and stereotype lift. *Communication Research, 48*(2), 151-179. https://doi.org/1.1177/0093650217715543

Atari, M., Afhami, R., & Swami, V. (2019). Psychometric assessments of Persian translations of three measures of conspiracist beliefs. *PLoS ONE, 14*(4), e0215202. https://doi.org/1.1371/journal.pone.0215202

Ballinger, D. (2014). 'live fast, die young and leave a good-looking conspiracy': Celebrity death conspiracies. *Australasian Journal of Popular Culture, 3*(2), 173-189. https://doi.org/1.1386/ajpc.3.2.173_1

Barron, D., Morgan, K., Towell, T., Altemeyer, B., & Swami, V. (2014). Associations between schizotypy and belief in conspiracist ideation. *Personality and Individual Differences, 70*, 156–159. https://doi.org/1.1016/j.paid.2014.06.040

Baruh, L., Ustaoğlu, B., Cemalcilar, Z., & Kuru, O. (2025). The effect of thinking styles on belief in conspiracy theories in the context of Covid-19. *SN Social Sciences, 5*(2), 9. https://doi.org/1.1007/s43545-024-01032-2

Bastos, M., Naranjo-Zolotov, M., & Aparício, M. (2024). Binge-watching uncovered: Examining the interplay of perceived usefulness, habit, and regret in continuous viewing. *Heliyon, 10*(6), e27848. https://doi.org/1.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e27848

Beaver, D. (2018, April 18). *Predictive programming.* Ohio State University. https://u.osu.edu/vanzandt/2018/04/18/predictive-programming/

Belton, E., Mulholland, T., & Murphy, K. (2025). Linking Conspiracy Beliefs with Violence: A Scoping Review of the Empirical Literature. *Terrorism and Political Violence*. Advanced Online Publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2025.2462601

Bengtsson, S., Fast, K., Jansson, A., & Lindell, J. (2021). Media and basic desires: An approach to measuring the mediatization of daily human life. *Communications, 46*(2), 275-296. https://doi.org/1.1515/commun-2019-0122

Bensley, D. A., Watkins, C., Lilienfeld, S. O., Masciocchi, C., Murtagh, M. P., & Rowan, K. (2022). Skepticism, cynicism, and cognitive style predictors of the generality of unsubstantiated belief. *Applied Cognitive Psychology, 36*(1), 83–99. https://doi.org/1.1002/acp.3900

Bentler, P. M. (1990). Comparative ft indexes in structural models. *Psychological Bulletin, 107*(2), 238–246. https://doi.org/1.1037/0033-2909.107.2.238

Bentler, P. M., & Bonett, D. G. (1980). Significance tests and goodness of ft in the analysis of covariance structures. *Psychological Bulletin, 88*(3), 588–606. https://doi.org/1.1037/0033-2909.88.3.588

Bergmann, E. (2018). Kinds of conspiracy theories. In: *Conspiracy & populism*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/1.1007/978-3-319-90359-0_2

Bertin, P., Delouvée, S., McColl, K., & Van Prooijen, J. W. (2022). Rage against the machine: investigating conspiracy theories about the video assistant referee on Twitter during the 2018 FIFA World Cup. *Sport Management Review, 26*(4), 495-516. https://doi.org/1.1080/14413523.2022.2127179

Bewick, V., Cheek, L., & Ball, J. (2003). Statistics review 7: Correlation and regression. *Critical care (London, England), 7*(6), 451–459. https://doi.org/1.1186/cc2401

Biddlestone, M., Green, R., Douglas, K., Azevedo, F., Sutton, R., & Cichocka, S. (2024). Reasons to believe: A systematic review and meta-analytic synthesis of the motives associated with conspiracy beliefs. *Psychological Bulletin*. https://kar.kent.ac.uk/107924/

Bilewicz, M., Winiewski, M., Kofta, M., & Wójcik, A. (2013). Harmful ideas, the structure and consequences of anti-Semitic beliefs in Poland. *Political Psychology, 34*(6), 821–839. https://doi.org/1.1111/pops.12024

Billieux, J., Flayelle, M., Rumpf, H.-J., & Stein, D. J. (2019). High involvement versus pathological involvement in video games: A crucial distinction for ensuring the validity and utility of gaming disorder. *Current Addiction Reports, 6*(3), 323–33. https://doi.org/1.1007/s40429-019-00259-x

Bird, S. T., & Bogart, L. M. (2005). Conspiracy beliefs about HIV/AIDS and birth control among African Americans: implications for the prevention of HIV, other STIs, and unintended pregnancy. *The Journal of Social Issues, 61*(1), 109–126. https://doi.org/1.1111/j.0022-4537.2005.00396.x

Boateng, G. O., Neilands, T. B., Frongillo, E. A., Melgar-Quiñonez, H. R., & Young, S. L. (2018). Best practices for developing and validating scales for health, social, and behavioral research: A primer. *Frontiers in Public Health, 6*, 149. https://doi.org/1.3389/fpubh.2018.00149

Bonetto, E., & Arciszewski, T. (2021). The creativity of conspiracy theories. *The Journal of Creative Behavior, 55*(4), 916–924. https://doi.org/1.1002/jocb.497

Booker, I. (2017, September 9). *Polybius: Government-run arcade game and psychological experiment or complete hoax?* Kotaku Australia. Retrieved from https://www.kotaku.com.au/2017/09/polybius-government-run-arcade-game-and-psychological-experiment-or-complete-fiction/

Bordeleau, J.-N., & Stockemer, D. (2024). On the relationship between age and conspiracy beliefs. *Political Psychology*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/1.1111/pops.13044

Bowes, S. M., Costello, T. H., & Tasimi, A. (2023). The conspiratorial mind: A meta-analytic review of motivational and personological correlates. *Psychological Bulletin, 149*(5-6), 259–293. https://doi.org/1.1037/bul0000392

Brewster, P. W., Melrose, R. J., Marquine, M. J., Johnson, J. K., Napoles, A., MacKay-Brandt, A., Farias, S., Reed, B., & Mungas, D. (2014). Life experience and demographic influences on cognitive function in older adults. *Neuropsychology, 28*(6), 846–858. https://doi.org/1.1037/neu0000098

Brooks, S. K. (2021). FANatics: Systematic literature review of factors associated with celebrity worship, and suggested directions for future research. *Current Psychology: A Journal for Diverse Perspectives on Diverse Psychological Issues, 40*(2), 864–886. https://doi.org/1.1007/s12144-018-9978-4

Brotherton, R., & French, C. C. (2014). Belief in conspiracy theories and susceptibility to the conjunction fallacy. *Applied Cognitive Psychology, 28*(2), 238–248. https://doi.org/1.1002/acp.2995

Brotherton, R., French, C. C., & Pickering, A. D. (2013). Measuring belief in conspiracy theories: the generic conspiracist beliefs scale. *Frontiers in Psychology, 4*, 279. https://doi.org/1.3389/fpsyg.2013.00279

Brown, K. W., & Ryan, R. M. (2003). The benefits of being present: mindfulness and its role in psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 84*(4), 822–848. https://doi.org/1.1037/0022-3514.84.4.822

Brown, T. A. (2015). *Confirmatory factor analysis for applied research*. Guilford publications.

Browne, M. W., & Cudeck, R. (1993). Alternative ways of assessing model ft. In K. A. Bollen & J. S. Long (Eds.), *Testing structural equation models* (pp. 136–162). Sage.

Bruder M., Manstead A. S. R. (2009). *Questionnaire on Conspiracy Theories.* Available at: http://www.conspiracytheory.martinbruder.com/en

Bruder, M., Haffke, P., Neave, N., Nouripanah, N., & Imhoff, R. (2013). Measuring individual differences in generic beliefs in conspiracy theories across cultures: Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire. *Frontiers in Psychology, 4,* Article 225. https://doi.org/1.3389/fpsyg.2013.00225

Bruns, A., Harrington, S., & Hurcombe, E. (2020). 'Corona? 5G? or both?': The dynamics of COVID-19/5G conspiracy theories on Facebook. *Media International Australia, 177*(1), 12–29. https://doi.org/1.1177/1329878X20946113

Buil, I., de Chernatony, L., & Martínez, E. (2012). Methodological issues in cross-cultural research: An overview and recommendations. *Journal of Targeting, Measurement and Analysis for Marketing*, *20*, 223-234. https://doi.org/1.1057/jt.2012.18

Burnell, K., George, M. J., & Underwood, M. K. (2021). New media and solitude: Implications for peer relations. In R. J. Coplan, J. C. Bowker, & L. J. Nelson (Eds.), *The handbook of solitude:*

Psychological perspectives on social isolation, social withdrawal, and being alone (2nd ed., pp. 254–267). Wiley Blackwell. https://doi.org/1.1002/9781119576457.ch18

Buschman, T. J., Siegel, M., Roy, J. E., & Miller, E. K. (2011). Neural substrates of cognitive capacity limitations. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, *108*(27), 11252–11255. https://doi.org/1.1073/pnas.1104666108

Buturoiu, R., Udrea, G., Oprea, D-A., & Corbu, N. (2021). Who believes in conspiracy theories about the covid-19 pandemic in romania? an analysis of conspiracy theories believers' profiles. *Societies*, *11*(4), 138. https://doi.org/1.3390/soc11040138

Cappella, J. N., & Jamieson, K. H. (1996). News frames, political cynicism, and media cynicism. The *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *546*(1), 71-84. https://doi.org/1.1177/0002716296546001007

Cassese, E. C., Farhart, C. E., & Miller, J. M. (2020). Gender differences in covid-19 conspiracy theory beliefs. *Politics & Gender*, *16*(4), 1009-1018. https://doi.org/1.1017/s1743923x20000409

Caycho-Rodríguez, T., Valencia, P. D., Ventura-León, J., Vilca, L. W., Carbajal-León, C., Reyes-Bossio, M., White, M., Rojas-Jara, C., Polanco-Carrasco, R., Gallegos, M., Cervigni, M., Martino, P., Palacios, D. A., Moreta-Herrera, R., Samaniego-Pinho, A., Lobos-Rivera, M. E., Figares, A. B., Puerta-Cortés, D. X., Corrales-Reyes, I. E., Calderón, R., … Petzold, O. (2022). Design and cross-cultural invariance of the COVID-19 vaccine conspiracy beliefs scale (COVID-VCBS) in 13 Latin American countries. *Frontiers in Public Health*, *10*, 90872. https://doi.org/1.3389/fpubh.2022.908720

Chen, X., Zhang, S. X., Jahanshahi, A. A., Alvarez-Risco, A., Dai, H., Li, J., & Ibarra, V. G. (2020). Belief in a COVID-19 conspiracy theory as a predictor of mental health and well-being of health care workers in Ecuador: Cross-sectional survey study. *JMIR Public Health and Surveillance*, *6*(3), e20737. https://doi.org/1.2196/20737

Cichocka, A., Marchlewska, M., & Golec de Zavala, A. (2016). Does self-love or self-hate predict conspiracy beliefs? Narcissism, self-esteem, and the endorsement of conspiracy theories. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *7*(2), 157–166. https://doi.org/1.1177/1948550615616170

Cinelli, M., Etta, G., Avalle, M., Quattrociocchi, A., Di Marco, N., Valensise, C., Galeazzi, A., & Quattrociocchi, W. (2022). Conspiracy theories and social media platforms. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, *47*, 101407. https://doi.org/1.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101407

Clark, L. A., & Watson, D. (1995). Constructing validity: Basic issues in objective scale development. *Psychological Assessment, 7*(3), 309–319. https://doi.org/1.1037/1040-359.7.3.309

Clark, L. A., & Watson, D. (2019). Constructing validity: New developments in creating objective measuring instruments. *Psychological Assessment*, *31*(12), 1412–1427. https://doi.org/1.1037/pas0000626

Costello, T. H., Pennycook, G., & Rand, D. G. (2024). Durably reducing conspiracy beliefs through dialogues with AI. *Science*, *385*(6714), eadq1814. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.adq1814

Couldry, N., & Hepp, A. (2016). The mediated construction of reality. Wiley. https://www.wiley.com/en-us/The+Mediated+Construction+of+Reality-p-9780745681306

Dagnall, N., Drinkwater, K. G., Denovan, A., & Gascón, A. E. (2025). Paranormal belief, conspiracy endorsement, and positive wellbeing: A network analysis. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *16*, 1448067. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1448067

Dagnall, N., Drinkwater, K. G., Parker, A., Denovan, A., & Parton, M. (2015). Conspiracy theory and cognitive style: A worldview. *Frontiers in Psychology, 6*, Article 206. https://doi.org/1.3389/fpsyg.2015.00206

Darwin, H., Neave, N., & Holmes, J. (2011). Belief in conspiracy theories. The role of paranormal belief, paranoid ideation and schizotypy. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *50*(8), 1289–1293. https://doi.org/1.1016/j.paid.2011.02.027

Dębski, P., Boroń, A., Kapuśniak, N., Dębska-Janus, M., Piegza, M., & Gorczyca, P. (2022). Conspiratorial beliefs about COVID-19 pandemic - Can they pose a mental health risk? The relationship between conspiracy thinking and the symptoms of anxiety and depression among adult poles. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, *13*, 870128. https://doi.org/1.3389/fpsyt.2022.870128

de Winter, J. C., Dodou, D., & Wieringa, P. A. (2009). Exploratory factor analysis with small sample sizes. *Multivariate Behavioral Research*, *44*(2), 147–181. https://doi.org/1.1080/00273170902794206

de Zavala, A. G., & Cichocka, A. (2012). Collective narcissism and anti-Semitism in Poland. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, *15*(2), 213–229. https://doi.org/1.1177/1368430211420891

Desjardins, S., Giroux, A., & Gamache, D. (2024). Comparison of personality traits of two anti-oppression groups: Vegans and anarchists. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy (ASAP).* Advance online publication. https://doi.org/1.1111/asap.12385

Diamantopoulos, A., Sarstedt, M., Fuchs, C., Wilczynski, P., & Kaiser, S. (2012). Guidelines for choosing between multi-item and single-item scales for construct measurement: A predictive validity

perspective. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *40*(3), 434–449. https://doi.org/1.1007/s11747-011-0300-3

Douglas, K. M., & Sutton, R. M. (2011). Does it take one to know one? Endorsement of conspiracy theories is influenced by personal willingness to conspire. *The British Journal of Social Psychology*, *50*(3), 544–552. https://doi.org/1.1111/j.2044-8309.201.02018.x

Douglas, K. M., & Sutton, R. M. (2023). What are conspiracy theories? A definitional approach to their correlates, consequences, and communication. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *74*, 271-298. https://doi.org/1.1146/annurev-psych-032420-031329

Douglas, K. M., Sutton, R. M., Callan, M. J., Dawtry, R. J., & Harvey, A. J. (2016). Someone is pulling the strings: Hypersensitive agency detection and belief in conspiracy theories. *Thinking & Reasoning*, *22*(1), 57–77. https://doi.org/1.1080/13546783.2015.1051586

Douglas, K. M., Sutton, R. M., Jolley, D., & Wood, M. J. (2015). The social, political, environmental, and health-related consequences of conspiracy theories: Problems and potential solutions. In M. Bilewicz, A. Cichocka, & W. Soral (Eds.), *The psychology of conspiracy* (pp. 183–200). Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group. https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2015-33221-010

Douglas, K. M., Uscinski, J. E., Sutton, R. M., Cichocka, A., Nefes, T., Ang, C. S., & Deravi, F. (2019). Understanding conspiracy theories. *Political Psychology*, *40*(Suppl 1), 3–35. https://doi.org/1.1111/pops.12568

Drinkwater, K., Dagnall, N., & Parker, A. (2012). Reality testing, conspiracy theories and paranormal beliefs. *Journal of Parapsychology*, *76*(1), 57–77. Available at: https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/id/eprint/619337

Einstein, K. L., & Glick, D. M. (2015). Do I think BLS data are BS? The consequences of conspiracy theories. *Political Behavior*, *37*(3), 679–701. https://doi.org/1.1007/s11109-014-9287-z

Eisinga, R., Grotenhuis, M. T., & Pelzer, B. (2013). The reliability of a two-item scale: Pearson, Cronbach, or Spearman-Brown? *International Journal of Public Health*, *58*(4), 637–642. https://doi.org/1.1007/s00038-012-0416-3

Enders, A., Klofstad, C., Diekman, A., Drochon, H., Rogers de Waal, J., Littrell, S., Premaratne, K., Verdear, D., Wuchty, S., & Uscinski, J. (2024). The sociodemographic correlates of conspiracism. *Scientific Reports*, *14*(1), 14184. https://doi.org/1.1038/s41598-024-64098-1

Enders, A. M., Uscinski, J. E., Klofstad, C. A., Seelig, M. I., Wuchty, S., Murthi, M. N., Premaratne, K., & Funchion, J. R. (2021). Do conspiracy beliefs form a belief system? Examining the structure and organization of conspiracy beliefs. *Journal of Social and Political Psychology, 9*(1), 255–271. https://doi.org/1.5964/jspp.5649

Enders, A. M., Uscinski, J. E., Seelig, M. I., Klofstad, C. A., Wuchty, S., Funchion, J. R., Murthi, M. N., Premaratne, K., & Stoler, J. (2023a). The relationship between social media use and beliefs in conspiracy theories and misinformation. *Political Behavior*, *45*(2), 781–804. https://doi.org/1.1007/s11109-021-09734-6

Enders, A., Farhart, C., Miller, J., Uscinski, J., Saunders, K., & Drochon, H. (2023b). Are republicans and conservatives more likely to believe conspiracy theories? *Political Behavior, 45*(4), 2001–2024. https://doi.org/1.1007/s11109-022-09812-3

Farhart, C. E., Miller J. M., & Saunders, K L. (2020). Conspiracy stress or relief? Learned helplessness and conspiratorial thinking. In *The politics of truth*, eds. Suhay Elizabeth and Barker David. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/1.1093/oso/9780197578384.003.0011

Faul, F., Erdfelder, E., Lang, A. G., & Buchner, A. (2007). G*Power 3: A flexible statistical power analysis program for the social, behavioral, and biomedical sciences. *Behavior Research Methods, 39*(2), 175–191. https://doi.org/1.3758/bf03193146

Federico, C. M., Williams, A. L., & Vitriol, J. A. (2018). The role of system identity threat in conspiracy theory endorsement. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 48*(7), 927–938. https://doi.org/1.1002/ejsp.2495

Feißt, M., Hennigs, A., Heil, J., Moosbrugger, H., Kelava, A., Stolpner, I., Kieser, M., & Rauch, G. (2019). Refning scores based on patient reported outcomes - Statistical and medical perspectives. *BMC Medical Research Methodology, 19*(1), 167. https://doi.org/1.1186/s12874-019-0806-9

Field, A. (2013). *Discovering statistics using IBM SPSS statistics: And sex and drugs and rock "n" roll.* Sage.

Fischoff, S. (2005). Media psychology: A personal essay in definition and purview. *Journal of Media Psychology*, *10*(1), 1-21. https://www.apadivisions.org/division-46/about/fischoff-media-psychology.pdf

Fredrickson B. L. (2001). The role of positive emotions in positive psychology. The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. *The American Psychologist*, *56*(3), 218–226. https://doi.org/1.1037//0003-066x.56.3.218

Freeman, D., & Bentall, R. P. (2017). The concomitants of conspiracy concerns. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, *52*(5), 595–604. https://doi.org/1.1007/s00127-017-1354-4

Freeman, D., Waite, F., Rosebrock, L., Petit, A., Causier, C., East, A., Jenner, L., Teale, A. L., Carr, L., Mulhall, S., Bold, E., & Lambe, S. (2022). Coronavirus conspiracy beliefs, mistrust, and compliance with government guidelines in England. *Psychological Medicine*, *52*(2), 251–263. https://doi.org/1.1017/S0033291720001890

Furnham A. (2013). Commercial conspiracy theories: a pilot study. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *4*, 379. https://doi.org/1.3389/fpsyg.2013.00379

Furnham, A. (2021). Just world beliefs, personal success and beliefs in conspiracy theories. *Current Psychology*, *42*, 2636–2642.

Gagliardi, L. (2023). The role of cognitive biases in conspiracy beliefs: A literature review. *Journal of Economic Surveys*. https://doi.org/1.1111/joes.12604

Galliford, N., & Furnham, A. (2017). Individual difference factors and beliefs in medical and political conspiracy theories. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, *58*(5), 422–428. https://doi.org/1.1111/sjop.12382

Garg, R., Bansal, S., Rathi, R., & Bhowmick, S. (2024). Mindful consumption–A systematic review and research agenda. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, *459*, 142373. https://doi.org/1.1016/j.jclepro.2024.142373

Garland, E. L., Farb, N. A., Goldin, P. R., & Fredrickson, B. L. (2015). Mindfulness broadens awareness and builds eudaimonic meaning: A process model of mindful positive emotion regulation. *Psychological Inquiry*, *26*(4), 293–314. https://doi.org/1.1080/1047840X.2015.1064294

Georgiou, N., Delfabbro, P., & Balzan, R. (2019). Conspiracy beliefs in the general population: The importance of psychopathology, cognitive style and educational attainment. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *151*, Article 109521. https://doi.org/1.1016/j.paid.2019.109521

Georgiou, N., Delfabbro, P., & Balzan, R. (2020). COVID-19-related conspiracy beliefs and their relationship with perceived stress and pre-existing conspiracy beliefs. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *166*, 110201. https://doi.org/1.1016/j.paid.202.110201

Georgiou, N., Delfabbro, P., & Balzan, R. (2021). Autistic traits as a potential confounding factor in the relationship between schizotypy and conspiracy beliefs. *Cognitive Neuropsychiatry*, *26*(4), 273–292. https://doi.org/1.1080/13546805.2021.1924650

Georgiou, N., Delfabbro, P., & Balzan, R. (2023). The effectiveness of a scientific reasoning intervention for conspiracy theory beliefs. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, *37*(2), 369–382. https://doi.org/1.1002/acp.4039

Gjoneska B. (2021). Conspiratorial beliefs and cognitive styles: an integrated look on analytic thinking, critical thinking, and scientific reasoning in relation to (dis)trust in conspiracy theories. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *12*, 736838. https://doi.org/1.3389/fpsyg.2021.736838

Gligorić, V., da Silva, M. M., Eker, S., van Hoek, N., Nieuwenhuijzen, E., Popova, U., & Zeighami, G. (2021). The usual suspects: How psychological motives and thinking styles predict the endorsement of well-known and COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, *35*(5), 1171–1181. https://doi.org/1.1002/acp.3844

Goertzel, T. (1994). Belief in conspiracy theories. *Political Psychology*, 731-742. https://doi.org/1.2307/3791630

Goreis, A., & Voracek, M. (2019). A systematic review and meta-analysis of psychological research on conspiracy beliefs: field characteristics, measurement instruments, and associations with personality traits. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *10*, 205. https://doi.org/1.3389/fpsyg.2019.00205

Gosling, S. D., Rentfrow, P. J., & Swann, W. B., Jr. (2003). A very brief measure of the Big-Five personality domains. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *37*(6), 504–528. https://doi.org/1.1016/S0092-6566(03)00046-1

Green S. B. (1991). How many subjects does it take to do a regression analysis. *Multivariate Behavioral Research*, *26*(3), 499–510. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327906mbr2603_7

Green, J., Druckman, J. N., Baum, M. A., Lazer, D., Ognyanova, K., & Perlis, R. H. (2023). Depressive symptoms and conspiracy beliefs. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, *37*(2), 332-359. https://doi.org/1.1002/acp.4011

Green, R., & Douglas, K. M. (2018). Anxious attachment and belief in conspiracy theories. *Personality and Individual Differences, 125,* 30–37. https://doi.org/1.1016/j.paid.2017.12.023

Hackman, D. A., Farah, M. J., & Meaney, M. J. (2010). Socioeconomic status and the brain: mechanistic insights from human and animal research. *Nature reviews. Neuroscience*, *11*(9), 651–659. https://doi.org/1.1038/nrn2897

Hair, J. F., Anderson, R. E., Tatham, R. L., & Black, W. C. (2003). *Multivariate data analysis* (5th ed.). Pearson Education.

Halama, P., & Teličák, P. (2024). General and maladaptive traits as predictors of specific conspiracy beliefs related to covid-19 and Russian-Ukrainian war: Three-wave longitudinal study. *Current Psychology: A Journal for Diverse Perspectives on Diverse Psychological Issue, 43,* 35651–35659. https://doi.org/1.1007/s12144-024-06647-5

Hartman, T. K., Marshall, M., Stocks, T. V. A., McKay, R., Bennett, K., Butter, S., Gibson Miller, J., Hyland, P., Levita, L., Martinez, A. P., Mason, L., McBride, O., Murphy, J., Shevlin, M., Vallières, F., & Bentall, R. P. (2021). Different conspiracy theories have different psychological and social determinants: Comparison of three theories about the origins of the COVID-19 virus in a representative sample of the Uk population. *Frontiers in Political Science, 3,* 64251. https://doi.org/1.3389/fpos.2021.642510

Hayes, A. F., & Coutts, J. J. (2020). Use omega rather than Cronbach's alpha for estimating reliability. But…. *Communication Methods and Measures, 14*(1), 1–24. https://doi.org/1.1080/19312458. 202.1718629

Heiss, R., Gell, S., Röthlingshöfer, E., & Zoller, C. (2021). How threat perceptions relate to learning and conspiracy beliefs about COVID-19: Evidence from a panel study. *Personality and Individual Differences, 175,* 110672. https://doi.org/1.1016/j.paid.2021.110672

IBM Corp. Released (2012). *IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 21.*. IBM Corp.

Imhoff, R., Bertlich, T., & Frenken, M. (2022). Tearing apart the "evil" twins: A general conspiracy mentality is not the same as specific conspiracy beliefs. *Current Opinion in Psychology, 46,* Article 101349. https://doi.org/1.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101349

Imhoff, R., & Bruder, M. (2014). Speaking (un–)truth to power: conspiracy mentality as a generalised political attitude. *European Journal of Personality, 28*(1), 25-43. https://doi.org/1.1002/per.1930

Imhoff, R., Dieterle, L., & Lamberty, P. (2021). Resolving the puzzle of conspiracy worldview and political activism: belief in secret plots decreases normative but increases nonnormative political engagement. *Social Psychological and Personality Science, 12*(1), 71-79. https://doi.org/1.1177/1948550619896491

Imhoff, R., & Lamberty, P. (2020). A bioweapon or a hoax? The link between distinct conspiracy beliefs about the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak and pandemic behavior. *Social Psychological and Personality Science, 11*(8), 1110-1118. https://doi.org/1.1177/1948550620934692

Infowars.com (2024, December 20). *Just like the Simpsons predicted, deep state mainstream media propaganda says next pandemic will spread through house cats*. Retrieved from https://www.infowars.com/posts/just-like-the-simpsons-predicted-deep-state-mainstream-media-propaganda-says-next-pandemic-will-spread-through-house-cats

Irwin, H. J., Dagnall, N., & Drinkwater, K. (2015). Belief inconsistency in conspiracy theorists. *Comprehensive Psychology, 4*. https://doi.org/1.2466/17.CP.4.19

Jetten, J., Peters, K., & Casara, B. G. S. (2022). Economic inequality and conspiracy theories. *Current Opinion in Psychology, 47,* 101358. https://doi.org/1.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101358

Jolley, D., & Douglas, K. M. (2014). The social consequences of conspiracism: Exposure to conspiracy theories decreases intentions to engage in politics and to reduce one's carbon footprint. *British Journal of Psychology, 105*(1), 35–56. https://doi.org/1.1111/bjop.12018

Jolley, D., & Douglas, K. M. (2017). Prevention is better than cure: Addressing anti-vaccine conspiracy theories. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 47*(8), 459–469. https://doi.org/1.1111/jasp.12453

Jolley, D., Douglas, K. M., Leite, A. C., & Schrader, T. (2019). Belief in conspiracy theories and intentions to engage in everyday crime. *The British Journal of Social Psychology, 58*(3), 534–549. https://doi.org/1.1111/bjso.12311

Jolley, D., Mar, S., & Douglas, K. M. (2020). Consequences of conspiracy theories. In M. Butter & P. Knight (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of conspiracy theories* (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/1.4324/9780429452734

Jolley, D., Marques, M. D., & Cookson, D. (2022). Shining a spotlight on the dangerous consequences of conspiracy theories. *Current Opinion in Psychology, 47,* Article 101363. https://doi.org/1.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101363

Jolley, D., Paterson, J. L., & McNeill, A. (2024). The impact of conspiracy beliefs on a targeted group: Perceived popularity of Jewish-targeted conspiracy beliefs elicits outgroup avoidant behaviours. *British Journal of Psychology (London, England : 1953)*, *115*(2), 345–362. https://doi.org/1.1111/bjop.12690

Jonason, P. K., & Webster, G. D. (2010). The dirty dozen: A concise measure of the dark triad. *Psychological Assessment, 22*(2), 420–432. https://doi.org/1.1037/a0019265

Jovanović, V., & Lazić, M. (2020). Is longer always better? A comparison of the validity of single-item versus multiple-item measures of life satisfaction. *Applied Research in Quality of Life, 15*(3), 675–692. https://doi.org/1.1007/s11482-018-9680-6

Juárez, F. P. G., Solomonova, E., Nephtali, E., & Gold, I. (2024). Conspiracies and contagion: Two patterns of COVID-19 related beliefs associated with distinct mental symptomatology. *Psychiatry Research Communications, 4*(1), 100153. https://doi.org/1.1016/j.psycom.2023.100153

Kabat-Zinn, J. (2005). *Coming to our senses: Healing ourselves and the world through mindfulness*. Hyperion.

Kachanoff, F. J., Bigman, Y. E., Kapsaskis, K., & Gray, K. (2021). Measuring realistic and symbolic threats of COVID-19 and their unique impacts on well-being and adherence to public health behaviors. *Social Psychological and Personality Science, 12*(5), 603–616. https://doi.org/1.1177/1948550620982198

Kang, Y., Gruber, J., & Gray, J. R. (2013). Mindfulness and de-automatization. *Emotion Review, 5*(2), 192-201. https://doi.org/1.1177/1754073912451629

Kang, Y., Gruber, J., & Gray, J. R. (2014). Mindfulness: Deautomatization of cognitive and emotional life. In A. le, C. T. Ngnoumen, & E. J. Langer (Eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell handbook of mindfulness* (pp. 168–185). Wiley Blackwell. https://doi.org/1.1002/9781118294895.ch9

Karić, T., & Međedović, J. (2021). COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs and containment-related behaviour: The role of political trust. *Personality and Individual Differences, 175*, 110697. https://doi.org/1.1016/j.paid.2021.110697

Kaufman, K. A., Glass, C. R., & Arnkoff, D. B. (2009). Evaluation of Mindful Sport Performance Enhancement (MSPE): A new approach to promote flow in athletes. *Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology, 3*(4), 334–356. https://doi.org/1.1123/jcsp.3.4.334

Kay, A. C., Whitson, J. A., Gaucher, D., & Galinsky, A. D. (2009). Compensatory control: Achieving order through the mind, our institutions, and the heavens. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *18*(5), 264–268. https://doi.org/1.1111/j.1467-8721.2009.01649.x

Kay, C. S., & Slovic, P. (2023). The generic conspiracist beliefs scale−5: A short-form measure of conspiracist ideation. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *102*, 104315. https://doi.org/1.1016/j.jrp.2022.104315

Keeley, B. (1999). Of conspiracy theories. *Journal of Philosophy*, *96*(3), 109-126. https://doi.org/1.2307/2564659

Kingston, J., Lassman, F., Matias, C., & Ellett, L. (2019). Mindfulness and paranoia: A cross-sectional, longitudinal and experimental analysis. *Mindfulness*, *10*(10), 2038–2045. https://doi.org/1.1007/s12671-019-01162-2

Koning, I. M., van den Eijnden, R. J. J. M., & Vossen, H. G. M. (2024). From greenwashing to screenwashing?. *Journal of Behavioral Addictions*, *13*(1), 1–5. https://doi.org/1.1556/2006.2023.00084

Koppel, S., Bugeja, L., Hua, P., Osborne, R., Stephens, A. N., Young, K. L., Chambers, R., & Hassed, C. (2019). Do mindfulness interventions improve road safety? A systematic review. *Accident Analysis and Prevention, 123*, 88–98. https://doi.org/1.1016/j.aap.2018.11.013

Krüppel, J., Yoon, D., & Mokros, A. (2023). Clarifying the link between anxiety and conspiracy beliefs: A cross-sectional study on the role of coping with stressors. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *202*, 111966. https://doi.org/1.1016/j.paid.2022.111966

Kużelewska, E., & Tomaszuk, M. (2022). Rise of conspiracy theories in the pandemic times. *International journal for the semiotics of law = Revue internationale de semiotique juridique*, *35*(6), 2373–2389. https://doi.org/1.1007/s11196-022-09910-9

Kyriazos, T. A. (2018). Applied psychometrics: sample size and sample power considerations in factor analysis (EFA, CFA) and SEM in general. *Psychology*, *9*, 2207-223. https://doi.org/1.4236/psych.2018.98126

Langer, E. J. (1992). Matters of mind: Mindfulness/mindlessness in perspective. *Consciousness and Cognition: An International Journal, 1*(4), 289–305. https://doi.org/1.1016/1053-8100(92)90066-J

Lantian, A., Muller, D., Nurra, C., & Douglas, K. M. (2016). Measuring belief in conspiracy theories: Validation of a French and English single-item scale. *International Review of Social Psychology, 29*(1), Article 1-14. https://doi.org/1.5334/irsp.8

Lantian, A., Muller, D., Nurra, C., Klein, O., Berjot, S., & Pantazi, M. (2018). Stigmatized beliefs: Conspiracy theories, anticipated negative evaluation of the self, and fear of social exclusion. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 48*(7), 939–954. https://doi.org/1.1002/ejsp.2498

Leavitt, C. E., Butzer, B., Clarke, R. W., & Dvorakova, K. (2021). Intentional solitude and mindfulness: The benefits of being alone. In R. J. Coplan, J. C. Bowker, & L. J. Nelson (Eds.), *The handbook of solitude: Psychological perspectives on social isolation, social withdrawal, and being alone* (2nd ed., pp. 340–350). Wiley Blackwell. https://doi.org/1.1002/9781119576457.ch24

Lee, Y.-C., Lin, Y.-C., Huang, C.-L., & Fredrickson, B. L. (2013). The construct and measurement of peace of mind. *Journal of Happiness Studies: An Interdisciplinary Forum on Subjective Well-Being, 14*(2), 571–59. https://doi.org/1.1007/s10902-012-9343-5

Leibovitz, T., Shamblaw, A. L., Rumas, R., & Best, M. W. (2021). COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs: Relations with anxiety, quality of life, and schemas. *Personality and Individual Differences, 175*, 110704. https://doi.org/1.1016/j.paid.2021.110704

Li, K., Jiang, S., Yan, X., & Li, J. (2023). Mechanism study of social media overload on health self-efficacy and anxiety. *Heliyon, 10*(1), e23326. https://doi.org/1.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e23326

Liekefett, L., Christ, O., & Becker, J. C. (2023). Can conspiracy beliefs be beneficial? longitudinal linkages between conspiracy beliefs, anxiety, uncertainty aversion, and existential threat. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 49*(2), 167-179. https://doi.org/1.1177/01461672211060965

Lobato, E., Mendoza, J., Sims, V., & Chin, M. (2014). Examining the relationship between conspiracy theories, paranormal beliefs, and pseudoscience acceptance among a university population. *Applied Cognitive Psychology, 28*(5), 617–625. https://doi.org/1.1002/acp.3042

Lorenzo-Seva, U. (2022). SOLOMON: A method for splitting a sample into equivalent subsamples in factor analysis. *Behavior Research Methods, 54*(6), 2665–2677. https://doi.org/1.3758/s13428-021-01750-y

Lund, B. D., Mannuru, N. R., & Agbaji, D. (2024). AI anxiety and fear: A look at perspectives of information science students and professionals towards artificial intelligence. *Journal of Information Science*. https://doi.org/1.1177/01655515241282001

Luong, R., & Flake, J. K. (2023). Measurement invariance testing using confirmatory factor analysis and alignment optimization: A tutorial for transparent analysis planning and reporting. *Psychological Methods, 28*(4), 905–924. https://doi.org/1.1037/met0000441

Madison, T. P., Auverset, L. A., Chauvin, K., & Puspasari, D. (2025). The road to moral superiority was paved with hate-watching: A qualitative examination of why people watch things they hate. *First Monday, 30*(5). https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v30i5.13366

Mao, J.-Y., van Prooijen, J.-W., & Van Lange, P. A. M. (2024). Conspiracy theories: Groups, ideology, and status as three distinct bases for expressions in society. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 33*(6), 385-391. https://doi.org/10.1177/09637214241280742

Mao, J.-Y., Yang, S.-L., & Guo, Y.-Y. (2020). Are individuals from lower social classes more susceptible to conspiracy theories? An explanation from the compensatory control theory. *Asian Journal of Social Psychology, 23*(4), 372–383. https://doi.org/1.1111/ajsp.12417

McLaughlin, B., Gotlieb, M. R., & Mills, D. J. (2023). Caught in a dangerous world: Problematic news consumption and its relationship to mental and physical ill-being. *Health Communication, 38*(12), 2687-2697. https://doi.org/1.1080/10410236.2022.2106086

March, E., & Springer, J. (2019). Belief in conspiracy theories: The predictive role of schizotypy, Machiavellianism, and primary psychopathy. *PloS One, 14*(12), e0225964. https://doi.org/1.1371/journal.pone.0225964

Marchlewska, M., Cichocka, A., & Kossowska, M. (2018). Addicted to answers: Need for cognitive closure and the endorsement of conspiracy beliefs. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 48*(2), 109–117. https://doi.org/1.1002/ejsp.2308

Mari, S., Gil de Zuniga, H., Suerdem, A., Hanke, K., Brown, G., Vilar, R., Boer, D., & Bilewicz, M. (2022). Conspiracy theories and institutional trust: Examining the role of uncertainty avoidance and active social media use. *Political Psychology, 43*(2), 277-296. https://doi.org/1.1111/pops.12754

McCarthy, M., Murphy, K., Sargeant, E., & Williamson, H. (2022). Examining the relationship between conspiracy theories and COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy: A mediating role for perceived health threats, trust, and anomie? *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy, 22*(1), 106-129. https://doi.org/1.1111/asap.12291

McGuiness, C. E., Zajac, I., Wilson, C., & Turnbull, D. (2019). The REIm-13: A brief measure of thinking style. *European Journal of Psychological Assessment, 35*(4), 451–458. https://doi.org/1.1027/1015-5759/a000421

Meng, S. Q., Cheng, J. L., Li, Y. Y., Yang, X. Q., Zheng, J. W., Chang, X. W., Shi, Y., Chen, Y., Lu, L., Sun, Y., Bao, Y. P., & Shi, J. (2022). Global prevalence of digital addiction in general population: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Clinical Psychology Review, 92,* 102128. https://doi.org/1.1016/j.cpr.2022.102128

Merskin, D. L. (2020). *The SAGE international encyclopedia of mass media and society*. SAGE Publications. https://doi.org/1.4135/9781483375519

Meuer, M., Oeberst, A., & Imhoff, R. (2023). How do conspiratorial explanations differ from non-conspiratorial explanations? A content analysis of real-world online articles. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *53*(2), 288–306. https://doi.org/1.1002/ejsp.2903

Miller, J. M., Saunders, K. L., & Farhart, C. E. (2016). Conspiracy endorsement as motivated reasoning: the moderating roles of political knowledge and trust. *American Journal of Political Science* 60(4), 824–44.

Millypilly83 (2019, July 21). *What celebrity conspiracy theory do you absolutely, 100%, believe is true?* [Online forum post]. Reddit. Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/cg6zi1/what_celebrity_conspiracy_theory_do_you/

Mitchell, S. S. (2019). Population control, deadly vaccines, and mutant mosquitoes: The construction and circulation of Zika virus conspiracy theories online. *Canadian Journal of Communication, 44*(2), 211-237. https://doi.org/1.22230/cjc.2019v44n2a3329

Montag, C., & Markett, S. (2023). Social media use and everyday cognitive failure: investigating the fear of missing out and social networks use disorder relationship. *BMC psychiatry*, *23*(1), 872. https://doi.org/1.1186/s12888-023-05371-x

Morgado, F. F. R., Meireles, J. F. F., Neves, C. M., Amaral, A. C. S., & Ferreira, M. E. C. (2017). Scale development: Ten main limitations and recommendations to improve future research practices. *Psicologia, reflexao e critica: revista semestral do Departamento de Psicologia da UFRGS*, *30*(1), 3. https://doi.org/1.1186/s41155-016-0057-1

Moulding, R., Nix-Carnell, S., Schnabel, A., Nedeljkovic, M., Burnside, E. E., Lentini, A. F., & Mehzabin, N. (2016). Better the devil you know than a world you don't? Intolerance of uncertainty and worldview explanations for belief in conspiracy theories. *Personality and individual differences*, *98*, 345-354. https://doi.org/1.1016/j.paid.2016.04.060

Murray, C. (2023, July 15). *The adrenochrome conspiracy theory—pushed by 'Sound Of Freedom' star—explained.* Forbes. Retrieved from https://www.forbes.com/sites/conormurray/2023/07/15/the-adrenochrome-conspiracy-theory-pushed-by-sound-of-freedom-star-explained/?sh=6735946e5179

Muthén, L. K., & Muthén, B. O. (2016). *Mplus.* Version 7.4 [Computer software]. Los Angeles, CA: Muthén & Muthén.

Narmashiri, A., Akbari, F., Sohrabi, A., & Hatami, J. (2023). Conspiracy beliefs are associated with a reduction in frontal beta power and biases in categorizing ambiguous stimuli. *Heliyon*, *9*(10), e20249. https://doi.org/1.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e20249

Nelson, J. B. (2017). Mindful eating: The art of presence while you eat. *Diabetes Spectrum, 30*(3), 171–174. https://doi.org/1.2337/ds17-0015

Nera, K. (2024). Analyzing the causation between conspiracy mentality and belief in conspiracy theories: Potential pitfalls and leads to address them. *Zeitschrift für Psychologie, 232*(1), 44–49. https://doi.org/1.1027/2151-2604/a000533

Nera, K., & Schöpfer, C. (2023). What is so special about conspiracy theories? Conceptually distinguishing beliefs in conspiracy theories from conspiracy beliefs in psychological research. *Theory & Psychology*, *33*(3), 287-305. https://doi.org/1.1177/09593543231155891

Nießen, D., Beierlein, C., Rammstedt, B. & Lechner, C. M. An English-language adaptation of the Interpersonal Trust Short Scale (KUSIV3). *Measurement Instruments for the Social Sciences, 2*, 1. https://doi.org/1.1186/s42409-020-00016-1

Nilsson, H. (2021). Mindfulness as a tool for ADHD drivers: A comparative study of higher levels of self-awareness. *Journal of Disability & Religion*, *25*(2), 225-238. https://doi.org/1.1080/23312521.202.1775755

Noelle-Neumann, E. (1974). The spiral of silence a theory of public opinion. *Journal of Communication*, *24*(2), 43-51. https://doi.org/1.1111/j.1460-2466.1974.tb00367.x

Nunnally, J. C. (1978). An overview of psychological measurement. In B. B. Wolman (Ed.), *Clinical diagnosis of mental disorders*. Springer. https://doi.org/1.1007/978-1-4684-2490-4_4

O'Brien, R. M. (2007). A caution regarding rules of thumb for variance inflation factors. *Quality & Quantity: International Journal of Methodology, 41*(5), 673–69. https://doi.org/1.1007/s11135-006-9018-6

O'Brien, C., Georgiou, N., & Bartholomaeus, J. (2025). The association between belief in a just world and endorsing conspiracy theories is moderated by ambiguity tolerance, but not scientific reasoning. *Personality and Individual Differences, 233*, 112885. https://doi.org/1.1016/j.paid.2024.112885

Öhman, S. (2017). Previous experiences and risk perception: The role of transference. *Journal of Education, Society and Behavioural Science*, *23*(1), 1–1. https://doi.org/1.9734/JESBS/2017/35101

Oleksy, T., Wnuk, A., Maison, D., & Łyś, A. (2021). Content matters. Different predictors and social consequences of general and government-related conspiracy theories on COVID-19. *Personality and Individual Differences, 168,* 110289. https://doi.org/1.1016/j.paid.202.110289

O'Mahony, C., Brassil, M., Murphy, G., & Linehan, C. (2023). The efficacy of interventions in reducing belief in conspiracy theories: A systematic review. *PloS One*, *18*(4), e0280902. https://doi.org/1.1371/journal.pone.0280902

O'Mahony, C., Murphy, G., & Linehan, C. (2024). True discernment or blind scepticism? Comparing the effectiveness of four conspiracy belief interventions. *Advances.in/Psychology*, *2*, e215691. https://doi.org/1.56296/aip00030

Ondrejková, N., Halamová, J., & Strnádelová, B. (2022). Effect of the intervention mindfulness based compassionate living on the—Level of self-criticism and self-compassion. *Current Psychology: A Journal for Diverse Perspectives on Diverse Psychological Issues, 41*(5), 2747–2754. https://doi.org/1.1007/s12144-020-00799-w

Orosz, G., Krekó, P., Paskuj, B., Tóth-Király, I., Bőthe, B., & Roland-Lévy, C. (2016). Changing conspiracy beliefs through rationality and ridiculing. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *7*, 1525. https://doi.org/1.3389/fpsyg.2016.01525

Pae, H.K. (2020). The east and the west. In: *Script effects as the hidden drive of the mind, cognition, and culture*. Literacy Studies, vol 21. Springer. https://doi.org/1.1007/978-3-030-55152-0_6

Palecek, M., & Hampel, V. (2024). Conspiracy theories and anxiety in culture: why is threat-related misinformation an evolved product of our ability to mobilize sources in the face of un-represented threat? *Philosophy of the Social Sciences, 54*(2), 99-132. https://doi.org/1.1177/00483931231210335

Palgi, Y., Segel-Karpas, D., Ost Mor, S., Hoffman, Y., Shrira, A., & Bodner, E. (2021). Positive solitude scale: theoretical background, development and validation. *Journal of Happiness Studies,* 1-28. https://doi.org/1.1007/s10902-021-00367-4

Papaioannou, K., Pantazi, M., & van Prooijen, J. W. (2023). Unravelling the relationship between populism and belief in conspiracy theories: The role of cynicism, powerlessness and zero-sum thinking. *British Journal of Psychology*, *114*(1), 159–175. https://doi.org/1.1111/bjop.12602

Papaioannou, K., Pantazi, M., & van Prooijen, J. W. (2024). Rejection of the status quo: Conspiracy theories and preference for alternative political systems. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 63(4), 2077-2099. https://doi.org/1.1111/bjso.12754

Pekárová, V. (2021). Paranoid and conspiracy beliefs: the role of anxiety and life satisfaction. *Studia Psychologica*, *63*(4), 393-403. 0039-332. https://doi.org/1.31577/sp.2021.04.835

Pelkmans, M., & Rhys, M. (2011). Conspiracy theories and their truth trajectories. *Focaal; Brooklyn, 59*, 66-8. https://doi.org/1.3167/fcl.2011.590105

Peng, P., & Liao, Y. (2023). Six addiction components of problematic social media use in relation to depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms: a latent profile analysis and network analysis. *BMC Psychiatry*, *23*(1), 321. https://doi.org/1.1186/s12888-023-04837-2

Perry, R., Sibley, C. G., & Duckitt, J. (2013). Dangerous and competitive worldviews: A meta-analysis of their associations with social dominance orientation and right-wing authoritarianism. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *47*(1), 116–127. https://doi.org/1.1016/j.jrp.2012.1.004

Pilch, I., Turska-Kawa, A., Wardawy, P., Olszanecka-Marmola, A., & Smołkowska-Jędo, W. (2023). Contemporary trends in psychological research on conspiracy beliefs. A systematic review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *14*, 1075779. https://doi.org/1.3389/fpsyg.2023.1075779

Pinkleton, B. E., & Austin, E. W. (2004). Media perceptions and public affairs apathy in the politically inexperienced. *Mass Communication & Society*, *7*(3), 319–337. https://doi.org/1.1207/s15327825mcs0703_4

Plenta, P. (2020). Conspiracy theories as a political instrument: utilization of anti-Soros narratives in Central Europe. *Contemporary Politics*, *26*(5), 512-53. https://doi.org/1.1080/13569775.202.1781332

Potter, W. J. (2013). Synthesizing a working definition of "mass" media. *Review of Communication Research, 1*, 1-30. https://doi.org/10.12840/issn.2255-4165_2013_01.01_001

Przybylski, A. K., & Weinstein, N. (2017). A large-scale test of the Goldilocks hypothesis: Quantifying the relations between digital-screen use and the mental well-being of adolescents. *Psychological Science, 28*(2), 204–215. https://doi.org/1.1177/0956797616678438

Pummerer, L., Böhm, R., Lilleholt, L., Winter, K., Zettler, I., & Sassenberg, K. (2022). Conspiracy theories and their societal effects during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *13*(1), 49-59. https://doi.org/1.1177/19485506211000217

Pyszczynski, T., & Kesebir, P. (2011). Anxiety buffer disruption theory: a terror management account of posttraumatic stress disorder. *Anxiety, Stress, and Coping*, *24*(1), 3-26. https://doi.org/1.1080/10615806.201.517524

Pytlik, N., Soll, D., & Mehl, S. (2020). Thinking preferences and conspiracy belief: intuitive thinking and the jumping to conclusions-bias as a basis for the belief in conspiracy theories. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, *11*, 568942. https://doi.org/1.3389/fpsyt.202.568942

Quiring, O., Ziegele, M., Schemer, C., Jackob, N., Jakobs, I., & Schultz, T. (2021). Constructive skepticism, dysfunctional cynicism? Skepticism and cynicism differently determine generalized media trust. *International Journal of Communication*, *15*, 22. Available at: https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/16127

Ramasubramanian, S., & Yadlin-Segal, A. (2017). Stigma: Media influence on. In *The international encyclopedia of media effects*. Editors P. Rössler, C. A. Hoffner, and L. Zoonen. https://doi.org/1.1002/9781118783764.wbieme0159

Rhoder, C. (2002). Mindful reading: Strategy training that facilitates transfer. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, *45*(6), 498-512. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40014738

Robins, R. W., Hendin, H. M., & Trzesniewski, K. H. (2001). Measuring global self-esteem: Construct validation of a single-item measure and the Rosenberg self-esteem scale. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 27*(2), 151–161. https://doi.org/1.1177/0146167201272002

Roscigno, S. (2024). The status foundations of conspiracy beliefs. Socius, 1. https://doi.org/1.1177/23780231241237654

Rose, C. L. (2017). *The measurement and prediction of conspiracy beliefs.* [Doctoral dissertation, Victoria University of Wellington]. https://openaccess.wgtn.ac.nz/articles/thesis/The_measurement_and_prediction_of_conspiracy_beliefs/17060408

Rössler, P. (2017). The international encyclopedia of media effects. Wiley. https://www.wiley.com/en-us/The+International+Encyclopedia+of+Media+Effects%2C+4+Volume+Set-p-9781118784044

Salvador Casara, B. G., Suitner, C., & Jetten, J. (2022). The impact of economic inequality on conspiracy beliefs. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 98,* Article 104245. https://doi.org/1.1016/j.jesp.2021.104245

Sammut, G. (2023) Worldviews and the role of social values that underlie them. *PLoS ONE 18*(7), e0288451. https://doi.org/1.1371/journal.pone.0288451

Savage I. (1993). Demographic influences on risk perceptions. *Risk analysis: An official publication of the Society for Risk Analysis*, *13*(4), 413–42. https://doi.org/1.1111/j.1539-6924.1993.tb00741.x

Schuman-Olivier, Z., Trombka, M., Lovas, D. A., Brewer, J. A., Vago, D. R., Gawande, R., Dunne, J. P., Lazar, S. W., Loucks, E. B., & Fulwiler, C. (2020). Mindfulness and behavior change. *Harvard Review of Psychiatry*, *28*(6), 371–394. https://doi.org/1.1097/HRP.0000000000000277

Scrivner, C., & Stubbersfield, J. M. (2024). Curious about threats: Morbid curiosity and interest in conspiracy theories in US adults. *British Journal of Psychology*, *115*(1), 129–147. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12682

Shabahang, R., Brewer, M. B., Reyes, M. E. S., Pacquing, M. C. T., Buvár, Á., Aruguete, M. S., Orosz, G., & Zsila, Á. (2024a). How much do LGBTQ+ Filipinos perceive media as threatening? first steps in the development of the perceived media threat scale. *Sexuality & Culture.* https://doi.org/1.1007/s12119-024-10240-0

Shabahang, R., Zsila, Á., Aruguete, M. S., Huynh, H. P., & Orosz, G. (2024b). Embrace the moment using social media: A cross-cultural study of mindful use of social media. *Mindfulness, 15*(1), 157–173. https://doi.org/1.1007/s12671-023-02271-9

Siegel, D. J. (2009). Mindful awareness, mindsight, and neural integration. *The Humanistic Psychologist, 37*(2), 137–158. https://doi.org/1.1080/08873260902892220

Skivko, M., Korneeva, E., & Kolmykova, M. (2020). Digital minimalism as a leading limitation of media communications in the Heyday of digital culture. In Proceedings of the 6th international conference on social, economic, and academic leadership (ICSEAL-6-2019) (pp. 61–67). Prague: Atlantis Press. https://doi.org/1.2991/assehr.k.200526.010

Smallpage, S. M., Drochon, H., Uscinski, J. E., & Klofstad, C. (2020). Who are the conspiracy theorists?: Demographics and conspiracy theories. In *Routledge handbook of conspiracy theories* (pp. 263–277). Routledge. https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/1.4324/9780429452734-3_1/conspiracy-theorists-steven-smallpage-hugo-drochon-joseph-uscinski-casey-klofstad

Snierson, D., & Mercadante, J. (2024, July 10). *21 times The Simpsons predicted the future*. Entertainment. https://ew.com/simpsons-predictions-that-came-true-8662708

Stammler, F. M., & Ivanova, A. (2020). From spirits to conspiracy? Nomadic perceptions of climate change, pandemics and disease. *Anthropology Today, 36*(4), 8-12. https://doi.org/1.1111/1467-8322.12589

Stasielowicz, L. (2022). Who believes in conspiracy theories? A meta-analysis on personality correlates. *Journal of Research in Personality, 98*, 104229. https://doi.org/1.1016/j.jrp.2022.104229

Stasielowicz, L. (2024). The effectiveness of interventions addressing conspiracy beliefs: A meta-analysis. PsyArXiv. https://doi.org/1.31234/osf.io/6vs5u

Stecula, D. A., & Pickup, M. (2021). Social media, cognitive reflection, and conspiracy beliefs. *Frontiers in Political Science*, *3*, 647957. https://doi.org/1.3389/fpos.2021.647957

Stefana, A., Damiani, S., Granziol, U., Provenzani, U., Solmi, M., Youngstrom, E. A., & Fusar-Poli, P. (2025). Psychological, psychiatric, and behavioral sciences measurement scales: Best practice guidelines for their development and validation. *Frontiers in Psychology, 15*, 1494261. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1494261

Stempel, C., Hargrove, T., & Stempel, G. H. (2007). Media use, social structure, and belief in 9/11 conspiracy theories. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 84*(2), 353-372. https://doi.org/1.1177/107769900708400210

Stevens, M. W., Dorstyn, D., Delfabbro, P. H., & King, D. L. (2021). Global prevalence of gaming disorder: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, *55*(6), 553–568. https://doi.org/1.1177/0004867420962851

Stojanov, A., & Douglas, K. (2022). Conspiracy beliefs in Britain and North Macedonia: A comparative study. *International Journal of Psychology: Journal International de Psychologie*, *57*(2), 209–217. https://doi.org/1.1002/ijop.12801

Strömbäck, J., Broda, E., Bouchafra, S., Johansson, S., Rettenegger, G., & Lindgren, E. (2023). Conspiracy thinking and the role of media use: Exploring the antecedents of conspiratorial predispositions. *European Journal of Communication, 38*(3), 255-271. https://doi.org/1.1177/02673231221122951

Strömbäck, J., Broda, E., Tsfati, Y., Kossowska, M., & Vliegenthart, R. (2024). Disentangling the relationship between conspiracy mindset versus beliefs in specific conspiracy theories. *Zeitschrift für Psychologie, 232*(1), 18–25. https://doi.org/1.1027/2151-2604/a000546

Sullivan, G. M., & Feinn, R. (2012). Using effect size-or why the p value is not enough. *Journal of Graduate Medical Education*, *4*(3), 279–282. https://doi.org/1.4300/JGME-D-12-00156.1

Sutton, R. M., & Douglas, K. M. (2020). Conspiracy theories and the conspiracy mindset: Implications for political ideology. *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences, 34,* 118–122. https://doi.org/1.1016/j.cobeha.202.02.015

Sutton, R. M., & Douglas, K. M. (2022). Rabbit hole syndrome: Inadvertent, accelerating, and entrenched commitment to conspiracy beliefs. *Current Opinion in Psychology, 48,* Article 101462. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101462

Sutton, R. M., Douglas, K. M., & Trella, C. (2024). Conspiracy mentality versus belief in conspiracy theories: Response to Nera and some recommendations for researchers. *Zeitschrift für Psychologie, 232*(1), 50–54. https://doi.org/1.1027/2151-2604/a000549

Swami V. (2012). Social psychological origins of conspiracy theories: the case of the Jewish conspiracy theory in Malaysia. *Frontiers in Psychology, 3,* 28. https://doi.org/1.3389/fpsyg.2012.00280

Swami, V., Barron, D., Weis, L., & Furnham, A. (2018). To Brexit or not to Brexit: The roles of Islamophobia, conspiracist beliefs, and integrated threat in voting intentions for the United Kingdom European Union membership referendum. *British Journal of Psychology, 109*(1), 156–179. https://doi.org/1.1111/bjop.12252

Swami, V., Chamorro-Premuzic, T., & Furnham, A. (2010). Unanswered questions: A preliminary investigation of personality and individual difference predictors of 9/11 conspiracist beliefs. *Applied Cognitive Psychology, 24*(6), 749–761. https://doi.org/1.1002/acp.1583

Swami, V., Coles, R., Stieger, S., Pietschnig, J., Furnham, A., Rehim, S., & Voracek, M. (2011). Conspiracist ideation in Britain and Austria: evidence of a monological belief system and associations between individual psychological differences and real-world and fictitious conspiracy theories. *British Journal of Psychology*, *102*(3), 443–463. https://doi.org/1.1111/j.2044-8295.201.02004.x

Swami, V., Pietschnig, J., Tran, U. S., Nader, I. W., Stieger, S., & Voracek, M. (2013). Lunar lies: The impact of informational framing and individual differences in shaping conspiracist beliefs about the moon landings. *Applied Cognitive Psychology, 27*(1), 71–8. https://doi.org/1.1002/acp.2873

Swami, V., Tran, U. S., Stieger, S., Pietschnig, J., Nader, I. W., & Voracek, M. (2016). Who believes in the giant skeleton myth? an examination of individual difference correlates. *Sage Open, 6*(1). https://doi.org/1.1177/2158244015623592

Swami, V., Voracek, M., Stieger, S., Tran, U. S., & Furnham, A. (2014). Analytic thinking reduces belief in conspiracy theories. *Cognition, 133*(3), 572–585. https://doi.org/1.1016/j.cognition.2014.08.006

Tan, C. S., Cheng, S. M., Tan, S. A., Eisenbeck, N., Mohd Hashim, I. H., & Carreno, D. F. (2025). The predictive power of inner harmony on well-being: testing the mature happiness scale-revised and the peace of mind scale. *Psychological Reports*, 332941251330553. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/1.1177/00332941251330553

Tapper K. (2022). Mindful eating: What we know so far. *Nutrition Bulletin*, *47*(2), 168–185. https://doi.org/1.1111/nbu.12559

Teymoori, A., Jetten, J., Bastian, B., Ariyanto, A., Autin, F., Ayub, N., Badea, C., Besta, T., Butera, F., Costa-Lopes, R., Cui, L., Fantini, C., Finchilescu, G., Gaertner, L., Gollwitzer, M., Gómez, Á., González, R., Hong, Y. Y., Jensen, D. H., . . . Wohl, M. (2016). Revisiting the measurement of anomie. *PLoS ONE, 11*(7), Article e015837. https://doi.org/1.1371/journal.pone.0158370

Teličák, P., Halama, P., & Kohút, M. (2024). The relationship between dark tetrad and conspiracy beliefs. No consistent results across three different samples from Slovakia. *Current Psychology: A Journal for Diverse Perspectives on Diverse Psychological Issues, 43*(11), 10448–10457. https://doi.org/1.1007/s12144-023-05171-2

Teresi, J. A., Yu, X., Stewart, A. L., & Hays, R. D. (2022). Guidelines for designing and evaluating feasibility pilot studies. *Medical Care*, *60*(1), 95–103. https://doi.org/1.1097/MLR.0000000000001664

Thatcher, J. B., Wright, R. T., Sun, H., Zagenczyk, T. J., & Klein, R. (2018). Mindfulness in information technology use. *MIS quarterly*, *42*(3), 831-847. http://dx.doi.org/1.25300/MISQ/2018/11881

Thomas, E. F., Bird, L., O'Donnell, A., Osborne, D., Buonaiuto, E., Yip, L., ... & Skitka, L. (2024). Do conspiracy beliefs fuel support for reactionary social movements? Effects of misbeliefs on actions to oppose lockdown and to "stop the steal". *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 63(3), 1297-1317. https://doi.org/1.1111/bjso.12727

Tsang, S., Royse, C. F., & Terkawi, A. S. (2017). Guidelines for developing, translating, and validating a questionnaire in perioperative and pain medicine. *Saudi Journal of Anaesthesia*, *11*(Suppl 1), S80–S89. https://doi.org/1.4103/sja.SJA_203_17

Uscinski, J. E. (2018). The study of conspiracy theories. *Argumenta*, *3*(2), 233-245.

Uscinski, J., & Enders, A. (2023). What is a conspiracy theory and why does it matter? *Critical Review*, *35*(1-2), 148-169. https://doi.org/1.1080/08913811.2022.2115668

Uscinski, J., Enders, A., Diekman, A., Funchion, J., Klofstad, C., Kuebler, S., ... & Wuchty, S. (2022a). The psychological and political correlates of conspiracy theory beliefs. *Scientific Reports*, *12*(1), 21672. https://doi.org/1.1038/s41598-022-25617-0

Uscinski, J., Enders, A., Klofstad, C., Seelig, M., Drochon, H., Premaratne, K., & Murthi, M. (2022b). Have beliefs in conspiracy theories increased over time? *PloS One*, *17*(7), e0270429. https://doi.org/1.1371/journal.pone.0270429

Uscinski, J. E. & Parent, J. M. (2014). *American conspiracy theories.* Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/1.1093/acprof:oso/978019935180.001.0001

Valenzuela, S., Diehl, T., Lee, S., & Halpern, D. (2023). A panel study on the dynamics of social media use and conspiracy thinking. *Media Psychology*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/1.1080/15213269.2023.2295522

Van Bavel, J. J., Rathje, S., Harris, E., Robertson, C., & Sternisko, A. (2021). How social media shapes polarization. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, *25*(11), 913–916. https://doi.org/1.1016/j.tics.2021.07.013

van der Linden, S. (2015). The conspiracy-effect: Exposure to conspiracy theories (about global warming) decreases pro-social behavior and science acceptance. *Personality and Individual Differences, 87*, 171–173. https://doi.org/1.1016/j.paid.2015.07.045

van der Wal, R. C., Sutton, R. M., Lange, J., & Braga, J. P. N. (2018). Suspicious binds: Conspiracy thinking and tenuous perceptions of causal connections between co-occurring and spuriously correlated events. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *48*(7), 970–989. https://doi.org/1.1002/ejsp.2507

Van Doesum, N. J., Van Lange, D. A., & Van Lange, P. A. (2013). Social mindfulness: Skill and will to navigate the social world. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 105*(1), 86–103. https://doi.org/1.1037/a0032540

van Mulukom, V., Pummerer, L. J., Alper, S., Bai, H., Čavojová, V., Farias, J., Kay, C. S., Lazarevic, L. B., Lobato, E. J. C., Marinthe, G., Pavela Banai, I., Šrol, J., & Žeželj, I. (2022). Antecedents and consequences of COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs: A systematic review. *Social science & Medicine (1982), 301*, 114912. https://doi.org/1.1016/j.socscimed.2022.114912

van Prooijen J. V. (2022). Psychological benefits of believing conspiracy theories. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, *47*, 101352. https://doi.org/1.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101352

van Prooijen J. W. (2017). Why education predicts decreased belief in conspiracy theories. *Applied Cognitive Psychology, 31*(1), 50–58. https://doi.org/1.1002/acp.3301

van Prooijen, J.-W., & Douglas, K. M. (2017). Conspiracy theories as part of history: The role of societal crisis situations. *Memory Studies, 10*(3), 323–333. https://doi.org/1.1177/1750698017701615

van Prooijen, J. W., & Douglas, K. M. (2018). Belief in conspiracy theories: Basic principles of an emerging research domain. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 48*(7), 897–908. https://doi.org/1.1002/ejsp.2530

van Prooijen, J. W., Etienne, T. W., Kutiyski, Y., & Krouwel, A. P. M. (2023). Conspiracy beliefs prospectively predict health behavior and well-being during a pandemic. *Psychological Medicine*, *53*(6), 2514–2521. https://doi.org/1.1017/S0033291721004438

van Prooijen, J. W., & van Vugt, M. (2018). Conspiracy theories: evolved functions and psychological mechanisms. *Perspectives on Psychological Science: A Journal of the Association for Psychological Science*, *13*(6), 770–788. https://doi.org/1.1177/1745691618774270

Voci, D., Karmasin, M., Nölleke-Przybylski, P., Altmeppen, K. D., Möller, J., & von Rimscha, M. B. (2019). What is a media company today? Rethinking theoretical and empirical definitions. *SCM Studies in Communication and Media*, *8*(1), 29-52. http://dx.doi.org/10.5771/2192-4007-2019-1-29

Vorderer, P., Krömer, N., & Schneider, F. M. (2016). Permanently online—Permanently connected: Explorations into university students' use of social media and mobile smart devices. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *63*, 694–703. https://doi.org/1.1016/j.chb.2016.05.085

Wang, J., & Kim, S. (2021). The paradox of conspiracy theory: the positive impact of beliefs in conspiracy theories on preventive actions and vaccination intentions during the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *18*(22), 11825. https://doi.org/1.3390/ijerph182211825

Whiting, A., & Williams, D. (2013). Why people use social media: A uses and gratifications approach. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, *16*(4), 362–369. https://doi.org/1.1108/QMR-06-2013-0041

Wickham H (2016). *ggplot2: Elegant Graphics for Data Analysis*. Springer-Verlag New York. ISBN 978-3-319-24277-4, https://ggplot2.tidyverse.org.

Williams, M. N., Marques, M. D., Hill, S. R., Kerr, J. R., & Ling, M. (2022). Why are beliefs in different conspiracy theories positively correlated across individuals? Testing monological network versus unidimensional factor model explanations. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *61*(3), 1011–1031. https://doi.org/1.1111/bjso.12518

Williams, M. N., Marques, M. D., Kerr, J. R., Hill, S. R., Ling, M., & Clarke, E. J. R. (2025). Does developing a belief in one conspiracy theory lead a person to be more likely to believe in others? *European Journal of Social Psychology*. https://doi.org/1.1002/ejsp.3153

Wilson-Daily, A. E., Kemmelmeier, M., & Prats, J. (2018). Intergroup contact versus conflict in Catalan high schools: A multilevel analysis of adolescent attitudes toward immigration and diversity. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *64*, 12–28. https://doi.org/1.1016/j.ijintrel.2018.03.002

Wood M. J. (2017). Conspiracy suspicions as a proxy for beliefs in conspiracy theories: Implications for theory and measurement. *British Journal of Psychology*, *108*(3), 507–527. https://doi.org/1.1111/bjop.12231

Wood, M. J., Douglas, K. M., & Sutton, R. M. (2012). Dead and alive: Beliefs in contradictory conspiracy theories. *Social Psychological and Personality Science, 3*(6), 767-773. https://doi.org/1.1177/1948550611434786

Yablokov, I. (2020). Conspiracy theories in Putin's Russia: The case of the 'New World Order'. In *Routledge handbook of conspiracy theories*. Routledge. https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/1.4324/9780429452734-5_5/conspiracy-theories-putin-russia-ilya-yablokov

Yamamoto, M., & Kushin, M. J. (2014). More harm than good? Online media use and political disaffection among college students in the 2008 election. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 19*(3), 430-445. https://doi.org/1.1111/jcc4.12046

Zaleski, Z., Sobol-Kwapinska, M., Przepiorka, A., & Meisner, M. (2019). Development and validation of the Dark Future Scale. *Time & Society, 28*(1), 107–123. https://doi.org/1.1177/0961463X16678257

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

Appendix 1. Examples of Internet Posts, News Articles, and Forum Discussions Covering Media Conspiracy Theories

Arora, R. (2023, December 5). *The federal government paid media outlets to promote the covid vaccine.* Infowars. Retrieved from https://www.infowars.com/posts/the-federal-government-paid-media-outlets-to-promote-the-covid-vaccine/

Avdeeff, M. (2024, February 9). *Taylor Swift-NFL conspiracy theories are the result of two sets of hardcore fans colliding.* The Conversation. Retrieved from https://theconversation.com/taylor-swift-nfl-conspiracy-theories-are-the-result-of-two-sets-of-hardcore-fans-colliding-223020

Booker, I. (2017, September 9). *Polybius: Government-run arcade game and psychological experiment or complete hoax?* Kotaku Australia. Retrieved from https://www.kotaku.com.au/2017/09/polybius-government-run-arcade-game-and-psychological-experiment-or-complete-fiction/

Chilton, C. (2022, October 26). *30 crazy conspiracy theories that people actually believe.* Popular Mechanics. Retrieved from https://www.popularmechanics.com/culture/g35766929/cra. zy-conspiracy-theories/

Christianitygaming. (2019). *Awareness: Satanic themes in video games, as well as esoteric/masonic/occult symbolism* [Online forum post]. Reddit. https://www.reddit.com/r/christianitygaming/comments/9phjop/awareness_satanic_themes_in_video_games_as_well/

Clique34. (2022, October 28). *The media controls what "matters" to us* [Online forum post]. Reddit. https://www.reddit.com/r/nosurf/comments/qjosvf/the_media_controls_what_matters_to_us/

Collins, F. (2023, March 28). *Wildest Lady Gaga theories - Madonna's child, DNA mystery and Satanic cult claims.* Daily Star. Retrieved from https://www.dailystar.co.uk/showbiz/us-showbiz/wildest-lady-gaga-theories-madonnas-29535496

Crawford, A. J. (2023, January 3). *Column: A decade after Sandy Hook, conspiracy theories still plague the culture.* Michigan Advance. https://michiganadvance.com/2023/01/03/a-decade-after-sandy-hook-conspiracy-theories-still-plague-the-culture-opinion/

Davison, T. (2021, April 22). *Britney Spears conspiracy claims she was paid by White House to distract from George Bush.* Mirror. Retrieved from https://www.mirror.co.uk/3am/celebrity-news/britney-spears-conspiracy-claims-paid-23961991

Di Placido, D. (2020, July 6). *The bizarre Beyoncé conspiracy theory, explained.* Forbes. Retrieved from https://www.forbes.com/sites/danidiplacido/2020/07/06/the-bizarre-beyonc-conspiracy-theory-explained/?sh=5a36c16234c4

Donegan, M. (2020, September 20). *QAnon conspiracists believe in a vast pedophile ring. The truth is sadder.* The Guardian. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/sep/20/qanon-conspiracy-child-abuse-truth-trump

Egan, J. (2022, February 12). 10 video game conspiracy theories you'll start to believe. What Culture. Retrieved from https://whatculture.com/gaming/10-video-game-conspiracy-theories-youll-start-to-believe-2

Fitzpatrick, S. (2013, June 6). The conspiracy of pornography exposed. criss magazine. Retrieved from https://crisismagazine.com/opinion/the-conspiracy-of-pornography-exposed

Gold, S. (2023, December 20). *Biden and the media are gaslighting us about inflation.* Infowars. Retrieved from https://www.infowars.com/posts/biden-and-the-media-are-gaslighting-us-about-inflation/

Gubitosi, B. (2019, February 2021). *Frozen' at the center of bizarre new Disney conspiracy.* New York Post. Retrieved from https://nypost.com/2019/02/20/frozen-at-the-center-of-bizarre-new-disney-conspiracy/

Hedge, Z. (2023, December 6). *South Carolina treasurer removes Disney from portfolio due to "far-left activism".* Infowars. Retrieved from https://www.infowars.com/posts/south-carolina-treasurer-removes-disney-from-portfolio-due-to-far-left-activism/

Huffman, R. M. (2021, November 22). *Disney stars defending convicted pedophiles is not a good look.* Infowars. Retrieved from https://www.infowars.com/posts/disney-stars-defending-convicted-pedophiles-is-not-a-good-look/

Infowars. (2022, April 13). *Disney releases 'gayest movie yet' amid groomer controversy.* Infowars. Retrieved from https://www.infowars.com/posts/disney-releases-gayest-movie-yet-amid-groomer-controversy/

Infowars. (2022, April 30). *Disney's darkest secrets.* Infowars. Retrieved from https://www.infowars.com/posts/disneys-darkest-secrets/

Infowars. (2023, August 27). *Disney jumps the shark: company hires bearded drag queens to run park attractions.* Infowars. Retrieved from https://www.infowars.com/posts/disney-jumps-the-shark-company-hires-bearded-drag-queens-to-run-park-attractions/

Kiley, R. (2020, March 22). *People think Madonna predicted coronavirus with 2019 performance.* Daily Dot. Retrieved from https://www.dailydot.com/unclick/madonna-eurovision-coronavirus-prediction/

Lealos, S. S., & Dutta, D. (2023, November 5). *Wizard of Oz's secret dead munchkin myth explained.* screen rant. Retrieved from https://screenrant.com/wizard-oz-movie-dead-munchkin-myth-explained/

Leigh, K. (2023, February 20). Controlled media deceives about disasters. Infowars. Retrieved from https://www.infowars.com/posts/controlled-media-deceives-about-disasters/

Mahadevia, P. (2019, December 28). Mark Zuckerberg is an alien, and other wild conspiracy theories from 2019. Hindustan Times. Retrieved from https://www.hindustantimes.com/more-lifestyle/mark-zuckerberg-is-an-alien-and-other-wild-conspiracy-theories-from-2019/story-3QTQP9EWfJLMvf4lmUPkpJ.html

McClendon, L. (2016, July 6). *Stanley Kubrick's daughter addresses moon landing conspiracy theory.* Variety. https://variety.com/2016/film/news/stanley-kubrick-moon-landing-conspiracy-theory-addressed-daughter-vivian-1201809270/

Menahan, C. (2023, September 5). *'Secret suspensions and shadowbans': Elon Musk blows the lid off the adl's behind-the-scenes censorship of social media.* Infowars. Retrieved from https://www.infowars.com/posts/secret-suspensions-and-shadowbans-elon-musk-blows-the-lid-off-the-adls-behind-the-scenes-censorship-of-social-media/

Mercola, J. (2023, November, 21). *Report: Media ruled by robust psyop alliance.* Infowars. Retrieved from https://www.infowars.com/posts/report-media-ruled-by-robust-psyop-alliance/

Murray, C. (2023, July 15). *The adrenochrome conspiracy theory—pushed by 'sound of freedom' star—explained.* Forbes. Retrieved from https://www.forbes.com/sites/conormurray/2023/07/15/the-adrenochrome-conspiracy-theory-pushed-by-sound-of-freedom-star-explained/?sh=6735946e5179

Quinn, J. (2019, April 6). *The bizarre reason why some think prince Charles is a vampire.* Royals. Retrieved from https://www.cheatsheet.com/entertainment/royal-family-conspiracy-theories-prince-charles-vampire.html/

Reclaim the Net. (2023, April 15). *Biden administration considers increasing social media surveillance after Pentagon leaks.* Infowars. Retrieved from https://www.infowars.com/posts/biden-administration-considers-increasing-social-media-surveillance-after-pentagon-leaks/

Reuters Fact Check. (2021, August 16). *The Simpsons episodes are not evidence of 'predictive programing'.* Reuters. Retrieved from https://www.reuters.com/article/factcheck-simpsons-compilation-idUSL1N2PN1VW/

Sinclair, C. (May 14, 2015). *Facebook conspiracy theorists - halal, mind control and the New World Order.* NT News. Retrieved from https://www.ntnews.com.au/news/opinion/facebook-conspiracy-theorists-halal-mind-control-and-the-new-world-order/news-story/bede5a90a8a768fc5f125f876ee9b60b

Stack, L. (216, November 14). *Globalism: A far-right conspiracy theory buoyed by Trump.* The New York Times. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/15/us/politics/globalism-right-trump.html

Stutz, C. (2016, February 26). *Conspiracy theorists claim Katy Perry is actually JonBenet Ramsey, even though she's obviously not.* Billboard. Retrieved from https://www.billboard.com/music/pop/katy-perry-actually-jonbenet-ramsey-conspiracy-theorists-videos-6890483/

Turney, A. (2020, August 3). *Pokémon: What is lavender town syndrome (& is it real?).* Screen Rant. Retrieved from https://screenrant.com/pokemon-rumor-lavender-town-syndrome-fake-suicide-music/

Wang, E. (2018, February 7). *Conspiracy theory about Adele and Sam smith takes internet by storm.* TeenVOGUE. Retrieved from https://www.teenvogue.com/story/conspiracy-theory-adele-sam-smith

War Room. (2023, December 13). *Why does liberal media downplay the scourge of child porn and predators?* Infowars. Retrieved from https://www.infowars.com/posts/why-does-liberal-media-downplay-the-scourge-of-child-porn-and-predators/

Watson, P. J. (2021, January 28). '*They control your brain': Pamela Anderson quits social media.* Infowars. Retrieved from https://www.infowars.com/posts/they-control-your-brain-pamela-anderson-quits-social-media/

Watson, P. J. (2023, August 18). *Keep your kids away from Disney.* Infowars. Retrieved from https://www.infowars.com/posts/keep-your-kids-away-from-disney/

Watson, S. (2023, August 31). *Tucker Carlson: Media didn't care when Obama was having gay sex and smoking crack.* Infowars. Retrieved from https://www.infowars.com/posts/tucker-carlson-media-didnt-care-when-obama-was-having-gay-sex-and-smoking-crack/

Watson, S. (2023, July 12). *Disney-produced cartoon features illuminati-style robed elites drinking blood, sacrificing people and worshipping an all seeing eye.* Infowars. Retrieved from https://www.infowars.com/posts/disney-produced-cartoon-features-illuminati-style-robed-elites-drinking-blood-sacrificing-people-and-worshipping-an-all-seeing-eye/

Watson, S. (2023, July 19). *Video: Trump says media is lying about scale of death in Ukraine.* Infowars. Retrieved from https://www.infowars.com/posts/video-trump-says-media-is-lying-about-scale-of-death-in-ukraine/

Watters, H. (2017, May 16). *So complicated: Why the relentless Avril Lavigne clone conspiracy persists.* CBC. Retrieved from https://www.cbc.ca/news/entertainment/avril-lavigne-hoax-persists-1.4118140

White, J. (2023, June 4). *Bombshell! Secret UK gov't unit worked with social media to shut down covid lockdown critics.* Infowars. https://www.infowars.com/posts/bombshell-secret-uk-govt-unit-worked-with-social-media-to-shut-down-covid-lockdown-critics/

Table S1. Measurement Invariance of the Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories across the Australian, Iranian, and Filipino Samples

Model	χ^2	Df	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	SRMR	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf	p-value
Configural	313.12	42	.032	.932	.897	.042	-	-	>.05
Metric	33.05	54	.082	.930	.919	.050	16.94	12	.152
Scalar	406.52	66	.115	.914	.918	.057	76.47	12	<.001
Strict	508.15	80	.124	.892	.915	.060	101.63	14	<.001

Note. Configural invariance was partially supported, as indicated by generally acceptable fit indices—with the exception of the TLI. All items loaded significantly ($p < .001$) onto the latent factor across the samples. However, full measurement invariance was not established.

Table S2. Descriptive Statistics of the Variables (means and standard deviations)

	Australian Sample Mean (SD)	Iranian Sample Mean (SD)	United States Sample Mean (SD)	Filipino Sample Mean (SD)	Hungarian Sample Mean (SD)

Peace of mind	4.983 (1.487)	2.767 (1.037)	4.695 (1.474)	4.536 (1.436)	2.746 (1.017)
Life satisfaction	6.345 (2.130)	5.789 (2.505)	6.237 (1.914)	6.237 (2.148)	6.640 (2.240)
Future anxiety	21.162 (6.848)	16.388 (7.716)	21.037 (7.387)	24.570 (6.288)	17.006 (6.945)
Interpersonal trust	4.162 (1.613)	2.620 (1.822)	3.033 (1.548)	2.668 (1.366)	1.843 (1.396)
Trust in Representative Government	12.463 (4.529)	7.810 (4.804)	9.394 (4.317)	7.709 (3.604)	6.953 (3.571)
Trust in Governing Bodies	17.304 (5.371)	10.662 (6.598)	13.226 (5.535)	10.020 (4.583)	11.656 (5.300)
Trust in Security Forces	8.886 (2.903)	6.312 (3.642)	7.810 (3.244)	5.561 (2.847)	7.262 (3.037)
Breakdown in Social Fabric	26.853 (5.660)	29.042 (5.717)	26.260 (5.224)	27.474 (5.251)	26.684 (6.235)
Breakdown of Leadership	27.337 (5.439)	21.725 (5.288)	25.379 (5.151)	23.695 (5.087)	33.421 (6.952)
Xenophobia	23.142 (3.914)	21.198 (3.752)	21.899 (3.117)	22.108 (3.419)	17.250 (5.299)
Anarchist tendency	5.650 (2.951)	4.227 (2.951)	4.040 (3.020)	5.669 (2.774)	4.431 (3.152)
Activist inclination	5.369 (2.907)	4.426 (2.937)	4.587 (2.985)	5.444 (2.771)	3.662 (2.875)
Localised Worldview	3.674 (.832)	3.763 (1.117)	3.951 (.914)	4.167 (.865)	3.734 (.980)
Pragmatist Worldview	3.422 (.894)	3.464 (1.039)	3.408 (1.097)	3.589 (1.021)	3.209 (1.009)

Orthodox Worldview	3.422 (.998)	3.012 (1.155)	3.330 (1.224)	3.644 (1.022)	3.175 (1.062)
Reward Worldview	3.475 (.992)	3.544 (1.140)	3.193 (1.292)	3.701 (1.123)	2.818 (1.055)
Survivor Worldview	3.439 (.948)	2.730 (1.151)	2.721 (1.224)	3.270 (1.220)	2.346 (1.086)
Dangerous and Threatening Social Worldview	4.703 (1.326)	4.569 (1.641)	4.650 (1.519)	5.322 (1.237)	4.171 (1.768)
Competitive Jungle Social Worldview	4.695 (1.303)	4.295 (1.817)	4.379 (1.615)	5.222 (1.396)	4.512 (1.766)

Table S3. Measurement Invariance of the Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories across the Australian, Iranian, Filipino, United States, and Hungarian Samples

Model	**χ^2**	**Df**	**RMSEA**	**CFI**	**TLI**	**SRMR**	**$\Delta\chi^2$**	**Δdf**	**p-value**
Configural	652.05	70	.069	.920	.880	.042	-	-	>.05
Metric	717.77	94	.136	.914	.904	.060	65.72	24	<.001
Scalar	848.50	118	.131	.899	.910	.070	13.73	24	<.001
Strict	1131.0	146	.137	.864	.902	.076	282.45	28	<.001

Note. Configural invariance was partially supported, as indicated by generally acceptable fit indices—with the exception of the TLI. All items loaded significantly ($p < .001$) onto the latent factor across the samples. However, full measurement invariance was not established.

Table S4. Descriptive Statistics of the Variables (means and standard deviations)

	Australian Sample Mean (SD)	Iranian Sample Mean (SD)	Filipino Sample Mean (SD)
Neuroticism	4.174 (1.662)	4.198 (1.738)	4.251 (1.682)
Extraversion	3.906 (1.710)	4.565 (1.848)	4.278 (1.463)

Conscientiousness	4.874 (1.404)	5.624 (1.380)	5.150 (1.225)
Agreeableness	4.105 (1.686)	3.903 (1.839)	4.713 (1.619)
Openness to experience	4.910 (1.312)	5.122 (1.489)	5.979 (1.133)
Machiavellianism	16.650 (8.675)	9.312 (5.899)	15.101 (7.648)
Psychopathy	16.341 (8.665)	13.253 (6.208)	10.930 (6.630)
Narcissism	17.605 (8.736)	23.025 (8.386)	17.059 (8.033)
Self-esteem	4.402 (1.555)	4.443 (1.581)	3.989 (1.572)
Rationality	12.707 (2.639)	11.472 (2.436)	12.122 (2.208)
Experientiality-Imagination	10.544 (2.355)	11.594 (2.624)	11.925 (2.313)
Experientiality-Intuition	3.459 (1.004)	2.793 (1.063)	3.284 (1.039)
Experientiality-Emotionality	3.500 (.959)	3.763 (1.059)	3.733 (1.083)
Time Spent on Traditional Media	3.101 (1.812)	3.160 (2.275)	2.543 (1.882)
Time Spent on New Media	3.451 (1.794)	4.983 (2.082)	6.076 (1.935)
Mindful Use of Social Media	25.008 (8.053)	27.776 (8.206)	24.043 (7.837)

Appendix 2. Recruitment Advertisement

A Brief Educational Intervention Promoting Mindful Use of Social Media: Are you interested in improving your social media habits? Do you want to learn how to get the most out of your social media use? This scientific study aims to enhance users' awareness during social media engagement. Over three weeks, with three sessions per week (a total of nine sessions), you will be introduced to the principles of positive and optimal social media use and learn how to become a more mindful and positive user. You will be asked to answer some questions about your attitude toward the media and sociopolitical events around you both before and after the program.

Appendix 3. Details of the Online Group-Based Educational Intervention Promoting Mindful Use of Social Media

Session 1	Explaining the foundational principles of mindfulness, this session focused on providing an understanding of what mindfulness entails and how it can be defined. Participants were introduced to mindfulness as a state that prioritizes direct, first-person experience over mere

	knowledge about the experience. They learned that mindfulness involves an enhanced, intentional focus on and awareness of the present moment, allowing them to connect deeply with current reality. The session further elaborated on the comprehensive benefits of mindfulness, encompassing positive influences on physical health, cognitive functioning, emotional regulation, and behavioral responses. Participants were informed how mindfulness has the potential to lead to improvements in areas such as stress reduction, emotional stability, enhanced focus, and greater resilience. Through this understanding, they were encouraged to see mindfulness as a tool not only for mental clarity but also for fostering overall well-being and a balanced, engaged approach to daily life.
Session 2	This session introduced participants to the concepts of mindful use and mindful consumption, focusing on how mindfulness has the potential to enhance various daily behaviors, including technology engagement. Participants learned that mindfulness is not limited to traditional activities like eating, driving, or exercising but can also extend to their interactions with technology. They were informed that mindfulness in activities such as eating or driving has the potential to lead to positive outcomes—like reduced disordered eating, improved driving quality, and a more enjoyable exercise experience. The session then explored how such mindful approach can be applied to digital spaces, particularly within new media environments such as social media. Participants were introduced to recent scientific findings on positive new media engagement, including practices like mindful social media use, mindful messaging, and cultivating an independent mindset toward social media. These studies were discussed in clear, accessible language, with an emphasis on the potential benefits of mindfulness in technology use, such as reduced risk of addiction, improved focus, and enhanced well-being. Through these insights, participants were helped to gain an understanding of how mindfulness has the potential to transform their interactions with technology, potentially helping them maintain control and balance in their digital lives.
Session 3	Building upon the previous sessions, this session narrowed the focus specifically to social media and social media use. Participants were introduced to various needs that social media may fulfill, including social interaction, information seeking, entertainment, relaxation,

	communication, self-expression, information sharing, and keeping up with others. They were encouraged to reflect on their own motivations, considering both their general reasons for using social media and their most recent engagement before the session. Participants were asked to consider: Are they truly aware of their underlying reasons for using social media? Participants were introduced to the concept of mindful social media use, with an explanation of what it genuinely entails. They taught that mindful social media use involves a deliberate, conscious approach that reduces automatic behaviors and impulsive reactions. Through guidance, they practiced to increase awareness of their engagement, becoming more intentional in their online interactions and beginning to recognize patterns in their social media habits. This reflective approach was applied to help foster a greater sense of control, allowing participants to use social media in a way that aligns with their genuine needs rather than falling into habitual, unconsidered use.
Session 4	This session focused on teaching participants the distinction between mindful awareness and impulsive behavior in social media use. The concept of proactive, intentional engagement was emphasized over reactive, unplanned usage, encouraging participants to structure their social media interactions with clear intentions. Participants were asked to think about their motivations before entering social media—what specific reasons or needs do they hope to fulfill? Once they begin using social media, they were prompted to observe their thoughts, emotions, and the needs they experience during their interaction. After a set time, participants were asked to stop and reflect: Did the interaction fulfill the needs they intended to address? Did their emotions or thoughts shift, and if so, did they improve or worsen? This exercise aimed to build familiarity with self-assessment and increase comfort with using self-awareness as a tool during social media engagement. Through these structured check-ins, participants were taught to gradually develop the habit of evaluating their digital experiences, empowering them to make mindful, intentional choices in their social media use rather than succumbing to automatic or impulsive behaviours.
Sessions 5–8	These sessions focused on understanding the problematic aspects of social media use, specifically excessive and addictive behaviors. Participants were introduced to underlying

	states—such as the fear of missing out and a dependency mindset—that make them more prone to mindless, automatic engagement with social media. They learned how these states has the potential to lead to habitual, unreflective scrolling and a feeling of being controlled by social media. To cultivate a healthier relationship with social media, participants were guided to enhance mindful, intentional engagement. They learned to foster flow in their usage, emphasizing balance and awareness over impulsivity. Through individual and group reflections, they explored questions like why they are drawn to social media at a given moment, what emotions or thoughts arise during use, and whether their needs are meaningfully fulfilled by the interaction. The sessions also encouraged participants to increase focus, attentiveness, and self-control during social media engagement. Participants practiced setting intentions before use, using mindful check-ins to track changes in their emotions and satisfaction levels, and recognizing when to step away if their needs are not being met. These exercises were designed to help participants gain greater control over their social media habits, encouraging them to use social media in ways that support their well-being and align with their authentic goals.
Session 9	In this final session, participants were encouraged to explore alternative ways to fulfill needs commonly met through social media, such as connecting with friends and family, engaging in hobbies, physical exercise, or other non-digital activities. Through guided discussions, they reflected on how these offline activities has the potential to provide meaningful experiences and help reduce dependency on social media for need satisfaction. Participants were then guided and encouraged to practice self-reflection techniques before, during, and after using social media. The session concluded with a brief recap of the key concepts covered throughout the program. Participants received a pamphlet summarizing the highlights of each session to serves as a reference to support their continued mindful social media use beyond the program.

Table S5. Correlations between Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories Scale and Single-Item Conspiracy Belief Scale at Pre-test and Post-test across Experimental and Waitlist Control Groups

		Single-Item Conspiracy Belief Scale – Pre-test	Single-Item Conspiracy Belief Scale – Post-test
Experimental Group	Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories Scale – Pre-test	.524	.547
	Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories Scale – Post-test	.586	.588
Waitlist Control Group	Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories Scale – Pre-test	.633	.643
	Belief in Media Conspiracy Theories Scale – Post-test	.641	.650
Note. All correlations significant at $p < .001$.			