



Kent Academic Repository

van Prooijen, Jan-Willem, Bergmann, Paul K., Čavojevová, Vladimira and Šrol, Jakub (2026) *Everyone knows it's a hoax: The role of perceived descriptive norms in conspiracy beliefs*. *European Journal of Social Psychology* . ISSN 0046-2772.

Downloaded from

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/116090/> The University of Kent's Academic Repository KAR

The version of record is available from

<https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.70111>

This document version

Publisher pdf

DOI for this version

Licence for this version

CC BY (Attribution)

Additional information

Versions of research works

Versions of Record

If this version is the version of record, it is the same as the published version available on the publisher's web site. Cite as the published version.

Author Accepted Manuscripts

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding. Cite as Surname, Initial. (Year) 'Title of article'. To be published in **Title of Journal** , Volume and issue numbers [peer-reviewed accepted version]. Available at: DOI or URL (Accessed: date).

Enquiries

If you have questions about this document contact ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in KAR. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our [Take Down policy](https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies) (available from <https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies>).

RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Everyone Knows It's a Hoax: The Role of Perceived Descriptive Norms in Conspiracy Beliefs

Jan-Willem van Prooijen^{1,2,3} | Paul K. Bergmann^{1,4} | Vladimira Čavojová⁵ | Jakub Šrol^{5,6}

¹Department of Experimental and Applied Psychology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, the Netherlands | ²The Netherlands Institute for the Study of Crime and Law Enforcement (NSCR), Amsterdam, the Netherlands | ³Department of Criminal Law and Criminology, Maastricht University, Maastricht, the Netherlands | ⁴Department of Psychology, University of Marburg, Marburg, the Netherlands | ⁵Slovak Academy of Sciences, Centre of Social and Psychological Sciences, Institute of Experimental Psychology, Bratislava, Slovakia | ⁶School of Psychology, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK

Correspondence: Jan-Willem van Prooijen (j.w.van.prooijen@vu.nl)

Received: 9 April 2026 | **Revised:** 25 August 2026 | **Accepted:** 29 August 2026

Keywords: conspiracy theories | descriptive norms | false consensus | overconfidence | social influence

ABSTRACT

People's belief in conspiracy theories is shaped by social influence processes. This contribution investigated these processes in six studies (total $N = 2906$) by examining the role of descriptive norms, that is, the perception that others endorse conspiracy theories. Studies 1a and 1b indicate that stronger own conspiracy beliefs are associated with overestimating conspiracy beliefs in others. Studies 2a and 2b showed that experimentally exposing participants to a conspiracy theory increased their perceptions of the extent others believed this conspiracy theory. Studies 3 and 4 manipulated descriptive norm information. Although abstract, context-free normative information did not influence conspiracy beliefs (Study 3), providing factual statistical information showing that most people do not believe in various specific conspiracy theories reduced participants' own conspiracy beliefs (Study 4). These results indicate that perceived descriptive norms are important to understand why people often believe the conspiracy theories spread by others.

1 | Introduction

Conspiracy theories are widespread on social media and in public discourse. During the COVID-19 pandemic, popular conspiracy theories (e.g., that the coronavirus was created by humans in the lab, that the pandemic was a hoax or that policymakers covered up dangerous side-effects of the mRNA-vaccines) quickly reached a large audience and subsequently were accepted as true by surprisingly large numbers of citizens (Bierwiazczek et al. 2022; Pummerer et al. 2022). This underscores the basic notion that people's belief in conspiracy theories often may emerge via social influence processes. Understanding these social influence processes is crucial as conspiracy beliefs can be harmful to societies, for instance by undermining public health, societal cohesion and climate action, and by stimulating conflict, crime and radicalization (e.g., Biddlestone et al. 2022; Bowes et al. 2023;

Hebel-Sela et al. 2022; Hornsey et al. 2023; Imhoff et al. 2021; Jolley et al. 2019, 2022; Kruglanski et al. 2022; Van Es et al. 2025; Van Prooijen, Fousiani, et al. 2025; Van Prooijen, Šrol, et al. 2025). The present contribution will examine the possibility that encountering conspiracy theories stimulates exaggerated inferences about descriptive norms, that is, the extent to which others are perceived to believe these theories—which, in turn, shapes people's own conspiracy beliefs.

Conspiracy theories are commonly defined as explanatory narratives that assume multiple actors to collude in secret agreement for nefarious purposes (Van Prooijen and Van Vugt 2018). Beliefs in conspiracy theories are inherently social, as they often are part of people's identity (e.g., Biddlestone et al. 2025; Douglas et al. 2017; Robertson et al. 2022; Van Prooijen 2024). For instance, people regularly endorse conspiracy theories about outgroups,

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2026 The Author(s). *European Journal of Social Psychology* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

including political groups, sports teams, ethnic minorities and other nations (Bertin et al. 2023; Mao et al. 2024; Miller et al. 2016; Obaidi et al. 2022; Van Prooijen and Song 2021; Van Prooijen, Fousiani, et al. 2025). In the online environment, some influencers successfully spread many false conspiracy theories and other forms of misinformation to a large audience (e.g., ‘super-spreaders’; Van der Linden 2022), conspiracy theories sometimes go viral within receptive communities (Del Vicario et al. 2016), and people share them to get social approval (e.g., ‘likes’; Rathje et al. 2023). Importantly, simply exposing people to conspiracy theories turns out to be an effective way to increase their belief in them. Experimental research underscores that merely reading a blog post promoting a conspiracy theory robustly increases the likelihood that participants believe the theory (Jolley et al. 2014, 2019; Pummerer et al. 2022; Van Prooijen et al. 2022). Altogether, these insights suggest that belief in conspiracy theories can be socially contagious, and that sharing them in social networks is often sufficient to increase support for conspiracy theories.

This suggests that the principle of social proof is likely to play a role in people’s acceptance of conspiracy theories. Social proof refers to the psychological process that people determine their own attitudes and behaviours by imitating the attitudes and behaviours of others (Cialdini 1984). Particularly when people feel uncertain how to think, feel or behave in a situation, they look for cues to make inferences about descriptive norms, that is, what most other people think, feel or do. Consistently, empirical research underscores that norms influence attitudes and behaviours across judgement domains particularly after being reminded of their own mortality (Fritzsche et al. 2010; Jonas et al. 2008) or when experiencing low levels of sociopolitical control (Potoczek et al. 2023). Descriptive norms, hence, are powerful tools to shape people’s attitudes and behaviours in a broad variety of settings (Cialdini et al. 1990; Cialdini and Trost 1998).

Not all social information that people encounter represents the majority opinion, however, which is particularly the case for conspiracy theories. Even when some conspiracy theories are widespread, the number of citizens *disbelieving* a conspiracy theory usually is much bigger than the number of citizens believing it (Imhoff et al. 2022; Sutton and Douglas 2022; Van Prooijen et al. 2023), although there are exceptions (e.g., conspiracy theories about the Kennedy assassination; Brennan 2023). Yet, as conspiracy theories draw significant attention and often are amplified online, encountering conspiracy theories may lead people to overestimate the number of others who believe in them (Robertson et al. 2024). This, in turn, might increase their own susceptibility to these conspiracy theories. Put differently, exposing people to conspiracy theories may prompt them to make inflated estimates of descriptive norms of conspiracy beliefs, which may contribute to subsequent endorsement of those conspiracy theories.

1.1 | Descriptive Norms in Conspiracy Beliefs

The human tendency towards conformity underscores that people are social animals. Two types of norms are typically associated with such social influence. The first type is injunctive norms,

which prescribe what attitudes and behaviours are considered socially desirable, thus providing a guideline for people to adopt those attitudes and behaviours that increase social acceptance and decrease the likelihood of rejection by their community (i.e., normative social influence). More central to the current investigation, the second type is descriptive norms, which provide information about how many others display certain attitudes or behaviours. Such consensus information validates or invalidates people’s prior attitudes and beliefs, leading to more confidence about their perceptions of the world (informational social influence) (for an overview, see Cialdini and Trost 1998). Accordingly, descriptive norms shape human attitudes and behaviours in a broad variety of domains, including positive attitudes and behaviours in the context of health (Stevens et al. 2022; Von Wagner et al. 2019) and environmental sustainability (Goldstein et al. 2008; Miller and Prentice 2016), but also antisocial attitudes and behaviours related to corruption (Köbis et al. 2015) and bullying (Paluck and Shepherd 2012).

Although the effects of descriptive norms are hence not unique to conspiracy beliefs, they may be essential to understand why people accept conspiracy theories in social networks. Recent studies have investigated the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and people’s perceptions of and responses to descriptive norms. Some of these studies are more circumstantial by focusing on the question whether conspiracy beliefs moderate the effects of descriptive norm information on attitudes and behaviours for a variety of topics. Descriptive norms suggesting that a majority share participants’ opinion on a range of topics (i.e., fossil fuels, border control policies and abortion) increased participants’ support for referenda regarding these issues (Bertlich et al. 2026), and pro-environmental descriptive norms were associated with increased pro-environmental behaviour (Winter et al. 2026). However, none of these effects were moderated by participants’ conspiracy beliefs, that is, participants higher on conspiracy belief were not significantly more or less affected by descriptive norms in comparison with those lower on conspiracy belief. Moreover, some studies have focused on constructs closely associated with conspiracy beliefs, notably populist attitudes (Papaioannou et al. 2023). These studies found that populist attitudes are associated with the false consensus effect, that is, an overestimation of how many others share participants’ political beliefs (Steiner et al. 2026).

Other research has highlighted a direct link between descriptive norms and conspiracy beliefs: Stronger own conspiracy beliefs are associated with perceiving stronger conspiracy beliefs in others and with overestimating how broadly endorsed conspiracy theories actually are by other people (Cookson et al. 2021a; Pennycook et al. 2026) or experts (Alper et al. 2023). Consistent with the link between descriptive norms and informational social influence, people endorse their conspiracy beliefs and related perceptions of the world with high levels of confidence. Conspiracy beliefs are associated with the illusion of explanatory depth in the political domain, that is, an inflated confidence in one’s causal understanding of political issues (Vitriol and Marsh 2018). More generally, conspiracy beliefs are associated with misplaced certainty (Oettingen et al. 2022) and with an increased tendency to jump to conclusions in probabilistic reasoning (Sanchez and Dunning 2021). Relatedly, conspiracy beliefs are associated with systematically overestimating one’s

own performance on the cognitive reflection test and a numeracy test assessing probabilistic and mathematical competence (Pennycook et al. 2026). Conspiracy beliefs thus are tied to the belief that many people agree with them, and accordingly, people who endorse conspiracy theories and related beliefs tend to do so with exaggerated confidence (see also Wang and Van Prooijen 2026).

The current paper was designed to expand on these insights by investigating how people infer descriptive norms from conspiratorial information, and how these norms subsequently shape conspiracy beliefs. We propose that when people encounter conspiracy theories in the online or offline sphere, they may misperceive how widely believed these conspiracy theories are in the broader population. This is consistent with theorizing suggesting that online echo chambers function like a ‘funhouse mirror factory’ by distorting people’s perceptions of how normative some conspiracy theories are (Robertson et al. 2024). Our proposition follows from the notion that most citizens do not believe in, or are sceptical of, many conspiracy theories (Imhoff et al. 2022; Sutton and Douglas 2022; Van Prooijen et al. 2023), combined with the insight that people routinely make errors in estimating probabilities, including how representative certain beliefs or attributes are for the broader population (i.e., the base rate fallacy; Kahneman and Tversky 1973). This line of reasoning is consistent with the insight that repeatedly exposing people to conspiracy theories increases their perceived credibility (the ‘illusory truth effect’; Udry and Barber 2024). Moreover, conspiracy theories tend to be perceived as interesting, exciting and attention-grabbing narratives. These entertaining features make conspiracy theories relatively easy to process (Van Prooijen et al. 2022) and arguably make it seem compelling that many others would believe in these theories. Altogether, these arguments suggest that one reason why exposing people to conspiracy theories increases belief in them (Jolley et al. 2014, 2019; Pummerer et al. 2022) is because people make exaggerated inferences of the number of others believing these theories. These perceived descriptive norms then validate people’s initial suspicions and increase their own conspiracy beliefs.

Testing this process meaningfully expands previous work on the direct link between descriptive norms and conspiracy beliefs, which was mostly correlational (Cookson et al. 2021a; Pennycook et al. 2026; but see Cookson et al. 2021b). Correlation after all is not causation, and it is important to keep in mind that the (not mutually exclusive) opposite causal order is also quite plausible. Although our theorizing and empirical studies mostly focus on the process that people infer their own conspiracy beliefs from perceived descriptive norms, it is also likely that people egocentrically project their own conspiracy beliefs onto others, producing inflated perceptions of the norm. Such egocentric projection has been found across different judgement domains (Epley et al. 2004) and is at the basis of the false consensus effect, which stipulates that people overestimate how common one’s own beliefs are in the broader population (Ross et al. 1977; see also Mullen et al. 1985). These considerations underscore the need to move beyond a correlational approach and experimentally test the effects of exposing people to conspiracy theories and descriptive norms information on their conspiracy beliefs.

1.2 | The Current Research

We conducted six studies that were designed to investigate the link between descriptive norms and conspiracy beliefs. The first two studies (1a and 1b) were correlational and thus designed to calibrate the current project in relation to previous correlational research (Alper et al. 2023; Cookson et al. 2021a; Pennycook et al. 2026). We specifically investigated whether own conspiracy beliefs predicted the extent to which participants believed others held these same conspiracy beliefs, and how (in)accurate these perceptions were. To assess others’ conspiracy beliefs, we specifically focused on the other participants in this study as the reference group. Although this is not necessarily representative for the broader population, it does provide factual information about the descriptive norms in the participant sample.

Extending this correlational approach, in two experiments, we manipulated whether participants were exposed to conspiracy theories (Studies 2a and 2b). We investigated the effects of conspiracy exposure on perceived descriptive norms, that is, the extent to which participants expected other participants to believe the conspiracy theory. In the last two experiments (Studies 3 and 4), then, we manipulated descriptive norms and tested the effects of information on how many other participants believe conspiracy theories on participants’ own conspiracy beliefs. As such, the present experiments follow the procedures to establish a causal chain as recommended by Spencer and colleagues (Spencer et al. 2005), by first experimentally testing the effects of the independent variable (conspiracy theory exposure) on the mediator (perceived descriptive norms), and then in subsequent experiments manipulating the mediator to test its causal effect on the dependent variable (conspiracy beliefs).

1.3 | Open Science Practices

All the studies were preregistered, and all data, code, materials and supplementary analyses can be found on the Open Science Framework.¹ We report all the measures and all the studies that we ran to test these hypotheses and did not exclude any participants (except for incomplete cases and attrition). The order in which we present the studies in the article does not represent the chronological order of conducting them (Study 2b was conducted after Study 3 and before Study 4). All studies were programmed in Qualtrics and ran via Prolific. Although it is impossible to exclude the possibility that some participants participated in more than one study, this concern is mitigated by the large Prolific panels, the fact that we conducted studies in two different nations and the fact that there were always multiple weeks between the studies (see the time-stamped preregistrations for more information on when the studies were run). However, as we did not use Prolific’s preselection tools to exclude participants from previous studies, this is a potential limitation of our project. All analyses were conducted in R version 4.4.1. The studies have ethical approval as part of a cluster application by the first author. Each study lasted approximately 5 min, and participants were paid 0.75 GBP (or approximately \$0.91) for participation.

2 | Studies 1a and 1b

Studies 1a and 1b had an identical set-up but were conducted in samples from two different countries (the United States in Study 1a and the United Kingdom in Study 1b). Participants indicated how plausible they found 10 popular conspiracy theories and then estimated how plausible the other participants in the study would find these same conspiracy theories. Such plausibility ratings are strongly diagnostic for the extent to which participants endorse conspiracy theories (Frenken et al. 2025). On the basis of our line of reasoning, we predicted that stronger own conspiracy beliefs would be positively correlated with conspiracy beliefs perceived in others (Hypothesis 1).

This design also enabled us to address a paradox in our line of reasoning. Specifically, various studies have indicated that belief in conspiracy theories is associated with a need for uniqueness (Imhoff and Lamberty 2017; Lantian et al. 2017). The basic idea explaining this finding is that most conspiracy theories represent unusual ideas, and believing them, hence, enables perceivers to stand out from the crowd. This would suggest that stronger conspiracy beliefs might be associated with perceiving oneself as more strongly deviating from descriptive norms. Such reasoning is not necessarily incompatible with the ideas that are central in this contribution: People may overestimate conspiracy beliefs in the broader population while still perceiving oneself as more qualified than most people to detect conspiracies. Integrating these two streams of research, we predicted that stronger conspiracy beliefs would be associated with a stronger perception of oneself as deviating from the norm (Hypothesis 2).

Finally, consistent with earlier findings (Alper et al. 2023; Cookson et al. 2021a; Pennycook et al. 2026), we anticipated that stronger conspiracy beliefs would be associated with more strongly overestimating the norm. We, therefore, predicted that stronger own conspiracy beliefs would be correlated with more inaccuracy in their ratings estimating conspiracy beliefs in others (Hypothesis 3).

2.1 | Methods

As correlations stabilize around 250 participants (Schönbrodt and Perugini 2013), in both samples we aimed for 300 participants to be on the safe side. A sensitivity power analysis for bivariate correlations in G*power indicates that a sample of 300 participants yields 95% power ($\alpha = 0.05$, two-tailed) to detect correlations of 0.21.

2.1.1 | Participants Study 1a

Study 1a had 300 US participants who provided complete responses (50.7% female, 46.7% male, 2.7% non-binary or third gender). They were between 21 and 79 years old ($M = 39.8$, $SD = 13.45$). Most of the participants had college education, either at bachelor's (43.3%) or graduate level (20.3%). On political orientation (1 = *very left-wing*, 7 = *very right-wing*), our sample was leaning left of centre ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 1.69$).

2.1.2 | Participants Study 1b

Study 1b contained 299 UK participants who provided complete responses (60.5% female, 38.8% male, 0.3% non-binary or third gender, 0.3% prefer not to say), with an age ranging from 18 to 78 years old ($M = 42.8$, $SD = 13.77$, two participants did not report their age). Most of the participants had college education, either at bachelor's (54.5%) or graduate level (18.1%). On political orientation (1 = *very left-wing*, 7 = *very right-wing*), our sample was close to the midpoint of the scale ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 1.18$).

2.1.3 | Procedure

After providing their informed consent, participants filled in the measures of own conspiracy belief and perceived others' conspiracy beliefs. We also asked them several basic demographic questions, after which participants were debriefed and redirected to a URL for payment.

2.1.4 | Measures

2.1.4.1 | Own Conspiracy Beliefs. We measured own conspiracy beliefs by asking participants how plausible they found 10 statements involving popular conspiracy theories (example items: 'The virus that causes COVID-19 was manufactured in a Chinese lab to destabilize the world's economy' and 'The 9/11 terrorist strikes were an inside job planned by the US government to increase domestic support for war in Afghanistan and Iraq'). Participants responded to each statement on a slider from 0 (*Not at all plausible*) to 100 (*Extremely plausible*). We averaged participants' responses into a reliable conspiracy beliefs scale (Study 1a: $M = 33.09$, $SD = 22.29$, $\alpha = 0.90$; Study 1b: $M = 34.16$, $SD = 21.94$, $\alpha = 0.90$).

2.1.4.2 | Perceived Others' Conspiracy Beliefs. As indicator of perceived descriptive norms, we asked participants to indicate how plausible they think the *other* participants in the study on average found each of the ten statements from our measurement of conspiracy beliefs. Again, participants responded on a slider from 0 (*Not at all plausible*) to 100 (*Extremely plausible*) (Study 1a: $M = 39.85$, $SD = 18.74$, $\alpha = 0.90$; Study 1b: $M = 42.30$, $SD = 19.91$, $\alpha = 0.91$).

2.1.4.3 | Self-Perceived Deviation From the Norm. We calculated this variable by subtracting participants' own conspiracy beliefs rating from their perceived others' conspiracy beliefs rating (which yields a positive score if people perceive stronger conspiracy beliefs in others and a negative score if people perceive weaker conspiracy beliefs in others) and then calculating the absolute value of this score. Higher scores on this variable hence indicate a higher perceived difference between own and other participants' conspiracy beliefs, and a score of zero indicates no perceived difference between own and others' conspiracy beliefs (Study 1a: $M = 14.33$, $SD = 12.16$; Study 1b: $M = 13.85$, $SD = 11.47$).

2.1.4.4 | Inaccuracy of the Perceived Norm. To establish how accurate or inaccurate participants were in their perceptions of the descriptive norms, we subtracted the sample mean of

the own conspiracy beliefs measure from the perceived others' conspiracy beliefs ratings (which yields a positive score if people overestimate conspiracy beliefs in the sample and a negative score if people underestimate conspiracy beliefs in the sample) and then calculated the absolute value of this score. Higher scores on this variable hence indicate a stronger deviation between participants' estimated conspiracy beliefs in the sample versus the actually observed conspiracy beliefs in the sample, and a score of zero indicates a correct perception of the norm (Study 1a: $M = 16.57$, $SD = 11.03$; Study 1b: $M = 17.76$, $SD = 12.09$).

2.2 | Results

Supporting Hypothesis 1, own conspiracy beliefs were positively correlated with perceived others' conspiracy beliefs in both studies, Study 1a: $r(298) = 0.65$, $p < 0.001$; Study 1b: $r(297) = 0.71$, $p < 0.001$. Conspiracy beliefs were unrelated with self-perceived deviation of the norm, however, which does not support Hypothesis 2, Study 1a: $r(298) = -0.03$, $p = 0.62$; Study 1b: $r(297) = 0.04$, $p = 0.48$. Finally, conspiracy beliefs were positively correlated with inaccuracy of the perceived norm, Study 1a: $r(298) = 0.22$, $p < 0.001$; Study 1b: $r(297) = 0.32$, $p < 0.001$, supporting Hypothesis 3. We have also tested the three hypotheses for each conspiracy theory separately and report the results in Table S1 (on OSF). Jointly, these findings indicate that stronger own conspiracy beliefs are associated with overestimating conspiracy beliefs in others.

2.3 | Discussion

The findings indicated that own conspiracy beliefs were strongly correlated with conspiracy beliefs perceived in others, and that stronger conspiracy beliefs were associated with more strongly overestimating such descriptive norms. These findings are consistent with previous research (Alper et al. 2023; Cookson et al. 2021a; Pennycook et al. 2026) and underscore that conspiracy beliefs are closely tied to perceived descriptive norms.

We found no support for the hypothesis that stronger own conspiracy beliefs would be associated with a stronger belief to be deviating from the norm. Although conspiracy beliefs are associated with a *need* for uniqueness (Imhoff and Lamberty 2017; Lantian et al. 2017), in our studies conspiracy beliefs were not associated with an increased tendency to perceive one's own conspiracy beliefs as different from others' conspiracy beliefs.

3 | Studies 2a and 2b

Moving beyond correlations, we investigated the causal effects of exposing people to conspiracy theories on perceived descriptive norms. Participants in the experimental condition were exposed to a conspiracy theory about the pharmaceutical industry, whereas participants in the control condition read information about the pharmaceutical industry that did not support this conspiracy theory. On the basis of the idea that encountering conspiracy theories influences people's perception of how widely believed these conspiracy theories are (Robertson et al. 2024), we predicted that participants in the conspiracy exposure

condition would more strongly believe that other participants in the study believed the conspiracy theory (Hypothesis 1). Moreover, we predicted that these perceived descriptive norms would mediate the effects of the conspiracy exposure manipulation on participants' own conspiracy beliefs (Hypothesis 2).²

3.1 | Methods

Again, Study 2a was conducted among US participants and Study 2b among UK participants. Both studies aimed to collect 500 participants, and while the achieved samples deviated slightly, in both studies (also after attrition; Study 2a) sensitivity analyses in G*power for independent samples *t*-tests indicated that the sample provided 95% power to detect a below-medium effect size ($d = 0.32$; $\alpha = 0.05$, two-tailed).

3.1.1 | Participants

3.1.1.1 | Study 2a. We collected 505 US participants through Prolific (degrees of freedom deviate slightly from the total sample and between measures due to attrition). Participants (45.7% female, 52.3% male, 1.0% non-binary or third gender, 1.0% prefer not to say or missing) were between 20 and 80 years old ($M = 39.4$, $SD = 12.40$). Most of the participants had college education, either at bachelor's (47.3%) or graduate level (21.2%). On political orientation (1 = *very left-wing*, 7 = *very right-wing*) our sample was on average close to the midpoint of the scale ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.71$).

3.1.1.2 | Study 2b. We collected 501 UK participants through Prolific. Participants (61.5% female, 37.9% male, 0.2% non-binary or third gender, 0.4% prefer not to say) were between 19 and 83 years old ($M = 43.92$, $SD = 14.11$; one missing response to the age question). Most of the participants had college education, either at bachelor's (46.1%) or graduate level (21.8%). On political orientation (1 = *very left-wing*, 7 = *very right-wing*), our sample on average was close to the midpoint of the scale ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.12$).

3.1.2 | Procedure

After providing their informed consent, participants were randomly allocated to one of two conditions. In both conditions they read a blog post about pharmaceutical companies from an unknown author. In the conspiracy exposure condition, the blog argued that pharmaceutical companies likely suppress cures to increase profits. In the control condition, the blog argued that pharmaceutical companies are unlikely to suppress cures to increase profits (full text in the materials on OSF). To enhance the strength of the manipulation, participants briefly summarized the blog and responded to a binary comprehension check ('Does the author believe that pharmaceutical companies do their best to find effective cures for diseases?' [Yes vs. No]). Subsequently, participants responded to measures of their own conspiracy beliefs and perceived others' conspiracy beliefs (i.e., descriptive norms) about pharmaceutical companies. Then, we asked participants several basic demographic questions, after which participants were debriefed and redirected to a URL for payment.

3.1.3 | Materials

3.1.3.1 | Own Conspiracy Beliefs. Own conspiracy beliefs were measured by asking participants to rate to what extent they believed four conspiracy theory statements regarding the secret and malevolent activities of pharmaceutical companies (e.g., 'Pharmaceutical companies deliberately withhold more effective treatments for financial gain'). Participants rated every statement using a slider from 0 (*Not at all plausible*) to 100 (*Completely Plausible*). We then averaged participants' ratings into a reliable measure of own conspiracy beliefs (Study 2a: $M = 55.70$, $SD = 29.58$, $\alpha = 0.95$; Study 2b: $M = 50.79$, $SD = 28.97$, $\alpha = 0.95$).

3.1.3.2 | Perceived Others' Conspiracy Beliefs. As indicator of perceived descriptive norms, we asked participants to indicate how plausible they think the other participants in the study found each of the four statements from our measurement of conspiracy beliefs. Again, participants responded on the same slider from 0 to 100, and we averaged their ratings into reliable scale (Study 2a: $M = 56.91$, $SD = 25.45$, $\alpha = 0.96$; Study 2b: $M = 53.28$, $SD = 25.35$, $\alpha = 0.96$).

3.2 | Results

3.2.1 | Study 2a

Participants who were exposed to a conspiracy theory about the pharmaceutical industry believed the corresponding conspiracy theories more strongly ($M = 61.78$, $SD = 29.32$) than participants in the control condition ($M = 49.46$, $SD = 28.57$), $t(497) = 4.75$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.43$; $CI_{95\%}[0.24, 0.62]$. Furthermore, as predicted, participants in the conspiracy exposure condition perceived stronger conspiracy beliefs in others ($M = 62.64$, $SD = 24.88$) than participants in the control condition ($M = 51.00$, $SD = 24.71$), $t(493) = 5.22$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.47$; $CI_{95\%}[0.28, 0.65]$.

To examine whether perceived others' conspiracy beliefs mediated the effect of the experimental manipulation on own conspiracy beliefs, we conducted a simple mediation analysis with 5000 bootstrapped samples using the R package *lavaan* (Rosseel 2012). The results of the mediation analysis are presented in Figure 1. Although conspiracy theory exposure predicted own conspiracy beliefs ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.001$), after including perceived others' conspiracy beliefs as the mediator, this direct path became non-significant. Perceived others' conspiracy beliefs fully mediated the effect of the manipulation on own conspiracy beliefs ($B = 9.78$, $SE = 1.87$; $CI_{95\%}[6.17, 13.46]$).

We also explored the reverse order, with own conspiracy beliefs as mediator of the effect of the experimental manipulation on perceived others' conspiracy beliefs. This indirect effect also was significant ($B = 8.07$, $SE = 1.66$; $CI_{95\%}[4.93, 11.30]$).

3.2.2 | Study 2b

Study 2b yielded results consistent with Study 2a. Again, participants in the conspiracy exposure condition believed the associated conspiracy theories more strongly ($M = 59.78$, $SD = 28.63$)

than participants in the control condition ($M = 41.99$, $SD = 26.54$), $t(499) = 7.21$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.64$; $CI_{95\%}[0.45, 0.83]$. Furthermore, and as hypothesized, they perceived stronger conspiracy beliefs in others ($M = 60.28$, $SD = 46.41$) than participants in the control condition ($M = 46.41$, $SD = 24.90$), $t(499) = 6.36$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.57$; $CI_{95\%}[0.40, 0.76]$.

We again conducted a simple mediation analysis using the same procedure as in Study 2a. The results are presented in Figure 2. Conspiracy theory exposure predicted own conspiracy beliefs ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$). After including perceived others' conspiracy beliefs as the mediator, this direct path became weaker but remained significant. The indirect path via perceived others' conspiracy beliefs was significant, indicating partial mediation ($B = 11.93$, $SE = 1.89$; $CI_{95\%}[8.17, 15.63]$).

As in Study 2a, we also explored the reverse indirect effect of own conspiracy beliefs mediating the effect of the manipulation on perceived others' conspiracy beliefs. This indirect path also was significant ($B = 11.96$, $SE = 1.79$; $CI_{95\%}[8.56, 15.55]$).

3.3 | Discussion

Results from both studies supported the hypothesis. Exposing participants to conspiracy theories shaped their perceptions of descriptive norms, that is, the extent to which participants expected others to believe these conspiracy theories. These findings are consistent with the notion that encountering conspiracy theories prompts inferences of how widespread belief in those theories is Robertson et al. (2024).

Although informative, these studies do not show that descriptive norms causally influence people's own conspiracy beliefs. Although our mediation analyses yielded results consistent with this notion, mediation analyses do not provide evidence for a causal chain as both the descriptive norms and conspiracy beliefs were measured variables. To establish such a causal chain, it is necessary to experimentally manipulate the mediator in subsequent experiments (Spencer et al. 2005). In Studies 3 and 4, we, therefore, experimentally manipulated descriptive norms to investigate their causal effects on participants' own conspiracy beliefs.

4 | Study 3

In Study 3, we presented participants with six conspiracy theories and manipulated descriptive norms by informing them that either many or a few, others have found these theories plausible. The hypothesis was that participants in the high norms condition would indicate stronger own conspiracy beliefs than participants in the low norms condition.

4.1 | Methods

4.1.1 | Participants

We collected 501 US participants through Prolific. Participants (50.1% female, 48.1% male, 1.2% non-binary or third gender, 0.6%

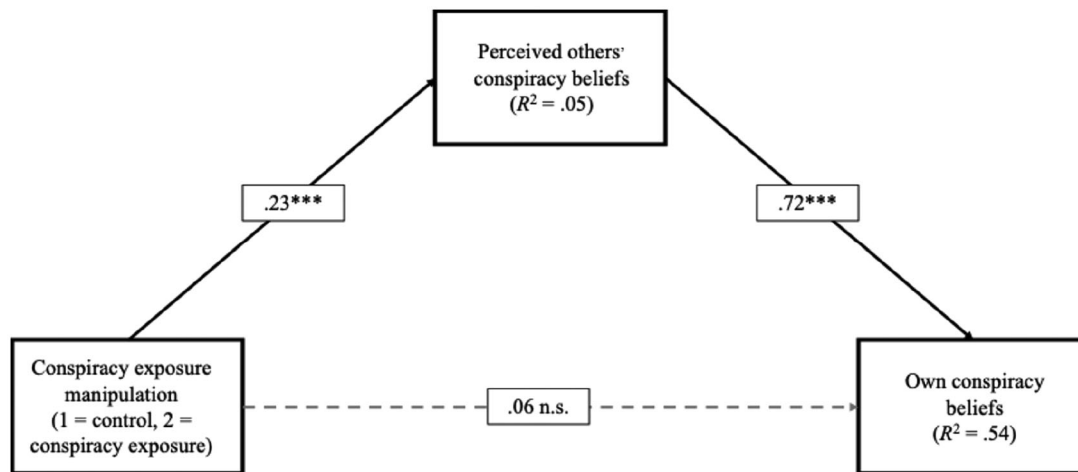


FIGURE 1 | Standardized coefficients derived from a simple mediation analysis conducted in *lavaan* (5000 bootstrapped samples; Study 2a). Paths that are not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$) are presented with grey dashed lines. *** $p < 0.001$.

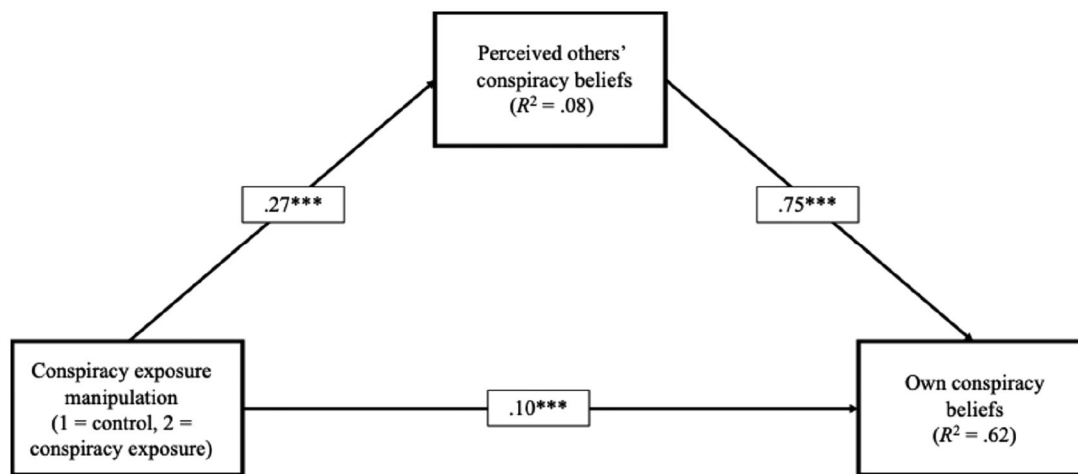


FIGURE 2 | Standardized coefficients derived from a simple mediation analysis conducted in *lavaan* (5000 bootstrapped samples; Study 2b). *** $p < 0.001$.

prefer not to say) were between 18 and 80 years old ($M = 38.8$, $SD = 11.74$; ages of two participants were coded as missing as they provided nonsensical responses to this question). Most of the participants had college education, either at bachelor's (46.1%) or graduate level (20.0%). On political orientation (1 = *very left-wing*, 7 = *very right-wing*), our sample was leaning slightly left of centre ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 1.51$). Following the same power analysis as Studies 2a and 2b, this sample yielded 95% power to detect a below-medium effect size ($d = 0.32$; $\alpha = 0.05$, two-tailed).

4.1.2 | Procedure

After providing their informed consent, participants were randomly allocated into one of two conditions. Participants first read about a previous study on Prolific where US citizens responded to various statements about society. To manipulate descriptive norms (high/low), participants received the following instruction: 'Below, we present 6 statements that *especially many/only a few* participants found plausible. We would like to ask you for

your own opinion on each of these statements that *many/only a few* others found plausible'.

Participants in both conditions were then asked to rate how plausible they themselves found each of the six statements, which all were popular conspiracy theories (e.g., 'The government uses subliminal messages on TV to influence the public'). Participants rated every statement using a slider from 0 to 100, and we averaged participants' ratings as an index of belief in conspiracy theories ($M = 43.06$, $SD = 25.63$, $\alpha = 0.88$). After this, participants provided basic demographic information, after which they were debriefed and redirected to a URL for payment.

4.2 | Results

Although participants' own conspiracy beliefs appeared somewhat higher in the high norms condition ($M = 44.48$, $SD = 25.32$) than in the low norms condition ($M = 41.65$, $SD = 25.89$), this difference was not significant, $t(499) = 1.24$, $p = 0.22$, $d = 0.11$; $CI_{95\%}[-0.05, 0.28]$. Thus, we found no support for the hypothesis.

4.3 | Discussion

Study 3 found no evidence for a causal effect of descriptive norms on conspiracy beliefs. At least two interpretations of this finding are possible. A first possibility is that people do not derive their own conspiracy beliefs from descriptive norms information, implying that the previously observed associations between own and perceived others' conspiracy beliefs are entirely due to egocentric projection. A second possibility, however, is that the manipulation of descriptive norms was insufficiently powerful to exert meaningful effects on conspiracy beliefs. Although it is impossible to assess this latter option empirically with the Study 3 data (as Study 3 did not include a measure of perceived others' conspiracy beliefs), it might be the case that the manipulation provided descriptive norms information in a too abstract, context-free manner, leaving too much room for interpretation (e.g., only informing others that 'many' or 'few' others found these theories plausible without giving more concrete information such as proportions). To address this possibility, we, therefore, took a different approach in Study 4 and manipulated whether participants were given concrete, specific and factual normative information.

5 | Study 4

In Study 4, we capitalized on the notion that people tend to overestimate how widespread conspiracy beliefs are in the population (e.g., Cookson et al. 2021a) and increasingly do so as they believe conspiracy theories more strongly themselves (Pennycook et al. 2026; Studies 1a and 1b of this contribution). Specifically, providing factual and detailed statistical information about the norm is likely to emphasize that beliefs in many conspiracy theories are not as widespread as one might think, decreasing people's support for them. Preliminary evidence for the potential of providing factual normative information was found in the specific context of childhood vaccination conspiracy theories. Providing factual normative feedback about anti-vaccination conspiracy beliefs lowered anti-vaccination conspiracy beliefs and increased vaccination intentions in a sample of parents of young children (Cookson et al. 2021b).

Extending these insights, in Study 4 we presented US participants with eight different conspiracy theories that were also assessed in Study 1a. We manipulated whether participants received factual normative information about each conspiracy theory, in the form of a histogram showing previous participants' actual plausibility ratings as observed in Study 1a. Our hypothesis was that presenting people with such detailed statistical information of the factual descriptive norm would decrease their own conspiracy beliefs as compared with a control condition.

5.1 | Methods

5.1.1 | Participants

We collected 800 US participants through Prolific. Participants (50.5% female, 47.5% male, 1.5% non-binary or third gender, 0.5% prefer not to say) were between 19 and 77 years old ($M = 40.61$, $SD = 12.87$, age of one participant was coded as missing after

providing a nonsensical response to this question). Most of the participants had college education, either at bachelor's (44.4%) or graduate level (19.0%). On political orientation (1 = *very left-wing*, 7 = *very right-wing*), our sample was close to the midpoint of the scale ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.67$). According to a sensitivity power analysis in G*power for independent samples *t*-tests, this sample provides 95% power to detect below-medium effect sizes ($d = 0.26$; $\alpha = 0.05$, two-tailed).

5.1.2 | Procedure

After providing their informed consent, participants were randomly allocated into one of two descriptive norms conditions. In each condition participants were shown a total of eight statements, each describing a popular conspiracy theory (e.g., 'The virus that causes COVID-19 was manufactured in a Chinese lab to destabilize the world's economy'). All these statements were also assessed in Study 1a. Participants saw one statement at a time. In the factual normative information condition, for each statement, participants were shown a histogram displaying the real plausibility ratings for that statement from our Study 1a results among US Americans. Additionally, they received a small text description about the histogram (emphasizing the empirical finding that most participants did not find the statement plausible at all) and were given the median plausibility rating taken from Study 1a. Participants in the control condition read that the statements were assessed in a previous study but were not given any additional information.

Participants in both conditions were asked how plausible they themselves found each statement. As a manipulation check, participants were also asked how plausible they believed the participants in the previous study found the statement. Subsequently, participants provided some demographic information. Finally, participants were debriefed and redirected to a URL for payment.

5.1.3 | Measures

5.1.3.1 | Own Conspiracy Beliefs. We measured own conspiracy beliefs by asking participants how plausible they found eight statements involving popular conspiracy theories (e.g., regarding COVID-19, the 9/11 terrorist attacks or the assassination of JFK). Participants responded on a slider from 0 (*Not at all plausible*) to 100 (*Extremely plausible*) ($M = 28.94$, $SD = 22.82$, $\alpha = 0.90$).

5.1.3.2 | Perceived Others' Conspiracy Beliefs. We measured perceived others' conspiracy beliefs by asking participants to indicate how plausible they think the participants in the previous study on average found each of the eight statements from our measurement of conspiracy beliefs. Again, participants responded on a slider from 0 (*Not at all plausible*) to 100 (*Extremely plausible*) ($M = 29.75$, $SD = 17.96$, $\alpha = 0.93$).

5.2 | Results

We first analysed perceived others' conspiracy beliefs to check the descriptive norms manipulation. Participants in the

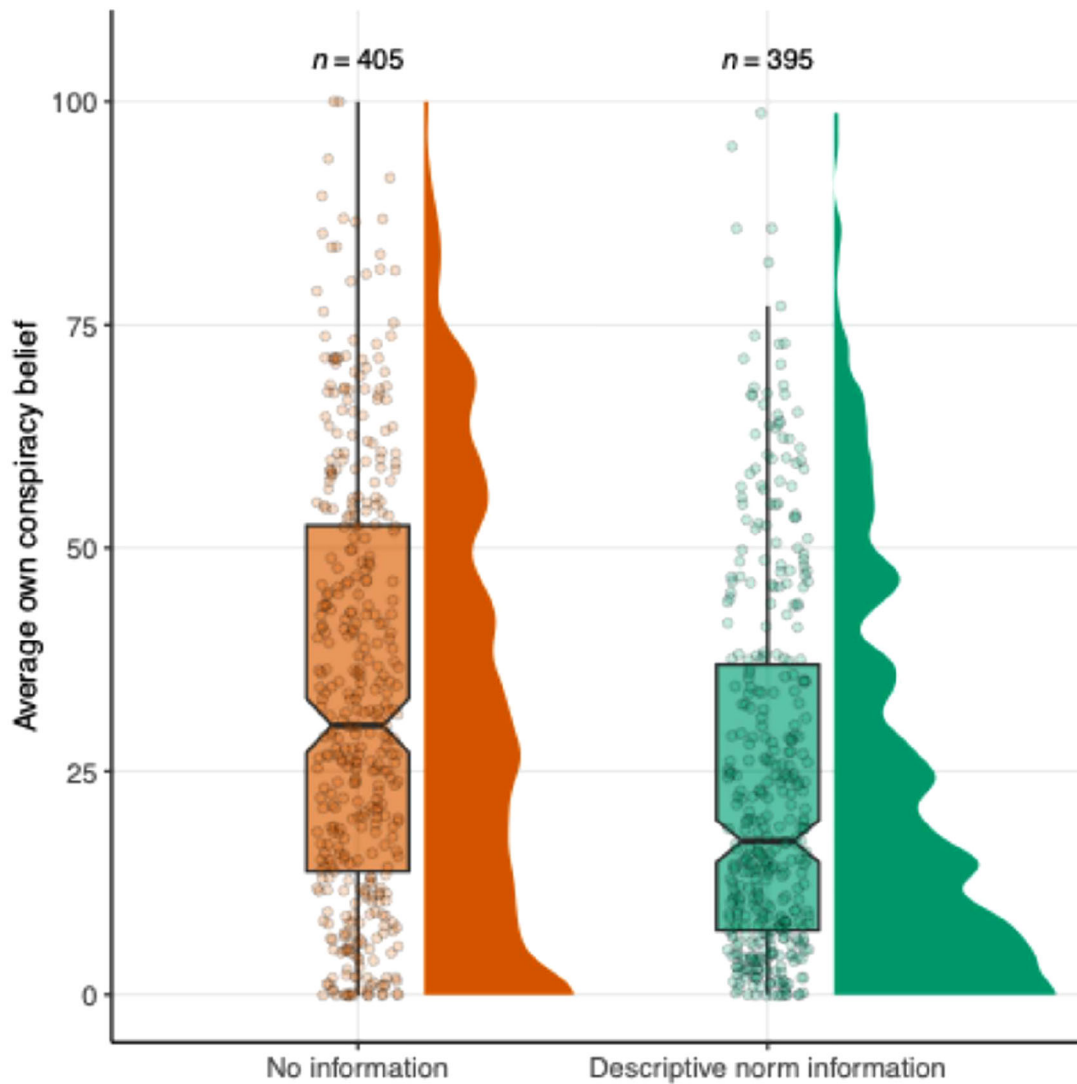


FIGURE 3 | Distribution of average own conspiracy belief under no information ($n = 405$) and descriptive norm information conditions ($n = 395$). Boxplots display the median and IQR. Dots represent individual observations per participant. Density curves show the distribution of individual observations in both conditions.

factual normative information condition estimated that participants in the previous study found the conspiracy theories less plausible ($M = 20.95$, $SD = 13.31$) than participants in the control condition ($M = 38.34$, $SD = 17.77$), $t(798) = 15.64$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.11$; $CI_{95\%}[0.94, 1.28]$. These findings indicate that our manipulation of descriptive norms worked as intended.

Then, we tested our hypothesis by analysing participants' own conspiracy beliefs. As predicted, participants in the factual normative condition showed lower own conspiracy beliefs ($M = 24.06$, $SD = 20.85$) than participants in the control condition ($M = 33.70$, $SD = 23.67$), $t(798) = 6.11$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.43$; $CI_{95\%}[0.30, 0.58]$. The difference between both experimental conditions is visualized in Figure 3. These findings indicate that providing people with factual information about descriptive norms reduces their own conspiracy beliefs, supporting the hypothesis.

6 | General Discussion

The current contribution sought to investigate the social influence processes explaining why encountering conspiracy theories increases people's belief in them and focused specifically on the role of descriptive norms. Studies 1a and 1b showed that own conspiracy beliefs are correlated with perceived others' conspiracy beliefs and with an overestimation of the norm (cf., Alper et al. 2023; Cookson et al. 2021a; Pennycook et al. 2026). Studies 2a and 2b were the first to provide causal evidence, as experimentally exposing participants to a blog post arguing for a conspiracy theory increased the perceived descriptive norm (i.e., the extent to which participants think others believe the conspiracy theory). Studies 3 and 4, then, investigated the effects of experimentally exposing participants to information about descriptive norms. Although abstract, context-free information about descriptive norms appears insufficiently powerful to influence participants' own conspiracy beliefs (Study 3), providing participants with

factual, statistical information showing that a conspiracy theory is not widely endorsed effectively reduced their own conspiracy beliefs (Study 4). Altogether, the studies support the notion that perceived descriptive norms are important to understand why people believe in the conspiracy theories spread by others.

These findings expand existing knowledge in at least two ways. First, the findings provide evidence for an underlying mechanism explaining why exposing people to conspiracy theories can increase belief in them. Relatedly, the idea that conspiratorial information stimulates inflated inferences of descriptive norms—which validates people’s beliefs and increases attitudinal certainty (Cialdini and Trost 1998)—may also help explain why conspiracy beliefs are associated with overconfidence (e.g., Oettingen et al. 2022; Pennycook et al. 2026; Sanchez and Dunning 2021; Vitriol and Marsh 2018; Wang and Van Prooijen 2026). Second, the findings not only provide further evidence that stronger conspiracy beliefs are associated with overestimating descriptive norms (e.g., Alper et al. 2023; Cookson et al. 2021a; Pennycook et al. 2026) but also extend these earlier findings by showing causal effects of conspiracy exposure on perceived descriptive norms and of descriptive norms information on own conspiracy beliefs.

The current project was designed to investigate the effects of conspiracy exposure and perceived descriptive norms on conspiracy beliefs. An alternative possible process explaining the link between descriptive norms and conspiracy beliefs is egocentric projection, where people assume their own beliefs to be representative for how others see the world (Epley et al. 2004; Ross et al. 1977). Of importance, the process that we have investigated versus egocentric projection are not mutually exclusive, and hence, the current findings cannot be taken as evidence against the notion of egocentric projection in conspiracy beliefs. Indeed, egocentric projection of own conspiracy beliefs onto others is a plausible and important hypothesis that warrants further research. If future evidence would support this process as well, it could imply that perceived descriptive norms and conspiracy beliefs might reinforce each other through a mutual cyclical process.

Besides these theoretical implications, the present findings may have practical implications for combating the spread of conspiracy theories on social media. Notably, our findings are consistent with arguments that due to a combination of user choices, design features and algorithmic ranking, extreme content (which includes conspiracy theories) gets excessive exposure online, and therefore distorts people’s perceptions of descriptive norms (Robertson et al. 2024). Consistently, common engagement-based algorithms have been found to inflate perceptions of how normative extreme content is on social media platforms (Brady et al. 2026). The Study 4 findings could inform efforts to develop online interventions for reducing belief in false conspiracy theories in the population. Providing normative information underscoring that some conspiracy theories are not as widespread as some perceivers may think appears to be a promising tool that could be applied in concert with other interventions such as debunking (e.g., Nyhan 2021), prebunking (Van der Linden 2022), shifting people’s attention to the accuracy of information on social media (Pennycook et al. 2021) or flagging dubious online content with warning labels (Martel and Rand 2023).

To be effective, our findings suggest that such normative information needs to be sufficiently concrete and detailed. The abstract statement that ‘many’ or ‘few’ people believe a conspiracy theory was ineffective in our Study 3, which we speculate is attributable to too many degrees of freedom in people’s subjective interpretation of such information. To illuminate, what does it mean to say that ‘few’ people believe the Earth is flat? Even assuming a small proportion of the total population believing it (e.g., 10%; Hamilton 2022) might still be considered a lot when taking into account how outlandish this conspiracy theory is. For the present purposes, this null-effect implies some caution in interpreting our findings as evidence for a causal chain, considering that the causal effects of descriptive norms on conspiracy beliefs currently rely on only one study (Study 4). Clearly, more research is needed to assess the potential of descriptive norm information as the basis of interventions and the boundary conditions that determine their effectiveness.

6.1 | Strengths and Limitations

The current contribution has a number of noteworthy strengths. It offers six studies that were all preregistered and well-powered. The studies connected to earlier findings (Alper et al. 2023; Cookson et al. 2021a; Pennycook et al. 2026) by starting with two correlational studies but also subsequently extended that by adding four experiments to the empirical package. Moreover, with the exception of Study 3 the results were remarkably consistent. Finally, the key findings replicated in two countries (the United States and the United Kingdoms).

Besides these strengths, we should also highlight a number of limitations, that mostly pertain to the ecological validity of these findings. Although the present studies investigated the causal effects of exposing unsuspecting participants to conspiracy theories or descriptive norms, in everyday life the associations between conspiracy exposure, descriptive norms and own conspiracy beliefs are likely to be more complicated. First, exposing participants to such information in experiments may influence them partially through demand characteristics, suggesting that these effects may be smaller in real life. Second, people often are not just passive recipients of conspiratorial information. To some extent, people may choose what information they wish to be exposed to (Uscinski et al. 2022), which adds a layer of complexity to the processes investigated here. Indeed, conspiracy theorists visit more conspiratorial webpages, and less official ones, when looking for information about the COVID-19 vaccines (Vital et al. 2025). Although assessing the role of individual predispositions towards conspiratorial information was beyond the scope of the current research, it stands to reason that some people are more inclined than others to actively search for conspiratorial information to exaggerate their perceptions of descriptive norms, as part of a motivated reasoning process designed to validate existing suspicions. Third, although the present research was partially inspired by the notion that features of the online environment may distort people’s perceptions of descriptive norms of believing conspiracy theories (Robertson et al. 2024), the current studies were not representative for how the online environment functions. For instance, filter bubbles and echo chambers may exaggerate perceptions of those norms particularly for people who already have an interest in conspiracy theories.

Future research, therefore, may more extensively investigate these issues.

Moreover, the present studies examined perceived descriptive norms in the community of research participants on Prolific, but the normative distribution of conspiracy theories can be rather different in other groups. Conspiracy theories can be quite normative in some online groups, such as anti-vaccination groups on Telegram (Schlette et al. 2025). Moreover, in the broader population, some conspiracy theories can be the norm. A majority of US citizens believe in conspiracy theories about the Kennedy assassination (Brenan 2023). US research participants on Prolific find the theory that, instead of committing suicide, sex offender Jeffrey Epstein was murdered quite plausible (Van Prooijen et al. 2022). Moreover, geopolitically some conspiracy theories can be normative. In the events leading up to the 2003 war in Iraq, the official US government position was that Saddam Hussein was hiding weapons of mass destruction, a false conspiracy theory that was also officially endorsed by many NATO allies at the time (cf., Van Prooijen, Fousiani, et al. 2025). These limitations are important to take into account, particularly when developing interventions along the lines suggested in Study 4. Providing factual information about descriptive norms might backfire if many people do believe the theory.

Finally, although the current contribution included samples from the United States and the United Kingdoms, cross-cultural replication, including more collectivistic cultures is necessary. Although conspiracy theory research conducted in Eastern cultures (e.g., China) sometimes yields similar results as in Western cultures (e.g., Wang et al. 2025), this is not always the case (e.g., Zhao et al. 2025), and macro-level, cultural factors do matter for belief in conspiracy theories (Hornsey and Pearson 2022; Hornsey et al. 2023). In this particular case, one might speculate that adhering to descriptive norms is more strongly expected in collectivistic than individualistic cultures. This could mean that the link between perceived descriptive norms and conspiracy beliefs might intensify in relatively collectivistic cultures. Consistently, collectivism positively predicts people's own belief in conspiracy theories (Adam-Troian et al. 2021).

6.2 | Concluding Remarks

Implausible conspiracy theories sometimes gain traction among a substantial audience. After spreading them, some conspiracy theories go viral on social media and persuade many people. Various individual, situational, and societal factors have been identified to explain people's susceptibility to conspiracy theories (e.g., Biddlestone et al. 2025; Bowes et al. 2023; Hornsey et al. 2023). The present study has contributed to these insights by highlighting how basic social influence processes—specifically the tendency for people to look at the attitudes of others (i.e., perceived descriptive norms) to determine their own attitudes—help explain why people accept the conspiracy theories that they encounter as true. These findings underscore that conspiracy beliefs cannot be understood separately from the social context in which they transpire.

Funding

The studies were funded by the Social Psychology Section at VU Amsterdam. The work of Jakub Šrol was supported by the Slovak Academy of Sciences as part of the project PostdokGrant APD0069.

Ethics Statement

The studies have been ethically approved (as part of a cluster application by the first author) by the ethical board of the faculty of the authors' university. File number: VCWE-2021-178.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

All data, analysis scripts, questionnaires and supplementary analyses are available on OSF. All studies have been preregistered. Nonanonymous Project Page on OSF: <https://osf.io/n2w53/overview>.

Endnotes

¹ Data, code, materials, supplementary analyses, and all preregistrations: <https://osf.io/n2w53/overview>.

² Hypothesis 2 was preregistered only for Study 2a.

References

- Adam-Troian, J., P. Wagner-Egger, M. Motyl, et al. 2021. "Investigating the Links Between Cultural Values and Belief in Conspiracy Theories: The Key Roles of Collectivism and Masculinity." *Political Psychology* 42: 597–618. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12716>.
- Alper, S., B. E. Yelbuz, and K. Konukoglu. 2023. "Perceived Expert and Laypeople Consensus Predict Belief in Local Conspiracy Theories in a Non-WEIRD Culture: Evidence From Turkey." *Judgment and Decision Making* 18: e35. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jdm.2023.33>.
- Bertin, P., S. Delouvée, K. McColl, and J.-W. Van Prooijen. 2023. "Rage Against the Machine: Investigating Conspiracy Theories About the Video Assistant Referee on Twitter During the 2018 FIFA World Cup." *Sports Management Review* 4: 495–516. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14413523.2022.2127179>.
- Bertlich, T., F. Kazarovyt'ska, and R. Imhoff. 2026. "Just a Means to an End? Individuals Support Direct Democracy Instrumentally, Irrespective of Conspiracy Mentality." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 125: 104905. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2026.104905>.
- Biddlestone, M., F. Azevedo, and S. Van der Linden. 2022. "Climate of Conspiracy: A Meta-Analysis of the Consequences of Belief in Conspiracy Theories About Climate Change." *Current Opinion in Psychology* 46: 101390. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101390>.
- Biddlestone, M., R. Green, K. M. Douglas, F. Azevedo, R. M. Sutton, and A. Cichocka. 2025. "Reasons to Believe: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analytic Synthesis of the Motives Associated With Conspiracy Beliefs." *Psychological Bulletin* 151: 48–87. <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000463>.
- Bierwaczek, K., A. B. Gundersen, and J. R. Kunst. 2022. "The Role of Conspiracy Beliefs for COVID-19 Health Responses: A Meta-Analysis." *Current Opinion in Psychology* 46: 101346. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101346>.
- Bowes, S. M., T. H. Costello, and A. Tasimi. 2023. "The Conspiratorial Mind: A Meta-Analytic Review of Motivational and Personological Correlates." *Psychological Bulletin* 149: 259–293. <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000392>.

- Brady, W. J., M. Doyle, A. Elnakouri, et al. 2026. "Redesigning Algorithms to Intervene on Social Norm Misperceptions During a National Election." *Nature* 655: 942–956. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-026-10536-1>.
- Brenan, M. 2023. *Decades Later, Most Americans Doubt Lone Gunman Killed JFK*. Gallup Poll. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/514310/decades-later-americans-doubt-lone-gunman-killed-jfk.aspx>.
- Cialdini, R. B. 1984. *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*. William Morrow and Company.
- Cialdini, R. B., R. R. Reno, and C. A. Kallgren. 1990. "A Focus Theory of Normative Conduct: Recycling the Concept of Norms to Reduce Littering in Public Places." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 58: 1015–1026. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.58.6.1015>.
- Cialdini, R. B., and M. R. Trost. 1998. "Social Influence: Social Norms, Conformity and Compliance." In *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, 4th ed., edited by D. T. Gilbert S. T. Fiske, and G. Lindzey, 151–192. McGraw-Hill.
- Cookson, D., D. Jolley, R. C. Dempsey, and R. Povey. 2021a. "'If They Believe, Then So Shall I': Perceived Beliefs of the In-Group Predict Conspiracy Theory Belief." *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 24: 759–782. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430221993907>.
- Cookson, D., D. Jolley, R. C. Dempsey, and R. Povey. 2021b. "A Social Norms Approach Intervention to Address Misperceptions of Anti-Vaccine Conspiracy Beliefs Amongst UK Parents." *PLoS ONE* 16: e0258985. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0258985>.
- Del Vicario, M., A. Bessi, F. Zollo, et al. 2016. "The Spreading of Misinformation Online." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 113: 554–559. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1517441113>.
- Douglas, K. M., A. Cichocka, and R. M. Sutton. 2017. "The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 26: 538–542. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721417718261>.
- Epley, N., B. Keysar, L. Van Boven, and T. Gilovich. 2004. "Perspective Taking as Egocentric Anchoring and Adjustment." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 87: 327–339. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.87.3.327>.
- Frenken, M., A. Reusch, and R. Imhoff. 2025. "'Just Because It's a Conspiracy Theory Doesn't Mean They're Not Out to Get You': Differentiating the Correlates of Judgments of Plausible Versus Implausible Conspiracy Theories." *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 16, no. 6: 684–696. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19485506241240506>.
- Fritzsche, I., E. Jonas, D. N. Kayser, and N. Koranyi. 2010. "Existential Threat and Compliance With Pro-Environmental Norms." *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 30, no. 1: 67–79. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2009.08.007>.
- Goldstein, N. J., R. B. Cialdini, and V. Griskevicius. 2008. "A Room With a Viewpoint: Using Social Norms to Motivate Environmental Conservation in Hotels." *Journal of Consumer Research* 35: 472–482. <https://doi.org/10.1086/586910>.
- Hamilton, L. C. 2022. *Conspiracy vs. Science: A Survey of U.S. Public Beliefs*. Carsey School of Public Policy. <https://scholars.unh.edu/carsey/448>.
- Hebel-Sela, S., B. Hameiri, and E. Halperin. 2022. "The Vicious Cycle of Violent Intergroup Conflicts and Conspiracy Theories." *Current Opinion in Psychology* 47: 101422. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101422>.
- Hornsey, M. J., K. Bierwaczzonek, K. Sassenberg, and K. M. Douglas. 2023. "Individual, Intergroup and Nation-Level Influences on Belief in Conspiracy Theories." *Nature Reviews Psychology* 2: 85–97. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44159-022-00133-0>.
- Hornsey, M. J., and S. Pearson. 2022. "Cross-National Differences in Willingness to Believe Conspiracy Theories." *Current Opinion in Psychology* 47: 101391. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101391>.
- Imhoff, R., T. Bertlich, and M. Frenken. 2022. "Tearing Apart the 'Evil' Twins: A General Conspiracy Mentality Is Not the Same as Specific Conspiracy Beliefs." *Current Opinion in Psychology* 46: 101349. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101349>.
- Imhoff, R., L. Dieterle, and P. Lamberty. 2021. "Resolving the Puzzle of Conspiracy Worldview and Political Activism: Belief in Secret Plots Decreases Normative but Increases Nonnormative Political Engagement." *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 12: 71–79. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550619896491>.
- Imhoff, R., and P. K. Lamberty. 2017. "Too Special to be Duped: Need for Uniqueness Motivates Conspiracy Beliefs." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 47: 724–734. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2265>.
- Jolley, D., and K. Douglas. 2014. "The Social Consequences of Conspiracy: Exposure to Conspiracy Theories Decreases Intentions to Engage in Politics and to Reduce One's Carbon Footprint." *British Journal of Psychology* 105: 35–56. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12018>.
- Jolley, D., K. M. Douglas, A. C. Leite, and T. Schrader. 2019. "Belief in Conspiracy Theories and Intentions to Engage in Everyday Crime." *British Journal of Psychology* 58: 534–549. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12311>.
- Jolley, D., M. D. Marques, and D. Cookson. 2022. "Shining a Spotlight on the Dangerous Consequences of Conspiracy Theories." *Current Opinion in Psychology* 47: 101363. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101363>.
- Jonas, E., A. Martens, D. N. Kayser, I. Fritzsche, D. Sullivan, and J. Greenberg. 2008. "Focus Theory of Normative Conduct and Terror-Management Theory: The Interactive Impact of Mortality Salience and Norm Salience on Social Judgment." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 95: 1239–1251. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0013593>.
- Kahneman, D., and A. Tversky. 1973. "On the Psychology of Prediction." *Psychological Review* 80: 237–251. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0034747>.
- Köbis, N., J.-W. Van Prooijen, F. Righetti, and P. A. M. Van Lange. 2015. "'Who Doesn't?' The Impact of Descriptive Norms on Corruption." *PLoS ONE* 10: e0131830. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0131830>.
- Kruglanski, A. W., E. Molinaro, M. Ellenberg, and G. Di Cicco. 2022. "Terrorism and Conspiracy Theories: A View From the 3N Model of Radicalization." *Current Opinion in Psychology* 47: 101396. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101396>.
- Lantian, A., D. Muller, C. Nurra, and K. M. Douglas. 2017. "'I Know Things They Don't Know!': The Role of Need for Uniqueness in Belief in Conspiracy Theories." *Social Psychology* 48: 160–173. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-9335/a000306>.
- Mao, J., J.-W. Van Prooijen, and P. A. M. Van Lange. 2024. "Conspiracy Theories: Groups, Ideology, and Status as Three Distinct Bases for Expressions in Society." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 33: 385–391. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09637214241280742>.
- Martel, C., and D. Rand. 2023. "Misinformation Warning Labels Are Widely Effective: A Review of Warning Effects and Their Moderating Features." *Current Opinion in Psychology* 54: 101710. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2023.101710>.
- Miller, D. T., and D. A. Prentice. 2016. "Changing Norms to Change Behavior." *Annual Review of Psychology* 67: 339–361. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-010814-015013>.
- Miller, J. M., K. L. Saunders, and C. E. Farhart. 2016. "Conspiracy Endorsement as Motivated Reasoning: The Moderating Roles of Political Knowledge and Trust." *American Journal of Political Science* 60, no. 4: 824–844. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12234>.
- Mullen, B., J. L. Atkins, D. S. Champion, et al. 1985. "The False Consensus Effect: A Meta-Analysis of 115 Hypothesis Tests." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 21: 262–283. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-1031\(85\)90020-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-1031(85)90020-4).
- Nyhan, B. 2021. "Why the Backfire Effect Does Not Explain the Durability of Political Misperceptions." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 118: e1912440117. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1912440117>.
- Obaidi, M., J. Kunst, S. Ozer, and S. Y. Kimel. 2022. "The 'Great Replacement' Conspiracy: How the Perceived Ousting of Whites Can Evoke

- Violent Extremism and Islamophobia." *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 25: 1675–1695. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13684302211028293>.
- Oettingen, G., A. Gollwitzer, J. Jung, and I. Olcaysoy Okten. 2022. "Misplaced Certainty in the Context of Conspiracy Theories." *Current Opinion in Psychology* 46: 101393. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101393>.
- Paluck, E. L., and H. Shepherd. 2012. "The Salience of Social Referents: A Field Experiment on Collective Norms and Harassment Behavior in a School Social Network." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 103: 899–915. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0030015>.
- Papaioannou, K., M. Pantazi, and J.-W. Van Prooijen. 2023. "Unravelling the Relationship Between Populism and Belief in Conspiracy Theories: The Role of Cynicism, Powerlessness and Zero-Sum Thinking." *British Journal of Psychology* 114: 159–175. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12602>.
- Pennycook, G., J. Binnendyk, and D. G. Rand. 2026. "Overconfidently Conspiratorial: Conspiracy Believers Are Dispositionally Overconfident and Massively Overestimate How Much Others Agree With Them." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 52: 2509–2528. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672251338358>.
- Pennycook, G., Z. Epstein, M. Mosleh, A. A. Arechar, D. Eckles, and D. G. Rand. 2021. "Shifting Attention to Accuracy Can Reduce Misinformation Online." *Nature* 592: 590–595. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-021-03344-2>.
- Potoczek, A., M. Bukowski, S. de Lemus, G. Jiménez-Moya, Á. Rodríguez-López, and K. Jasko. 2023. "Walk This Way: Ingroup Norms Determine Voting Intentions for Those Who Lack Sociopolitical Control." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 49: 692–708. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672211070070>.
- Pummerer, L., R. Böhm, L. Lilleholt, K. Winter, I. Zettler, and K. Sassenberg. 2022. "Conspiracy Theories and Their Societal Effects During the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 13, no. 1: 49–59. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19485506211000217>.
- Rathje, S., J. Roozenbeek, J. J. Van Bavel, and S. Van der Linden. 2023. "Accuracy and Social Motivations Shape Judgements of (Mis)information." *Nature Human Behaviour* 7: 892–903. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-023-01540-w>.
- Robertson, C. E., K. S. Del Rosario, and J. J. Van Bavel. 2024. "Inside the Funhouse Mirror Factory: How Social Media Distorts Perceptions of Norms." *Current Opinion in Psychology* 60: 101918. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2024.101918>.
- Robertson, C. E., C. Pretus, S. Rathje, E. A. Harris, and J. J. Van Bavel. 2022. "How Social Identity Shapes Conspiratorial Belief." *Current Opinion in Psychology* 47: 101423. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101423>.
- Ross, L., D. Greene, and P. House. 1977. "The 'False Consensus Effect': An Egocentric Bias in Social Perception and Attribution Processes." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 13: 279–301. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-1031\(77\)90049-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-1031(77)90049-X).
- Rosseel, Y. 2012. "lavaan: An R Package for Structural Equation Modeling." *Journal of Statistical Software* 48: 1–36. <https://doi.org/10.18637/jss.v048.i02>.
- Sanchez, C., and D. Dunning. 2021. "Jumping to Conclusions: Implications for Reasoning Errors, False Belief, Knowledge Corruption, and Impeded Learning." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 120: 789–815. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000375>.
- Schlette, A., J.-W. Van Prooijen, A. Blokland, and F. Thijs. 2025. "Information, Identity, and Action: The Messages of the Dutch Anti-Vaccination Community on Telegram." *New Media & Society* 27: 2865–2884. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231215735>.
- Schönbrodt, F. D., and M. Perugini. 2013. "At What Sample Size do Correlations Stabilize?" *Journal of Research in Personality* 47: 609–612. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2013.05.009>.
- Spencer, S. J., M. P. Zanna, and G. T. Fong. 2005. "Establishing a Causal Chain: Why Experiments Are Often More Effective Than Mediational Analyses in Examining Psychological Processes." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 89: 845–851. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.89.6.845>.
- Steiner, N. D., C. Landwehr, and P. Harms. 2026. "False Consensus Beliefs and Populist Attitudes." *Political Psychology* 47: e70026. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.70026>.
- Stevens, M., Á. Fitzpatrick, and T. Cruwys. 2022. "The Effect of Descriptive Norms and Social Identification on Performance and Exertion During a Physical Fitness Task." *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports* 32: 313–323. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sms.14072>.
- Sutton, R. M., and K. M. Douglas. 2022. "Agreeing to Disagree: Reports of the Popularity of Covid-19 Conspiracy Theories Are Greatly Exaggerated." *Psychological Medicine* 52: 791–793. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291720002780>.
- Udry, J., and S. J. Barber. 2024. "The Illusory Truth Effect: A Review of How Repetition Increases Belief in Misinformation." *Current Opinion in Psychology* 56: 101736. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2023.101736>.
- Uscinski, J., A. M. Enders, C. Klostad, and J. Stoler. 2022. "Cause and Effect: On the Antecedents and Consequences of Conspiracy Theory Beliefs." *Current Opinion in Psychology* 47: 101364. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101364>.
- Van der Linden, S. 2022. "Misinformation: Susceptibility, Spread, and Interventions to Immunize the Public." *Nature Medicine* 28: 460–467. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41591-022-01713-6>.
- Van Es, L., J.-W. Van Prooijen, J. Van Buuren, and A. Van Veldhuizen. 2025. "From 'Great Awakening' to Sending Death Threats: A Study of Police-Recorded Crimes Driven by Conspiracy Theories in the Netherlands." *European Journal of Criminology* 23: 488–511.
- Van Prooijen, J.-W. 2024. "Group-Oriented Motivations Underlying Conspiracy Theories." *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 27: 1050–1067. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13684302241240696>.
- Van Prooijen, J.-W., K. Fousiani, J. Šrol, et al. 2025. "The Evil Enemy: Belief in Conspiracy Theories Predicts Attitudes to War." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 55: 1420–1435. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.70021>.
- Van Prooijen, J.-W., J. Ligthart, S. Rosema, and Y. Xu. 2022. "The Entertainment Value of Conspiracy Theories." *British Journal of Psychology* 113: 25–48. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12522>.
- Van Prooijen, J.-W., and M. Song. 2021. "The Cultural Dimension of Intergroup Conspiracy Theories." *British Journal of Psychology* 112: 455–473. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12471>.
- Van Prooijen, J.-W., J. Šrol, and M. Maglić. 2025. "How Belief in Conspiracy Theories Could Harm Sustainability." *Nature Human Behaviour* 9: 1770–1779. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-025-02243-0>.
- Van Prooijen, J.-W., and M. Van Vugt. 2018. "Conspiracy Theories: Evolved Functions and Psychological Mechanisms." *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 13: 770–788. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691618774270>.
- Van Prooijen, J.-W., I. Währing, L. Mausolf, N. Mulas, and S. Shwan. 2023. "Just Dead, Not Alive: Reconsidering Belief in Contradictory Conspiracy Theories." *Psychological Science* 34: 670–682. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09567976231158570>.
- Vital, N., N. Chevalier, C. Dosso, and B. Tremoliere. 2025. "Conspiracy beliefs and analytical thinking in COVID-19 information web search." *Computers in Human Behavior Reports* 20, no. 7: 100804. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chbr.2025.100804>.
- Vitriol, J. A., and J. K. Marsh. 2018. "The Illusion of Explanatory Depth and Endorsement of Conspiracy Beliefs." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 48, no. 7: 955–969. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2504>.
- Von Wagner, C., Y. Hirst, J. Waller, et al. 2019. "The Impact of Descriptive Norms on Motivation to Participate in Cancer Screening—Evidence From Online Experiments." *Patient Education and Counseling* 102: 1621–1628. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pec.2019.04.001>.

Wang, H., and J.-W. Van Prooijen. 2026. "Nobody Knows Better: Examining the Link Between Overconfidence and Conspiracy Beliefs." *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 40: e70202. <https://doi.org/10.1002/acp.70202>.

Wang, H., J. W. van Prooijen, and P. A. van Lange. 2025. "How Perceived Coercion Polarizes Unvaccinated People: The Mediating Role of Conspiracy Beliefs." *Journal of Health Psychology* 30: 2354–2367. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13591053241238126>.

Winter, K., L. Pummerer, and K. Sassenberg. 2026. "Not That Different After All: Pro-Environmental Social Norms Predict Pro-Environmental Behaviour (Also) Among Those Believing in Conspiracy Theories." *British Journal of Psychology* 117: S176–S200. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.70030>.

Zhao, Q., J. W. van Prooijen, X. Jiang, and G. Spadaro. 2025. "Suspicious of AI? Perceived Autonomy and Interdependence Predict AI-Related Conspiracy Beliefs." *British Journal of Social Psychology* 64: e12883. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12883>.

Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.

Supporting Information: ejsp70111-sup-0001-SuppMat.docx