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ON SOME PROCESSES AFFECTING BELIEF IN CONSPIRACY THEORIES*

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Abstract. This study examines some of the processes influencing belief in conspiracy theories. They have gained considerable popularity among the public in recent years. They react more and more often to several socially significant events taking place around us while coming up with an alternative explanation, especially for events connected to popular personalities from the world of show business, politics, sports, etc., or concern a more significant number of people. Due to the rapidly progressing internalization, informatization, and digitalization of human society, as well as the dynamic development of information and communication technologies, systems, and means, conspiracy theories penetrate the field of mass media, especially new media. Today, social networks are the medium with the most incredible spread of conspiracy theories. It is one of the primary reasons why conspiracy theories have become the subject of our scientific interest. With the use of relevant methods of qualitative theoretical scientific research, in this work, we present our research findings and an insight into some processes affecting belief in conspiracy theories to readers from the professional and lay public.

Keywords: human society; people; events; conspiracy theories; processes; social issues

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, conspiracy theories have increasingly drawn attention as a significant sociocultural phenomenon affecting public perceptions, political attitudes, and social behaviour (Douglas et al., 2019; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018). Defined broadly as explanatory beliefs attributing events or circumstances to secret plots by powerful entities (Keeley, 1999), conspiracy theories thrive in environments of uncertainty, distrust, and rapid information dissemination (Uscinski et al., 2020). Although conspiracy theories have existed historically (Pigden, 1995), the proliferation of digital media platforms and social networks has significantly amplified their

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reach and influence (Wood & Douglas, 2013; Roberts & Risen, 2022; Shields, 2022; Cassam, 2023; Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2023; Strömbäck et al., 2024; Prims, 2024; Littrell et al., 2025; Salvati, 2025).

The rise of conspiracy theories is particularly notable following pivotal or traumatic events, such as terrorist attacks, pandemics, political upheavals, or sudden social crises (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018). Notably, incidents such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Uscinski et al., 2020), the conflict in Ukraine, or major electoral processes have recently illustrated how rapidly conspiracy narratives can emerge and gain traction among the general population. Such theories offer simplified explanations for complex events, providing individuals with psychological comfort by reducing uncertainty and attributing clear causes to distressing phenomena (Marchlewska et al., 2017).

Research into conspiracy theories has identified several psychological, social, and cognitive factors contributing to their acceptance and proliferation. Psychological predispositions, including cognitive biases, intuitive rather than analytical reasoning (Swami et al., 2014), and a heightened need for cognitive closure (Leman & Cinnirella, 2013), significantly influence the susceptibility of individuals to conspiracy beliefs. Moreover, the interplay between media consumption patterns, political polarization, and motivated reasoning further complicates the dynamics surrounding belief formation in conspiracy theories (Miller et al., 2016; Saunders, 2017).

Despite the growing body of international literature examining the causes and consequences of conspiracy beliefs, research addressing this issue from specific regional or cultural contexts remains relatively sparse (Douglas et al., 2019). This gap in the literature highlights the need for continued investigation, particularly concerning how societal and cultural variables shape conspiracy thinking across diverse contexts. Therefore, the present study aims to provide an in-depth analysis of selected processes influencing belief in conspiracy theories, contributing to the broader discourse by examining factors relevant to both theoretical and practical implications in contemporary society.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Defining Conspiracy Theories and Related Concepts

Conspiracy theories are typically described as alternative explanations for significant events involving powerful actors or institutions operating in secrecy to achieve hidden goals (Keeley, 1999; Douglas et al., 2019). These theories challenge conventional narratives and often emerge in contexts of uncertainty, fear, and declining institutional trust. While such narratives have long existed – dating back to the Middle Ages – they have evolved dramatically in their content, spread, and sociopolitical function, especially with the advent of mass media and digital communication.

Unlike verified conspiracies, which involve clandestine actions that are later supported by empirical evidence (e.g., the Watergate scandal), conspiracy theories are usually speculative and rely on perceived inconsistencies, gaps in knowledge, or distrust in authority (Clarke, 2002; Barberio, 2020). This distinction is essential: while conspiracies are factual and provable, conspiracy theories often remain in the realm of suspicion and hypothesizing without clear substantiation.

Notably, the academic discussion of conspiracy theories has yielded multiple definitions emphasizing different dimensions of the phenomenon. Keeley (1999) frames conspiracy theories as explanations centred on the actions of groups operating in secret. Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) argue that such narratives often involve influential individuals who act to obscure their involvement in shaping events. A broader sociopolitical definition provided by Douglas et al. (2019) interprets conspiracy theories as efforts to attribute significant political or social outcomes to intentional manipulation by elite actors.

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Another critical conceptual distinction lies in the differentiation between "conspiracy belief," which denotes a person's acceptance of a specific theory, and "conspiracy mentality," which reflects a general disposition to interpret events through a conspiratorial lens. Imhoff and Bruder (2014) and Sutton and Douglas (2020) argue that conspiracy mentality can be considered a stable individual trait that predicts susceptibility across multiple, even contradictory, conspiracy beliefs.

Contemporary research also highlights the role of contextual triggers – such as sociopolitical crises, health emergencies, or natural disasters – as catalysts for the emergence and popularization of conspiracy theories. The COVID-19 pandemic is a contemporary case study of how global uncertainty can create fertile ground for misinformation and conspiracy narratives (Uscinski et al., 2020). From claims about the virus being manufactured in laboratories to suggestions of global elite manipulation, conspiracy theories surrounding COVID-19 reflect broader social anxieties and a need to assign agency to chaotic events.

Digital media environments further compound the problem. The Internet and social media provide unprecedented tools for rapidly disseminating and normalizing conspiratorial content, allowing these narratives to reach global audiences and foster online communities that reinforce shared beliefs (Wood & Douglas, 2013). These dynamics underscore the importance of distinguishing legitimate scepticism from conspiratorial thinking, which can erode social cohesion and public trust in science and institutions.

Ultimately, the definitional framework for understanding conspiracy theories must remain flexible to account for the fluid nature of such narratives across historical, cultural, and political settings. While unified definitions may be elusive, scholars widely agree that conspiracy theories function as explanatory frameworks that are compelling under conditions of low trust, ambiguous evidence, and high emotional arousal.

2.2 Conspiracy Beliefs and Psychological Determinants

Psychological research has consistently demonstrated that belief in conspiracy theories is associated with a variety of cognitive and motivational factors. At the core is "conspiracy thinking"—a tendency to attribute the causes of events to secret plots and hidden agendas, often by powerful actors (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). Individuals high in conspiracy thinking are more likely to interpret ambiguous information as evidence of malevolent intent, particularly when personal or collective uncertainty is heightened and traditional explanatory frameworks seem insufficient.

One major psychological factor is the need for cognitive closure, defined as the desire for definite answers and an aversion to ambiguity (Leman & Cinnirella, 2013). Individuals with a high need for closure are more likely to gravitate toward simplified, emotionally appealing narratives that provide resolution – even at the cost of accuracy. Conspiracy theories fulfil this role by offering coherent explanations for distressing or complex events, thereby reducing psychological discomfort and uncertainty (Marchlewska et al., 2017), especially when official sources fail to provide satisfactory or timely information.

In parallel, cognitive style – particularly the balance between intuitive and analytical thinking – plays a significant role. Studies have found that individuals who rely more on intuitive thinking (fast, automatic, emotion-driven) are more prone to endorsing conspiratorial explanations, whereas those with stronger analytical reasoning abilities are more likely to reject unsupported claims (Swami et al., 2014; Pytlik et al., 2020). This suggests that strengthening analytical reasoning and critical thinking skills may reduce vulnerability to conspiracy beliefs and foster more evidence-based evaluation of complex social phenomena.

Another robust psychological mechanism involved in conspiracy belief is motivated reasoning, which refers to the selective processing of information to support existing attitudes and worldviews. In politically charged environments, people may adopt conspiracy theories that align with their ideological preferences while dismissing contradictory evidence (Hartman & Newmark, 2012; Enders & Smallpage, 2018). Motivated reasoning thus reinforces polarization and reduces openness to corrective information.

Moreover, feelings of powerlessness, alienation, and perceived loss of control have been strongly linked to conspiracy beliefs. When individuals feel marginalized or excluded from decision-making processes, they are more likely to believe that unseen forces exert control behind the scenes (van Prooijen, 2017). In such cases, conspiracy theories can provide explanations and a sense of agency or empowerment by identifying a perceived enemy responsible for one's misfortune.

Finally, emotional factors such as fear, anxiety, and anger also influence conspiracy belief formation. Emotional arousal can impair critical evaluation and increase susceptibility to simplistic explanations. This makes conspiracy theories particularly compelling during periods of social upheaval or collective trauma. Effective interventions must, therefore, consider the emotional and psychological needs that conspiracy theories fulfil, not merely their informational inaccuracies.

Understanding these psychological determinants is crucial for developing effective countermeasures—whether through education, communication, or policy—that aim to reduce belief in harmful conspiracy theories without alienating individuals who hold them.

2.3 Social and Cultural Factors in Conspiracy Beliefs

Social and cultural factors also play crucial roles in the proliferation and acceptance of conspiracy theories. Political polarization is a notable social factor amplifying conspiracy theory dissemination, as individuals adopt narratives aligning with ideological or partisan affiliations (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018). Conspiracy theories involving electoral fraud, political scandals, or significant societal events often reflect ideological divisions, intensifying societal fragmentation and distrust toward democratic institutions.

Cultural contexts influence susceptibility to conspiracy theories. Communities marked by social alienation, mistrust toward authorities, or perceived powerlessness provide environments conducive to conspiracy beliefs (van Prooijen, 2017). Furthermore, media environments, particularly social media, significantly amplify conspiracy theory dissemination by facilitating rapid spread and reinforcing pre-existing beliefs through algorithmically driven content recommendations. Online echo chambers reinforce conspiratorial beliefs, reducing exposure to contradicting information (Uscinski et al., 2020).

Historical and regional contexts shape societal predispositions toward conspiracy beliefs. Societies with histories of political oppression, authoritarian regimes, or significant social disruptions frequently display elevated levels of conspiratorial thinking, driven by collective trauma and persistent distrust toward state or institutional narratives (Butter & Knight, 2020).

Conclusively, conspiracy theories represent complex phenomena shaped by intertwined psychological, social, and cultural determinants. Effective understanding requires multidisciplinary approaches integrating insights from psychology, political science, sociology, and media studies. Ongoing research should further unravel these interrelationships, offering deeper comprehension of conspiracy theories and contributing to interventions mitigating their potentially harmful social consequences.

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3. Results

3.1 Processes Affecting Belief in Conspiracy Theories

Today, it is evident that conspiracy theories have gained a more expansive space for their search, communication, and dissemination with the development of the Internet and social networks. In the current period, which is closely connected with the aggressive war led by Russia against Ukraine or with the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic, we can observe how many conspiracy theories only about the conflict in Ukraine or about the coronavirus and the COVID-19 disease have appeared during the past months. This proves that people explain events that are unexpected and crises for them using conspiracy theories and belief in them. Therefore, conspiracy theories are mainly created in connection with such events as, for example, wars, terrorist attacks, murders of important personalities, epidemics/pandemics, large-scale fires, floods, or accidents. It is precisely for this reason that it is not only interesting but also necessary to study and investigate the processes affecting belief in conspiracy theories. Many reasons contribute to a stronger belief in conspiracy theories, so in the following subsections of the article (also due to the limited space), we will focus on some of these processes.

3.2 Motivated Reasoning

Motivated reasoning is included among the psychological processes that influence whether or not a person believes in conspiracy theories. This may be because a relatively large number of conspiracy theories are created or spread about events that touch on political topics and are, therefore, political (Miller et al., 2016). Thus, motivated reasoning is most often associated with such political factors as party preferences or ideological beliefs (Miller et al., 2016; Saunders, 2017; Douglas et al., 2019). Therefore, the authors sometimes speak directly about party-motivated reasoning (for example, Smallpage et al., 2017).

Motivated reasoning affects the approach to information processing, namely in such a way that people who support different ideologies will perceive the same information differently (Douglas et al., 2019). This is because each ideology promotes specific values and attitudes. If a person supports one ideology, he supports the values associated with that ideology and thus forms his opinion on everything happening around him through ideological conviction. He processes information based on these values and views within the ideological or party preference framework. This can lead to preconceived or incorrect information, resp. To believe in conspiracy theories (Hartman & Newmark, 2012). Taber & Lodge (2006) came up with the term motivated scepticism based on the mechanism of motivated reasoning) or to accusations of manipulation (Hajdúková, 2023). As part of motivated reasoning, there is a strengthening of already-held attitudes and opinions or an idea of how a specific situation should look or be solved. However, Smallpage et al. (2017) point out that it is not a conscious process because people who make decisions in motivated reasoning do not perceive that they are processing information biased. According to these authors, this is an automatic psychological process.

However, the reactions mentioned above are not the only manifestations and consequences of motivated reasoning because, in addition to confirming one's opinions and creating ideal ideas about the functioning of the surrounding world, motivated reasoning also involves attacking the other side with different views, precisely through conspiracy theories. Such examples can be conspiracy theories that refer to the act of another political actor, most often a political opponent (Miller et al., 2016). Typically, we can observe this phenomenon in American politics between the two main camps, the Democrats and the Republicans, when these two political directions also debate whether one side is more prone to believe in conspiracy theories than the other. However, the agreement on whether there is an assumption of a higher susceptibility of a particular ideology or party to belief in conspiracy theories is not uniform, except for political extremism. Thus, even in motivated reasoning, asymmetry is discussed in connection with ideological preferences (Enders & Smallpage, 2018; van der Linden et al., 2020).

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Thinking and processing information through motivated reasoning, such as global warming, is more expected among Republican voters and supporters (Saunders, 2017). Theories about global warming and climate change can also be influenced by the ideological affiliation of scientists who confirm global warming. If such scientists are assigned to the left current, their claims can be rejected based on this information (Douglas & Sutton, 2015). However, this does not mean that the propensity for motivated reasoning does not apply to people with democratic preferences because they, too, can protect their attitudes through this psychological process (Saunders, 2017). These are primarily works and statements related to American politics that are necessary. In his work, Saunders (2017) talks about trust and, subsequently, that trust can moderate belief in the claim that global warming is a hoax. Therefore, he mentions increasing confidence as one of the options to combat such beliefs. He adds, however, that it is easier to spread false and unsubstantiated information because the opposite trend is more likely to occur. Based on the mentioned information, there is a strong connection between the processes of motivated reasoning, belief in conspiracy theories, and a person's ideological or party preferences. Van der Linden et al. (2020) also discuss the connection with denialism in these contexts, i.e., denial of scientific evidence in general, not only according to party preferences.

Conspiracy theories about Barack Obama and his place of birth are very often mentioned as a typical example of party-motivated reasoning. This is the so-called "birthers" movement (You can find more about this movement in Pham, 2015), which disputes the origin and place of birth of former US President Barack Obama. Hartman and Newmark (2012) point out that something similar was not avoided even by liberal and democratic supporters, specifically in the case of the presidency of George W. Bush when, according to the authors, there were various accusations against President Bush which were not true in all cases. Based on the logic of motivated reasoning, one might expect that people who preferred values other than President Obama's and, therefore, disagreed with him would be more likely to believe the conspiracy theories that were spread about his birthplace. And this belief in the "birthers" theory is thus supported by their different views on public events. In this case, these mainly promote conservative and republican values (Pasek et al., 2015). Pasek et al. (2015) argue that such people will perceive any further negative information about President Obama as much more credible than those who agree with and support his policies.

The link between conspiracy theories and motivated reasoning can also be seen in another type of conspiracy theory. Specifically, these are theories associated with electoral fraud (Edelson et al., 2017). Edelson et al. (2017) indicate belief in electoral fraud as a widespread consequence of conspiratorial thinking and motivated reasoning. As part of motivated reasoning, the already mentioned process occurs in which people will not believe the theories about the fraud committed by their preferred party. Instead, it will react indignantly to the party they perceive as an opponent of their political party. For example, Enders and Smallpage (2018) discuss defensive motivated reasoning, a defensive psychological information processing process. According to them, this defence process is precisely related to whether a person is exposed to a conspiracy theory that is in line with his views or, on the contrary, in line with his views.

Overall, people are more prone to fall into motivated thinking when their party is not in power or after losing elections (Duran et al., 2017). And this can lead, through motivated reasoning, to a higher belief in conspiracy theories as long as the preferred party is not in power. This may not only apply to the short post-election period and accusations of electoral fraud but to the entire period when the supported party is not in power.

At the same time, however, the negative consequences of motivated reasoning may not be present in every individual who sympathizes with an ideology or political party (Miller et al., 2016). And that's because there are different types of motivated reasoning. For example, in his work, Nir (2011) writes about different types of motivated reasoning, which differ according to their consequences in thinking through motivated reasoning. He talks, for example, about two types already mentioned by Kunda (1990: 480), namely (a) motivated reasoning to be accurate and (b) motivated reasoning with directional goals.

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Specifically, with motivated reasoning that focuses on accuracy, people may search for and believe information that does not confirm their belief or opinion. On the contrary, the so-called directional motivated reasoning is the type in which information processing occurs, as indicated above. In other words, a person with this reasoning looks for and receives information close to his opinion, thus maintaining his belief in the given question (Nir, 2011). This directionally motivated reasoning, considered a thought mechanism associated with ideological preferences, leads to belief in conspiracy theories and their spread (Craft et al., 2017). Craft et al. (2017) further investigated media literacy's influence on belief in conspiracy theory through motivated reasoning. They found that media literacy skills can positively reduce belief in conspiracy theories across the political spectrum.

3.3 The Need for Cognitive Closure

Conspiracy theories are related to the cognitive processes involved in processing the information we receive from our surroundings. Cognitive closure is cited as one of the processes that can impact belief in conspiracy theories. In the original wording, we can come across the term "need for cognitive closure" or a shortened version of the name of this psychological process "need for closure" (Leman & Cinnirella, 2013; Marchlewska et al., 2017). Specifically, cognitive closure refers to a person's motivation to process and evaluate information. People want to get answers to questions about problems that interest them. They want to avoid confusing and ambiguous information, which can lead to ambiguous conclusions regarding the events being explained. This means that people are willing to use any easily accessible information to get satisfactory final answers about an event to achieve cognitive closure. Later, however, it is difficult to leave the first answer received and re-evaluate one's opinion based on new information (Marchlewska et al., 2017).

According to Leman and Cinnirelli (2013), two tendencies occur within cognitive closure. The first tendency is that people try to get the necessary answers quickly to conclude the given event as soon as possible. The second tendency that the authors mention in their text is the tendency to freeze or retain a solution regarding the explained event. Thus, cognitive closure is needed mainly when the official explanation is insufficient or completely absent (Douglas et al., 2019). People resort to the psychological process of cognitive closure mainly because of the feeling of uncertainty that stems from this unsatisfactory or absent explanation of the event (Marchlewska et al., 2017).

However, the need for cognitive closure does not always have to be the same, as we can observe different values of the need for cognitive closure. Specifically, people may have a higher or lower level of need for closure or the need to obtain an explanation for a specific event. An increased need to conclude some explanation can occur when we are under cognitive load (Leman & Cinnirella, 2013) or time pressure (Klein & Webster, 2000). As part of the high need for cognitive closure, heuristic information processing and strengthening one's opinions occur (Leman & Cinnirella, 2013). On the contrary, with a lower need for cognitive closure, there is a more thoughtful and extensive information processing, which continues longer than those with higher values of the need for closure. At a lower need for closure, pre-held beliefs do not have as much influence as they might at a higher value (Klein & Webster 2000). For example, a characteristic such as a person's high level of responsibility can help lower the need for closure (Leman & Cinnirella, 2013). In their work, Leman and Cinnirella (2013) also investigated the link between feelings of alienation and conspiracy belief, the relationship between trust and faith in conspiracy theories, and the link between the type of evidence evaluation and the need for cognitive closure. The relationship between belief in conspiracy theories, feelings of alienation and low interpersonal trust was confirmed in their research.

In contrast to the above-described text by Leman and Cinnirella (2013), in the following research, it was assumed that the need for cognitive closure would support the explanation of events through conspiracy theories or the belief in conspiracy theories. This text also focuses on whether a conspiracy explanation for a certain event already exists and is spreading or, on the contrary, such an explanation is absent. If conspiracy theories about a particular event are widespread, the need for cognitive closure is more likely to support belief in conspiracy

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theories. On the contrary, if there is also a good official, non-conspiracy explanation for the given event, the need for cognitive closure will not significantly impact the individual's thinking. The assumption of the expected relationship between belief in conspiracy theories and cognitive closure has been confirmed in research (Marchlewska et al., 2017). However, Marchlewska et al. (2017) point out that the relationship between belief in conspiracy theories and the need for cognitive closure needs further attention, as direct evidence to confirm this relationship needs to be found. In addition to the already presented research, they also mentioned the influence of cognitive closure on relations between groups and competitive behaviour in their text. Cognitive closure can affect how people will cooperate. However, this connection means a higher need for cognitive closure is associated with higher support for competitive behaviour and the resulting competitive struggles.

Conspiracy belief can be connected with party or ideological preferences, as indicated in this article. And that through motivated reasoning and the feeling of defeat or trust in state institutions. In their work, Kossowska and van Hiel (2003) claim that sympathy for a political party or ideology also affects the process of the need for cognitive closure.

3.4 Intuitive and Analytical Thinking

One of the psychological processes often mentioned in several works precisely in connection with the fact that it can influence the belief in conspiracy theories is the style or type of thinking. For this reason, we deal with the analytical or intuitive thinking style in this subchapter. Several authors have been able to confirm in various research the claim that analytical or, conversely, intuitive thinking has an influence on whether a person believes explanations of events through conspiracy theories (Swami et al., 2014; Douglas et al., 2016; van Prooijen, 2017; Mao et al., 2020). As indicated above, we distinguish two thinking styles, namely analytical and intuitive thinking styles. Analytical thinking is described as rational, in which information is processed slowly, consciously, and deliberately. In general, one could talk about critical thinking ability in this case. On the contrary, in the case of an intuitive thinking style, the information presented to us is processed quickly and spontaneously (Dagnall et al., 2015).

Some authors talk about paradoxes concerning analytical thinking and conspiracy theories. According to them, conspiracy theories are often built on very complicated claims; therefore, belief in such theories should also include analytical information processing. However, as they point out, empirical evidence confirms that conspiracy theories are more related to an intuitive thinking style. This means that belief in conspiracy theories is, on the contrary, based on emotional, mostly negative processes, which relate to the intuitive thought process. As mentioned above, spontaneous and automatic information processing is also associated with an intuitive thinking style, like emotional states (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018).

If a person has acquired analytical thinking skills, he will likely be able to reject false and fake news based on carefully considered information (Douglas et al., 2016). Douglas et al. (2015) also investigated whether gender affects conspiracy theory beliefs. They tried to see if it was possible that men or women would be more prone to believe in conspiracy explanations of events. Still, they found no difference between perceptions of conspiracy theories based on gender. Therefore, based on the claim that analytical thinking can reduce conspiracy beliefs, it is possible to infer that an intuitive thinking style will support belief in conspiracy theories (Pytlik et al., 2020). Swami et al. (2014) confirm this thesis in their research. Analytical thinking can help an individual find inaccuracies often occurring in conspiracy theories. The results indicated that lower analytical thinking elicited stronger belief in conspiracy theories, while stronger conspiracy thinking was associated with a more intuitive thinking style. This is also because conspiracy theories are associated with intuitive information processing since they do not require much cognitive effort and evoke emotions. For this reason, conspiracy theories can appeal more to people who want to find accurate information about a given event but lack the cognitive tools to obtain accurate information through critical and analytical thinking (Douglas et al., 2019).

How a person thinks and processes information also affects other characteristics and factors. For example, according to the authors, a paranormal thinking style is a trait that can be linked to an analytical thinking style. Specifically, it is assumed that this is a negative relationship, which means that a higher analytical thinking ability will be associated with a lower belief in paranormal phenomena. Conversely, an intuitive way of thinking will be accompanied by a higher belief in such phenomena (Douglas et al., 2016). With motivated reasoning, the need for cognitive closure, and an intuitive thinking style, there can be a connection between ideological and party preferences (van der Linden et al., 2020). For example, Talhelm et al. (2014) investigated the relationship between party sympathies and thinking style. They found differences in thinking style based on which ideological or party line a person prefers. Specifically, they concluded that more analytical thinking led to a more liberal view of public events and vice versa.

Another factor related to the processes affecting the belief in conspiracy theories is the lower social status of a person, in which the level of education is associated with the style of thinking. The lower the level of education, the more an individual is expected to seek simple solutions and explanations for events and thus be prone to believe in conspiracy theories. Belief in simple solutions is given by the relationship between education and analytical thinking (van Prooijen, 2017; Mao et al., 2020). Higher education supports analytical or critical thinking, leading to slower but more thorough information processing. This then results in a lower probability of the individual believing the explanation of events through conspiracy theories. Van Prooijen (2017) confirmed this expected relationship in his research.

Some authors also discussed the possibility of limiting conspiracy belief within the framework of the relationship between thinking style and belief in conspiracy theory. For example, Swami et al. (2014), based on their work, propose the possibility of combating conspiracy theories, which prove harmful, by strengthening the ability to think analytically. However, other authors point out that we should not focus purely on the fight against conspiracy theories through education but instead on strengthening analytical and critical thinking in education (Douglas et al., 2016) because even the automatic judgment that every conspiracy theory is a misleading and incorrect conclusion. Based on examples from practice, we know that even a conspiratorial explanation of an event can eventually be confirmed. A perfect example of such a theory is the Watergate case.

4. Conclusions

The present study provided an extensive examination of the multifaceted processes influencing belief in conspiracy theories, highlighting psychological, social, and cultural factors integral to understanding their persistence and popularity in contemporary societies. Conspiracy theories, characterized by alternative explanations that challenge official accounts, emerge notably during periods of uncertainty, crisis, or political polarization, as underscored by historical and contemporary examples.

Our analysis identified key psychological mechanisms central to conspiracy beliefs, particularly the role of conspiracy thinking, cognitive biases such as the need for cognitive closure, intuitive versus analytical reasoning styles, and motivated reasoning. Individuals prone to conspiracy beliefs demonstrate heightened suspicion, exhibit intuitive information processing, and frequently interpret events through ideologically motivated lenses. Understanding these psychological dynamics offers crucial insight into the cognitive mechanisms that drive individuals toward conspiratorial thinking, thereby providing a foundation for developing more effective educational and communication strategies to counteract misinformation.

Additionally, this research underscored the significance of broader social and cultural contexts influencing conspiracy theories. Political polarization emerged as a substantial determinant, with individuals more likely to endorse conspiratorial explanations congruent with their political identities, thus exacerbating societal divisions. Cultural factors, including collective historical experiences of oppression, mistrust towards authorities, and social alienation, also proved pivotal, fostering environments in which conspiracy theories can thrive as alternative frameworks for interpreting reality.

The impact of digital media, particularly social networks, represents a contemporary challenge, amplifying conspiracy beliefs through rapid dissemination and reinforcement within echo chambers. This highlights the urgent need for policymakers, educators, and media platforms to develop coordinated responses that address misinformation effectively, promote transparency, and enhance public trust in credible sources. In this regard, digital literacy and critical thinking education should be prioritized to foster resilience against disinformation, encourage evidence-based reasoning, and equip individuals with tools to critically evaluate sources of information in a rapidly evolving media landscape.

Conclusively, addressing the complexities of problems related to conspiracy theories necessitates a multidisciplinary and integrative approach, bridging psychological insights with sociopolitical analyses. Further empirical research, therefore, could focus on exploring these interdisciplinary interactions more deeply, providing a robust evidence base for policies and interventions designed to counteract potentially harmful effects of widespread conspiracy beliefs on society. It is equally important to engage with communities most vulnerable to misinformation, build trust through inclusive dialogue, and ensure that public health and policy communication is culturally sensitive, accessible, and transparent.

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