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ACTIVE SOCIAL MEDIA USERS ON CONSPIRACY FACEBOOK GROUPS. POLITICAL, LEADERSHIP, AND WORLDVIEW PROFILES

Agnieszka TURSKA-KAWA – Irena PILCH

ABSTRACT:

Social media outlets seem a natural place for spreading conspiracy theories. Facebook groups addressed to supporters of conspiracy theories are an essential element of these spaces. The presented research was conducted using a semi-structured interview method among the most active members of groups on Facebook focusing on themes promoting conspiracy thinking. Considering different motivations for activity on social media, we divided the sample into three subgroups, taking into account the degree of conspiratorial ideation. The study aimed to create profiles of characteristics for the “convinced” group (declaring a strong belief in conspiracy theories) and the “seeking” group (declaring less certainty in this regard). Subsequently, the differences between those belonging to the groups in terms of the three highlighted areas of functioning were analysed. Our study showed that worldview characteristics differentiated the groups with different levels of conspiracist ideation more clearly than psychological or political characteristics.

KEYWORDS:

conspiracy beliefs, conspiracy worldview, Facebook users, leadership functioning, political functioning

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1 Introduction

Conspiracy narratives emerge more often in situations that are difficult to explain, in particular in those that arouse anxiety and other negative emotions (Darius & Urquhart, 2021; Horvat, 2021). By providing quick explanations of the events generating such feelings, conspiracy theories channel them, giving the individual false reassurance. Traditional research emphasises that negative emotions of this kind are social in their nature – they are socially constructed and must be framed and re-framed (Mouffe, 1992) in ways that resonate with potential participants and, in effect, re-draw boundaries in social life (Melucci, 1996). This encourages us to look at the development of these frameworks from the point of view of the narrator, i.e., an active social media user, whose above-average activity in virtual conspiracy spaces makes it possible to identify their role as important in the process of reinforcing conspiracy echo chambers.

Social media outlets seem natural places for spreading conspiracy theories. False information, developed for minority audiences, is particularly pervasive on social media, fostering collective credulity (Mari et al., 2022). Thematic social media communities offer the opportunity to receive conspiracy content in different ways, on the one hand responding to specific user needs, but on the other hand having different implications for the relevant community. The literature makes a distinction between active and passive social media use. Verduyn et al. (2020) argue that active social media use refers to the process of content creation by posting and responding, while passive media use refers to the consumption of content (e.g., scrolling through news feeds and viewing posts). We focus attention on the most active members of Facebook groups bringing together those interested in conspiracy theories. Analyses of the role that conspiracies play in online networks (Bode & Vraga, 2018; Del Vicario et al., 2017), as well as analyses of the content of online forums that bring together supporters of such theories have been developing dynamically (Fong et al., 2021; Wood & Douglas, 2015). The current study complements these analyses by exploring the characteristics of the senders of such content.

Social media such as Facebook are central communication channels where people can share their opinions and comments, as well as get to know those shared by others. They can initiate discussions and influence their development. They can also take the role of consumers of information, without interacting with others. The ubiquity of social media and the lack of entry filters means that social media are full of diverse, not necessarily structured content (Turska-Kawa & Stępień-Lampa, 2023). However, social media collaborative filtering algorithms have enabled the formation of what are referred to as echo chambers (Gupta et al., 2022). These are spaces where users encounter only similar beliefs and opinions on a given topic, without having to consider any alternative points of view. Echo chambers favour and reinforce presupposed narratives and ideologies (Cinelli et al., 2021).

Social media seem to be a natural place to discuss conspiracy theories. Their content often stands in opposition to the explanations of important events presented in public spaces. Public institutions are often addressed in conspiratorial content, and doubts are expressed with regard to public office holders. Facebook groups addressed to supporters of conspiracy theories are an important element of these spaces. Such communities of conspiracy proponents create a particular kind of social identity. On the one hand, they make it possible to build a certain kind of imagined community, united in its views and experiences (Reid, 1985). The specific nature of this imagined construct allows the individual to shape it in line with their needs. Diana Petkova's study (2024) on the process of spreading conspiracy theories on Facebook proves that the main factors causing individuals to adhere to misconceptions are (1) the need to reduce stress, (2) low levels of education, (3) cultural memory and traumatic past experiences that shape present judgments, and (4) the phenomenon of mental schemas, making it harder for individuals to change their established beliefs and opinions. On the other hand, the widespread stigmatization of conspiracy theory supporters helps to define this community and actually strengthens it through supportive feedback. Conspiracy beliefs, understood as "stigmatised knowledge", can result in having minority status, which in turn perpetuates a sense of belonging (Lowe, 2020). The fact that these spaces are socially closed off from incidental audiences further reinforces the sense of uniqueness among their members. It also seals the boundaries of the views and opinions spread within them.

What the members of these groups have in common are definitely the conspiracy views they share, which are relatively often verified by short questions at the accession stage. However, it can be assumed that the activity is driven by a variety of motives – seeking information, reaffirming one’s beliefs, sharing experiences, persuading others of one’s opinions, and reinforcement through feedback. For this reason, it can be assumed that the participants play different roles, just as in any community. We focus on the most active individuals who, through their above-average involvement, can influence the direction of the conspiracy narrative within a specific group. We are interested in the structure of their conspiracy beliefs, their political opinions, as well as selected leadership and worldview characteristics. The data will be analysed in two groups distinguished on the basis of the level of conspiracist ideation, understood as the belief in generic (i.e., the most abstract) conspiracy theories. Profiles of characteristics will be created for the “convinced” groups (i.e., those declaring a strong belief in conspiracy theories, which may indicate a consolidated conspiracy mentality), and the “seeking” groups (i.e., those declaring less certainty in this regard, and therefore likely to seek verification of their suspicions and intuitions on conspiracy forums).

2 Participants and Procedure

The research was conducted using a semi-structured interview method, among the most active members of groups on Facebook focusing on themes promoting conspiracy thinking. These groups were identified through a search engine using keywords that included “plandemia” [“plandemic” – translator’s note], “ukropolin”, “upain” [neologisms from conspiracy theories concerning Ukraine], “prawda” [“truth”], “stop szczepieniom” [“stop vaccines”]. Some of the groups were closed (private), so each time we had to ask the administrator if we could join. Our request was sent with the research information sheet, including information on the research objectives, the institution in charge of the project, and a guarantee of the anonymity of the data collected as a result of the interviews. Not all our requests were accepted: 34 out of 112 were denied. On more than one occasion, refusal was accompanied by threats or insults, which had also been the case in similar studies (Franks et al., 2017). Group after group, as we were granted access, we carried out quantitative and qualitative analyses of the discussion participants’ activity, which allowed us to single out specific individuals to whom we sent invitations to participate in an interview. The criterion for selection was above-average activity in the group in terms of publishing content as separate posts, responding to comments or engaging in ongoing discussions under the posts. It was to those people that we sent information about the study along with the invitation, and they were assured that their opinions would be respected. Following the experience of other researchers (Franks et al., 2017; Wood & Douglas, 2015), we did not use the “conspiratorial thinking” label. Researchers have pointed out that the term is used, according to conspiracy theory proponents, to deliberately challenge alternative and reasonable explanations. It was emphasised that the interview was aimed at people who were interested in current political events and the global sociopolitical situation, as well as those who did not accept the official explanations given to the public by governments on public issues such as the pandemic, the vaccination system, and 5G systems, as well as people interested in the determinants of public decisions. These explanations convinced 73 individuals out of the 169 invited. Two people withdrew during the interview. Eventually, therefore, the final sample consisted of 71 people. A meeting was arranged with each person who had sent their consent on a platform such as MS Teams, Zoom, Meets, or via the WhatsApp video function. Each interviewee was very cautious about the respective platform, most often suggesting a different channel for contact. The answers were not recorded via audio, but in their entirety in the form of notes. The reason was the lack of consent from the study participants. The data were collected between 1st May and 31st October 2023. Participants provided informed (verbal) consent by contacting the researcher and arranging an online meeting with them. No personal data were collected and processed during the study, therefore, in agreement with the Ethics Committee, we assumed that consent to the study was granted by the subject contacting the researcher to arrange a meeting with the interviewer and participating in the interview. The principal investigator (ATK) recorded and archived the meeting date, interviewer code, and interview code along with the data.

3 Research Design

The study was exploratory in its nature. The interviews were aimed at obtaining a psychological and political characterisation of the most active conspiracist social media users. The entry filter for the study was above-average (inter)activity in the group, but we were not interested in the content of this behaviour, but in its source, i.e., the sender of the communication. The tools used made it possible to analyse the interviewees' statements in the following areas: conspiracist ideation and specific conspiracy beliefs, political, leadership and worldview features.

Observation of ongoing discussions in community groups during the process of selecting active media users confirmed the assumption that motivation to participate in such groups varied. Some people sought to persuade others of their views by means of their activity, and took part in discussions about various events and their interpretation in the light of conspiratorial beliefs. Others looked for information, for instance on the consequences of vaccination, and wanted to find out about the experiences of other people with aspects of interest to them. Importantly, the literature demonstrates that conspiratorial beliefs can have different underlying origins: cognitive (e.g., Ballová Mikušková, 2018), motivational (e.g., Alper et al., 2021), personality (e.g., Green & Douglas, 2018), psychopathological (e.g., Furnham & Grover, 2021), political (e.g., Hollander, 2018), and sociocultural (e.g., Van Prooijen & Song, 2021). Bearing this in mind, we decided to divide the group into three subgroups, taking into account the degree of conspiratorial ideation, considered to be the substrate on which beliefs in other theories are built (Miller, 2020). Subsequently, the differences between those belonging to the groups with the relatively weakest (G1) and strongest (G3) conspiracist ideation with regard to the three highlighted areas of functioning were characterised and analysed (see Figure 1).

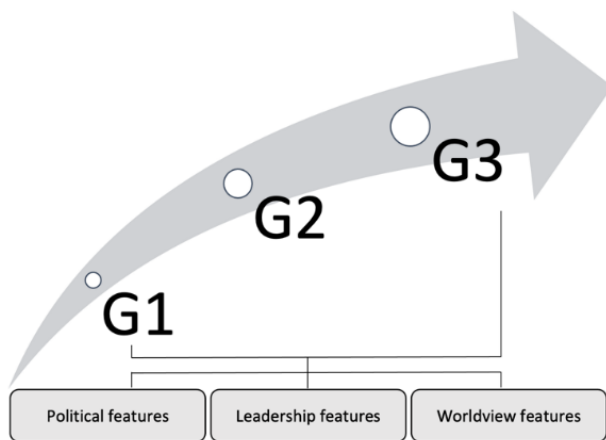


Figure 1: Research design of the study

Source: Own processing, 2024

Within the political profile framework, we analysed the respondents' political views and preferences studied in the following areas: interest in politics, political beliefs located on the left-right dimension, political subjectivity (i.e., citizens' feelings concerning their place within the political system, their sense of importance and their awareness of the significance of their civil rights) and political agency (i.e., the active and conscious attitude of the agent towards the activity itself and its direction).

As part of the leadership profile, we diagnosed selected variables describing agency, self-confidence and the tendency to control others. The aim was to find out whether people active on conspiracy theory forums perceived themselves as capable of leading others, and effective at influencing, or rather as ones seeking guidance and direction, and looking for support from other people sharing their views.

The third area of analysis involved the worldview profile of active users, identifying the key features of their view of the world. Assuming that worldview is the source of an individual's attitudes and justification for their behaviour, it can play an important role in shaping narrative. According to Koltko-Rivera (2004), a worldview (or world view) is a set of assumptions about physical and social reality that may have powerful effects on cognition and behaviour. These are often beliefs and judgments, allowing the individual to wrap what surrounds them in a system of meanings. A given worldview encompasses assumptions concerning a heterogeneous variety of topics, including human nature, as well as the meaning and nature of life. Therefore, a conspiracy worldview should involve positionings on issues of the nature of reality (ontology), the nature of knowledge (epistemology), and human agency.

4 Measures

Conspiracy beliefs. The Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale/GCBS (Brotherton et al., 2013) in the Polish adaptation by Siwiak et al. (2019) was used to assess individual differences in conspiracist ideation (e.g., *Secret organisations communicate with extraterrestrials, but keep this fact from the public*). The scale examines the generalised tendencies to believe in conspiracy theories without referring to a specific theory, which enables research at any historical moment and eliminates the effect of cultural differences. In each of the 15 items, respondents rate how much they agree with a given statement on a 5-point scale, where 1 means "strongly disagree" and 5 means "strongly agree".

Belief in particular conspiracy theories. Four 3-item scales were introduced to diagnose belief in particular conspiracy theories: (1) the SARS-CoV-2 virus pandemic (e.g., *COVID-19 morbidity and death statistics are deliberately fabricated*); (2) 5G networks (e.g., *The evidence of the dangerous impact of 5G radiation is hidden from the public*); (3) vaccines (e.g., *Vaccines are harmful and this fact is hidden from the people*); (4) Russian aggression on Ukrainian territory (e.g., *The war in Ukraine is necessary to eliminate the Nazi government there*). For each scale, the respondents were given a 5-point response scale, where 1 means "strongly disagree" and 5 means "strongly agree".

Personal sense of power. The sense of power was assessed by the Personal Sense of Power Scale (Anderson et al., 2012). The scale has eight items with answers ranging from 1 "strongly disagree" to 7 "strongly agree". The scores were averaged. Higher scores reflect higher personal power. In order to enable comparison with the results of other scales (mostly five-point), the results were converted by multiplying by 5/7 (Colman et al., 1997).

Directiveness ("aggressive dominance") was assessed by the Polish version of Ray's (1976) Directiveness Scale (short version, D-15 (Brzozowski, 1997)). The scale has 15 items with three possible answers (yes, ?, no). The scores were averaged. Higher scores reflect higher directiveness. In order to enable comparison with the results of other scales (mostly five-point), the results were converted by multiplying by 5/3 (Colman et al., 1997).

Self-esteem was measured by the Single-Item Self-Esteem Scale (SISE) (Robins et al., 2001). The participants rated their self-esteem ("I have high self-esteem") using a five-point scale (1 – "strongly disagree", 5 – "strongly agree").

Self-efficacy was measured by the three items from the General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSES) (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995). Thus, "I can solve most problems if I invest the necessary effort" is associated with the answers on a four-point scale ("not at all true", "hardly true", "moderately true", "exactly true"). In order to enable comparison with the results of other scales (mostly five-point ones), the results were converted by multiplying by 5/4 (Colman et al., 1997).

Political beliefs. The Political Beliefs Questionnaire (PBQ) is a Polish tool that identifies political beliefs (cultural and economic) on the right-left dimension (Czarnek et al., 2017). The Cultural Beliefs dimension has nine items and it consists of two subdimensions (religious fundamentalism – six items, and xenophobia – three items). The Economic Beliefs dimension has 10 items and it also consists of two subdimensions (acceptance of capitalism – three items, and "anti-welfare" – seven items). The subjects answered using a five-point scale (1 – "strongly disagree", 5 – "strongly agree"). The scores were averaged. Higher scores reflect more right-wing beliefs.

Political agency was measured using a tool developed for this research, based on a classic question about the declarative intentions to participate (Durand et al., 2004). The respondents were asked to estimate the likelihood of attending each of the eight political events listed, if they took place on the following day. Willingness to participate in the following was measured: (1) presidential elections, (2) parliamentary elections, (3) local elections, (4) European Parliament elections, (5) referendum on a question important to the participant, (6) civic budget vote, (7) meeting with a politician, (8) protest/demonstration concerning an important issue. The participants answered using a five-point scale (1 – “definitely not”, 5 – “definitely yes”). The scores were averaged, with higher scores indicating higher political agency. Due to the potentially different motivation for participating in the individual events, the analysis was carried out both for the scale as a whole and for the individual activity types.

Political subjectivity was measured with the Political Subjectivity Scale (Turska-Kawa, 2023). The scale consists of three factors, confirmed by an explanatory factor analysis: identification with the political system, political initiative, and political sense. The first factor included citizens’ feelings concerning their place within the political system, their sense of importance and their awareness of the significance of their civil rights, and was measured with two items: “I feel important as a citizen” and “Regardless of the reshuffling of the political scene after the elections, I know that there is a place for me as a citizen.” The second factor expressed citizens’ initiative to deepen their political subjectivity – searching for knowledge, observing current events, and combining them into a cause-and-effect system. It should be emphasised that the activity element in this factor is not related to a tangible impact on the political system (e.g., through participation in elections or referenda) but rather to caring for one’s subjectivity. It consisted of two items: “I keep up to date with political events” and “I am keen to expand my knowledge about current political events”. The third factor included expressions defining the perception of a sense of political space and comprehension of the rules that govern it: “It is difficult to find any logic in politicians’ behaviours” and “I find the political scene unpredictable”. The participants were asked to respond on a 5-point scale (1 – “strongly disagree”; 5 – “strongly agree”).

Acceptance of democracy, a set of questions showing attitudes towards the democratic system. The respondents were asked to subjectively rate on a 5-point scale the importance of individual features of the democratic system. They were asked whether and how important it was to them to have the following in Poland: (1) free and fair elections; (2) political parties functioning alongside one another, engaging in discussions and disputes; (3) the media providing citizens with reliable information allowing them to assess the government; (4) constitutional courts having the ability to stop government actions when it exceeds its powers; (5) courts treating everyone equally. Due to the different areas of democracy addressed in the individual items, the analysis treats them separately.

Worldview characteristics were measured using the incomplete sentence method, a semi-structured instrument in which the subject is asked to complete previously prepared sentences. The resulting data are analysed qualitatively and quantitatively. The respondents were asked to complete the sentences with the first thing that came to their mind after hearing the first part. They were instructed to provide a prompt response, without reflecting too long. The test consisted of 12 statements, e.g., *The world’s biggest lie is...*; *My greatest support is...* Bearing in mind that the key feature of the conspiracy worldview is that it explains the complex social reality of modern societies in terms of the logic of action (Vobruba, 2024), the items proposed oscillated between diagnosing the major driving forces operating in the more and less immediate social environment of conspiracist social media users.

5 Results and Discussion

5.1 Preliminary Analysis

Descriptive statistics for the variables included in the study and the reliability of the tools are presented in Table 1. Correlations between the variables describing conspiracy thinking and the remaining variables are presented in Table 2. Results of all statistical tests are given for a two-sided p-value.

Table 1: Reliability of the scales, descriptive statistics and group comparisons

Variable	α	Sample (N=71)		Group 1 (N=24)		Group 3 (N=23)		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> -value
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Conspiracist ideation	0.88	3.72	0.63	3.08	0.21	4.50	0.30	-18.63	<0.001
Anti-vaccines conspiracy	0.86	3.69	0.99	3.36	1.07	4.19	0.76	-3.05	0.002
Anti-war conspiracy	0.84	2.70	1.00	2.53	1.14	3.13	1.01	-1.92	0.031
Anti-5G conspiracy	0.79	3.22	0.87	2.92	0.82	3.67	0.77	-3.22	0.001
Anti-COVID conspiracy	0.85	4.11	0.97	3.46	1.13	4.67	0.48	-4.81	<0.001
Self-esteem	-	3.44	0.92	3.50	0.83	3.35	1.11	0.53	0.597
Personal power	0.75	3.33	0.62	3.27	0.57	3.30	0.74	-0.13	0.893
Self-efficacy	0.70	4.10	0.86	3.92	1.06	4.29	0.70	-1.40	0.167
Directiveness	0.81	3.47	0.81	3.42	0.67	3.51	0.89	-0.38	0.708
Interest in politics	-	3.17	1.19	3.18	1.17	3.35	1.14	-0.05	0.620
Political agency	0.71	4.03	0.59	3.97	0.44	4.15	0.68	-1.10	0.276
Identification with the system	0.67	3.48	1.12	3.54	1.02	3.06	1.21	1.46	0.151
Political initiative	0.76	3.51	1.10	3.69	0.96	3.67	1.14	0.44	0.965
Political sense	0.52	2.41	1.03	2.52	1.02	2.11	1.06	1.36	0.181
Religious fundamentalism	0.75	2.44	0.85	2.53	1.01	2.31	0.88	0.81	0.424
Xenophobia	0.72	3.48	1.02	3.22	0.99	3.65	1.07	-1.43	0.160
Acceptance of capitalism	0.32	2.55	0.74	2.49	0.79	2.55	0.74	-0.29	0.774
Anti-welfare	0.82	2.75	0.94	2.67	0.77	2.72	1.02	-0.18	0.856

Note. α – reliability of the scale (Cronbach’s alpha). *t* – Student’s *t* statistics.

Source: Own processing, 2024

In the case of conspiracist ideation ($M=3.72$), the mean score was higher compared to the results of other Polish studies on groups from the general population that did not use purposive sampling (e.g., Kowalska-Duplaga & Duplaga, 2023: $M=3.02$); (Siwak et al., 2019: $M=2.69$). Four specific conspiracy theories were additionally included in this study: the anti-vaccines conspiracy ($M=3.69$), the Ukraine war conspiracy ($M=2.70$), the anti-5G conspiracy ($M=3.22$), and the anti-COVID-19 conspiracy ($M=4.11$). The relatively highest scores were obtained for the COVID-19 conspiracy, where the mean was above 4 on the response scale (“rather true”), and the lowest ones for the Ukraine war conspiracy, where the mean was below the midpoint on the response scale (“hard to say”). The above results indicate that the studied group was not homogeneous in terms of the conspiracy beliefs held. At the same time, these beliefs correlated significantly with each other and with conspiracist ideation (see Table 2).

Table 2: Correlations between conspiracy beliefs and other variables ($N=71$)

Variable	Conspiracist ideation	Anti-vaccines	Anti-war	Anti-5G	Anti-COVID
Conspiracist ideation	-	0.38**	0.34**	0.38***	0.56***
Anti-vaccines conspiracy	0.38**	-	0.65***	0.67***	0.45***
Anti-war conspiracy	0.34**	0.65***	-	0.57***	0.39***
Anti-5G conspiracy	0.38***	0.67***	0.57***	-	0.46***
Anti-COVID conspiracy	0.56***	0.45***	0.39***	0.46***	-
Self-esteem	-0.15	-0.08	-0.19	-0.03	-0.05

Personal power	-0.03	-0.08	-0.14	-0.09	0.11
Self-efficacy	0.16	-0.13	-0.22	-0.15	0.01
Directiveness	0.02	-0.02	-0.12	-0.05	-0.11
Interest in politics	0.10	0.01	0.12	0.07	-0.17
Political agency	0.12	-0.03	-0.05	-0.14	0.05
Identification with the system	-0.28*	0.01	0.02	0.14	0.06
Political initiative	0.05	-0.06	-0.12	-0.09	-0.03
Political sense	-0.19	-0.09	-0.26*	-0.11	-0.17
Religious fundamentalism	-0.11	0.30*	0.48**	0.11	-0.03
Xenophobia	0.15	0.17	0.33**	0.12	0.21
Acceptance of capitalism	-0.01	0.17	0.13	0.10	-0.09
Anti-welfare	0.01	0.11	-0.10	-0.12	-0.18

*p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001.

Source: Own processing, 2024

Correlations of variables describing conspiracy beliefs with other variables were not numerous. Conspiracist ideation and the specific conspiracy beliefs did not correlate with age and gender or with any psychological variable (self-esteem, directiveness, self-efficacy, the sense of personal power). In addition, a weak negative correlation was observed between declared financial situation and the Ukraine war conspiracy ($r=-0.27$, $p=0.022$).

In the case of the political variables, conspiracist ideation correlated negatively only with political subjectivity–identification with the system. For specific conspiracy beliefs, a significant negative correlation was observed between the Ukraine war conspiracy and political subjectivity–political sense and a positive correlation with religious fundamentalism and xenophobia.

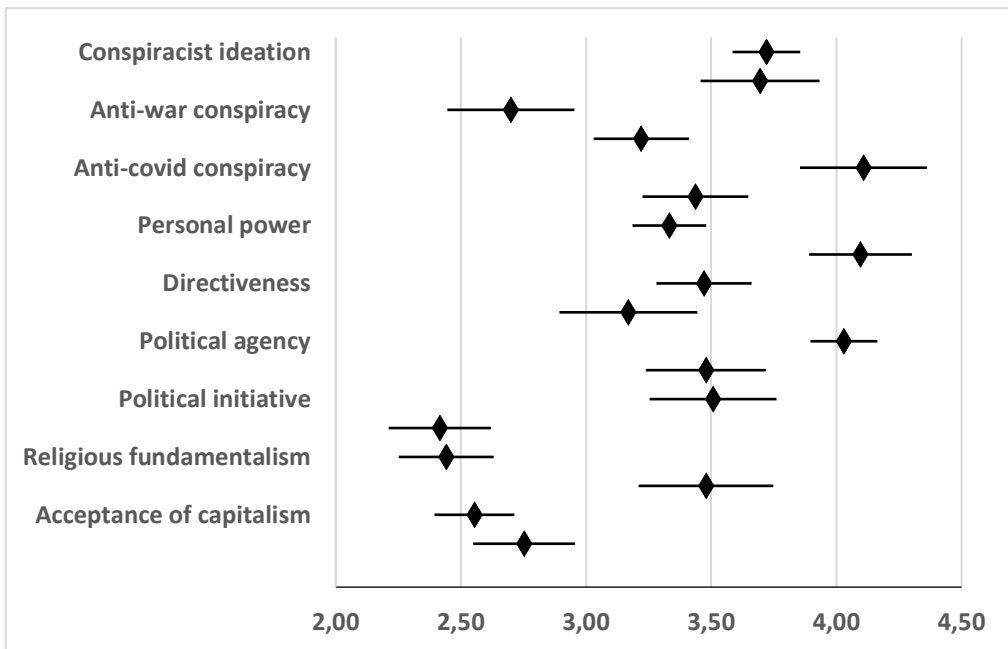


Figure 2: Forest plot for the data – means with 95% confidence intervals (CI) for the study variables

Source: Own processing, 2024

5.2 Internal Diversity of the Active Conspiracist Media Users Group

In line with the proposed model, we were interested in the characteristics of individuals with the relatively highest and lowest levels of conspiratorial ideation. Consequently, the study sample was divided into three subgroups according to their GCBS scores, using the 33.3 and 66.6 percentile values (3.27 and 4.00, respectively) as dividing points. This yielded subgroups with similar numbers (G1 n=24, G2 n=24, G3 n=23), but with significantly different levels of conspiracist ideation (G1 M=3.08, G2 M=3.62, G3 M=4.50). Further analysis used the scores of the groups on the extreme ends in terms of the level of conspiracist ideation: G1 (“seeking”) and G3 (“convinced”). Group comparisons for variables measured on the interval scale were made using the t-test for independent groups (together with Levene’s test for equality of variances), and for variables measured on the ordinal scale – using the non-parametric Mann-Whitney test (Ferguson & Takane, 1999 see Table 1 and Figure 2).

First, the groups of “seeking” and “convinced” respondents were compared in terms of their acceptance of specific conspiracy theories. The groups differed significantly in terms of their level of acceptance of three of the four conspiracy theories included in the survey (anti-COVID-19, anti-vaccines, anti-5G; in the case of the war in Ukraine, a statistical trend emerged, with $p=0.06$). According to the mean scores, we can characterise the “seeking” as a group with an average level of conspiracist ideation (M=3.08 – the middle value on a five-point scale), accompanied by uncertainty (“hard to say”) concerning the veracity of the four conspiracy theories under investigation. In turn, the “convinced” are those with high conspiracist ideation (M=4.5) accompanied by: a very strong belief in the veracity of the COVID-19 conspiracy (M=4.67), a strong belief in the veracity of the vaccines conspiracy (M=4.19), and a slightly weaker belief in the veracity of the 5G conspiracy (M=3.67). Uncertainty in this group is declared only regarding the veracity of the Ukraine war conspiracy (M=3.13). We can therefore presume that active participation of those assigned to the “seeking” group in forums of conspiracy theory proponents is rather aimed at acquiring information to cope with uncertainty regarding the veracity of the conspiratorial vision of the world, which arouses their interest, but with which they do not identify at the moment. However, this is not the case for members of the “convinced” group, who declare strong conspiracy beliefs and whose “area of uncertainty” is limited only to the latest of the conspiracy theories included in the study (i.e., Ukraine war conspiracy).

5.3 Political Profile

In order to investigate potential differences between the “seeking” and the “convinced” in terms of selected political science variables (interest in politics, political beliefs, political subjectivity, political agency), a t-test for independent groups was conducted again. No statistically significant differences were demonstrated between the groups in terms of the variables analysed (see Table 1 and Figure 2).

In the subsequent step, differences between the groups were sought by analysing the answers to individual questions concerning declared participation in political events (questions forming the political agency scale) and additionally in questions diagnosing acceptance of the rules of the democratic system (see Table 3). In the questions from the scale exploring acceptance of democracy, the differences concerned operation of the media (“Is it important for you that the media provide citizens with reliable information making it possible to assess the government?”), constitutional courts (“Is it important for you that the constitutional courts have the ability to stop the government’s actions when it exceeds its powers?”) and common courts of law (“Is it important for you that the courts treat everyone equally?”). In each of these questions, the “convinced” declared stronger support for a given statement compared to the “seeking”. This result shows a greater orientation of those with stronger conspiracy beliefs towards equal treatment of citizens, but interestingly enough, only on the part of those whose primary role is to look after the interests of citizens in terms of providing information (media) and observance of the law (courts). The remaining questions of the scale, which did not differentiate between people with different levels of CBs, directly addressed political power, i.e., political parties, power as such, and political leaders.

In the questions concerning participation in political events, the difference concerns the likelihood of participating in a “referendum on a matter important to the respondent” and a “protest/demonstration concerning a

matter important to the respondent” (the “convinced” scored higher than the “seeking”), while there were no differences regarding participation in elections (parliamentary, presidential, local, and for the European Parliament). The group with stronger beliefs is therefore significantly more involved in social activities of a political nature. These events do not entail decision-making effects defined by law or by the constitution, but are in fact consultative and exploratory in their nature in terms of public attitudes and opinions. The groups are not differentiated, in turn, when it comes to participation in political elections, i.e., events in line with the constitutional and legal order.

Table 3: Differences between the “seeking” and “convinced” groups in the answers to the political agency and acceptance of democracy questions (Mann-Whitney non-parametric test)

Questions	U-statistics	p-value
Would you take part in the following events:		
Presidential elections	305.5	0.441
Local elections	314.5	0.356
parliamentary elections (Sejm, Senate)	312.5	0.366
European Parliament elections	282.5	0.882
Referendums of a matter of importance to me	372.5	0.010
Civic budget vote	299.5	0.591
Meeting with a politician	303.0	0.554
Protest/demonstration on a matter of importance to me	404.5	0.005
Do you find it important to have...		
Free and fair political elections?	305.0	0.479
A great number of political parties functioning alongside one another, and having discussions and disputes with one another?	296.5	0.647
The media providing citizens with reliable information to be able to access the government?	351.0	0.047
Constitutional courts being able to stop the government when it exceeds its powers?	350.5	0.044
The courts treating everyone equally?	378.5	0.007
People obeying the authorities unconditionally?	306.5	0.461

Source: Own processing, 2024

The above results show that the active conspiracy media users’ attitudes are not explicitly anti-democratic: those elements of democracy that place a clear emphasis on equal treatment of citizens are accepted more strongly by those with higher levels of conspiracy ideation. However, these are areas not directly related to political power. When it comes to political representatives, these are areas that do not differentiate between the “seeking” and the “convinced”. This may indicate a strong need for the most active conspiracy media users to influence the political sphere and make decisions within it.

Studies have appeared in the literature highlighting the anti-democratic nature of conspiracy theories. For example, the study by Papaioannou et al. (2023) established a link between conspiracy beliefs and rejection of democracy. However, researchers have demonstrated much more often that belief in conspiracy theories is associated with a decline in support for representative democracy, but also with an increase in support for direct democracy (Pantazi et al., 2021). In another study, conspiracy beliefs were linked to a general tendency to reject liberal democracy (Prooijen, 2018) and a preference for different forms of government (Richey, 2017).

5.4 Leadership Profile

In the subsequent step, the “seeking” and “convinced” groups were compared in terms of selected psychological characteristics (self-esteem, self-efficacy, the sense of personal power, and directiveness), forming the leadership profile created for this study. The t-test for independent samples showed no statistically significant differences between the groups in terms of the variables analysed (see Table 1 and Figure 2). On the basis of the mean scores, members of both subgroups can be characterised as having average self-esteem, with average confidence in their ability to influence other people and shape their behaviours, and high self-efficacy scores. In turn, directiveness, defined as a tendency to force one’s will on other people and associated with aggressive dominance and themselves as self-confident, but without a clear tendency to impose their opinion on others.

According to Smircich and Morgan (1982, p. 258), “Leadership is realised in the process whereby one or more individuals succeed in attempting to frame and define the reality of others.” A strong belief in one’s own abilities, reflected in valuing oneself highly (i.e., high self-esteem) and in believing in one’s ability to cope with any situation (i.e., self-efficacy), accompanied by the confidence in one’s ability to effectively shape the judgments and behaviours of others (i.e., a sense of power) and the motivation to dominate and shape others according to one’s will (directiveness), constitute a set of characteristics strongly conducive to a group member assuming leadership roles. However, in the current study only average levels of the above characteristics were observed in the “convinced” subgroup. On the basis of this result, despite the high level of activity of such individuals on the forums, they should rather not be expected to take effective actions aimed at “framing and defining the reality of others” (Smircich & Morgan, 1982) in line with their own conspiratorial vision of the world. However, it cannot be ruled out that people with leadership qualities were among those who declined to participate in this study.

5.5 Worldview Profile

In the subsequent step, the quantitative analysis was enriched by a qualitative one. Using the incomplete sentence method, an attempt was made to obtain the basic worldview characteristics of the interviewees and find differences between the groups distinguished (see Table 1S in the Supplementary material).

In the answers completing the sentence *The world’s biggest lie is...* the “seeking” group is dominated by specific detailed issues that have triggered much discussion in recent years. The respondents cited the COVID-19 pandemic most often (45.83%), with vaccines (16.67%) and climate change (16.67%) also appearing. The “convinced” display a different approach in terms of what they consider to be the biggest lies. They overwhelmingly refer to politics (democracy, politicians, elections) in this case (69.57%).

Those “seeking” *truth* look for it primarily in the media (66.67%), sometimes described more precisely as independent or impartial. This response appeared only twice among the “convinced”. Most of them look for truth in themselves (in their own knowledge or experience) (34.78%), as well as in religious contexts (God, the Bible; 26.09%). Non-media sources of information indicated were books (21.74%).

The world around the “seeking” is difficult, complicated or strange (62.5%). Group 3, on the other hand, describes the world pejoratively, as broken, manipulated or even messed up (86.96%). A similar disproportion is noticeable in relation to the sentence *Everything that surrounds us is...* In the “seeking” group, there were more indications pointing to the beauty and goodness of what is around us (45.83%), whereas one statement was pejorative. In turn, what surrounds the “convinced” is more often evil, trash or illusion (39.13%), with the other terms being rather neutral. There are relatively many references to nature (26.09%). *A chance for a better world* for the “seeking” is provided more often by the truth (20.83%), while among the „convinced” there are references to knowledge (21.74%) and politics (21.74%).

Answers completing the sentence *Politicians treat citizens...* do not differentiate the distinguished groups. All the data obtained are pejorative expressions of citizens, pointing to a lack of respect on the part of politicians.

The answers completing sentences referring to *Democracy* do not clearly differentiate the groups either. Negative descriptions of the system prevail (the biggest source of lies, war, rule of fools). The few positive ones

appearing among both the “seeking” (33.33%) and the “convinced” (21.74%), are those related to freedom (of speech, of decision, of people).

An interesting dividing line between the groups is drawn by the sentence *My greatest support is...* Almost all of the “seeking” group’s responses (91.67%) indicate the family as a whole or its individual members (mother, husband, daughter). Similar indications were recorded much less frequently among the “convinced” (30.44%). More responses focus on the respondent, indicating themselves, or their knowledge, as being the greatest source of support (43.48%). The remaining responses are religious (faith, God; 26.09%).

The “seeking” more often *believe* in people (37.5%), with a similar response appearing only once among the “convinced”. In turn, those with stronger conspiracy views believe more often in themselves (17.39%), such a response not appearing even once among the “seeking”. God appears more frequently among the “convinced” (39.13%) than in Group 1 (12.5%).

The majority of the answers, regardless of the group, indicate that the respondents *will never learn* the truth. Truth is defined broadly, in individual cases specified in more detail, for instance with regard to UFOs, how Sikorski died, what comes after death. Among the “convinced”, there were some responses (34.78%) that clearly indicated someone was concealing the truth (Who is telling the truth? Who rules the world? Who planned 9/11?).

The vast majority of the respondents *are afraid* of aspects related to the transience of life: illness, old age, death. What is clearly noticeable in the “convinced” group is the higher number of indications of death (34.78%). Some responses were also absent among the “seeking”, i.e., war (13.04%) and influential people (13.04%).

Respondents *hold most highly values* such as honesty and integrity (29.17% of the “seeking”; 20.29% of the “convinced”). In the “seeking” group, two values appeared that were not indicated at all by the “convinced”, namely family (9.72%) and health (5.56%). In turn, only the “convinced” indicated God as a value (7.25%).

Taking the above into account, the worldview of the “convinced” can be placed on four pillars: the central Self – the threatening world – hypocritical politics – immaterial authority. These are the four areas that clearly distinguished this group from the “seeking”, and the responses obtained within their boundaries were relatively consistent.

Central Self. Those with stronger conspiratorial views make themselves the context of functioning more often. They more often seek the truth within themselves than in external sources, they are more likely to believe in themselves and to be their own support.

The results obtained are in line with a number of studies whose findings suggest that people with relatively high levels of conspiracy thinking disregard others to a greater extent, focusing on themselves. These respondents display higher levels of narcissism both at the individual level (Cichočka et al., 2016; Siem et al., 2021) and collectively (Cichočka et al., 2016; Golec De Zavala & Federico, 2018). Moreover, exposure to conspiracy theories decreases various prosocial actions (Jolley & Douglas, 2014; van der Linden, 2015). Belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theories was related to greater concerns about one’s own safety, and lower concerns about the safety of close others (Hornsey et al., 2021). People higher in conspiracy beliefs are also more likely to report egocentric threat bias (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2018).

Threatening world. The environment surrounding those higher in conspiracy belief is defined by a number of pejorative terms expressing a negative attitude. Explicit language appears, and some respondents point to the world being filled with lies and manipulation.

Similar results have been obtained in other studies. Generic conspiracist beliefs were positively associated with dangerous worldview, competitive worldview, and zero-sum game belief (Grigoryev & Gallyamova, 2023). It has also been proven that beliefs about an unfair world were indeed linked to belief in conspiracy theories (Furnham, 2021). This belief is strongly rooted in negative affect (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018), and in many cases conspiracies gain influence by evoking negative emotions such as fear and anxiety (Fong et al., 2021).

Hypocritical politics. All respondents described politics and politicians negatively, highlighting being treated disrespectfully as citizens. However, those with stronger conspiratorial views identified the political sphere more often as the source of the biggest lies. They were also more likely to suggest that someone (an individual or a group of people) was hiding the truth about key events. Yablokov (2015, p. 302) argues that conspiracy theories “function by helping to unite the audience as ‘the people’ against the imagined ‘other’, represented as a secretive ‘power bloc’.”

Immaterial authority: God and religious references in the context of truth appear significantly more often in the group with stronger conspiratorial views. Although there is a fairly strong current in the literature pointing to a similarity between an all-powerful being (as described in many religions) and a hidden power organising events or hiding the truth (Pilch et al., 2023), divergences appear in this respect (e.g., Andrade, 2021; Kim & Kim, 2021). The study was conducted in Poland, where Catholicism has a strong and deeply-rooted presence.

The world of the “convinced” is thus built along the line between the Self and God. It is worth pointing out that this is a line where the burden of responsibility rests with the individual and in an immaterial space, difficult to verify, given meaning and significance by the individual themselves. In between, there is the threatening world, filled primarily with the hypocritical sphere of politics. Indirectly, this may emphasise the low level of trust (both interpersonal and institutional), quite consistently diagnosed among proponents of conspiracy theories (e.g., Milošević Đorđević et al., 2021; Vezzoni et al., 2022).

6 Concluding Remarks

A large part of the spaces we reached were restricted, and we requested permission to be able to join the respective groups. This way in which conspiracy groups are embedded has a protective function and reinforces the views of those who belong to them. The content that functions in such groups is more or less conspiratorial, clearly challenging the explanations circulating in public spaces for events such as the pandemic, inflation crises, climate change, vaccines, etc. Within these groups, natural expression of one of the basic cognitive biases occurs, i.e., confirmation bias, according to which, instead of attempting to learn the objective truth, we persistently search for arguments that confirm our beliefs.

Responses regarding sources of information reliable for the respondents display an interesting inconsistency. They were selected for the study as the most active participants in discussion groups on social media profiles. However, it turns out that for the “convinced” group, media outlets are not reliable sources of information. We can therefore assume that this above-average commitment is motivated differently. They may view the media as a possible channel for spreading knowledge that is consistent with conspiracy theories. Other analyses supported a positive link between the frequency and intensity of positive feedback received by users and perceived happiness that was mediated in part by an increase in self-esteem (Marengo et al., 2021).

Our study showed that worldview characteristics more clearly differentiated groups with different levels of conspiracist ideation than of psychological or political functioning. This is in line with a study by Adrian Furnham (2023), whose results prove that self-ratings of esteem and success play a smaller role in CT than other factors such as ideology and worldview. The key feature of the conspiracy worldview is that it explains the complex social reality of modern societies in terms of the logic of action and traces it back to an omnipotent centre of action, its hidden intentions and the resulting manipulative strategies (Vobruba, 2024).

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