

# Conspiracy Theory Beliefs

Detailed annotated reading digest for research project: definitions, article summaries, aims, hypotheses, methods, findings, limitations, and illustrative quotes.

## How to use this document

This is designed as a working study document, not a finished literature review. Use the summaries to understand what each reading contributes, then use the quotes sparingly as evidence. Page numbers refer to the article/PDF page numbers shown in the reading where available. Reviews and book chapters often do not have formal hypotheses, so their 'hypotheses' section is described as aims, propositions, or research questions.

## Core definitions across the readings

**Conspiracy:** A secret plot by two or more powerful actors, usually involving hidden attempts to gain, preserve, or abuse power (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 4).

**Conspiracy theory:** An explanation of significant social or political events that attributes their ultimate cause to secret plots by powerful actors (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 4).

**Conspiracy belief:** Belief in one specific conspiracy theory, or a set of specific conspiracy theories, such as beliefs about JFK, 9/11, vaccines, HIV, or COVID-19 (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 4).

**Conspiracy mentality / conspiracy thinking:** A broader tendency or worldview in which people are generally ready to interpret events as being caused by secret plots, rather than only endorsing one specific theory (Imhoff et al., 2022, p. 1; Uscinski et al., 2022, p. 3).

**Conspiracy orientation:** A dispositional or general tendency to subscribe to different conspiracy theories (Tam & Lee, 2024, p. 1396).

**Conspiracy attribution:** A situational tendency to apply conspiracy explanations to specific problematic events or crises (Tam & Lee, 2024, p. 1396).

**Epistemic motives:** Motives related to understanding, accuracy, meaning, subjective certainty, and reducing uncertainty (Douglas et al., 2017, p. 538).

**Existential motives:** Motives related to safety, control, and security when people experience threat, anxiety, powerlessness, or uncertainty (Douglas et al., 2017, p. 538).

**Social motives:** Motives related to maintaining a positive image of the self, ingroup, or social identity (Douglas et al., 2017, p. 538).

**Epistemic mistrust:** A general tendency to view socially communicated information as unreliable, especially when it comes from authorities, institutions, or experts (Brauner et al., 2023, p. 57).

**Credulity:** A tendency to accept information too readily, particularly when alternative or unofficial sources appear to fill an information gap (Brauner et al., 2023, pp. 56-57).

**Misinformation:** Information presented as accurate but later found to be false; it overlaps with conspiracy theories but is not identical to them (Tam & Lee, 2024, p. 1397).

**Rumour:** Unverified information that spreads through social channels; unlike conspiracy theories, it does not always involve powerful hidden actors or malevolent plots (Tam & Lee, 2024, p. 1397).

# Detailed article summaries

## 1. Douglas, Sutton, and Cichocka (2017) - The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories

**Reference:** Douglas, K. M., Sutton, R. M., & Cichocka, A. (2017). The psychology of conspiracy theories. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 26(6), 538-542.

**Aim / purpose:** To organise the psychological literature explaining why conspiracy theories are popular and what consequences they have. The article aims to show that conspiracy beliefs are driven by three broad motives: epistemic, existential, and social.

**Hypotheses / research questions:** This is a review rather than an empirical hypothesis-testing paper. Its central claim is that conspiracy theories appeal because they seem to satisfy needs for understanding, control, security, and positive social identity. The authors also argue that conspiracy beliefs are often more appealing than genuinely satisfying.

**Method / design:** Narrative review and synthesis of psychological research on predictors and consequences of conspiracy belief.

**Main findings:** The article shows that conspiracy beliefs are linked to uncertainty, pattern perception, anxiety, powerlessness, low analytic thinking, low education, narcissism, collective narcissism, and threatened group identity. The authors argue that conspiracy theories appear to promise certainty and control but evidence suggests they can increase uncertainty, reduce autonomy, and undermine positive action.

**What the article achieved:** It provides one of the most useful frameworks for your assignment: epistemic, existential, and social motives. This framework can organise the whole predictor section.

**Challenges / limitations:** Because it is a brief review, it does not test causal mechanisms itself. The authors also note that consequences were under-researched at the time.

**How it helps your project:** Use it as the backbone for Section 2. It gives the clearest structure for factors influencing conspiracy beliefs.

### Illustrative quotes

Conspiracy theories are explanations for important events that involve secret plots by powerful and malevolent groups.

Douglas et al., 2017, p. 538

Belief in conspiracy theories appears to be driven by motives that can be characterized as epistemic, existential, and social.

Douglas et al., 2017, p. 538

Conspiracy belief may be more appealing than satisfying.

Douglas et al., 2017, p. 538

Conspiracy theories appear to provide broad, internally consistent explanations that allow people to preserve beliefs in the face of uncertainty and contradiction.

Douglas et al., 2017, p. 539

Experimental exposure to conspiracy theories appears to immediately suppress people's sense of autonomy and control.

Douglas et al., 2017, p. 539

## 2. Douglas et al. (2019) - Understanding Conspiracy Theories

**Reference:** Douglas, K. M., Uscinski, J. E., Sutton, R. M., Cichocka, A., Nefes, T., Ang, C. S., & Deravi, F. (2019). Understanding conspiracy theories. *Advances in Political Psychology*, 40(S1), 3-35.

**Aim / purpose:** To provide a broad interdisciplinary review of what conspiracy theories are, why people believe them, how they spread, and what risks or benefits they might have.

**Hypotheses / research questions:** This is not a hypothesis-testing study. It asks three guiding questions: what factors are associated with conspiracy beliefs, how conspiracy theories are communicated, and what societal risks or rewards are associated with them.

**Method / design:** Interdisciplinary review covering psychology, political science, sociology, history, information science, and communication research.

**Main findings:** The review identifies psychological factors such as epistemic, existential, and social motives; political factors such as populism and ideological extremity; and communication pathways through traditional and social media. It argues that conspiracy theories tend to do more harm than good, especially in politics, science, health, and social cohesion.

**What the article achieved:** It gives a comprehensive overview and is ideal for introducing the field. It also distinguishes key terms: conspiracy, conspiracy theory, conspiracy belief, conspiracy thinking, and conspiracy theorist.

**Challenges / limitations:** Because it synthesises a huge field, it is broad rather than deeply focused on any one mechanism. It also highlights unresolved issues in measuring conspiracy beliefs.

**How it helps your project:** Use this for Section 1 definitions, Section 2 predictors, Section 3 consequences, and general framing in your introduction.

#### Illustrative quotes

A 'conspiracy' is a secret plot by two or more powerful actors.

Douglas et al., 2019, p. 4

Conspiracy theories are attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors.

Douglas et al., 2019, p. 4

Conspiracy belief refers to belief in a specific conspiracy theory, or set of conspiracy theories.

Douglas et al., 2019, p. 4

Conspiracy beliefs tend to 'stick together'.

Douglas et al., 2019, p. 7

People appear to be drawn to conspiracy theories when they promise to satisfy important social psychological motives.

Douglas et al., 2019, p. 7

### 3. van Prooijen and van Vugt (2018) - Conspiracy Theories: Evolved Functions and Psychological Mechanisms

**Reference:** van Prooijen, J.-W., & van Vugt, M. (2018). Conspiracy theories: Evolved functions and psychological mechanisms. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 13(6), 770-788.

**Aim / purpose:** To explain why conspiracy thinking is widespread and culturally universal by examining possible evolutionary functions and psychological mechanisms.

**Hypotheses / research questions:** The authors compare two explanations: conspiracy theories may be by-products of evolved cognitive systems such as pattern perception and agency detection, or conspiracy thinking may be an adaptive system for detecting dangerous coalitions.

**Method / design:** Theoretical review drawing on social, cultural, cognitive, and evolutionary psychology.

**Main findings:** The authors argue that conspiracy theories contain five core ingredients: pattern, agency, coalition, threat, and secrecy. They propose that humans may be especially sensitive to hostile coalitions because such coalitions would have been dangerous in ancestral environments.

**What the article achieved:** It provides one of the best conceptual frameworks for defining conspiracy theories. It also explains why beliefs can feel intuitive rather than random.

**Challenges / limitations:** Evolutionary explanations are difficult to test directly. The article provides propositions and indirect evidence rather than a single empirical test.

**How it helps your project:** Use it heavily in Section 1. The five ingredients are very useful for creating your own workable definition.

#### Illustrative quotes

Belief in conspiracy theories ... is a widespread and culturally universal phenomenon.

van Prooijen & van Vugt, 2018, p. 770

A conspiracy theory contains at least five critical ingredients.

van Prooijen & van Vugt, 2018, p. 771

First, conspiracy theories make an assumption of how people, objects, or events are causally interconnected.

van Prooijen & van Vugt, 2018, p. 771

A conspiracy theory always involves a coalition, or group, of actors working in conjunction.

van Prooijen & van Vugt, 2018, p. 771

A conspiracy theory always carries an element of secrecy and is therefore often difficult to invalidate.

van Prooijen & van Vugt, 2018, p. 771

#### 4. Imhoff, Bertlich, and Frenken (2022) - Tearing Apart the 'Evil' Twins

**Reference:** Imhoff, R., Bertlich, T., & Frenken, M. (2022). Tearing apart the 'evil' twins: A general conspiracy mentality is not the same as specific conspiracy beliefs. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 46, 101349.

**Aim / purpose:** To clarify the difference between general conspiracy mentality and belief in specific conspiracy theories.

**Hypotheses / research questions:** This is a conceptual review. The authors argue that conspiracy mentality should be treated like a relatively stable trait-like disposition, while specific conspiracy beliefs are more context-dependent and content-contaminated.

**Method / design:** Review of conceptual and psychometric evidence comparing conspiracy mentality measures with specific conspiracy belief measures.

**Main findings:** Specific conspiracy beliefs are often skewed because many people reject them, while conspiracy mentality is more normally distributed and stable. Specific beliefs can be shaped by content, ideology, and current events. Conspiracy mentality better captures a broad readiness to suspect hidden plots.

**What the article achieved:** The article improves measurement clarity. It helps avoid treating 'belief in one theory' as the same as a general conspiratorial worldview.

**Challenges / limitations:** It is not an empirical study testing new data. It is strongest as a conceptual and methodological source.

**How it helps your project:** Use it in Section 1 to explain dimensions: specific conspiracy belief versus general conspiracy mentality.

##### Illustrative quotes

A general conspiracy mentality is not the same as specific conspiracy beliefs.

Imhoff et al., 2022, p. 1

Conspiracy mentality is a relatively stable readiness to interpret world events as being caused by plots hatched in secret.

Imhoff et al., 2022, p. 1

Specific conspiracy beliefs and conspiracy mentality are already markedly different in their definition.

Imhoff et al., 2022, p. 1

Conspiracy mentality reflects the general propensity to endorse specific conspiracy theories.

Imhoff et al., 2022, p. 2

Conspiracy mentality should be a rather temporally stable disposition difficult to change.

Imhoff et al., 2022, p. 3

#### 5. Tam and Lee (2024) - From Conspiracy Orientation to Conspiracy Attribution

**Reference:** Tam, L., & Lee, H. (2024). From conspiracy orientation to conspiracy attribution: The effects of institutional trust and demographic differences. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 68(10), 1395-1411.

**Aim / purpose:** To examine how general conspiracy orientation relates to situational conspiracy attribution, and whether institutional trust, STEM education, and demographics reduce conspiratorial thinking.

**Hypotheses / research questions:** H1 predicted that higher dispositional conspiracy orientation would relate to higher situational conspiracy attribution. H2a and H2b predicted that institutional trust would reduce orientation and attribution.

H3a and H3b predicted that STEM education would reduce both. H4 predicted an interaction between institutional trust and STEM education in reducing attribution.

**Method / design:** Survey study with 720 participants in South Korea.

**Main findings:** Institutional trust had stronger effects than STEM education in explaining conspiracy orientation and attribution. Demographic factors had different effects depending on whether the outcome was general orientation or situational attribution.

**What the article achieved:** It provides a useful distinction between stable/dispositional and situational/event-specific conspiracy thinking. It also shows that trust may matter more than education alone.

**Challenges / limitations:** The study is based in South Korea, so the exact demographic patterns may not generalise globally. Its cross-sectional survey design limits causal certainty.

**How it helps your project:** Use it in Section 1 for conceptual dimensions and Section 4 for trust as part of a possible feedback loop.

### Illustrative quotes

Conspiracy orientation refers to the general tendency to believe in different conspiracy theories.

Tam & Lee, 2024, p. 1396

Conspiracy attribution refers to the tendency to subscribe to conspiracy theories related to specific problematic situations.

Tam & Lee, 2024, p. 1396

The higher the (dispositional) conspiracy orientation, the higher the (situational) conspiracy attribution.

Tam & Lee, 2024, p. 1400

Individuals with higher institutional trust report lower conspiracy orientation.

Tam & Lee, 2024, p. 1400

Institutional trust had greater effects than STEM education in explaining conspiracy orientation and attribution.

Tam & Lee, 2024, p. 1395

## 6. Brauner et al. (2023) - Trust Me, Do Not Trust Anyone

**Reference:** Brauner, F., Fonagy, P., Campbell, C., Griem, J., Storck, T., & Nolte, T. (2023). 'Trust me, do not trust anyone': How epistemic mistrust and credulity are associated with conspiracy mentality. *Research in Psychotherapy: Psychopathology, Process and Outcome*, 26, 705.

**Aim / purpose:** To investigate whether conspiracy mentality is associated with disruptions in epistemic trust, especially mistrust and credulity.

**Hypotheses / research questions:** The authors predicted that conspiracy mentality would be positively associated with mistrust and credulity, negatively associated with trust, that mistrust and credulity would predict conspiracy mentality after controlling for confounds, and that mistrust would mediate the effect of credulity on conspiracy mentality.

**Method / design:** Cross-sectional online survey of 417 UK participants recruited through Prolific. Measures included epistemic trust, mistrust, credulity, conspiracy mentality, narcissism, attachment avoidance/anxiety, authoritarianism, and loneliness.

**Main findings:** Mistrust predicted conspiracy mentality even after controlling for other variables. Credulity was associated with conspiracy mentality, but its effect was fully mediated by mistrust. This means gullibility alone was not the key issue; mistrust created the psychological opening for alternative explanations.

**What the article achieved:** The study offers one of the clearest mechanisms for trust: mistrust in authorised knowledge creates an epistemic vacuum, making implausible alternatives more attractive.

**Challenges / limitations:** The design is cross-sectional, so it cannot prove causality or temporal sequence. It also uses a UK online sample.

**How it helps your project:** Use it for Section 2 as a predictor and Section 4 as bidirectional mistrust evidence. It is one of your strongest trust papers.

### Illustrative quotes

Conspiracy mentality is associated with disrupted forms of epistemic trust.

Brauner et al., 2023, p. 55

People who believe in one CT are very likely to believe in other CTs, even if they are completely different in content.

Brauner et al., 2023, p. 56

A fundamental tendency to mistrust ... is a central psychological precondition for a heightened conspiracy mentality.

Brauner et al., 2023, p. 56

A suspicious attitude comprising a generalized mistrust ... creates an epistemic vacuum.

Brauner et al., 2023, p. 56

The association between credulity and conspiracy mentality is fully mediated by mistrust.

Brauner et al., 2023, p. 55

## 7. Halpern et al. (2019) - From Belief in Conspiracy Theories to Trust in Others

**Reference:** Halpern, D., Valenzuela, S., Katz, J., & Miranda, J. P. (2019). From belief in conspiracy theories to trust in others: Which factors influence exposure, believing and sharing fake news. In G. Meiselwitz (Ed.), *Social Computing and Social Media* (LNCS 11578, pp. 217-232).

**Aim / purpose:** To explain how people become exposed to fake news, believe it, and share it, while comparing the relative influence of social media use, political variables, trust, and conspiracy mentality.

**Hypotheses / research questions:** The article tested seven hypotheses. H1-H2 predicted social media use and news consumption through social media would increase exposure and misperceptions. H3-H4 predicted online political participation and political extremity would increase exposure and misperceptions. H5 predicted mistrust in traditional media would increase exposure and misperceptions. H6 predicted trust in contacts would increase exposure and misperceptions. H7 predicted conspiracy mentality would increase exposure to fake news and misperceptions.

**Method / design:** Two-wave panel survey of Chileans with internet access, using nationally representative sampling procedures. The authors used lagged dependent variable models and structural equation modelling.

**Main findings:** Personal and political-psychological factors, including conspiracy mentality, trust, education, and gender, were more important than social media use alone. Conspiracy mentality was positively associated with exposure to fake news and holding misperceptions, which then contributed to sharing.

**What the article achieved:** It links conspiracy mentality to concrete behaviour: fake news exposure, belief, and sharing. It moves beyond 'people think weird things' and shows behavioural outcomes.

**Challenges / limitations:** The study is specific to Chile and internet users. Fake news examples were context-specific. It does not prove universal patterns across all countries.

**How it helps your project:** Use it in Section 3 for consequences: misinformation susceptibility, belief in fake news, and sharing behaviour.

### Illustrative quotes

We offer a theoretical model that explains how people become exposed to fake news, come to believe in them and then share them with their contacts.

Halpern et al., 2019, p. 217

Personal and political-psychological factors are more relevant in explaining this behavior than specific uses of social media.

Halpern et al., 2019, p. 217

Users first need to believe in, or at least be open to, the general orientation represented by the false item.

Halpern et al., 2019, p. 218

H7: Having a conspiracy mentality is positively associated with exposure to fake news and holding misperceptions.

Halpern et al., 2019, p. 220

The hypothesized variables included in the model include trust in media and contacts, conspiracy mentality, credibility in fake news, exposure to fake news, and sharing fake news.

Halpern et al., 2019, p. 222

## 8. Jennings et al. (2021) - Lack of Trust, Conspiracy Beliefs, and Social Media Use Predict COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy

**Reference:** Jennings, W., Stoker, G., Bunting, H., Valgardsson, V. O., Gaskell, J., Devine, D., McKay, L., & Mills, M. C. (2021). Lack of trust, conspiracy beliefs, and social media use predict COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy. *Vaccines*, 9, 593.

**Aim / purpose:** To identify how trust, conspiracy beliefs, misinformation, social media use, and perceived threat predicted willingness to receive a COVID-19 vaccine in the UK.

**Hypotheses / research questions:** H1 predicted that trust in government and positive views of crisis handling would increase vaccine willingness, while vaccine distrust and government mistrust would increase hesitancy. H1.1 predicted that trust in health institutions and experts would increase willingness. H2 predicted that social trust and perceived personal threat would reduce hesitancy. H3 predicted that social media consumers would be more vaccine-hesitant than traditional media consumers.

**Method / design:** Nationally representative survey of 1,476 UK adults conducted in December 2020, combined with five focus groups.

**Main findings:** Distrust in vaccines and government increased vaccine hesitancy. Trust in health institutions and experts, perceived personal risk, and conventional information sources were associated with greater willingness. Social media use and general conspiratorial beliefs predicted lower willingness.

**What the article achieved:** The article connects conspiracy beliefs directly to health behaviour and vaccine uptake. The focus groups add richer insight into the fears behind hesitancy, including concerns about rapid vaccine development, side effects, population control, and misunderstanding of herd immunity.

**Challenges / limitations:** The study is UK-specific and conducted at one early vaccine rollout point. Self-reported willingness may not fully predict actual vaccination behaviour.

**How it helps your project:** Use it in Section 3 for health consequences and Section 5 for why misinformation matters in public health contexts.

### Illustrative quotes

Trust is a core predictor, with distrust in vaccines in general and mistrust in government raising vaccine hesitancy.

Jennings et al., 2021, p. 1

Those who obtain information from relatively unregulated social media sources ... and who hold general conspiratorial beliefs, are less willing to be vaccinated.

Jennings et al., 2021, p. 1

COVID-19 is not only a pandemic, but an 'infodemic' of complex and dynamic information.

Jennings et al., 2021, p. 1

We hypothesise that trust in government ... will predict higher vaccine willingness.

Jennings et al., 2021, p. 2

More attention needs to be devoted to helping people understand their own risks, unpacking complex concepts, and filling knowledge voids.

Jennings et al., 2021, p. 1

## 9. Jolley, Meleady, and Douglas (2020) - Exposure to Intergroup Conspiracy Theories

**Reference:** Jolley, D., Meleady, R., & Douglas, K. M. (2020). Exposure to intergroup conspiracy theories promotes prejudice which spreads across groups. *British Journal of Psychology*, 111, 17-35.

**Aim / purpose:** To test whether exposure to intergroup conspiracy theories increases prejudice and discrimination toward targeted outgroups, and whether prejudice spreads to other groups.

**Hypotheses / research questions:** Study 1 and Study 2 predicted that exposure to conspiracy theories would increase prejudice toward the target outgroup. Study 2 also tested whether exposure would increase discrimination through voting bias. Study 3 tested whether prejudice would spread to other secondary outgroups.

**Method / design:** Three experiments. Study 1 used conspiracy narratives about immigrants in Britain. Study 2 used conspiracy narratives about Jewish people and measured voting intentions toward a Jewish candidate. Study 3 examined prejudice spreading to additional outgroups.

**Main findings:** Exposure to conspiracy theories increased prejudice toward the implicated group. In the Jewish conspiracy condition, it also reduced willingness to vote for a Jewish political candidate. Prejudice could spread to unrelated outgroups.

**What the article achieved:** The paper provides causal evidence that conspiracy theories can worsen intergroup relations, not just correlate with prejudice.

**Challenges / limitations:** The studies used short-term experimental exposure, so long-term real-world effects are still less clear. The samples were online and largely UK-based.

**How it helps your project:** Use it in Section 3 for outcomes: prejudice, discrimination, intergroup hostility, and social harm.

### Illustrative quotes

Exposure to conspiracy theories concerning immigrants ... exacerbated prejudice towards this group.

Jolley et al., 2020, p. 17

Exposure to conspiracy theories about Jewish people ... increased prejudice towards this group and reduced participants' willingness to vote for a Jewish political candidate.

Jolley et al., 2020, p. 17

Exposure to conspiracy theories about Jewish people not only increased prejudice towards this group but was indirectly associated with increased prejudice towards a number of secondary outgroups.

Jolley et al., 2020, p. 17

Conspiracy theories may have potentially damaging and widespread consequences for intergroup relations.

Jolley et al., 2020, p. 17

Conspiracy theories typify the outgroup as a collective conspirator that threatens the majority group's welfare or values.

Jolley et al., 2020, p. 19

## 10. Hogg et al. (2017) - Conspiracy Beliefs and Knowledge About HIV Origins Among Adolescents in Soweto

**Reference:** Hogg, R., Nkala, B., Dietrich, J., Collins, A., Closson, K., Cui, Z., Kanters, S., Chia, J., Barhafuma, B., Palmer, A., Kaida, A., Gray, G., & Miller, C. (2017). Conspiracy beliefs and knowledge about HIV origins among adolescents in Soweto, South Africa. *PLOS ONE*, 12(2), e0165087.

**Aim / purpose:** To examine adolescents' knowledge about the origins of HIV/AIDS and the correlates of conspiracy beliefs about HIV origins in Soweto, South Africa.

**Hypotheses / research questions:** The article does not present formal hypotheses. It aimed to measure accurate knowledge and identify predictors of conspiracy beliefs about HIV origins.

**Method / design:** Cross-sectional observational study with 830 adolescents aged 14-19 years living in Soweto. Participants answered survey questions on HIV knowledge and beliefs about HIV origins. Logistic regression examined correlates.

**Main findings:** Only 20.2% correctly identified HIV as originating from non-human primates. A small minority, 8.6%, endorsed conspiracy beliefs, such as HIV originating from the US government, pharmaceutical industry, a vaccine, space, or a scientist. Men, unemployed/students, and those with a parent or close relative who died of HIV were more likely to believe in conspiracy theories.

**What the article achieved:** It shows that conspiracy beliefs can exist in a highly consequential health context and that accurate knowledge of HIV origins is limited among adolescents in Soweto.

**Challenges / limitations:** The study is cross-sectional and focused on adolescents recruited from one urban South African area. It does not directly measure behavioural outcomes such as condom use or treatment uptake.

**How it helps your project:** This is essential for Section 5. It gives South African evidence for why studying conspiracy beliefs matters in public health.

### Illustrative quotes

South Africa continues to experience the world's most devastating HIV epidemic.

Hogg et al., 2017, p. 2

AIDS denialism ... has had devastating consequences for South Africans.

Hogg et al., 2017, p. 2

AIDS denialism and conspiracy theories may create obstacles to HIV prevention and treatment efforts.

Hogg et al., 2017, p. 2

Of 830 adolescents, 168 (20.2%) participants correctly identified HIV as originating from chimpanzees.

Hogg et al., 2017, p. 1

Accurate knowledge of the origins of HIV and debunking myths are important for improving uptake of HIV prevention tools.

Hogg et al., 2017, p. 2

## 11. Bam (2022) - Strategies to Address Conspiracy Beliefs and Misinformation on COVID-19 in South Africa

**Reference:** Bam, N. E. (2022). Strategies to address conspiracy beliefs and misinformation on COVID-19 in South Africa: A narrative literature review. *Health SA Gesondheid*, 27, a1851.

**Aim / purpose:** To explore and describe strategies that could reduce the negative effects of COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs and misinformation in South Africa, especially to improve vaccine acceptance.

**Hypotheses / research questions:** This is a narrative literature review, so it does not test formal hypotheses. Its guiding research question asks what strategies are available in the literature to address conspiracy beliefs and misinformation.

**Method / design:** Narrative literature review using Google Scholar, EBSCOhost, WHO, Africa CDC, South African Department of Health, and university library sources from 2019-2022. The review included 27 articles after screening.

**Main findings:** Two main themes emerged: underlying motives for conspiracy theories/misinformation, and strategies to overcome them. Suggested strategies included strengthening critical scanning of information, critical review to address misinformation, and establishing approaches for managing conspiracy theories.

**What the article achieved:** It directly addresses South African COVID-19 vaccine misinformation and provides practical intervention ideas.

**Challenges / limitations:** As a narrative review, it is less systematic than a meta-analysis. It also includes the author's personal experience, which enriches context but is not generalisable empirical evidence.

**How it helps your project:** Use it in Section 5 for South African relevance and for practical intervention implications.

### Illustrative quotes

This study aimed to explore strategies that can be used to reduce the negative effects of conspiracies and misinformation about SARS-CoV-2.

Bam, 2022, p. 1

COVID-19 vaccines will change a person's DNA ... contain some microchip device ... and are a way for the oppressors in the past to control people again.

Bam, 2022, p. 2

Only 9.53 m individuals were fully vaccinated ... representing just 24% of the adult population.

Bam, 2022, p. 2

Infodemics ... lead to mistrust in public interventions, eventually causing death if not properly managed.

Bam, 2022, p. 2

What are the strategies available in literature that could be used to address conspiracy beliefs and misinformation?

Bam, 2022, p. 3

## 12. Kroesbergen-Kamps (2021/2023) - Conspiracy Theories in Africa: A Continuum of Narratives About Evil Agents

**Reference:** Kroesbergen-Kamps, J. (2021/2023). Conspiracy theories in Africa: A continuum of narratives about evil agents. In *Conspiracy theories in global perspective* (chapter).

**Aim / purpose:** To examine how conspiracy theory scholarship can be applied to African contexts without collapsing conspiracy theories into rumours, myths, occult cosmologies, or other narratives about evil agency.

**Hypotheses / research questions:** This is a conceptual chapter. The author argues for a continuum of narratives about evil agents with increasing levels of conspiracy-mindedness.

**Method / design:** Conceptual and comparative analysis of African narratives, including medical conspiracy theories, rumours about evil agents, witchcraft, Satanism, and penis snatching narratives.

**Main findings:** The chapter argues that African conspiracy-related narratives need careful conceptual treatment. Not every story about hidden evil agency is a full conspiracy theory. A full conspiracy theory needs a hidden plot involving a group or coalition, not merely one evil actor.

**What the article achieved:** It provides cultural nuance and prevents over-Westernised definitions. It is particularly useful for South African contextual framing.

**Challenges / limitations:** It is a theoretical chapter rather than empirical research. It does not measure prevalence or test predictors.

**How it helps your project:** Use it in Section 1 and Section 5. It helps justify studying conspiracy beliefs in African/South African context with cultural sensitivity.

### Illustrative quotes

Conspiracy theories are a global phenomenon.

Kroesbergen-Kamps, 2021/2023, p. 185

The research that has been done in non-Western contexts is quite limited.

Kroesbergen-Kamps, 2021/2023, p. 185

In articles on conspiracy theories in Africa, one topic immediately sticks out, namely conspiracy theories about medical conditions.

Kroesbergen-Kamps, 2021/2023, p. 185

The most basic definition of a conspiracy theory is an explanation that attributes the causes of an adverse event to a hidden conspiracy or plot conceived by a group of powerful people.

Kroesbergen-Kamps, 2021/2023, p. 186

For conspiracy theorists, what happens is not the consequence of coincidences and random events. Rather, there is an intention and an agency behind circumstances.

Kroesbergen-Kamps, 2021/2023, p. 186

## 13. Senette and Popa (2025) - Unpacking Conspiracy Mentality Through Cross-Country Predictors

**Reference:** Senette, C., & Popa, V. (2025). Unpacking conspiracy mentality through cross-country predictors. *IEEE Access*, 13, 165548-165574.

**Aim / purpose:** To identify individual, psychological, political, and sociocultural predictors of conspiracy mentality across countries.

**Hypotheses / research questions:** The study used four research questions: whether populism, ideology, authoritarianism, and socioeconomic status predict conspiracy mentality; whether self-esteem, need for closure, and cognitive style predict it; which theories cluster and vary across countries; and whether predictors of general mentality also explain specific theories.

**Method / design:** Analysis of Comparative Conspiracy Research Survey data from 8,101 participants across eight countries: Australia, Brazil, Canada, Germany, Lebanon, Morocco, South Africa, and the United States.

**Main findings:** Conspiracy mentality is influenced by both individual and sociopolitical factors. Some predictors, especially populism, had broad influence, while others varied by country. Brazil, Lebanon, and South Africa showed higher median levels of conspiracy mentality than Germany and Australia.

**What the article achieved:** It gives cross-national evidence and includes South Africa, making it especially relevant to your project. It supports treating conspiracy mentality as a multi-determined phenomenon.

**Challenges / limitations:** The data are cross-sectional and online survey-based. The paper can identify associations but not causal direction.

**How it helps your project:** Use it in Sections 2 and 5. It supports predictors, cultural context, and why South Africa matters in comparative research.

#### Illustrative quotes

Conspiracy mentality [is] a multifaceted disposition influenced by both individual characteristics and larger sociopolitical circumstances.

Senette & Popa, 2025, p. 165548

Some predictors, such as populism, have a broad influence, others are shaped by specific political and cultural contexts.

Senette & Popa, 2025, p. 165548

Interventions effective in reducing belief in CTs in one country ... may prove ineffective or even counterproductive elsewhere.

Senette & Popa, 2025, p. 165549

Individual susceptibility to CTs does not emerge in a vacuum.

Senette & Popa, 2025, p. 165549

Brazil, Lebanon, and South Africa display higher median levels of conspiracy mentality.

Senette & Popa, 2025, p. 165554

## 14. Hornsey et al. (2023) - Individual, Intergroup and Nation-Level Influences

**Reference:** Hornsey, M. J., Bierwiazzonek, K., Sassenberg, K., & Douglas, K. M. (2023). Individual, intergroup and nation-level influences on belief in conspiracy theories. *Nature Reviews Psychology*, 2, 85-97.

**Aim / purpose:** To synthesise conspiracy theory research across three levels: individual factors, intergroup dynamics, and national-level influences.

**Hypotheses / research questions:** This is a review rather than a hypothesis-testing article. Its organising claim is that conspiracy beliefs cannot be explained only at the individual level; they are shaped by micro, meso, and macro influences.

**Method / design:** Narrative review of cognitive, clinical, motivational, personality, developmental, intergroup, cultural, economic, political, and historical research.

**Main findings:** The review identifies cognitive factors like intuitive thinking and low analytic thinking; clinical factors like paranoia and schizotypy; motivational factors like control, belonging, and self-esteem; personality factors like narcissism; intergroup factors such as group threat; and national factors including corruption, inequality, authoritarianism, and democracy.

**What the article achieved:** It provides an up-to-date multilevel framework that can make your literature review sound much more sophisticated.

**Challenges / limitations:** As a narrative review, it synthesises but does not produce new empirical tests.

**How it helps your project:** Use it to structure Section 2 and to justify including South African context in Section 5.

#### Illustrative quotes

Conspiracy theories are part of mainstream public life, with the potential to undermine governments, promote racism, ignite extremism and threaten public health efforts.

Hornsey et al., 2023, p. 85

This multilevel approach offers a deep and broad insight into conspiracist thinking.

Hornsey et al., 2023, p. 85

A conspiracy theory is an explanation for important events and circumstances that involve secret plots by groups with malevolent agendas.

Hornsey et al., 2023, p. 86

Conspiracy belief is associated with relatively low levels of analytical thinking and high levels of intuitive thinking.

Hornsey et al., 2023, p. 86

Conspiracy beliefs help to accelerate and consolidate mistrust of - and anxiety about - established institutions.

Hornsey et al., 2023, p. 86

## 15. Uscinski et al. (2022) - The Psychological and Political Correlates of Conspiracy Theory Beliefs

**Reference:** Uscinski, J. E., Enders, A., Diekmann, A., Funchion, J., Klofstad, C., Kuebler, S., Murthi, M., Premaratne, K., Seelig, M., Verdear, D., & Wuchty, S. (2022). The psychological and political correlates of conspiracy theory beliefs. *Scientific Reports*, 12, 21672.

**Aim / purpose:** To examine whether known psychological and political correlates of conspiracy beliefs generalise across many different conspiracy theories.

**Hypotheses / research questions:** The guiding research question asked whether major correlates fluctuate depending on the specific conspiracy theory being examined.

**Method / design:** National survey of 2,021 US adults measuring 15 psychological/political characteristics and beliefs in 39 specific conspiracy theories, producing 585 relationships across bivariate and multivariate analyses.

**Main findings:** Psychological traits such as the Dark Triad and non-partisan political worldviews such as populism and support for violence were most consistently related to conspiracy beliefs. Partisanship and ideological extremity were less consistent. Correlates of specific beliefs often mirrored correlates of general conspiracy thinking.

**What the article achieved:** The paper shows which predictors are general and which are theory-specific. It helps avoid overinterpreting results from one specific conspiracy belief.

**Challenges / limitations:** The sample is US-based, so political patterns may not generalise to South Africa or other contexts. It is cross-sectional.

**How it helps your project:** Use it for Section 2 predictors, especially personality, populism, support for violence, and trust.

### Illustrative quotes

Understanding the individual-level characteristics associated with conspiracy theory beliefs is vital to addressing and combatting those beliefs.

Uscinski et al., 2022, p. 1

Psychological traits ... and non-partisan/ideological political worldviews ... are most strongly related to individual conspiracy theory beliefs.

Uscinski et al., 2022, p. 1

Partisanship, ideological extremity ... are inconsistently related.

Uscinski et al., 2022, p. 1

Conspiracy thinking [is] the predisposition towards believing conspiracy theories.

Uscinski et al., 2022, p. 3

These conspiracy theories vary considerably in their popularity.

Uscinski et al., 2022, p. 3

## 16. Krueppel, Yoon, and Mokros (2023) - Clarifying the Link Between Anxiety and Conspiracy Beliefs

**Reference:** Krueppel, J., Yoon, D., & Mokros, A. (2023). Clarifying the link between anxiety and conspiracy beliefs: A cross-sectional study on the role of coping with stressors. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 202, 111966.

**Aim / purpose:** To examine whether the relationship between anxiety and conspiracy beliefs can be explained by coping strategies such as vigilance and avoidance.

**Hypotheses / research questions:** The authors expected conspiracy beliefs to correlate positively with state anxiety and trait anxiety. They also tested whether vigilance and cognitive avoidance moderated the relationship between anxiety and conspiracy beliefs, and whether self-efficacy further moderated these effects.

**Method / design:** Two online studies. Study 1 included 589 participants. Study 2 included 177 participants and added a behaviour-based measure. Measures included anxiety, coping, conspiracy beliefs, behavioural inhibition, and self-efficacy.

**Main findings:** Conspiracy beliefs were linked to dispositional/trait anxiety but not situational/state anxiety. They were positively correlated with vigilance and unrelated to avoidance. Coping did not mediate or moderate the anxiety-conspiracy belief relationship.

**What the article achieved:** It refines the anxiety argument by suggesting conspiracy believers may be more generally anxious and ambiguity-intolerant rather than temporarily anxious in a specific situation.

**Challenges / limitations:** The effects were weak, and the design was cross-sectional. The authors explicitly call for replication and more focused work on anxiety, coping, and fear.

**How it helps your project:** Use it in Section 2 for anxiety and coping, and to avoid oversimplifying anxiety as a direct causal factor.

### Illustrative quotes

Conspiracy beliefs were linked to higher levels of dispositional, but not situational anxiety.

Krueppel et al., 2023, p. 1

Conspiracy beliefs were positively correlated with vigilance and unrelated to avoidance.

Krueppel et al., 2023, p. 1

Individuals who endorse conspiracy theories are rather more anxious and less tolerant to ambiguity.

Krueppel et al., 2023, p. 1

Conspiracy beliefs can be regarded as a coping strategy.

Krueppel et al., 2023, p. 2

It is not exactly clear which coping behaviors are employed by individuals who believe in conspiracy theories.

Krueppel et al., 2023, p. 2

## 17. Grzesiak-Feldman (2013) - The Effect of High-Anxiety Situations on Conspiracy Thinking

**Reference:** Grzesiak-Feldman, M. (2013). The effect of high-anxiety situations on conspiracy thinking. *Current Psychology*, 32, 100-118.

**Aim / purpose:** To examine the relationship between anxiety and conspiracy thinking about ethnic and national groups.

**Hypotheses / research questions:** Study 1 hypothesised that state and trait anxiety would positively correlate with conspiracy thinking about Jewish people, Germans, and Arabs. Studies 2 and 3 hypothesised that a high-anxiety pre-exam situation would increase conspiracy thinking about Jewish people.

**Method / design:** Three studies with 200 university student participants. Study 1 used the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory and conspiracy belief items. Studies 2 and 3 compared high-anxiety pre-exam situations with control situations.

**Main findings:** Study 1 found positive correlations between anxiety and conspiracy thinking about Jewish people, Germans, and Arabs. Studies 2 and 3 found that the pre-exam high-anxiety situation increased conspiracy thinking about Jewish people. However, the effect was not mediated by state anxiety.

**What the article achieved:** This is an early empirical source for anxiety as a situational and dispositional factor in conspiracy thinking.

**Challenges / limitations:** Small student samples, specific Polish intergroup context, and unclear mediation. Later stronger longitudinal studies complicate the causal interpretation.

**How it helps your project:** Use it as early support for anxiety but balance it with Fox and Liekefett, which show the causal evidence is weaker than simple correlations suggest.

### Illustrative quotes

The aim of the present studies was to examine a possible relationship between anxiety and conspiracy thinking about ethnic and national groups.

Grzesiak-Feldman, 2013, p. 100

State-anxiety and trait-anxiety ... were positively correlated with conspiracy thinking about Jewish people, Germans and Arabs.

Grzesiak-Feldman, 2013, p. 100

The pre-exam (high-anxiety) situation increased conspiracy thinking about Jewish people.

Grzesiak-Feldman, 2013, p. 100

Conspiracy theories provide simple answers for unanswered questions and an enemy to blame for the problem.

Grzesiak-Feldman, 2013, p. 101

High-anxiety individuals tend to adopt a threatening interpretation of ambiguous information and events.

Grzesiak-Feldman, 2013, p. 102

## 18. Swami et al. (2016) - Putting the Stress on Conspiracy Theories

**Reference:** Swami, V., Furnham, A., Smyth, N., Weis, L., Lay, A., & Clow, A. (2016). Putting the stress on conspiracy theories: Examining associations between psychological stress, anxiety, and belief in conspiracy theories. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 99, 72-76.

**Aim / purpose:** To test whether psychological stress and anxiety are associated with belief in conspiracy theories.

**Hypotheses / research questions:** The authors hypothesised that higher perceived stress and more stressful life events would be associated with greater endorsement of conspiracy theories. They also examined state anxiety, trait anxiety, and episodic tension.

**Method / design:** Cross-sectional survey of 420 US adults recruited through MTurk. Measures included belief in conspiracy theories, perceived stress, stressful life events, state/trait anxiety, episodic tension, subjective social status, and demographics.

**Main findings:** More stressful life events and greater perceived stress predicted belief in conspiracy theories after accounting for social status and age. State anxiety, trait anxiety, and episodic tension were not significant predictors.

**What the article achieved:** It provided direct evidence that stress may be a more important correlate than anxiety in some contexts.

**Challenges / limitations:** The study is cross-sectional, so it cannot establish that stress causes conspiracy beliefs. The explained variance was modest.

**How it helps your project:** Use it in Section 2 for stress as a possible antecedent, but pair it with Fox et al. to show more recent longitudinal evidence is sceptical about strong causality.

### Illustrative quotes

Psychological stress and anxiety may be antecedents of belief in conspiracy theories.

Swami et al., 2016, p. 72

More stressful life events and greater perceived stress predicted belief in conspiracy theories.

Swami et al., 2016, p. 72

State and trait anxiety and episodic tension were not significant predictors.

Swami et al., 2016, p. 72

Conspiracy theories provide simplified, causal explanations for distressing events.

Swami et al., 2016, p. 72

Higher stress would be associated with greater endorsement of conspiracy theories.

Swami et al., 2016, p. 73

## 19. Fox, Williams, and Hill (2025) - Do Stress, Depression, and Anxiety Lead to Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories?

**Reference:** Fox, N. D., Williams, M. N., & Hill, S. R. (2025). Do stress, depression, and anxiety lead to beliefs in conspiracy theories? *Clinical Psychological Science*, 1-16.

**Aim / purpose:** To test whether anxiety, depression, and stress causally affect conspiracy beliefs, and whether conspiracy beliefs affect psychological distress.

**Hypotheses / research questions:** The preregistered study tested 15 hypotheses. It predicted positive cross-lagged effects from depression, perceived stress, stressful life events, and anxiety to conspiracy beliefs/mentality, and from conspiracy beliefs/mentality to later depression, perceived stress, and anxiety.

**Method / design:** Seven-wave monthly longitudinal study with 970 participants from Australia, New Zealand, and the UK. Used multiple-indicator random-intercept cross-lagged panel models.

**Main findings:** Only one of 15 preregistered hypotheses was supported: a small cross-lagged effect of anxiety on belief in conspiracy theories. There was no evidence that conspiracy beliefs provoked later psychological distress.

**What the article achieved:** This is one of the strongest pieces of evidence cautioning against simple causal claims that distress leads to conspiracy beliefs.

**Challenges / limitations:** The sample was from English-speaking Commonwealth countries and highly educated. Longitudinal data improve causal inference but still cannot eliminate all time-varying confounds.

**How it helps your project:** Use it to refine Section 2 and Section 4. It helps you write a nuanced argument: anxiety and conspiracy beliefs correlate, but causal evidence is mixed and often weak.

### Illustrative quotes

Positive correlations between manifestations of psychological distress ... and belief in conspiracy theories have been found.

Fox et al., 2025, p. 1

It remains unclear whether these relationships represent causal effects.

Fox et al., 2025, p. 1

We found support for only one of 15 preregistered hypotheses: a small cross-lagged effect of anxiety on belief in conspiracy theories.

Fox et al., 2025, p. 1

We also found no evidence of belief in conspiracy theories itself provoking psychological distress.

Fox et al., 2025, p. 1

Our findings provide grounds for skepticism of the notion that beliefs in conspiracy theories are often motivated by psychological distress.

Fox et al., 2025, p. 1

## 20. Liekefett, Christ, and Becker (2023) - Can Conspiracy Beliefs Be Beneficial?

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

**Aim / purpose:** To test whether conspiracy beliefs reduce anxiety, uncertainty aversion, and existential threat, or whether they reinforce those negative experiences.

**Hypotheses / research questions:** The authors expected people higher in anxiety, uncertainty aversion, and existential threat to hold stronger conspiracy beliefs at the between-person level. They also expected within-person increases in those negative states to predict later increases in conspiracy beliefs, and conspiracy beliefs to predict later increases in negative states rather than reduce them.

**Method / design:** Two longitudinal studies during the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany. Study 1 had 405 participants across four waves over two-week intervals. Study 2 had 1,012 participants across four waves over longer intervals. Analyses used random-intercept cross-lagged panel models.

**Main findings:** People who were generally more anxious, uncertainty averse, and existentially threatened held stronger conspiracy beliefs. Increases in conspiracy beliefs did not reduce negative states. In Study 1, they predicted increases in anxiety, uncertainty aversion, and existential threat; in Study 2, they were unrelated. In both studies, conspiracy beliefs predicted later conspiracy beliefs, suggesting self-reinforcement.

**What the article achieved:** It directly tests whether conspiracy beliefs are helpful coping mechanisms and largely rejects that idea.

**Challenges / limitations:** Evidence differed somewhat across the two studies, and the context was COVID-19 in Germany. Still, the longitudinal design is strong.

**How it helps your project:** Use it in Section 3 and Section 4. It is your strongest source for a possible negative feedback loop.

#### Illustrative quotes

Conspiracy beliefs are adopted because they promise to reduce anxiety, uncertainty, and threat.

Liekefett et al., 2023, p. 167

Conspiracy beliefs are 'more appealing than satisfying'.

Liekefett et al., 2023, p. 167

People who were, on average, more anxious, uncertainty averse, and existentially threatened held stronger conspiracy beliefs.

Liekefett et al., 2023, p. 167

Increases in conspiracy beliefs were either unrelated to changes ... or even predicted increases in these variables.

Liekefett et al., 2023, p. 167

Conspiracy beliefs likely do not have beneficial consequences, but may even reinforce the negative experience of anxiety, uncertainty aversion, and existential threat.

Liekefett et al., 2023, p. 167

## 21. Stojanov and Halberstadt (2020) - Does Lack of Control Lead to Conspiracy Beliefs?

**Reference:** Stojanov, A., & Halberstadt, J. (2020). Does lack of control lead to conspiracy beliefs? A meta-analysis. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 50, 955-968.

**Aim / purpose:** To meta-analyse whether experimentally induced lack of control increases conspiracy beliefs.

**Hypotheses / research questions:** The study questioned the compensatory control hypothesis, which claims that lack of control motivates conspiracy beliefs. It examined whether the effect appears across studies and whether it depends on moderators such as measurement type, manipulation type, sample, manipulation checks, comparison group, and publication status.

**Method / design:** Meta-analysis of 15 reports, 23 studies, and 45 effect sizes, including published and unpublished studies.

**Main findings:** The overall effect of lack of control on conspiracy belief was small and not statistically significant. Effects were more likely when conspiracy belief was measured using specific theories rather than general conspiracy mentality.

**What the article achieved:** It provides an important corrective to overconfident claims that lack of control causes conspiracy beliefs.

**Challenges / limitations:** The available experimental literature was limited and heterogeneous. The meta-analysis can only assess existing studies.

**How it helps your project:** Use it in Section 2 to show lack of control is theoretically important but empirically contested.

#### Illustrative quotes

Perceived lack of control is widely believed to motivate ... belief in conspiracy theories.

Stojanov & Halberstadt, 2020, p. 955

The overall effect was small and not statistically significant.

Stojanov & Halberstadt, 2020, p. 955

Overall, the present studies to date offer limited support for the hypothesis that conspiracy beliefs arise as a compensatory control.

Stojanov & Halberstadt, 2020, p. 955

Conspiracy theories provide too much order and structure.

Stojanov & Halberstadt, 2020, p. 956

The way conspiracy beliefs are measured may be a source of variation in effect sizes.

Stojanov & Halberstadt, 2020, p. 956

## 22. Cordonier and Cafiero (2024) - Public Sector Corruption Is Fertile Ground for Conspiracy Beliefs

**Reference:** Cordonier, L., & Cafiero, F. (2024). Public sector corruption is fertile ground for conspiracy beliefs: A comparison between 26 Western and non-Western countries. *Social Science Quarterly*, 105, 843-861.

**Aim / purpose:** To test whether public sector corruption predicts higher levels of conspiracy beliefs across countries.

**Hypotheses / research questions:** The authors aimed to replicate previous findings that people in countries with more public sector corruption are more likely to endorse conspiracy theories, even after controlling for other country-level factors.

**Method / design:** International comparison across 26 Western and non-Western countries using YouGov conspiracy belief surveys from 2020 and 2021. Analyses included multiple linear regressions and conditional inference trees. Controls included democracy, press freedom, unemployment, homicide rates, economic inequality, and human development.

**Main findings:** Public sector corruption robustly predicted higher conspiracy beliefs even after controlling for other national-level variables. The authors argue that corruption makes conspiracy theories seem less implausible.

**What the article achieved:** It gives strong macro-level evidence that conspiracy belief is not only an individual psychological issue but also shaped by real political conditions.

**Challenges / limitations:** Country-level analyses cannot explain individual-level mechanisms directly. The data are correlational and use survey-based conspiracy indexes.

**How it helps your project:** Use it in Section 5 and Section 2. It helps argue that South African context matters because corruption, institutional trust, and historical/political conditions may make conspiracy beliefs more plausible.

### Illustrative quotes

Public sector corruption is fertile ground for conspiracy beliefs.

Cordonier & Cafiero, 2024, p. 843

People living in countries with a highly corrupt public sector seem to be more likely to endorse conspiracy theories.

Cordonier & Cafiero, 2024, p. 843

Our analyses confirm a robust link between public sector corruption and conspiracy beliefs.

Cordonier & Cafiero, 2024, p. 843

Conspiracy theories can have serious implications.

Cordonier & Cafiero, 2024, p. 844

Public sector corruption is fertile ground for conspiracy theories because it makes them less implausible to the public.

Cordonier & Cafiero, 2024, p. 843

# Quick synthesis map for your assignment structure

**1. Conceptualisation:** Use Douglas et al. (2019), van Prooijen & van Vugt (2018), Imhoff et al. (2022), Tam & Lee (2024), and Kroesbergen-Kamps. Your strongest distinction is between specific conspiracy beliefs and broader conspiracy mentality/orientation.

**2. Factors influencing conspiracy beliefs:** Use Douglas et al. (2017), Hornsey et al. (2023), Brauner et al. (2023), Tam & Lee (2024), Senette & Popa (2025), Uscinski et al. (2022), Krueppel et al. (2023), Swami et al. (2016), and Stojanov & Halberstadt (2020). Cover at least four: mistrust, anxiety/stress, cognitive style, populism/authoritarianism, lack of control, corruption/context.

**3. Factors influenced by conspiracy beliefs:** Use Halpern et al. (2019), Jennings et al. (2021), Jolley et al. (2020), Hogg et al. (2017), Liekefett et al. (2023), and Douglas et al. (2019). Cover misinformation, health behaviour, prejudice, institutional trust, and anxiety/threat.

**4. Bidirectional factors:** Best two are mistrust and anxiety/threat. Mistrust predicts conspiracy mentality (Brauner; Tam & Lee), but conspiracy exposure can deepen distrust (Liekefett; Douglas; Hornsey). Anxiety/threat can predict conspiracy belief in some studies (Grzesiak-Feldman; Swami), but stronger longitudinal evidence is mixed (Fox; Liekefett).

**5. South African context:** Use Hogg et al. (2017), Bam (2022), Kroesbergen-Kamps, Senette & Popa (2025), and Cordonier & Cafiero (2024). Emphasise public health history, HIV/AIDS denialism, COVID-19 misinformation, underrepresentation of African contexts, and institutional trust/corruption.