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RESEARCH ARTICLE

From True Believers to Institutional Skeptics: Classifying conspiracy theory supporters and their media consumption

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Abstract

As the role of social media and the internet as key sources of daily news grows, more and more people are exposed to conspiracy theories. Yet despite increasing similarities in exposure, there is considerable variation in what people take from the conspiracy theories that they hear. When it comes to supporters of conspiracy theories, this article suggests that significant differences in conspiratorial belief are not ones of degree but of kind. Rather than putting individuals on a continuum, this article argues that a categorical approach of conspiracy theory belief is more fruitful for understanding how distinct types of conspiracy theory supporters come to embrace—and potentially reject—conspiracy theories. Drawing on original, in-depth interviews, I construct a typology of conspiracy theory supporters that is rooted in consequential differences in how they approach conspiracy theories. To demonstrate the analytic relevance of the three categories of conspiratorial belief, I assess their patterns of media consumption. Lastly, by highlighting significant differences in media consumption of distinct types of conspiratorial supporters, I argue for targeted strategies for countering conspiratorial belief and mitigating its negative social and political consequences.

Keywords

conspiracy theories, conspiratorial thinking, conspiracy theory belief

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Introduction

Conspiracies are clandestine plots that are hatched by two or more powerful actors. Conspiracy theories explain significant events or social, political, and, in some cases, even natural phenomena with conspiracies at their core (Aaronovitch, 2010; Byford, 2011; Coady, 2006; Dentith & Orr, 2017; Douglas *et al.*, 2019; Keeley, 2019). On the one hand, conspiracy theories can be healthy characteristics of democracies. While they may correspond to decreasing support for representative democracy, they are also correlated to increased support for direct democracy (Pantazi *et al.*, 2022) and some political action (Kim, 2022). Moreover, they can inspire healthy public debate by bringing to light cases of corruption and promoting their investigation (Culloty & Suiter, 2021; Moore, 2016). On the other hand, the line between legitimate critiques and "paranoid" conspiracy debates can be difficult to find (Harambam & Aupers, 2015; Huneman & Vorms, 2018). Moreover, the misinformation that conspiracy theories breed has noticeable and worrisome social and political consequences. From promoting violence (Crawford & Keen, 2020; Imhoff *et al.*, 2021) and undermining public health initiatives to eroding political trust (Albertson & Guiler, 2020; Mayer & Ryder, 2023) and decreasing normative political engagement (Imhoff *et al.*, 2021) conspiracy theories can shake up societies and the institutions that support them.

Over the past decade, the growth of conspiracy theories has accompanied an increase in research aimed at explaining their appeal. In particular, there is an extensive literature that examines the characteristics of believers by drawing on large-scale surveys to study the characteristics of believers (Cichocka *et al.*, 2016; Douglas & Sutton, 2011; Freeman & Bentall, 2017; Keeley, 2019; Uscinski & Parent, 2014; van Prooijen, 2017). This study contributes to this growing body of research by arguing for a qualitative shift in conceptualizing conspiracy theory support. Existing studies have portrayed conspiratorial beliefs as a scaled continuum. This article, however, argues that the most consequential differences in conspiratorial beliefs are not of degree, but of kind. Namely, they differ in how conspiracy theory supporters come to, embrace, and hold on their conspiratorial beliefs.

The next section discusses the relevance of studying conspiratorial beliefs and reviews competing analytic approaches to understanding and measuring them. Following a short discussion of the data and methodology, I leverage an original dataset of in-depth interviews to develop a typology of conspiracy theory supporters. I show that they way in which conspiracy theory supporters approach, engage with and embrace conspiracy theories distinguishes them not only from non-believers but also from each other. Next, to assess the analytic relevance of the three categories of conspiracy theory supporters, I examine the similarities and differences in their media consumption. The article concludes by discussing the research and public implications of the findings, including their contributions to viable approaches for countering the spread of conspiracy theories.

State of knowledge: Measuring conspiratorial belief

Spreading with increasing speed, through word of mouth and clicks of buttons, conspiracy theories abound. Yet, what drives individuals to entertain, believe, or even seek political explanations rooted in conspiracy theories? Scholars highlight several key characteristics that distinguish conspiracy believers from non-believers. Among others, they point out that believers in conspiracies share many personality traits, including narcissism, low interpersonal trust, religiosity, and paranoia (e.g., Cichocka *et al.*, 2016; Douglas & Sutton, 2011; Mancosu *et al.*, 2017; Schöpfer *et al.*, 2023). Others highlight that personal distinctions rooted in experience, a lower level of education, and lower social status increase one's propensity to engage in conspiratorial thinking (e.g. Freeman & Bentall, 2017; Roscigno, 2024; Uscinski & Parent, 2014; van Prooijen, 2017).

Regardless of the characteristics they choose, scholars of conspiracy theories agree that its variation drives the disparity in their conspiratorial beliefs. How exactly is this belief measured and conceptualized? There are two main approaches to operationalizing belief in conspiracy theories. The first gages support popular conspiracy theories through the use of scaled surveys where respondents note their level of agreement with "commonly known" conspiratorial statements about 9/11, the assassination of JFK, etc. (e.g., Cassino, 2016; Douglas & Sutton, 2008; Mayer & Ryder, 2023; Roscigno, 2024). The second approach focuses on individuals' level of conspiratorial "thinking," whereby respondents are presented with a series of statements that range from expressions of mild socio-political skepticism to socio-political paranoia,[1] and note their level of agreement or disagreement with each (e.g. Brotherton *et al.*, 2013; Lantian *et al.*, 2016; Uscinski & Parent, 2014).

The standardized nature of such scaled surveys makes them appealing. In theory, they provide reliable, objective measures of conspiratorial support that can be easily correlated with responders' pro- or anti-social attitudes and behaviors. At the same time, they can produce biased results (Brotherton *et al.*, 2013). First, the theories that they name or refer to are context-specific. Not all conspiracy theories are universally relevant, and a lack of familiarity can affect individual scores (Wood, 2017). Furthermore, conspiracy theorists do not necessarily support all conspiracies known to them, nor do they do so equally.[2] Thus, while universal surveys may seem to provide standardized means

[1] Examples of such statements include "A lot of important information is deliberately concealed from the public out of self-interest;" "New and advanced technology which would harm current industry is being suppressed;" (Brotherton *et al.*, 2013).

[2] While vehemently in favor of some conspiracy theories, conspiracy theory supporters who participated in this study were equally passionately opposed to others, in particular those that shone a critical light on their political opinions or preferred party.

of measuring the same mechanisms, their context-based interpretations may mislabel individuals' degree of conspiratorial belief, rating it as either too weak or too strong. Second, scales that use conspiracy theories and those that measure conspiratorial thinking can conflate distinct underlying mechanisms (e.g., fact-driven critique vs. unfounded, paranoid critique) depending on their content and wording, thereby misidentifying justified skepticism as conspiratorial beliefs (Brotherton *et al.*, 2013; Swami *et al.*, 2017). For instance, conspiratorial thinking scales can potentially capture "rational," logical and democratically-beneficial attitudes such as a mistrust in official narratives in contexts where corruption is not imagine, but real and pervasive. Third, surveys can misclassify the distinct types of conspiratorial support. For instance, while two supporters may both believe in a conspiratorial explanation of the Covid-19 pandemic, they may arrive at those beliefs through disparate logical tendencies. This means that they may also respond differently to distinct attempts to undermine those beliefs.

In contrast to the predominant scaled approach to measuring support for conspiracy theories, this article argues that a categorical approach rooted in qualitative distinctions in how supporters engage with conspiracy theories is more fruitful for understanding their spread and appeal.

Methods: In-depth interviews, inductive content analysis and conspiracy belief

The findings presented in this article are grounded in inductive content analysis (Fields, 1988; Markoff *et al.*, 1975; Vears & Gillam, 2022) conducted on 37 in-depth, semi-structured narrative interviews (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000; Knott *et al.*, 2022; Legard *et al.*, 2003; Scheibelhofer, 2008; Thompson, 1981) carried out with Polish residents from March 2021 to January 2022. Project participants were recruited using two approaches. The first utilized open recruitment, whereby respondents replied to advertisements to participate in a project on political beliefs. Participants of all political hues were invited, and their political leanings were only taken into consideration to ensure a wide range of political opinions within the study. The second approach, which relied on snowball sampling with multiple entries (Heckathorn, 1997; Kendall *et al.*, 2008), whereby a few unconnected participants of a certain profile were asked to refer others from their networks to take part in the study. This second approach was used to ensure the participation of individuals with far-right leaning in the sample. Due to the sensitive nature of the material, names of participants were never recorded, and identifying information (e.g., gender) was excluded from the published interview responses. Project interviews, data management and data analysis were conducted in line with a research protocol that was approved by the Research Ethics Committee at Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Copenhagen on January 29, 2021. As the Committee does not provide IRB numbers, the project did not receive one.

All interviews took place during the Covid-19 epidemic and were conducted remotely via phone and online digital platforms (e.g., Zoom). The interviews, which on average took 2–2.5 hours, were conducted using an interview schedule that probed participants to speak about their political views, family histories, and personal opinions on topics ranging from family life to climate change to the Covid-19 pandemic. In accordance with the study's ethics and data management protocol, recorded verbal consent was obtained from all project participants before the start of each interview. The ethics committee agreed with the choice of oral consent as preferable over written consent. Verbal consent enabled the project to provide an additional layer of protection to participants of this study, which covered sensitive topics, by never keeping a record of their names, which would have been necessary with the use of written consent.

The project participants came from a variety of backgrounds. The youngest patient was 20 years old, and the oldest was 76 years old. Most participants voted on a regular basis at least once in their lives. Of the 37 participants, the majority were men (23 participants, 62%) and supporters of right-wing and radical right parties, including the ruling party *PiS* and their ally *Konfederacja* (21 participants or 57%, compared to 50% of Poland's 2019 voting population). Additionally, the majority of participants were highly educated, with 33 participants (89%) having completed tertiary education (compared to 21% of the general population).

As the interviews on which this article is based were originally conducted for a project aimed at deepening knowledge of voters' political choices, participants' opinions of conspiratorial theories were not solicited during the interviews or the recruitment process. Nonetheless, conspiracy theories are crept in. Out of 37 participants, 14 participants discussed conspiracy theories in a manner that led to their categorization as conspiracy theory supporters. Men and graduates of institutions of higher education were overrepresented in nearly all groups. Of the three True Believers, two were men and all three completed tertiary education; of the six Hesitant Believers, five were men and five held higher education degrees, of which Skeptics three were women, yet all five were either completed with or in the midst of completing their university education.

There are certain drawbacks to small N research based on in-depth interviews. In-depth interviews are time-consuming and, therefore, can rarely produce a representative sample. Simultaneously, they can provide a more nuanced analysis than survey-based studies (Cerulo, 2014; Osborne & Grant-Smith, 2021; Pugh, 2013). Regarding conspiratorial beliefs, an interview-based approach can provide subtle and complex descriptions of conspiratorial thinking. Among others, it can disentangle the more "rational" and "irrational" elements attributed to conspiratorial thinking, such as mistrust of official accounts versus unsubstantiated beliefs in secret plots. Moreover, by not relying on a predetermined list of conspiracy theories, an interview-based approach can be included in the analysis of instances of novel and unexpected conspiratorial beliefs.

Additionally, semi-structured, in-depth narrative interviews lend themselves to inductive content analysis (Bennett *et al.*, 2019; Lichtman, 2014; Morse, 1994; Vears & Gillam, 2022). The

latter utilizes open and iterative coding, enabling the production of new connections and insights. First, inductive content analysis is well-suited for the production of practical knowledge. With respect to conspiratorial beliefs, an inductive content analysis grounded in in-depth narrative interviews can provide new approaches for countering conspiratorial beliefs by focusing on potentially consequential differences among conspiratorial believers, such as their media consumption. Second, as with other inductive approaches, content analysis is an important step in theory-building. While a deductive approach can adjudicate multiple explanations, an inductive analysis lends itself to the production of new theoretical insights and avenues for future theory-testing research.

Findings: Categorizing conspiracy theory support

By definition, conspiracy theories provide agent-based explanations of phenomena that are likely rooted in happiness. Thus, to some degree, all types of conspiracy theories support gravitate toward explanations centered on actions perpetrated by conscious agents over answers rooted in complex socio-historical explanations or even their absence.[3] In line with, or perhaps because of, their preference for answers rooted in deliberate actions enacted by humans, conspiracy theory supporters are also characterized by what I call a "counter-hegemonic standpoint." In the face of ambiguity, a "mainstream" standpoint or disposition readily accepts explanations rooted in coincidence, chance, ignorance, and human error. It is the presence of secret plots, rather than their absence, that bears a heavier burden of proof. In contrast, when it comes to a counter-hegemonic standpoint, explanations are centered on historical-institutional forces or happenstances that bear the burden of proof. Simply put, conspiracy theories are not just as plausible as alternative explanations for believers. Rather, explanations rooted in schemes perpetuated by powerful individuals who excel at covering their tracks are more persuasive.

Distinctions between believers in conspiracies and non-believers were clear. They are also the focus of the bulk of the existing research. However, this article suggests that not all conspiratorial beliefs are equal, and conspiracy theory supporters should not be viewed as a singular category. Below, I introduce three categories of conspiracy theory supporters— true believers, hesitant believers, and institutional skeptics—and demonstrate the consequential differences in how each type of supporter engages with and embraces conspiracy theories.

True believers

When it comes to conspiracy theories, true believers embody the notion of unfounded beliefs. Yet, what really distinguished true believers from other categories of conspiracy theory supporters is not their full acceptance of conspiracy theories, but the bombastic way in which they relate to that belief and communicate it. Simply put, their conspiratorial beliefs are groundless and erratic, lacking cohesion or persuasive logic beyond an emotional imperative.

The 2010 Smolensk crash, which resulted in the death of all 96 passengers—largely representatives of the Polish state, including the president and members of parliament—during an attempted landing in Smolensk, Russia led to a charged public debate. Some claimed that a crash was an accident caused by a mechanical failure or pilot error. However, for true believers of the Smolensk conspiracy theory, there is no question about what transpired: the catastrophe was the result of a secret plot. It was a deliberate crash perpetrated by the Russian state, which colluded with the ruling Polish party at the time, the Civic Platform, to cover it. To them, the crash:

> *was an attack on our government. And that's how we understand it, it was an attack on Lech Kaczyński and Maria [the president and his wife]. It was an attack, it was done by Tusk [the leader of Civic Platform] and Mrs. Kopacz [the prime minister of health].* (Participant 12).

Once they embrace conspiracy theories, true believers hold onto them firmly without needing to cite proof to corroborate their claims. Others may reject their beliefs and may even try to undermine them. However, when it comes to the true believer, such attempts feel futile. Others can, "think what [they] want," but the true believer knows, holds on to and spreads their truth "sincerely" and "with good intentions" (Participant 12). It is in this lack of need to convince themselves or others, and in the corresponding absence of the possibility that new information could undermine their beliefs, true believers are consequentially distinct from their more hesitant counterparts.

Hesitant believers

Like true believers, hesitant believers see the appeal of agent-based clandestine plots to explain complex phenomena that others may view as the result of a cocktail of structural forces, ineptitude, and happenstance. Yet, in comparison to the true believer, while *not* lesser in degree, their conspiratorial belief is more cautious. It is contingent on crafting a coherent story with credulous facts that believers can cite and present to others in support of their claims. Thus, it is not an emotional reaction but credible evidence that roots hesitant believers' conspiratorial thinking. For example, when speaking about the Smolensk tragedy, the hesitant believer quoted below also backs the story of a deliberately caused crash. However, in contrast to the previously cited true believer who aggressively asserts the indisputable and "hard fact" of a secret plot to bring down the president's plane, the hesitant believer sees and spreads a story buttressed by logically linked events and evidence:

> *Smolensk is a kind of…test of honesty in political and social life. People who are in politics….accept the view that it was a mere catastrophe resulting from human error… for me this is not an honest person. If he looks at exactly what happened just after the crash… My first impulse was also anger that he [the president] had to get there*

[3] The proclivity for agent-based explanations has been explored in previous research. For example, see: Douglas *et al.*, 2016 and Van Prooijen, 2019.

> *[land in Smolensk despite deteriorating weather conditions]... but then all the facts that were collected proved that it was one big lie. That it had to be deliberate… faulty guidance [of the plane]. Two days earlier, a plane with the Prime Minister landed without any problems*. (Participant 9).

For the hesitant believer, the story must make sense. It has to be just as convincing to themselves as to their interlocutors; it needs to be underpinned by reason and facts. When it comes to the Smolensk conspiracy, this hesitant believer noted that they originally believed that the crash was an accident, as attested by their first impulse—anger at the president for insisting on a dangerous landing. Yet, it was the story that emerged later, along with the "reasonable' evidence around it, which changed the believer's mind. Simply put, when it comes to forming an opinion, hesitant believers' approach is clear—they are not dogmatic, but reasonable, changing their minds with changing "facts." Finally, a deeper need for logic, reason, and validation means that, unlike true believers, hesitant believers are more open to having a conversation, rather than a monologue, about their beliefs, so long as their sparring partner respects those beliefs (even if they disagree with them) and the hesitant believers' ability to make up their own mind independently and logically.

Institutional skeptics

In some ways, institutional skeptics are like believers and supporters of conspiratorial theories. They gravitate to agent-based explanations, and when it comes to a choice between the obvious and covert, they give the latter the benefit of doubt. In particular, when an occurrence comes with a costly social price, it is easier for institutional skeptics to believe in purposeful, agent-centered conspiracies than in human error or happenstance.

> *The minister of health, participated in…the autopsies [of the crash victims]…she guaranteed that everything was examined… that the debris was also collected, and it turns out that everything was one big lie…she was so confident, and it turns out that unfortunately they did not make sure of many things. (Participant 3)*

However, institutional skeptics are a clear category of their own. Like hesitant believers, institutional skeptics need more than just a conviction to accept the validity of conspiratorial activities. They buttressed their conspiratorial beliefs with stories built on a seemingly logical series of events and facts. Yet, they take their story building even further, and unlike hesitant believers, institutional skeptics approach conspiratorial theories piecemeal, easily accepting some aspects while rejecting others. This results in a more convincing and palpable end product that, while reasonable in appearance, is nonetheless grounded in unfounded assumptions, be they of singular—often nefarious motives or dubious facts.

In some instances, institutional skeptics make allegations that set off conspiracy theory flags, making them easier to identify. In other cases, however, substantiated claims and unfounded assumptions—whether motive or action— blend into each other, shrouding an institutional skeptic's conspiratorial belief more deeply in reasonable analysis and confirmed facts:

> *I judge a party by what it does, what laws it proposes, [what it] introduces and what follows. And it seems to me that for PiS, regardless of what it says in [its] program, it is important above all to maintain power in the long term and to bring about a situation in which power is in the hands of one party, or preferably one dictator.* (Participant 33).

In showcasing the subtle leap of logic from observations and facts to an unfounded assumption of nefarious motives and implied secret plots, this quote demonstrates the fine—and sometimes difficult to define— line that can exist between a political or social critic and an institutional skeptic. It is such plausibility of what is, upon closer inspection, conspiratorial claims that can make institutional skeptics difficult to identify.

In essence, believers—whether true or hesitant—believe. While true believers embrace conspiracy theories wholly and wholeheartedly, their hesitant counterparts are more cautious—but not necessarily less fervent—in their approach. Simply put, the conspiratorial belief of true believers is laden with faith—that their convictions are correct and that others should, like them, see the truth when confronted with it. Hesitant believers, however, need more reason than faith. While they readily embrace whole conspiracy theories, their belief is grounded in "logic," namely, in coherent narratives buttressed by "facts." It is plausible stories and credible facts that convince hesitant believers—and, in their eyes, should persuade others—of the validity of conspiratorial claims. Like hesitant believers, institutional skeptics root their conspiratorial belief in believable stories and plausible facts. Yet unlike hesitant believers, institutional skeptics approach conspiracy theories in a more opportunistic fashion, taking their more plausible and discarding their more dubious claims. It is this piecemeal approach that can make institutional skeptics appear similar to their critical non-believing counterparts. In sum, by carefully presenting their conspiratorial beliefs alongside credible narratives, they are often successful in making more convincing their conspiratorial claims.

Table 1 summarizes the core characteristics of the three types of conspiracy theory supporters. The next section examines the patterns of media consumption of conspiracy theory supporters to test whether these categories make sense past their relations to conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy theory supporters and media consumption

This section explores the media consumption habits and preferences of true believers, hesitant believers, and institutional skeptics to buttress the analytic usefulness of a categorical view of conspiratorial beliefs and to underscore its practical applications.

Table 1. Defining characteristics of Types of Conspiracy Theory Supporters.

	Defining Characteristics			
Conspiracy Theory Supporters/Non-Believers	***Conspiratorial Belief***	***Standpoint***	***Explanatory tendency***	***Need for stories/facts***
True Believers	Whole	Counter-hegemonic	Agent-centered	Low
Hesitant Believers	Whole	Counter-hegemonic	Agent-centered	Medium-High
Institutional Skeptics	Piecemeal	Counter-hegemonic	Agent-centered	Medium-High
Non-Believers	None	Mainstream	Happenstance	Medium-High

True believers

True believers' unwavering view of themselves, their abilities, and their beliefs are paralleled by their steadfast trust in their chosen authorities and media sources:

> – *I mainly watch Public Television [TVP], because I don't watch any Polsat or TVN... I absolutely don't watch them… [I use] also the Internet, the portal Niezalezna. pl [Independent.pl]. If you want real news, you'll find it there.* (Participant 4)

In the eyes of true believers, only they and their allies use logic and reason when it comes to their media consumption. Unlike "others," they do not passively receive news. They "analyze" it. Moreover, just as the true believer is the only one who approaches the news with objectivity and reason, so are the media outlets that share their views the only "objective and honest" sources. By contrast, those who espouse different viewpoints rely on manipulating the public:

> *…in those [other] programs they lie no matter what. TVN, this whole... no, please don't compare them. They lie about real things and everything…And the motivation is to deceive Poles.* (Participant 12).

True believers whose chosen party is in power place their trust in official state-backed news channels. However, those who support opposition parties disparage official state-supported news. In this case, they are no different from other critics of the ruling party. Yet, unlike non-believing supporters of the opposition, true believers pair their harsh criticism of mainstream media with an utter absence of skepticism when confronted with unusual stories and perspectives from independent sources:

> *I only choose sources of information that are verifiable. I never believe anyone, I rely only on verifiable evidence …I mainly rely on information from the Internet, YouTubers or some Internet TV hosts, things like that. Columnists who simply post on the Internet.* (Participant 7).

Moreover, for the true believer, "facts" are not merely possibly interesting but especially valuable if "the other side" fails to acknowledge them. They attributed the omission of stories or opinions to the media's fear of discussing such alternative narratives rather than a refusal to use airtime on dubious claims:

> *If someone actually talks about facts, well, I just listen. Do you think that Polish television reported, for example, protests in Denmark that took place against vaccinations, where they won that there would be no mandatory vaccinations? This was not available on any channel in Poland, neither on TVN, nor on Polsat, nor on TVP.* (Participant 7).

Hesitant believers

Like true believers, many hesitant believers tend to gravitate toward media sources that align with their political views and think that those who echo their own ideology are simply more trustworthy:

> *[Why do you choose specific sources?] Similar views, that's one, and two, it seems to me that they are more objective and more trustworthy, that's my impression.* (Participant 11)

As in the case of true believers, political preferences steer media trust among hesitant believers. Those who support the ruling party view state-backed established media as reliable and honest. Yet, those who support the opposition are drawn to alternative sources:

> *There appears media… where doctors with a slightly different opinion than those in the mainstream media are featured… It's good that there are such people. At times it seemed to me that there was [only] one political option, one medical [opinion]. And sometimes you have to make a little effort to find this [alternative] information.* (Participant 13).

Once more, the absence of opinions or stories is not a sign of a lack of credibility. For hesitant believers, as for true believers, it signals quite the opposite: the absence of viewpoints and stories from mainstream media reinforces the validity of

such claims in their eyes. For them, officials could easily refute and dismiss false claims. It is only the truth that mainstream channels fear confronting, and so choose to ignore:

> *If they wrote something untrue, the government of the country where it happened would immediately shout and lament that it's not true, that they are not like that and they would drag them [the media source] to be held accountable in court… Yet, if that is really the case, the state is silent about it.* (Participant 9).

Just as with true believers, most hesitant believers reserve the utmost skepticism and mistrust of the mainstream media. Simultaneously, they wholeheartedly trust alternative sources seemingly independent of powerful or official players:

> *Television is not independent, because despite everything someone supports someone. So it seems to me that the Internet is more objective… there are such websites related to the movements I have already mentioned, for example narodowcy.pl… sites that talk about various types of hidden mechanisms that, let's say, govern politics.* (Participant 11)

For hesitant believers, being an underdog, or at least presenting themselves as one, robs one of the motivations to lie. Being denied a seat at the mainstream table endows one's message with importance—a power derived not from being forgotten or dismissed, but from "never [being] allowed" to spread one's message, an act akin to being consciously silenced:

> *[What internet sources do you use?] These are interviews with various people that were not broadcast on television. These are also lectures by various historians, analysts in the geopolitical zone. … You can find various studies on the Internet, e.g. analytical ones, which were never allowed on television.* (Participant 14).

The media consumption of hesitant believers mirrors that of true believers in many ways. Yet there is one significant exception. Some hesitant believers stand out regarding partisan media loyalty. They are more likely to reach media that represents opposing political views, whether in service of their search for the "objective truth" or as part of a cynical exercise in reaffirming their counter-hegemonic critique of mainstream narratives:

> *I use Republika.pl or I look at the more right-wing Real24 for example….I also look at Onet, which is absolutely left-wing, very left-wing. And sometimes I laugh at different things. So I like to do such sociological experiments and I also see manipulation.* [Participant 13].

Institutional skeptics

Most true and hesitant believers had clear patterns of media consumption. Those who support the state rely on state-backed media. Those who oppose it often gravitate to the niche, alternative sources that they view as independent of political and monetary corruption. In comparison, institutional skeptics tend to have a more complex relationship with the news. First, trust in specific media outlets does not necessarily align with party affiliation. Furthermore, regardless of their political views, most institutional skeptics reach for established rather than alternative media sources. For most, an independent yet trustworthy source is not a commentator on YouTube, but a "non-aligned" or "less-biased" but established media outlet:

> *Salon24 is completely neutral, it is not on any political side. I like it because I don't like it when someone imposes something on me from the very beginning or when they attack some politicians right from the start.* (Participant 24)

Even skeptics who reach for alternatives over established media sources do so in a more measured manner than their believing counterparts. Rather than latching onto one outlet as the golden source of information, they seek out independent individuals on social media, such as Facebook, YouTube, or Twitter, to gather stories from multiple viewpoints and piece together their own take.

> *I try to read several different sources, because I don't trust their information. I know that everyone has... it doesn't even have to be something conscious, everyone has their own bias… it's kind of in the genes and it can't be avoided.* (Participant 38).

True to form and name, skeptics are rarely critical of just one media outlet or side. In their quest for a credible view of current events, some actively seek multiple sources and perspectives.

> *I watch, as my woman calls it, the regime's [station]. I watch TVN, Polsat. In my opinion, Polsat is the most reliable, every time I watch it, my blood doesn't boil over, because both TVN and TVP tend to go in different directions. [I also use] the internet. I follow some groups on Facebook, or my friends comment on something…* (Participant 30).

The best outlets, then those that skeptics really come to trust, acknowledge that there is no objectivity outside of subjectivity. Hence, in their efforts to remain impartial, they present multiple sides of each story.

> *Credibility for me is that [a media outlet] doesn't go in one direction, but is able to admit that someone has their flaws, despite the fact that they generally support them, [and]to admit that an opponent has [some] advantages. And here, for me, it is credibility that someone is able to admit that they are not perfect and are not 100% right. I think that the most credible person is the one who is able to assess both the good and bad sides.* (Participant 27).

Table 2 highlights the key similarities and differences in media consumption among the three types of supporters of conspiracy theories. In showcasing these how each type of believer

Table 2. Media consumption and perception across types of conspiracy theory supporters.

	True Believers	Hesitant Believers	Institutional Skeptics	Non-believers
Only use ideologically aligned news sources	All (3/3)	Many (4/6, 67%)	Some (2/5, 40%)	Some (7/23, 30%)
Primarily use "independent" sources	A few (1/3, 33%)	A few (2/6, 20%)	Some (2/5, 40%)	A few (5/23, 22%)
Believe that mainstream media sources have a political agenda that biases their reporting	All (3/3)	All (6/6)	Most (4/5, 80%)	Most (18/23, 78%)
Believe that mainstream media lie and/or manipulate or omit facts in service of their political agenda	Half (1/3) believes this of all mainstream media, half (2/3) believe it of ideologically-opposed media	Most (5/6, 83%)	Many (3/5, 60%)	A few (1/23, 4%)
Prefer "less-biased" or non-aligned but established media sources	None (0/3)	A few (1/6, 20%)	Some (2/5,40%)	Some (9/23, 39%)

chooses which media to consume and trust—and thus, how they come to encounter conspiracy theories and their critiques—these findings suggest viable yet distinct strategies for countering conspiratorial belief and mitigating its negative social and political consequences.

Among others, the findings suggest that established and non-ideologically aligned media are the least likely to engage with true and hesitant believers. Not only do most true and hesitant believers rely on media outlets that reflect their own political ideologies and worldviews, but most also doubt the credibility of established outlets— especially those with differing opinions from their own— in the first place. Nonetheless, despite their general suspicion of established media, hesitant believers rarely reach alternative sources such as YouTube commentators. When they do, they look for those who share their worldviews. True believers are more willing to trust established news sources and look for alternatives. Again, their choices are driven by a strong bias against those who espouse views contradictory to their own pre-existing perspectives and convictions.

In their skepticism of the world, institutional skeptics readily embrace conspiracy theory narratives. Yet, in their skepticism of media outlets, they have the most varied, open, and critical approach among all conspiracy theory supporters. Not only are institutional skeptics less likely to rely solely on ideologically aligned news sources than their believing counterparts, but their preference for non-aligned, yet still established media sources rivals that of all project participants—conspiracy theory believers and non-believers alike. Generally suspicious of all media, and often convinced of objectivity's status as a myth, institutional skeptics seek media outlets from across the spectrum and from across the political aisle.

These wide-reaching consumption patterns of institutional skeptics make them more open to entertaining the validity of those who support conspiracy theories and those who denounce them. Yet, just as with believers, the mode of presenting such theories, especially their critique, is important for retaining the skeptics' interest. All types of conspiracy theory supporters claim that they are more likely to believe in news outlets that present multiple sides of a story. True and hesitant believers view the absence of competing voices as active attempts to silence those with valid claims. Thus, in their silence, media outlets bolster the credibility of conspiracy theorists while discrediting themselves. Overall, institutional skeptics are cynical. They believe that all media is intrinsically biased. For them, the refusal of news outlets to engage with conspiracy theories does not automatically reaffirm a conspiracy's validity. However, this signals the bias of the outlet.

Conclusion

This study makes two central theoretical claims: First, it shows that there are three types of conspiracy theory supporters who, in addition to the distinct ways in which they embrace conspiracy theories, are also characterized by consequential differences in other behaviors. The way in which different types of conspiracy theory supporters consume media is one such characteristic. For instance, while most true and hesitant believers rely on media sources that reflect their ideological leanings, many institutional skeptics are open to them, and some even seek out news outlets from across the political divide. Taken together, these differences underpin the second claim made in this article: future research should view conspiracy theory supporters as categorical rather than continuous.

Such a claim raises the question of how future research should *categorize* conspiracy theory support. While providing concrete approaches such as specific survey questions is outside the purview of this article, it provides a general direction in which the operationalization of conspiracy theory supporters should move. As noted earlier, contemporary approaches rely on scaled surveys to correlate conspiratorial beliefs or thoughts with

individual characteristics and political preferences. However, by focusing on distinctions between conspiracy theory supporters and non-believers, they not only risk mislabeling context-based fact-based beliefs as conspiratorial thinking but also overlook consequential distinctions between different types of conspiracy theory supporters.

As critics of surveys of conspiracy beliefs point out, conspiracy theory *knowledge* is context dependent. The interviews conducted in this study show that conspiratorial *belief* similarly hinges on context. It is not just whether potential supporters are aware of a specific theory, but also who that theory benefits (or undermines) that contributes to their acceptance of its propositions. Thus, rather than using individuals' beliefs in specific conspiracy theories for the identification and classification of believers, this article argues that researchers should first focus on distinctions in how individuals engage with conspiracy theories.

The success of such an alternative approach hinges on the appropriate operationalization of the defining characteristics of true believers, hesitant believers, and institutional skeptics (Table 1). Existing approaches that focus on conspiratorial rather than conspiratorial beliefs can appear to do just that. However, as noted earlier, they often use statements whose meanings, such as whether they represent paranoid thought or genuine social critique, are context-dependent. Moreover, in viewing distinctions in conspiratorial thinking as continuous rather than categorical, that is, as distinguished by degree more so than quality, they also focus on questions that differentiate conspiracy theory believers from non-believers (e.g., preferences for agent-centered explanations, a counter-hegemonic or mainstream standpoint). In turn, they overlook questions aimed at uncovering qualitative distinctions in how true believers, hesitant believers, and institutional skeptics approach and embrace conspiracies (e.g., the need for stories and facts, readily assuming others' nefarious motives, proclivities for whole or piecemeal approach to conspiracy theories). I argue that these defining characteristics should center future attempts at categorizing conspiracy theory support.

In addition to its theoretical and research implications, this article touches upon broad public policy debates by offering a pathway to engage with the supporters of conspiracy theories. By showcasing significant differences in how true believers, hesitant believers, and institutional skeptics approach and embrace conspiracy theories on the one hand and engage with media outlets on the other hand, this article contributes additional insights into research on countering the spread of harmful conspiracy theories. For instance, whereas the counterhegemonic standpoint and proclivity for agent-centered explanations hinder the process of undermining conspiratorial beliefs, the need for credible stories and believable facts makes questioning the support of conspiracy theories—that is, by at least some institutional skeptics and hesitant believers –possible. Simply put, some supporters of conspiracy theories are a more viable target group for debunking harmful conspiracy beliefs.

Variations in media consumption across distinct types of conspiracy theories suggest that, while the same strategies may spark individuals' interest and belief in conspiracy theories, different approaches are needed to undermine that belief. Moreover, it suggests that countering the spread of harmful conspiracy theories and misinformation does not need to hinge on the gargantuan task of ensuring widespread equal access to high-quality higher education. Instead, it proposes measured and practical ways in which existing media can contravene conspiratorial beliefs. While it may be difficult to shake the faith of true believers and to reach most hesitant believers, both established news outlets, alternative media, and even independent individuals can engage many institutional skeptics and even a few hesitant believers in discussions about the validity of their conspiratorial beliefs.

In particular, this article highlights how acknowledging and engaging conspiracy theories may be crucial to undermining their prevalence and appeal (or, in cases of fact-based conspiracy theories, elevating their public prominence). For instance, institutional skeptics and a handful of hesitant believers craft their media consumption around a search for objectivity that is rooted in the acknowledgment of "various viewpoints." Thus, future research should take seriously the question of whether debate would provide conspiracy theories—including those that are socially and institutionally harmful— with a broader platform, thereby leading to an overall expansion of conspiratorial support, or whether such debate would encourage hesitant believers and institutional skeptics to re-evaluate their conspiratorial beliefs.

Ethics and consent statement

Project interviews, data management and data analysis were conducted in line with a research protocol that was approved by the Research Ethics Committee at Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Copenhagen on January 29, 2021. As the Committee does not provide IRB numbers, the project did not receive one. In accordance with the study's ethics and data management protocol, recorded verbal consent was obtained from all project participants before the start of each interview. The ethics committee agreed with the choice of oral consent as preferable over written consent. Verbal consent enabled the project to provide an additional layer of protection to participants of this study, which covered sensitive topics, by never keeping a record of their names, which would have been necessary with the use of written consent.

Data availability

The data utilized for this article cannot be made openly available as doing so would go against the study's ethics proto-

col. Making interview recordings or even interview transcripts available would undermine the study's foremost ethical imperative to protect the anonymity of project participants. If a subjects participation in the study was known to anyone in their network, they would be able to identify them from the interview transcripts. And even if someone's participation is not known, their specific answers would leave them open to potentially being identified. Due to the sensitive nature of the interviews, all participants were assured that their participation in the project would remain anonymous and that any use of their interviews would be done in such a way that would protect their anonymity. This precludes making the interview data open access. This also means that quoftations utilized in the article were carefully chosen and, when needed, redacted, in such a way so as to remove any potentially identifying information.

Requests for data access for academic purposes should be directed to (mmk@soc.ku.dk). Please be advised data will only be provided for research purposes and will require a data and ethics plan for data sharing, storage and usage that has been approved by an accredited ethics committee. Any requests that cannot guarantee the complete safety of data and the anonymity of project participants will not be granted.

Extended supporting information (interview schedule and oral consent form) can be found in the EUDAT repository.

https://doi.org/10.23728/b2share.40cc8278778442bc8d7c538164374284 [Unknown]. (2025).

Data is available under Public Domain Dedication (CC Zero) http://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/

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This is a fascinating paper that I think raises some interesting questions, but it also makes a number of questionable assumptions, assumptions which are — unfortunately — described as questionable assumptions made by earlier attempts to characterise belief in conspiracy theories.

Let me start with what I like and appreciated about the paper: in the second section the paper notes some limitations to existing characterisation of belief in conspiracy theories, and thus does justifiy the need to rethink how to characterise belief in conspiracy theories more generally.

However, here we come to the problems with the research as currently presented: the survey of conspiracy theories at the very beginning of the paper (the first section) seems to conflate the positive consequences of belief in some conspiracy theories with the negative consequences of belief in other conspiracy theories. It thus makes conspiracy theories seem slippery; the resolution to this problem is to insert the word “some” with respect to these claims: some conspiracy theories have positive social consequences. Others have negative social consequences. Sometimes these sets overlap. Sometimes they do not.

This is important because in the very next section we move from talk of theories to talk of theorising and theorists. This kind of shift is probably necessary for the subsequent discussion of the survey responses, but it is worth noting that there can be (and often is) a difference between whether a particular conspiracy theory is plausible or implausible vs. whether someone has come to believe a conspiracy theory in a good (i.e. rational) or bad (i.e. irrational) way. That is, we have to remember to separate the epistemic aspect of belief in conspiracy theories (are these theories plausible or implausible to believe for rational agents) vs. questions about the sociology or psychology of belief in these theories (i.e. why do some people come to believe implausible conspiracy theories?).

Why this is important is highlighted by the rest of this section: as the paper notes, existing surveys of conspiracy theorists and their conspiracy theory beliefs rest upon what we think of "popular" conspiracy theories. And the problem here is that this kind of work may well be skewing talk of both belief in conspiracy theories and the beliefs of conspiracy theorists because these surveys typically focus on what are "popular" and implausible conspiracy theories. It should be noted here that academics seem to be largely interested in looking at belief in bad conspiracy theories (thus the focus, up until recently) on the negative social consequences of belief in conspiracy theories.

After all, as the paper notes: "For instance, conspiratorial thinking scales can potentially capture “rational,” logical and democratically beneficial attitudes such as a mistrust in official narratives in contexts where corruption is not imagine, but real and pervasive." This is a valuable point, so it is unfortunate that the development of the categories of conspiracy theory believers that follows pays no heed to the caution expressed in this section of the paper. Indeed, to plug my work here for a moment, part of the problem of these surveys (and the other kind, which survey belief on particular conspiracy theories) is that often the theory or view being surveyed is itself a caricature of the kinds of theories which are articulated and believed by conspiracy theorists. As I note in "`I-know-it-when-I-see-it' - Motivating Examples in the Psychology of Conspiracy Theory Theory" the way many conspiracy theories are characterised by the literature ends up conflating all belief in a set of related conspiracy theories under the description of the most implausible version of the theory in that set. I.e. we should be cautious of how we talk about the beliefs of conspiracy theorists because often the theory associated with their belief is not exactly what the individual theorists themselves believe.

The issue here is that the first two sections of the paper go some way to show that we should be cautious of existing approaches to how we analyse belief in conspiracy theories. However, once we pass these sections the approach produced by the authors in response to their survey data simply repeats the mistakes the authors wisely noted in these first two sections.

Now, the survey itself is fascinating: we cannot see the raw data, and it is admitted that the survey served another purpose (looking at voting intentions) and has been repurposed for this analysis. This ends up being problem for a number of reasons: we see only a small sample of the statements made by the 37 participants. While this sample size is small, the data produced by interacting with them is large (2-2.5 hours per participant). So, much is left on the table. Thus, when we get the characterisation of true, hesitant, and institutional believers/skeptics, I was not certain whether we should accept the categorisation based upon the largely hidden data.

This starts to come to a head in the findings section. This section starts oddly with the claim that "By definition, conspiracy theories provide agent-based explanations of phenomena that are likely rooted in happiness." Aside from wondering what this means, there is no citation of relevant literature. There is a lot of literature on the definition of conspiracy theories (some of written by me, and also surveyed by me), and this does not seem to be part of the definition of "conspiracy theory." Thus, this point needs further articulation and also supporting citations.

Next we get the sentence "Thus, to some degree, all types of conspiracy theories support gravitate toward explanations centered on actions perpetrated by conscious agents over answers rooted in complex sociohistorical explanations or even their absence." Yet there is an entire literature in philosophy and sociology that disputes this: this is only true of some conspiracy theories. Also, as noted in the survey section, previous research has skewed how we view conspiracy theories, so

this section should should have noted that this kind of definition comes out of that skewed work, and is likely askew as a consequence.

Thus, when we get the categorisation of believers: true, hesitant and institutional. Because we see only snippets of the interviews, and the interviews were conducted for another purpose, it is hard to know if the categorisation associated with some of the participants reflects what they believed/thought.

For example, the "True believer" label seems like a weird term: the categorisation seems to be belief without evidence. "True believer" by itself is ambiguous between this kind of evidential lack, and someone who thinks the evidence is overwhelming. I.e. I am a true believer that the US and the UK conspired to manufacture consent for the invasion of Iraq in 20023 via the WMD narrative. Why am I true believer? Because the evidence is overwhelming!

This is another problem introduced by working with the pejorative framing of this article (a framing, I will note again, the second section of the article noted is problematic when it comes to earlier attempts to characterise belief in conspiracy theories). This occurs again in the section on the "hesitant believer", where it is just accepted that such belief is credulous with respect to the facts. (Also, this sentence - "Yet, in comparison to the true believer, while not lesser in degree, their conspiratorial belief is more cautious." - is hard to parse: how is something both not lesser in degree but also cautious [i.e. lesser in degree]?)

We see something similar in the section on institutional skeptics: it is just assumed that such skepticism is "grounded on unfounded assumptions."

The reason why this is problem is this: recall, the original survey was not about conspiracy theories, so the elicitation of these comments lacks follow-up and questions about the purported evidence. It is being assumed here that the subjects are credulous in their beliefs, but we cannot assume that given the limitations of the survey itself. After all, we are told that "the interviews on which this article is based were originally conducted for a project aimed at deepening knowledge of voters' political choices, participants' opinions of conspiratorial theories were not solicited during the interviews or the recruitment process." It is very possible, then, that people were expressing their beliefs poorly, but might have articulated their reasons with follow up questions. Given that also we are assuming the most stereotypical (and implausible) versions of the conspiracy theories they believe, we also don't know if their actual belief is more or less nuanced. As such, it is hard to know whether the categorisations made by this paper can be derived from this survey data.

This comes to a head in the conclusion. Here we are reminded of points made in the second section. Namely: "As critics of surveys of conspiracy beliefs point out, conspiracy theory knowledge is context dependent." The paper takes it that this context can be elicited from the survey data. But given the limitations of the survey (being designed for another task; limited participants; a pejorative frame using assumptions that were questioned by the second section of the paper), at this time I do not think the categorisation here of conspiracy theory believers as "true", "hesitant" or "institutional" can be justified at this time.

Some minor notes:

The paper claims that "Conspiracy theories explain significant events or social, political, and, in some cases, even natural phenomena with conspiracies at their core." Unless there is some explanation as to how natural phenomena can be caused by intentional action, I would recommend changing "natural" here to "unnatural." Natural phenomena tends to be not caused by human action; climate change is unnatural rather than natural because its chief cause is human intervention.

COVID-19 is described as an "epidemic." It is a pandemic.

"Nonetheless, conspiracy theories are crept in" should be "Nonetheless, conspiracy theories crept in."

"True believers" and "hesitant believers" are introduced as terms before they are defined. At the very least it should be noted at that earlier point that these terms will be defined later.

"quoftations" should be "quotations."

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?
Partly

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Partly

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
No

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
No

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
No

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Philosophy; conspiracy theory theory

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to state that I do not consider it to be of an acceptable scientific standard, for reasons outlined above.

Reviewer Report 22 January 2026

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This paper presents findings from in-depth interviews with Polish adults and uses those interviews to develop a three-part categorization of conspiracy theory supporters (true believers, hesitant believers, and institutional skeptics), linking each type to distinctive patterns of media consumption. I find the attempt to move beyond a “more vs. less belief” framing interesting and potentially valuable. The manuscript is well-written and the interview excerpts especially in the “media section” give a clear picture on how participants navigate their relationship to institutions, the media, and competing accounts of political events.

At the same time, I was not fully convinced by the article’s central theoretical claim that the differences between the three supporter types are qualitative (i.e., differences of kind rather than degree). The boundaries between categories are not very well specified, and the evidence presented—especially in Tables 1 and 2—also appears consistent with a more continuous, dimensional interpretation. For example, the defining characteristics listed in Table 1 overlap substantially across the three believer categories (e.g., counter-hegemonic standpoint and agent-centered explanations), while Table 2 suggests graded differences in media habits rather than discontinuities. If the intended contribution is to argue for types rather than levels, I would expect a clearer account of what constitutes a categorical threshold in practice: what features must be present for someone to be classified as an institutional skeptic rather than a hesitant believer, and what kinds of cases were ambiguous or difficult to place?

Relatedly, the methodological description does not much detail to evaluate how the typology was derived and how robust it is. The paper notes inductive content analysis and describes the broader interview project, but the specific steps that led from codes to category assignment remain unspecified. Was this a rating done by one person or several? What characteristics were decisive for placing one individual in one category rather than another? How were borderline cases (or disagreement between different raters, if existing) handled? There were a lot of quotes in the media section, but only few in the section describing the placement.

I was specifically wondering regarding the “institutional skeptic”. The quoted sentence does not necessarily specify a conspiracy belief, and the author herself states that there is a “fine – and sometimes difficult to define – line”. This raises an alarm for me, as it might mean that the category above all does not seem to be so clear.

The article is also missing a section about how the assumptions rely on different degrees of plausibility of conspiracy beliefs. Given that conspiracy beliefs are overall characterized as counter-hegemonic and non-rational, I am assuming that the categorization of the author relies on a definition of conspiracy beliefs as non-mainstream and irrational. However, there are also conspiracy theories that are plausible and even shared by the mainstream (see e.g. Frenken et al.,

2024; Pummerer et al., 2025)

Another concern is interpretive: the manuscript occasionally blurs self-perception and other-perception, or, more broadly, stated epistemic ideals versus observable epistemic practice. Many interviewees describe themselves as open-minded, fact-oriented, and willing to consider multiple viewpoints. These statements are important as self-presentations. However, interviews cannot on their own establish whether participants actually show that behavior. This is especially important in the realm of conspiracy beliefs as they are related to some biases in self-perception, for example narcissism (Cichocka et al., 2016) and lower meta-cognitive sensitivity, i.e., the ability to correctly assess ones knowledge, Pummerer et al., 2026). At times, the text reads as if the researcher takes such claims at face value. I would recommend systematically adjusting the language to reflect what the data can support ("participants report…", "participants present themselves as…"), and adding a brief limitation noting that behavioral validation would require complementary designs (media diaries, passive tracking, or experimental exposure).

Finally, the paper promises practical implications for engaging supporters and proposes "measured and practical ways in which existing media can contravene conspiratorial beliefs." In the current version, this section seems missing. Even more, it sometimes seems that any measures taken by journalists and media might remain futile as it is not consulted by true / hesitant believers unless ideologically aligned. I think that the paper itself is valuable, and adding a discussion about implications for media and journalists might be too much. But in this case, they should also not be promised.

One smaller but recurring conceptual issue is the repeated coupling of "stories and facts", but it seems to me that these are two different concepts, also differently related to conspiracy beliefs (i.e., one more cognitive, one more experiential). Additionally, it is not clear what is meant by "independent" sources in Table 2. Are these alternative media, or is this the consumption of media that is not as much ideologically aligned?

Overall, I view the manuscript as an interesting and promising contribution to a complex question, and see approaches based on interviews and qualitative answers as an important complementary approach to e.g. experimental data.

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Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?
Yes

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Partly

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Partly

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
Partly

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: social psychology, conspiracy beliefs, experimental research (not an expert in qualitative analyses)

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Reviewer Report 30 December 2025

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This paper presents findings from interviews conducted with Polish adults regarding their beliefs about conspiracies as they apply to the government in that country. The author argues that not all conspiracy believers are equal in their approach to those theories and provides a three-part categorization of their beliefs and associated media use.

I find the model interesting and worthy of further study. However, the study has important limitations. First, it seems that all of the analysis is based on a single conspiracy having to do with the causes of a highly contentious plane crash that involved important government figures and

potential involvement by a foreign country. One would need to probe beliefs about other conspiracy theories to draw conclusions about differences in approaches to such theories. As a result, the differences observed might not apply to other conspiracy theories. Persons with the mindset for conspiracies tend to accept a wide range of conspiracy theories and without more evidence about how people with the mindset approach those ideas, it is difficult to know how much the proposed model apples across other conspiracy theories.

The author also does not spend much time analyzing the beliefs of those who do not endorse the specific conspiracy under study. It would help the paper to discuss why those persons do not find the particular conspiracy believable.

In regard to media use, the differences between the groups do not seem all that informative. All four groups appear to find mainstream news subject to bias, so that doesn't seem to help much in distinguishing the groups. Again, a more in-depth analysis of the Non-believers might help to clarify the differences if there are any between the three conspiracy accepters. It would also help to provide some description of the media landscape in Poland regarding the political orientation of the mainstream press.

Regarding the use of the model, it would help readers to see how one would operationalize the differences between the groups in surveys so that a more generalizable analysis could be performed. If the differences between the groups can be identified either through their belief systems or media use, that would be a useful next step to further the study of the conspiracy mindset. It would be important to determine whether the differences found here would generalize across different conspiracy theories since that is a defining characteristic of those who tend to find such theories plausible.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?
Yes

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Partly

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Yes

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Partly

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Public health communication; mental health; adolescents

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.