University of Kent

Kent Academic Repository

Šrol, Jakub, Godžáková, Dana and Douglas, Karen M. (2026) *Divided by conspiracy beliefs: interpersonal conflict and relationship quality*. Frontiers in Social Psychology, 4 . ISSN 2813-7876.

Downloaded from
https://kar.kent.ac.uk/117461/ The University of Kent's Academic Repository KAR

The version of record is available from
https://doi.org/doi:10.3389/frsps.2026.1827061

This document version
Publisher pdf

DOI for this version

Licence for this version
UNSPECIFIED

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 (available from https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies).

frontiers in Social Psychology

TYPE Original Research
PUBLISHED 03 November 2026
DOI 10.3389/frsps.2026.1827061

Check for updates

OPEN ACCESS

EDITED BY
Theofilos Gkinopoulos,
Jagiellonian University, Poland

REVIEWED BY
Diego Guevara Beltran,
University of Arizona, United States
Simon Myers,
University of Warwick, United Kingdom

*CORRESPONDENCE
Jakub Šrol
✉ j.srol@kent.ac.uk

RECEIVED 10 March 2026
REVISED 28 September 2026
ACCEPTED 07 October 2026
PUBLISHED 03 November 2026

CITATION
Šrol J, Godžáková D and Douglas KM (2026) Divided by conspiracy beliefs: interpersonal conflict and relationship quality. *Front. Soc. Psychol.* 4:1827061. doi: 10.3389/frsps.2026.1827061

COPYRIGHT
© 2026 Šrol, Godžáková and Douglas. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.

Divided by conspiracy beliefs: interpersonal conflict and relationship quality

Jakub Šrol[1,2]*, Dana Godžáková[2] and Karen M. Douglas[1]

[1]University of Kent, London and South East University Group, Canterbury, United Kingdom, [2]Institute of Experimental Psychology, Centre of Social and Psychological Sciences, Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava, Slovakia

Introduction: Belief in conspiracy theories has been linked to a range of social and political outcomes, yet its consequences for close interpersonal relationships remain poorly understood. The present study examined how frequently people experience disagreements and conflicts with their romantic partners that arise specifically because of their differences in conspiracy beliefs and whether such conflicts are associated with lower relationship quality and wellbeing in general.
Method: Using a UK quota sample recruited through Prolific (N = 493), participants reported the frequency and strain they experience from conspiracy conflicts with their current or previous romantic partners, alongside measures of relationship satisfaction, life satisfaction, and several relationship context variables. Additionally, we also explored the frequency of conspiracy conflicts across relationships with one's family members, friends, and co-workers.
Results: More than 20% of participants reported experiencing conspiracy conflicts either "sometimes," "often," or "very often" with their current partner, and approximately 33% did so in their previous romantic relationships. Moreover, more than 20% of participants reported having had the experience of their previous romantic relationship ending due to such conflicts. Similar frequencies were also reported across other types of close social bonds. Greater conspiracy conflicts were associated with moderately lower relationship satisfaction, and the strain from such conflicts was associated with slightly lower satisfaction with life in general. Mediation analyses indicated that conspiracy conflicts were associated with greater relationship difficulties and lower trust and closeness, which in turn were related to lower relationship satisfaction. Although several other relationship context variables were correlated with conspiracy conflicts and relationship satisfaction, none significantly moderated the association between these variables.
Discussion: These findings provide the first estimates of the prevalence of conflicts over conspiracy beliefs in romantic relationships and other types of close relationships. Moreover, they offer cumulative evidence that such conflicts are linked to poorer relationship functioning and may also, at least when experienced in the relationship with one's romantic partner, be associated with lower wellbeing.

KEYWORDS
conflict, conspiracy beliefs, interpersonal relationships, life satisfaction, relationship satisfaction, romantic relationships

1 Introduction

Psychological research in the past 10 years has uncovered a wide range of factors that predispose individuals to believe in conspiracy theories—accounts positing that certain events are the results of secret plans orchestrated by typically powerful groups with malicious intentions (Douglas and Sutton, 2023). However, the consequences of these beliefs on individuals and larger social collectives have only recently gained more systematic research attention (e.g., Jolley et al., 2022). As a result, surprisingly little is known about how conspiracy beliefs affect interpersonal relationships (Douglas et al., 2024; Toribio-Flórez et al., 2023). The existing evidence, which has predominantly resulted from qualitative studies (Jordan and Whitmer, 2023; Kamitz et al., 2026; Mastroni and Mooney, 2024), suggests that the endorsement of conspiracy theories can become a source of substantial conflict, which subsequently deteriorates relationship quality.

Moreover, while this may seem at first glance like a fringe problem, in a study by Moskalenko et al. (2022), approximately 80% of participants reported having a family member or friend who supported the QAnon conspiracy movement. These participants reported higher emotional distress and anxiety as a result of their involvement with a QAnon-supporting loved one, highlighting that the potential negative impacts of conspiracy beliefs on interpersonal relationships may even affect people's mental health and wellbeing more generally (see also Kamitz et al., 2026). However, despite some progress and increasing interest in this topic, we still know very little about how conflicts due to conspiracy beliefs affect the most intimate social bonds—such as those with one's romantic partner.

There are several reasons why couples who do not share the same views on conspiracy theories might experience relationship conflicts and lower relationship quality. First, there is a considerable body of evidence showing that perceived political dissimilarity is related to higher conflict and lower satisfaction among romantic couples (Gordon et al., 2025; Peacock and Pederson, 2022). Moreover, there are grounds to expect dissimilarity over conspiracy theories to be an even more substantial source of conflict than dissimilarity over political attitudes or ideology more generally. This is because the accounts presented by conspiracy theories are typically oppositional to the official explanations held by the majority (Douglas and Sutton, 2023), which makes them more likely to evoke disagreements and attitudinal distancing in comparison with political attitudes in general. Moreover, belief in conspiracy theories is commonly perceived as stigmatising (Douglas et al., 2022; Lantian et al., 2018). This stigma could further negatively affect the partners of those who believe conspiracy theories (i.e., stigma-by-association, Douglas et al., 2024), creating an additional source of conflict or dissatisfaction in a relationship in which the two partners do not share their views on conspiracy theories, beyond that expected in politically dissimilar couples. Finally, belief in conspiracy theories has been shown to relate to the misperception of social norms (van Prooijen et al., 2026) and engagement in non-normative social behaviour (Pummerer, 2022). Such behaviours among some conspiracy-believing partners, e.g., vaccination refusal or engagement in violent protests, likewise could negatively impact relationship quality over and above what we would expect in couples that simply differ in their political views (Toribio-Flórez et al., 2023).

In the present study, we set out to assess how often people experience disagreements and conflicts that arise specifically because of differences in conspiracy theory beliefs (hereafter "*conspiracy conflicts*") between them and their current or previous romantic partners, and examine whether such conflicts are associated with decreased relationship quality and wellbeing more generally. We also examined several relationship factors as potential mediators and moderators of the link between conspiracy conflicts and lower relationship satisfaction. Additionally, we looked at how the personal conspiracy beliefs of our participants, as well as their perception of conspiracy beliefs of their partners and other people in general, relate to the frequency with which they experience conspiracy conflicts in their relationships. While our research mostly concerned how conspiracy conflicts have affected people's current or previous romantic relationships, we also explored how often people experienced these conflicts in other types of interpersonal bonds, such as those with their family members, friends, coworkers, or schoolmates, to check for potential differences across these relationship domains. Before introducing our study in more detail, we review the existing evidence on how conspiracy beliefs and the conflicts they may generate affect close interpersonal relationships and summarize the factors that could shape the link between experiencing such conflicts and decreased relationship quality.

1.1 Conspiracy conflicts and satisfaction in close interpersonal relationships

Existing research on the interpersonal impacts of conspiracy beliefs has typically examined these issues by sampling participants who identified as having a family member or a loved one involved with the QAnon conspiracy movement. Although most of these studies did not look specifically at the impacts of such beliefs on romantic relationships, the relative consistency in their results across various types of social bonds seems to suggest that the findings they bring are also relevant in this context. Participants in two qualitative studies reported that their loved one's endorsement of QAnon conspiracy theories led to deterioration of their relationship, emotional distancing, increased frequency of epistemic conflicts (Jordan and Whitmer, 2023), and that all of this resulted either at various attempts at maintaining the relationship or in some cases, to dissolution of the relationship (Mastroni and Mooney, 2024). A quantitative study by Mousaw (2022) revealed similar findings, in which participants reported that the relationships with their family members, romantic partners, friends or colleagues were less close and less satisfying after these others became involved in the QAnon conspiracy movement. Another recent qualitative study focused specifically on partners or ex-partners of people who believed a wide range of different conspiracy theories. Similarly to the abovementioned findings, participants in Kamitz et al. (2026) work reported that their partner's endorsement of conspiracy theories led to escalating conflicts, substantial relationship difficulties, and while the interviewees first tried to understand their partner's position, ultimately, most of the relationships either substantially deteriorated or were dissolved

as a result of this. Consistently, these studies bring evidence about the substantial relationship difficulties and conflict that the endorsement of conspiracy theories can cause in various types of interpersonal relationships. However, and importantly, most of these studies have used qualitative methodology, and all of them only sampled participants who specifically identified as being in a current (or previous) relationship with someone who believes conspiracy theories. Therefore, it is not possible to draw any conclusions from them about how commonly people experience conspiracy conflicts in their relationships and how these conflicts are related to the relationship quality.

Indeed, in the most comprehensive study on the interpersonal impacts of conspiracy beliefs so far, Toribio-Flórez et al. (2024) found that the perceived endorsement of other people's conspiracy beliefs led to a decrease in the actual or anticipated relationship satisfaction with those others (hereafter "alters"), partially because of anticipated attitudinal and relational distancing and decrease in trust. While this study did not specifically examine whether participants experienced a conflict in their relationships with their alters, across studies, the authors found that the effects of the endorsement of conspiracy theories on decreased relationship satisfaction were consistently moderated by participants' own conspiracy beliefs. Thus, the negative impacts of conspiracy beliefs on relationships primarily occurred when alters were perceived as endorsing conspiracy theories which participants themselves strongly disbelieved, suggesting a presence of conflict. In the present study, we therefore examined whether experiencing conspiracy conflicts in one's romantic relationship would be associated with lower satisfaction in those relationships.

Given the moderation pattern observed in Toribio-Flórez et al. (2024), we also asked participants to report the extent to which they personally endorse a range of conspiracy theories, as well as whether they believe their partners to endorse the same conspiracy theories, to ascertain whether the perceived difference in beliefs is related to more frequent experience of conspiracy conflicts and lowered relationship satisfaction. As people tend to overestimate how many others believe conspiracy theories (Cookson et al., 2021), and this is most pronounced among those with stronger conspiracy beliefs (Pennycook et al., 2026; van Prooijen et al., 2026), we also asked participants to what extent they think an average participant in the study believes the same set of conspiracy theory statements, gauging the degree to which they perceive conspiracy beliefs as prevalent. Misperception of their beliefs as more common than they actually are has been theorized to potentially motivate conspiracy believers to engage in non-normative behavior, which may ultimately lead to increased relationship conflicts, as well as reduced trust and relationship satisfaction (Toribio-Flórez et al., 2023). Thus, we also examined whether the perceived difference between one's conspiracy beliefs and the estimated prevalence of belief in conspiracy theories would be associated with the frequency with which our participants experience conspiracy conflicts in their relationships.

Importantly, the handful of existing studies also suggests that besides the effects on relationship quality *per se*, conspiracy conflicts with one's close social bonds could also be associated with broader negative health impacts, further highlighting the importance of this issue. Indeed, participants in the study by Kamitz et al. (2026) reported that as a result of their partners' conspiracy beliefs, they had experienced a range of negative mental and physical health symptoms, such as stress, anxiety, or insomnia. This resonates with the study of Moskalenko et al. (2022) which found that participants who had a family member or friend who supported the QAnon conspiracy movement reported experiencing higher levels of symptoms related to anxiety and PTSD. This might not be surprising, as high-quality interpersonal relationships are known to be an important predictor of both mental (Thomas et al., 2017) and physical health (Umberson and Thomeer, 2020), and this is especially true when it comes to romantic bonds (Proulx et al., 2007; Robles et al., 2014). Based on this, we not only examined whether conspiracy conflicts would be associated with lower satisfaction with one's romantic relationship, but also whether they would correlate with lower satisfaction with life more generally.

1.2 Factors shaping the link between conspiracy conflicts and relationship satisfaction

Besides investigating how frequently people experience conspiracy conflicts in their romantic relationships and how these experiences relate to relationship satisfaction and wellbeing, we also examined two sets of factors that we hypothesized to shape the associations between conspiracy conflicts and relationship satisfaction.

Regarding the first set of relationship variables, we focused on factors that might help us better understand the expected association between experiencing conspiracy conflicts and lower satisfaction in the relationship with one's romantic partner—specifically, increased relationship difficulties, and decreased trust and closeness. We based this on the abovementioned qualitative studies (Jordan and Whitmer, 2023; Kamitz et al., 2026; Mastroni and Mooney, 2024), in which participants consistently reported that conflicts because of conspiracy beliefs were not contained to epistemic arguments but eventually led to more general relationship difficulties—i.e., Breakdown of communication, disagreements, and tension. Moreover, building on theorizing in this domain (Douglas et al., 2024; Toribio-Flórez et al., 2023) and empirical evidence presented by Toribio-Flórez et al. (2024), we also examined decreased trust and closeness, as two variables that were shown to partially mediate the effects of alters' endorsement of conspiracy theories on reduced relationship satisfaction. Since lower tension and conflict and higher trust and closeness are among the most important predictors of relationship quality (Righetti et al., 2022; Joel et al., 2020), we included these variables here to examine whether they mediate the association between higher experienced conspiracy conflicts with one's romantic partner and lower relationship satisfaction.

Secondly, we included another set of relationship context measures to help us illuminate which relationships are more or less affected by conspiracy conflicts. The examination of these potential moderating variables was inspired by the recent study by Gordon et al. (2025), who included perspective-taking, self-silencing, and shared values and lifestyle, among other variables, as potential moderators in their examination of the effects of political dissimilarity on quality of romantic relationships. Based on the observation of Toribio-Flórez et al. (2024) that the effects of alters' endorsement of conspiracy beliefs on relationship satisfaction are substantially in line with previous literature on how political dissimilarity affects interpersonal relationships (e.g., Leikas et al., 2018), we decided to explore whether these variables could moderate the association between experiencing conspiracy conflicts and relationship satisfaction. We also included several additional relationship context variables that were previously shown to be associated with relationship conflict or relationship quality—relationship maintenance (Ogolsky and Bowers, 2013), empathic concern (Cramer and Jowett, 2010), and partner dependency (Valor-Segura et al., 2014).

1.3 Present study

To summarise, in the present study we explored how often people experience disagreements and conflicts that arise specifically because of differences in conspiracy beliefs between them and their current or previous romantic partners and examined whether these conspiracy conflicts are associated with lower relationship satisfaction and wellbeing in general. We also tested higher relationship difficulties, lower trust, and lower closeness as three mediators of the anticipated association between conspiracy conflicts and lower relationship satisfaction. Next, we explored the role of several relationship context variables as potential moderators in this regard, including self-silencing, shared lifestyle and values, spouse-specific dependency, relationship maintenance behaviours, empathic concern and perspective-taking. Crucially, we asked participants to indicate the extent to which they personally believe several popular conspiracy theories, and to what extent they think their romantic partner and an average participant in this study believe the same set of conspiracy theories to ascertain whether these variables relate to the frequency with which people experience conspiracy conflicts in their relationships. Finally, given that conspiracy beliefs may generate conflict across a range of social bonds, we included other relationship types as an exploratory comparison to assess whether romantic relationships are uniquely vulnerable to conspiracy-related conflict, or whether such conflicts are similarly prevalent and show similar associations with relationship satisfaction in other types of close relationships (with family members, friends, coworkers, or schoolmates). The study received ethical approval from the Psychology Ethics Team at the University of Kent. Our hypotheses, measures, sample size and analyses were preregistered on OSF: https://osf.io/ubcx2/overview. Data, materials and analysis codes for the present study are available at OSF: https://osf.io/dcs6h/overview.

2 Methods

2.1 Participants

Participants were recruited using a UK "standard representative sample" feature on Prolific, which can be used to recruit a UK sample of participants using stratified quotas for age, sex and ethnicity based on UK census data from 2024. Additionally, to be eligible, the participants had to be at least 18 years old, speak English fluently, and were required to be either involved in a romantic relationship at the time, or had been involved in a romantic relationship in the past. In total, we collected data from 541 participants, but, as preregistered, we excluded 48 participants who did not pass either of two simple attention checks (e.g., "*This is an attention check for random-clickers, please choose response option number four.*"). This left us with the final sample of 493 participants (250 men, 238 women, three non-binary/third gender, and two who preferred not to disclose their gender), aged between 19 and 79 years ($M = 42.7$, $SD = 13.22$). Most of the participants had either a graduate ($n = 102$) or undergraduate ($n = 199$) university degree, with smaller proportions with some university education without a degree ($n = 29$), vocational or similar school ($n = 81$), completed secondary education ($n = 78$), or some secondary education ($n = 4$). Regarding political orientation, measured on a scale from 1 ("*extremely conservative*") to 9 ("*extremely liberal*"), our sample was slightly liberal-leaning ($M = 5.58$, $SD = 1.77$). A *post-hoc* sensitivity analysis shows that this sample size gave us 80% statistical power to detect even relatively small correlations ($r > 0.126$) with 5% error probability (two-tailed). Moreover, using the Monte Carlo power calculator for mediation models by Schoemann et al. (2017) and inputting the actual correlation matrix and standard deviations of variables included in the present mediation analysis, the present sample provides very high (>95%) statistical power to test all three indirect effects. Finally, when it comes to our preregistered exploratory moderation analysis, the present sample gave us 80% statistical with 5% error probability (two-tailed) to detect coefficients of Cohen's $f^2 > 0.016$ in a multiple linear regression analysis with 15 predictors.

2.2 Procedure

After providing their informed consent, participants first answered general questions about their life satisfaction and overall satisfaction with their relationships with family, friends, and at the workplace or in school. Next, they completed measures about the quality of their current or most recent romantic relationship and reported how long their current or most recent relationship has lasted. Afterwards, they received a short text explaining what conspiracy theories are and how they can sometimes lead to disagreements and conflict (see Section 2.3) and were asked to indicate how frequently they experience such conflicts in their relationships, how much strain such conflicts put on their relationships, and whether they have ever had a relationship end because of such conflicts with their romantic partners, but also with family, friends, at the workplace or in school). This was followed by several additional blocks of relationship context measures. We then

10.3389/frsps.2026.1827061

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics and reliabilities for the main variables in the present study.

	n	*M*	*SD*	α
Overall life satisfaction (outcome)				
Life satisfaction	493	4.43	1.39	0.91
Quality of romantic relationships (outcome and mediators)				
Couple satisfaction (outcome)	493	18.0	5.07	0.96
Relationship difficulties (mediator)	493	2.84	1.32	0.89
Trust (mediator)	493	5.76	1.29	0.92
Closeness (mediator)	493	5.47	1.28	0.89
Conspiracy conflicts (outcomes & predictors)*				
Conflict frequency—current or most recent partner[y]	493	2.00	0.85	–
Conflict frequency—past romantic relationships	363	2.23	0.96	–
Relationship strain—current or most recent partner[†]	493	1.61	0.91	–
Relationship strain—past romantic relationships	363	1.82	1.06	–
Relationship ending—partner	493	1.32	0.69	–
Relationship context measures (moderators)				
Self-silencing	493	2.69	1.10	–
Shared values	493	3.36	0.96	–
Shared lifestyle	493	3.93	0.88	–
Relationship maintenance	493	3.79	0.78	0.85
Partner dependency	493	2.93	0.97	0.80
Empathic concern	493	4.10	0.71	0.82
Perspective-taking	493	3.69	0.80	0.88
Conspiracy beliefs (predictors)				
Personal conspiracy beliefs	493	2.47	1.17	0.87
Partner conspiracy beliefs	493	2.37	1.29	0.90
Perceived prevalence of belief in conspiracy theories	493	3.06	1.15	0.90

The table presents descriptive statistics and reliabilities for the main variables in the present study. For couple satisfaction, we report the sum score rather than the mean score, in line with the scoring instructions for this measure. The table also specifies the roles that the variables play in the main analyses in the current manuscript.

*Conspiracy conflict variables are treated as outcomes in some of the analyses below, while in others they are treated as predictors.

[†]These variables use merged data pertaining either to the current (n = 400) or the most recent romantic partner (n = 93).

asked participants about their personal belief in a range of specific conspiracy theories, as well as their perception of their current or most recent partner's conspiracy beliefs, and the extent to which they think an average participant in the study beliefs the same conspiracy statements. Finally, participants reported demographic information, after which they were debriefed and thanked for their participation, and the study was concluded.

2.3 Materials

Descriptive statistics and reliability estimates for all key measures are presented in Table 1. Apart from the main measures pertaining to the quality of romantic relationships and conspiracy conflicts in these relationships, we also asked participants several questions about how satisfied they were and how often they experience such conflicts in their relationships with their friends, family, at the workplace or at the place of study, as well as their perceived prevalence of conspiracy beliefs. Since these types of social bonds were not the primary focus of this work and were merely included as a comparison, to streamline the manuscript, these materials and analyses are presented in full in Section B of the Supplementary material.

2.3.1 Life satisfaction

We used the five-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985) to measure life satisfaction. Participants rated the statements (e.g., "*I am satisfied with my life*") using a scale from 1 ("*strongly disagree*") to 7 ("*strongly agree*").

2.3.2 Quality of romantic relationships

Participants who reported being currently in a romantic relationship ($n = 400$) answered the questions below as pertaining to their current partner. Participants who reported that they are

currently not in a relationship but have been in a relationship before ($n = 93$), were asked to respond to the same questions reworded to pertain to their most recent romantic partner.

2.3.2.1 Couple satisfaction

We used the four-item version of the Couples Satisfaction Index (Funk and Rogge, 2007) to measure participants' satisfaction in their current or past romantic relationship (e.g., "*Please indicate how happy you are, all things considered, with your relationship*"). Scores on this measure range from 0 to 21, with higher values representing higher relationship satisfaction.

2.3.2.2 Relationship difficulties

We used six items from Gordon and Chen (2016) to measure the extent to which participants experience(d) difficulties in their current or past romantic relationships. Participants rated the statements (e.g., "*I feel like all my partner and I do is fight*") using a scale from 1 ("*strongly disagree*") to 7 ("*strongly agree*").

2.3.2.3 Trust

Three items of the trust subscale of the Perceived Relationship Quality Component Inventory (Fletcher et al., 2000) were used to measure participants' trust toward their current or past romantic partner. Participants answered the questions (e.g., "*How much do you trust your partner?*") using a scale from 1 ("*not at all*") to 7 ("*completely*").

2.3.2.4 Closeness

Three items taken from Toribio-Flórez et al. (2024) were used to measure participants' relational, attitudinal and emotional closeness with their current or past romantic partner. Participants responded to these items (e.g., "*In general, how close is your relationship with your partner?*") using a scale from 1 ("*not at all close*") to 7 ("*extremely close*").

2.3.3 Conspiracy conflicts

We presented participants with a short excerpt, in which we specifically avoided using the term "conspiracy theory", as it has been shown that people are less likely to use that label to describe beliefs they personally endorse (Douglas et al., 2022). Instead, we based the text on the one-item conspiracy belief measure by Lantian et al. (2016) to illustrate what conspiracy beliefs are and how people can get into disagreements over such beliefs:

"People often debate how important political and social events (e.g., the 09/11 attacks, the death of Princess Diana, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the spread of COVID-19) really happened. Some people suggest that the official version of these events could be an attempt to hide the truth from the public. They say the official version could mask the fact that these events were planned and secretly prepared by a covert alliance of powerful individuals or organizations (e.g., secret services or governments). Other people disagree with these alternative accounts and believe that the events happened more or less in line with the official version. These differences in views can sometimes lead to interpersonal conflict in relationships, such as disagreements and arguments. Below, we will ask you whether you are currently experiencing, or have previously experienced, conflicts because of differences in these sorts of socio-political beliefs in different relationships in your everyday life."

Then, we asked participants a series of questions about experiencing these conflicts in various areas of their everyday lives Participants who reported being currently in a relationship, as well as having been in any relationships previous to the current one, were asked both about their current partner and their past romantic relationships in general. Those who indicated not having a current partner were only asked about their most recent romantic partner. In most of the analyses below, we merged the responses pertaining to the current ($n = 400$) and the most recent romantic partner ($n = 93$).

2.3.3.1 Conflict frequency

We asked participants how often they experience such conflicts in various areas of their relationships (e.g., "*How often do you experience such conflicts in your relationship with your current romantic partner?*"). They responded using a scale from 1 ("*never*") to 5 ("*very often*").

2.3.3.2 Relationship strain

We asked to what extent such conflicts cause tensions in various areas of their relationships (e.g., "*To what extent do such conflicts cause tensions or put strain on your relationship with your current romantic partner?*"). They responded using a scale from 1 ("*not at all*") to 5 ("*to a great extent*").

2.3.3.3 Relationship ending

We asked whether they ever had a relationship end because of such conflicts in various areas of their everyday lives (e.g., "*Have you ever had a relationship end (regardless of whether it was you or the other person who ended the relationship) because of such conflicts within your relationship with a romantic partner?*"), to which participants responded using a scale from 1 ("*never*") to 5 ("*many times*").

2.3.4 Relationship context measures

As with relationship quality, participants answered the following measures either pertaining to their current or most recent romantic partner, depending on their relationship status.

2.3.4.1 Self-silencing

We used a single item ("*How often do you keep your thoughts and opinions to yourself to avoid disagreements with your partner?*") taken from Gordon et al. (2025) to measure self-silencing in the current or most recent romantic relationship to which participants responded on a scale from 1 ("*never*") to 5 ("*always*").

2.3.4.2 Shared lifestyle and values

Two items from Gordon et al. (2025) were used to measure the extent (1 = "*not at all*", 5 = "*completely*") to which participants share their hobbies or interests, and their values with their current

or most recent romantic partners (e.g., "*Do you and your partner have shared hobbies or interests?*").

2.3.4.3 Relationship maintenance

We used eight items taken from Chonody et al. (2016) to measure participants' maintenance behaviors regarding their current or most recent romantic relationship (e.g., "*We talk to each other about everything*") to which participants responded on a scale from 1 ("*strongly disagree*") to 5 ("*strongly agree*").

2.3.4.4 Partner dependency

Five items taken from a scale by Rathus and O'Leary (1997) were used to measure spouse-specific dependency toward participants' current or most recent romantic partner (e.g., "*There is no one I need as much as my partner*") to which participants responded on a scale from 1 ("*strongly disagree*") to 5 ("*strongly agree*").

2.3.4.5 Empathic concern and perspective-taking

We used the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1983) adapted to the context of intimate relationships by Péloquin and Lafontaine (2010), including seven items to measure empathic concern (e.g., "*I often have tender, concerned feelings for my partner when they are less fortunate than me*") and six items to measure perspective-taking (e.g., "*I try to look at my partner's side of a disagreement before I make a decision*") regarding participants' current or most recent romantic partners. Participants responded to these items on a scale from 1 ("*does not describe me well*") to 5 ("*describes me very well*").

2.3.5 Belief in conspiracy theories

2.3.5.1 Personal conspiracy beliefs

Participants were asked to indicate to what degree they personally believe nine statements detailing popular specific conspiracy theories (e.g., "*There was an official campaign by MI6 to assassinate Princess Diana, sanctioned by elements of the establishment*") based on Toribio-Flórez et al. (2024) to be true. Their mean rating on a scale from 1 ("*not at all true*") to 7 ("*definitely true*") was used as an index of personal conspiracy beliefs.

2.3.5.2 Perceived partner's conspiracy beliefs

We presented participants with the same nine statements as above and asked them to indicate to what extent they think their current or most recent romantic partner believed them to be true, using the same scale as above. The same set of items was also used to ask participants about their perceived prevalence of conspiracy beliefs (see Section B in the Supplementary material).

As preregistered, we calculated two indices based on this variable, which we used to ascertain who experienced conspiracy conflicts more often. The first index is calculated as the absolute value [1] of a simple difference score between participants' personal mean conspiracy beliefs and the mean perceived current or most recent partner conspiracy belief (*simple self-partner difference*). The higher values of this variable indicate a larger difference in the average conspiracy belief between the two partners and the values close to zero indicate that participants perceive their partners to endorse conspiracy theories to the approximately same extent as themselves. For the second index, we summed the absolute deviations for every single item of conspiracy beliefs between participants' own ratings and the ratings for their current or most recent romantic partner (*item-level self-partner difference*). The higher values on this difference score indicate a bigger difference in the endorsement of specific conspiracy theories between the two partners, which we assume would be positively associated with conspiracy conflicts. These two indices were based on a rationale that conspiracy conflicts may not only be associated with differences between two partners in their general conspiracy belief levels (i.e., one partner having a high average and the other having a low average belief in conspiracy theories) but also with differences in their views on specific conspiracy theories (e.g., two partners having about the same average level of conspiracy beliefs but each endorses different set of conspiracy theories). In the latter case, a simple difference in average conspiracy belief would not be able to capture this subtler difference, which is why we decided to employ the second index, to see whether it would be associated with conspiracy conflicts more strongly than the first one.

3 Results

First, we examined the frequency of conspiracy conflicts and how often participants reported that their past relationships had ended because of them. As can be seen from Table 2, more than 20% of our participants experience such conflicts "sometimes," "often," or "very often" with their current or most recent romantic partner, and about 33% experienced them "sometimes," "often," or "very often" in their past romantic relationships. Moreover, more than 20% of our sample reported having had the experience of their romantic relationship ending because of conspiracy conflicts once or more times in their life. On the other hand, approximately 76% of our sample never or only rarely experienced conspiracy conflicts with their current or most recent romantic partners and 67% never or rarely experienced them within their past romantic relationships in general either. Note that similar frequencies of conspiracy conflicts were also reported by participants in their relationships with their friends, family, or at their workplace (see Supplementary Table S3 in Section B of the Supplementary material).

1 We preregistered this index as a simple difference score between participant's own mean conspiracy beliefs and mean perceived conspiracy beliefs of their romantic partner. Thus, the index indicated whether participants perceived their partner to have a lower or higher mean conspiracy belief than themselves. However, based on the feedback of one of the reviewers, we decided to convert the index to its absolute value for better comparability with the second difference index, thus reflecting the size of the difference in mean conspiracy level between participants and their perception of their partner. While we use the terms "self-partner difference" and "self-partner absolute difference" in the preregistration, to better account for the differences between the two indices, we renamed them to "simple self-partner difference" and "item-level self-partner difference" in the manuscript.

TABLE 2 Frequency of conspiracy conflicts.

	Response categories				
Frequency of conflict	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very often
Current or most recent partner ($n = 493$)	30.4%	45.2%	19.1%	4.9%	0.4%
Past romantic relationship ($n = 363$)	22.6%	44.6%	21.5%	9.6%	1.7%
Relationship ending	Never	Once	Few times	Several times	Many times
Romantic partner ($n = 493$)	78.7%	13.2%	6.3%	1.4%	0.4%

The table shows the percentages for the five response categories for the frequency of conspiracy conflicts, and how often participants reported their past relationships ended because of such conflicts with their romantic partners. Frequencies of conspiracy conflicts reflect responses given in relation to one's current or the most recent romantic partner. Additionally, a subset of participants (n = 363) who reported being currently in a relationship as well as having been in any relationships previous to the current one were also asked about how often they experienced conspiracy conflicts in their past romantic relationships in general.

3.1 Who experiences conspiracy conflicts more or less frequently?

Next, as preregistered, we examined whether differences between participants' personal conspiracy beliefs and the perceptions of their partner's conspiracy beliefs are associated with the frequency of conspiracy conflicts in their relationship. Although not preregistered, as part of this analysis, we also explored the roles of demographic factors and conspiracy belief variables in the prevalence of such conflicts. To this end, we calculated a simple correlational analysis using frequency of conspiracy conflicts, demographic variables, conspiracy belief variables, and conspiracy belief difference indices (see Section 2.3).

As can be seen from Table 3, women and more conservative participants reported experiencing a slightly higher frequency of conspiracy conflicts. Moreover, higher personal, as well as perceived partner's conspiracy beliefs, were moderately positively correlated with experiencing more frequent conspiracy conflicts. Notably, while the simple difference score between personal and perceived partner's conspiracy beliefs was also negatively related to conspiracy conflict frequency, the item-level self-partner difference score a stronger positive correlation in this regard and the difference between the dependent correlations as statistically significant, $z = 4.26$, $p < 0.001$. As can be seen in Table S4 in Section B of the Supplementary material, similar but less pronounced associations emerged when examining the difference scores between the self and perceived prevalence of belief in conspiracy theories and frequency of conspiracy conflicts in other relationship domains. This is consistent with our expectations. While the simple self-partner difference score only indicates that the two partners have a different average level of conspiracy belief, the more complex item-level difference index is more sensitive to perceived differences in the endorsement of particular conspiracy theories we surveyed. Thus, it accounts for the possibility of participants perceiving that they and their partner believe different sets of conspiracy theories, which might be expected to associate with an even higher frequency of conflicts [2].

3.2 Conspiracy conflicts and satisfaction with romantic relationships

Next, as preregistered, we examined whether the frequency of conspiracy conflicts and the strain they put on people's relationships with their current or most recent romantic partner and the perceived self-partner differences in conspiracy beliefs are associated with relationship quality, couple satisfaction and satisfaction with life in general. To do so, we conducted a simple correlation analysis. As can be seen from Table 4, both conflict frequency and the experienced relationship strain due to conspiracy conflicts, as well as both indices of the perceived self-partner difference in conspiracy beliefs, were weakly to moderately associated with higher experienced relationship difficulties in general and lower trust, closeness and satisfaction with one's current or most recent romantic partner. Importantly, strain experienced in the relationship with one's romantic partner due to conspiracy conflicts and perceived self-partner differences in conspiracy beliefs were also weakly negatively related to life satisfaction in general, highlighting the importance of good functioning of those kinds of relationships for people's wellbeing.

Moreover, as can be seen from Supplementary Table S5 in Section B of the Supplementary material, while relationship strain from experiencing conspiracy conflict is associated with lower satisfaction across other relationship domains (friends, family, workplace), conflict frequency is only significantly correlated with lower satisfaction with one's family, but not with friends or at a workplace. Thus, while we observe relatively similar levels of conflict frequency across various relationship domains, these frequencies seem to be differently related to satisfaction across the examined relationship domains. However, as satisfaction with one's friends, family and at the workplace was only measured using simple one-item scales, the analyses pertaining to these relationship domains should be treated as preliminary.

While this was not preregistered, as both conspiracy conflict frequency and perceived self-partner differences in conspiracy beliefs were associated with lower relationship satisfaction to a similar extent, we decided to look at whether the two variables predict relationship satisfaction independently of each other. To this end, we ran a linear regression with relationship satisfaction as an outcome variable and item-level self-partner difference and

2 To examine whether the associations between our difference scores and the frequency of conspiracy conflicts are not simply confounded with personal conspiracy beliefs or perceived conspiracy beliefs of one's partner, we ran two regression analyses (one for each difference score) in which we predicted frequency of conspiracy conflicts with the self-partner difference score while controlling for both personal and perceived partner's conspiracy belief score. As can be seen in Section D of the Supplementary Materials, in both of these analyses, the self-partner difference score significantly predicted conspiracy conflicts frequency, showing that it indeed accounts for some additional variance over and above the personal and perceived partner's conspiracy beliefs.

TABLE 3 Correlations between the frequency of conspiracy conflicts, demographic factors, and conspiracy belief variables.

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1. Conflict frequency partner	1							
2. Gender (1 = "man", 2 = "woman")	0.11*	1						
3. Age	−0.04	−0.02	1					
4. Education	−0.04	−0.08	−0.14**	1				
5. Political orientation	−0.15**	−0.02	−0.20**	0.04	1			
6. Personal conspiracy belief	0.31**	0.12**	−0.21**	−0.20**	−0.16**	1		
7. Partner conspiracy belief	0.36**	0.19**	−0.13**	−0.15**	−0.10*	0.73**	1	
8. Simple self–partner difference	0.23**	0.07	−0.10*	−0.10*	−0.09*	0.38**	0.27**	1
9. Item-level self–partner difference	0.32**	0.09	−0.16**	−0.15**	−0.08	0.53**	0.44**	0.88**

The table shows Pearson's correlations between the frequency of conspiracy conflicts with one's current or most recent romantic partner, demographic factors, and conspiracy belief variables. Higher values indicate more liberal political orientation. Pairwise correlations are based on 493 observations except for those with the binary gender variable, which are based on 488 observations (five missing values represented by non-binary or third-gender participants and those who preferred not to disclose their gender).
*p <.05; **p < 0.01.

TABLE 4 Correlations between conspiracy conflicts experienced with one's current or most recent romantic partner, quality of romantic relationship and life satisfaction.

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1. Conflict frequency	1							
2. Relationship strain	0.65***	1						
3. Simple self-partner difference	0.023***	0.14*	1					
4. Item-level self-partner difference	0.32***	0.18***	0.88***	1				
5. Relationship difficulties	0.38***	0.41***	0.20***	0.23***	1			
6. Trust	−0.24***	−0.31***	−0.17***	−0.19***	−0.65***	1		
7. Closeness	−0.27***	−0.28***	−0.19***	−0.18***	−0.67***	0.69***	1	
8. Relationship satisfaction	−0.25***	−0.28***	−0.18***	−0.19***	−0.73***	0.70***	0.82***	1
9. Life satisfaction	−0.08	−0.13**	−0.12**	−0.12**	−0.38***	0.36***	0.40***	0.48***

N = 493. The table shows Pearson's correlations between conspiracy conflict frequency and relationship strain, self-partner difference indices, relationship difficulties, trust, closeness as well as satisfaction with one's current or most recent romantic partner, and life satisfaction in general.
*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.

conspiracy conflict frequency as two predictors. Both item-level self-partner difference, $\beta = -0.13$, 95% CI [−0.22, −0.04], $p = 0.006$, and the frequency of conspiracy conflicts, $\beta = -0.21$, 95% CI [−0.30, −0.12], $p < 0.001$, significantly predicted relationship satisfaction, $F_{(2,490)} = 20.7$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.08$, adj. $R^2 = 0.07$, suggesting that the variance tapped by the conspiracy conflicts is at least to some extent unique and does not only reflect the perceived self-partner differences in conspiracy beliefs.

In line with our preregistration, we further examined whether the link between conspiracy conflicts and lower couple satisfaction can be explained by higher experienced relationship difficulties, and lower trust and relational closeness. As a predictor in this analysis, we used an average rating of two items tapping conflict frequency and relationship strain associated with conspiracy conflicts experienced in a relationship with one's current or most recent romantic partner ($N = 493$, $M = 1.80$, $SD = 0.80$, $\alpha = 0.79$).[3] To this end, we ran a parallel mediation model using R package *lavaan* (Rosseel, 2012), with standard errors based on 2,000 bootstrap samples.

While conspiracy conflicts negatively predicted couple satisfaction when included as the only variable in the model ($\beta = -0.29$, $p < 0.001$), after the inclusion of mediators, the direct association among these variables became non-significant (see Figure 1). On the other hand, the indirect paths through higher relationship difficulties [unstandardized $b = -0.79$, SE = 0.13, 95% CI (−1.05, −0.55)], as well as lower trust [$b = -0.29$, SE = 0.10, 95% CI (−0.50, −0.13)] and closeness [$b = -1.03$, SE = 0.18, 95% CI (−1.39, −0.69)], were all significant, as indicated by their confidence intervals not crossing zero. Although we cannot infer any temporal or causal order between our variables based on our cross-sectional data, these results suggest potential mechanisms relevant to the association between conspiracy conflicts and lower relationship satisfaction. As a robustness check, we also rerun

3 As our main preregistered mediation model included a predictor index based both on the frequency of experiencing conspiracy conflicts and the strain resulting from those conflicts, it could be argued that the predictor in the model was to some extent conflated with one of the mediators, namely, relationship difficulties. To account for this possibility, as a robustness check, we also reran the same mediation model with the frequency of conspiracy conflicts as a predictor. The results of this model are presented in Section C of the Supplementary Materials, however, they are completely in line with the findings reported in the main manuscript.

the same mediation model with relationship length included as a covariate. The results of this analysis are presented in Section C of the Supplementary material, however, they are completely consistent with the findings presented above.

3.3 Does the relationship context moderate the link between conspiracy conflicts and relationship satisfaction?

As a preregistered exploratory analysis, we also examined how several relationship context variables—i.e., self-silencing, shared lifestyle and values, partner dependency, relationship maintenance, empathic concern and perspective-taking—are associated with conspiracy conflicts and if any of them moderate the association between conspiracy conflicts experienced with one's current or most recent romantic partner and relationship satisfaction. As in the mediation analysis above, we used the average rating on two items tapping conflict frequency and relationship strain as an index of conspiracy conflicts. First, we scrutinized the correlations between conspiracy conflicts, personal and perceived partner conspiracy beliefs, relationship context variables, and relationship satisfaction with one's current or most recent romantic partner. As can be seen from Table 5, all relationship context variables but self-silencing were positively correlated with couple satisfaction. On the other hand, conspiracy conflicts were moderately positively correlated with self-silencing and weakly to moderately negatively correlated with all other relationship context variables, except for partner dependency.

Moreover, while this was not among the main aims of the present study, we also examined the correlations between personal and perceived partner's conspiracy beliefs and the included relationship context variables, as such associations are rarely examined in the existing research in this domain. As can be seen from Table 5, both participants' personal conspiracy beliefs and their perceived partner's conspiracy beliefs were related to slightly higher self-silencing and lower shared values. While personal conspiracy belief was also correlated with lower empathic concern, the perceived partner's conspiracy belief was slightly negatively correlated with couple satisfaction.

Next, we examined whether any of the relationship context measures moderated the associations between conspiracy conflicts and couple satisfaction, which would suggest their protective role in relationships in which one or both of the partners believe conspiracy theories. To do this, we conducted a multiple regression analysis predicting couple satisfaction with conspiracy conflicts, all relationship context measures, and all two-way interactions between relationship context measures and conspiracy conflicts included in the single step (for the detailed results, see Section A of the Supplementary material). While several of the relationship context measures did predict couple satisfaction in our model [self-silencing: $\beta = -0.08$, 95% CI (−0.14, −0.02), $p = 0.010$; shared values: $\beta = 0.18$, 95% CI (0.11, 0.25), $p < 0.001$; relationship maintenance: $\beta = 0.55$, 95% CI (0.46, 0.63), $p < 0.001$), none of their two-way interaction terms with conspiracy conflicts were statistically significant. And yet, it should be mentioned that the interaction term in the case of self-silencing almost reached significance, $\beta = -0.06$, 95% CI (−0.11, 0.00), $p = 0.056$].

4 Discussion

We set out to examine how often people experience conspiracy conflicts in their romantic relationships and how such conflicts relate to satisfaction with these relationships and life in general. First, we found that conspiracy conflicts are quite common. More than 20% of our sample reported experiencing them "sometimes," "often," or "very often" with their current or most recent romantic partner and around 33% reported experiencing them "sometimes," "often," or "very often" in their past romantic relationships in general. Moreover, more than 20% of the participants reported a romantic relationship ending due to such conflicts. Importantly, these frequencies were also relatively consistent across the other surveyed relationship domains (see Section B of the Supplementary material), suggesting that friendships or familial bonds are similarly susceptible. To our knowledge, ours is the first study to directly ask participants how often they experience conspiracy conflicts. While previous research by Moskalenko et al. (2022) suggests that around 80% of a US sample reported having a loved one who endorses the conspiracy movement QAnon, this estimate was obtained with a convenience sample that likely overrepresented people whose loved ones believed QAnon, and the authors did not ask about the frequency of conflicts *per se*. The present study used a sample recruited through a Prolific feature that uses stratified quotas for age, sex and ethnicity based on the UK census data. While such a sample might not be representative of the UK general population in other important respects (e.g., when it comes to education or political orientation), and we have additionally imposed some eligibility requirements (e.g., having been in a romantic relationship) that might likewise further restrict participation of certain demographic groups, we still believe our findings provide the most accurate estimate of the frequency of conspiracy conflicts to this day, at least when it comes to the UK national context.

Importantly, both the frequency of conspiracy conflicts and the associated relationship strain experienced with one's romantic partner were moderately associated with lower relationship satisfaction, and the latter was also weakly associated with lower life satisfaction in general. Further, the association between conspiracy conflict and lower relationship satisfaction was fully mediated by lower trust and closeness, and higher experienced relationship difficulties. These findings resonate with previous evidence showing that conspiracy beliefs may not only have a negative impact on satisfaction in interpersonal relationships (Mousaw, 2022; Toribio-Flórez et al., 2024), but also go beyond that in showing that experiencing strain from conspiracy conflicts in one's romantic relationship is associated with lower wellbeing (see also Kamitz et al., 2026; Moskalenko et al., 2022).

Indeed, while previous studies in this domain typically examined how conspiracy beliefs could impact interpersonal relationships more generally, looking at various relationships including one's family, friends or coworkers (e.g., Moskalenko et al.,

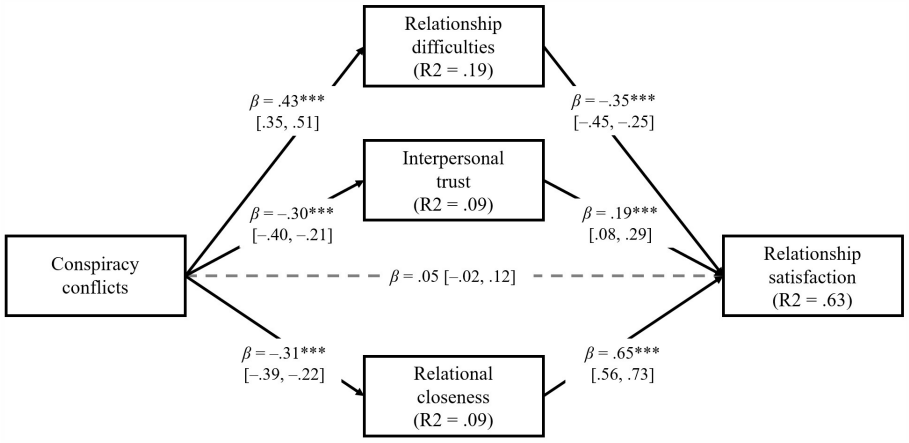


FIGURE 1
Parallel mediation model with relationship difficulties, trust and closeness as mediators of the association between conspiracy conflicts and satisfaction with one's current or most recent romantic partner. Paths that are not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$) are presented as grey dashed lines. Values represent standardized regression coefficients with their 95% confidence intervals. ***$p < 0.001$.

TABLE 5 Correlations between conspiracy conflicts, personal and perceived partner's conspiracy beliefs, relationship context variables, and satisfaction with one's current or most recent romantic partner.

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
1. Conspiracy conflicts	1									
2. Personal conspiracy belief	0.28***	1								
3. Partner conspiracy belief	0.35***	0.73***	1							
4. Self-silencing	0.35***	0.14**	0.16***	1						
5. Shared lifestyle	−0.12**	0.01	−0.02	−0.07	1					
6. Shared values	−0.33***	−0.14**	−0.17***	−0.32***	0.30***	1				
7. Relationship maintenance	−0.23***	−0.01	−0.06	−0.36***	0.51***	0.53***	1			
8. Partner dependency	−0.05	0.03	−0.01	−0.09*	0.11*	0.28***	0.45***	1		
9. Empathic concern	−0.29***	−0.09*	−0.09	−0.31***	0.25***	0.40***	0.61***	0.29***	1	
10. Perspective-taking	−0.16***	−0.09	−0.02	−0.08	0.36***	0.27***	0.46***	0.17***	0.50***	1
11. Couple satisfaction	−0.29***	−0.07	−0.15**	−0.38***	0.42***	0.57***	0.77***	0.38***	0.53***	0.41***

The table shows Pearson's correlations between conspiracy conflicts (using the average rating on two items tapping conflict frequency and relationship strain) with one's current or most recent romantic partner, personal and perceived partner's conspiracy beliefs, relationship context measures, and satisfaction with one's current or most recent romantic partner. N = 493.
*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.

2022; Mousaw, 2022; Toribio-Flórez et al., 2024; but see Kamitz et al., 2026), a novel aspect of this study was that we examined specifically how conspiracy beliefs relate to relationship quality and satisfaction within people's most intimate bonds. High-quality romantic relationships are known to be an important predictor of one's physical health (Robles et al., 2014) and wellbeing (Proulx et al., 2007), making the research examining potential predictors in this domain especially impactful. There are also other reasons for future research to look more closely at how conspiracy beliefs specifically relate to the relationship quality or satisfaction with one's romantic relationship. This is because it has been shown previously that relationship closeness can shape how people react to others' conspiracy beliefs—being both more tolerant and willing to confront those with whom they have a closer relationship (Okdie et al., 2023). Thus, future research on how conspiracy theories could impact the quality of romantic relationships and how their effects in this domain may differ from those observed in more distant relationships is needed to broaden our understanding of the mechanisms by which conspiracy beliefs affect interpersonal relationships.

When exploring the potential moderating role of various relationship context variables, we found no significant interactions to indicate that any of these variables attenuated the association between conspiracy conflicts and lower relationship satisfaction. However, it should be noted that given the relatively small interaction effects typically observed in psychological research (Baranger et al., 2023), our study was not particularly well-powered to detect these moderation effects. Therefore, the lack of significant moderation effects in our preregistered exploratory model should by no means be taken as conclusive evidence for their absence and future research might want to investigate these relationships in more detail.

However, higher conspiracy conflict was consistently weakly to moderately associated with most of the surveyed relationship variables, showing a positive correlation with self-silencing, and negative correlations with shared values and lifestyle, relationship maintenance, empathy and perspective-taking. Although this was not among the main aims of our study, we also found that participants who themselves more strongly endorsed conspiracy theories reported lower levels of shared values and empathic concern for their romantic partners, which is consistent with both the theorizing (Toribio-Flórez et al., 2023) and the previous empirical evidence (Toribio-Flórez et al., 2024) showing that conspiracy beliefs impact interpersonal relationships by decreasing closeness (attitudinal, emotional, value-based), which contributes to higher levels of conflict. An interesting new finding of the present study was that people who endorse conspiracy theories more strongly also reported a greater tendency to self-silence in their relationship with their romantic partner. Indeed, endorsing conspiracy theories is perceived as stigmatizing in many contexts and people who express conspiracy beliefs tend to fear social exclusion (Lantian et al., 2018), which would explain why those who endorse conspiracy theories would be more likely to learn not to share their thoughts and feelings with others. However, higher levels of self-silencing have been shown to prospectively predict poorer relationship quality and ability to deal with relationship stressors (Shulman et al., 2018). In line with this, our study provides preliminary evidence that self-silencing among conspiracy believers could contribute to their lower relationship satisfaction. However, given the cross-sectional design of the current study, it is impossible to determine the causal or temporal order of the relationships between self-silencing and conspiracy conflicts. Future longitudinal research could provide a valuable insight into whether people are more likely to use self-silencing as a strategy to avoid conspiracy conflicts with their partner or whether experiencing such conflicts over time makes them subsequently less likely to share their thoughts and emotions with their partner.

Finally, when looking at who experiences conspiracy conflicts more or less often, we found that their frequency was only weakly associated with demographic factors. However, and unsurprisingly, the frequency of conspiracy conflicts was moderately positively associated with both personal conspiracy beliefs and perceived conspiracy beliefs of one's partner. Crucially, we also assessed whether such conflicts are specifically associated with the difference between participants' personal conspiracy beliefs and their perception of conspiracy beliefs among their partners, using a simple difference in mean levels of those beliefs, as well as the sum of differences between all surveyed conspiracy belief items. While the first difference score is more sensitive to overall perceived difference in conspiracy beliefs (perception of one partner believing while the other disbelieving conspiracy theories in general), the second difference score allows for more nuance—such as conflicts arising even when both partners are perceived to endorse conspiracy theories, but of a different kind. Indeed, while the simple difference score was positively related to the frequency of conspiracy conflicts, the item-level difference score showed a significantly stronger positive correlation with the frequency of conspiracy conflicts with one's partner. Moreover, a similar pattern was also present when looking at the associations between the item-level difference score based on personal conspiracy beliefs and their perceived prevalence with conspiracy conflicts in other areas of relationships (see Section B of the Supplementary material). This suggests that when it comes to interpersonal conspiracy conflicts, it may be more informative to consider differences in particular conspiracy theories endorsed by both partners, rather than simply looking at perceived similarities or differences in the overall level of belief in conspiracy theories. Indeed, the highest level of relationship conflict might arise in relationships in which both partners endorse conspiracy beliefs, but of a different kind. However, such a proposition should be examined in more detail in future research, as the present correlational evidence is based solely on our participants' perception of their partner's belief in conspiracy theories and thus may not reliably reflect genuine differences in beliefs, as these perceptions can be influenced by various psychological mechanisms (e.g., egocentric projection).

4.1 Limitations

To our knowledge, our study is the first to survey the frequency of conspiracy conflicts and to examine how these conflicts are associated with satisfaction in those relationships, bringing some important novel evidence in this domain. However, our data come from a simple cross-sectional study and, as such, cannot be used to infer the temporal or causal order of the relationships between our surveyed variables. This is especially important when considering the mediation analysis presented in the current study. While we interpret these analyses in a purely correlational manner, it should still be noted that the model examined in the present study could be argued to be ordered differently, and the precise ordering of the variables should be examined in future experimental or longitudinal research. For example, while we examined trust, closeness, and relationship difficulties as mediators of the link between conspiracy conflicts and couple satisfaction, it is entirely possible that the participants who experience higher relationship difficulties and lower closeness with their partner, for whatever reason, then subsequently overestimate the frequency of conflicts in other areas as well, which could lead to elevated reporting of conspiracy conflicts. Moreover, it should also be noted that the three parallel mediators included in our mediation model shared substantial correlations among themselves as well as with the outcome variable in the model (r's between 0.65 and 0.82), which could have likewise affected the estimates of the indirect paths through these mediators and the direct path between conspiracy conflicts are relationship satisfaction. For all these reasons, we would urge researchers to treat these findings with caution until they are replicated in studies better designed to provide evidence about the temporal or causal order among these variables.

While our main aim was to obtain a reliable estimate of the prevalence of conspiracy conflicts and examine the associations of such conflicts with other relationship variables, there are several limitations of our approach which warrant some caution when interpreting our prevalence estimates. First, in our instrument for measuring conspiracy conflicts, we explained to participants what we meant by conspiracy theories, while avoiding using that specific term and then asked them to report whether they experience conflicts because of those sorts of socio-political beliefs. This was done because previous research indicated that people are reluctant to use the term conspiracy theory to describe

beliefs they personally endorse (Douglas et al., 2022). However, it is possible that participants interpreted this question more broadly and that the prevalence estimates include to some extent also conflicts over other socio-political beliefs. For example, as we did not ask participants about how similar they and their romantic partners are regarding political orientation, we cannot rule out the possibility that the reported prevalence of conflicts may, to some extent, also reflect this potential mismatch. Secondly, all analyses pertaining to the current partner are necessarily conditioned on relationship survival. Romantic relationships in which participants experience more common conspiracy conflicts and lower relationship satisfaction are presumably much more likely to end. As a result, the prevalence estimates for conspiracy conflicts in one's current relationship in the present study are likely to be underestimated, and their associations with relationship satisfaction may be attenuated. Nevertheless, we believe that the substantial consistency in the estimates of conspiracy conflicts across various relationship domains and both current and past romantic relationships lends credence to the present findings. And thirdly, the present study did not measure how often participants experienced other sorts of conflicts with their romantic partners and thus cannot speak to whether conspiracy conflicts are more or less common than conflicts over other sorts of issues or beliefs, or whether their association with other relationship variables are in any way unique.

Finally, in some of our analyses, we also relied on participants' perceptions of their partner's conspiracy beliefs. However, such perceptions could be biased in many ways. For example, people who believe conspiracy theories are known to overestimate how many others believe the same conspiracy theories (Pennycook et al., 2026; van Prooijen et al., 2026), suggesting a false consensus effect. To avoid such biases, future research should employ dyadic designs to examine how both partner's perceptions of each other's conspiracy beliefs differ from their actual endorsement of conspiracy theories, and whether actual or perceived differences in conspiracy beliefs between the romantic partners contribute to relationship satisfaction. These types of studies are paramount to examining the intrinsically dyadic nature of many social phenomena (e.g., Kenny et al., 2020), as they can be used to investigate both actor and partner effects as well as their potential interactions—such as whether relationship satisfaction is impacted by conspiracy beliefs of one or both partners or their mutual interplay. Indeed, while existing monadic research suggests perceived differences in conspiracy beliefs undermine relationship satisfaction (e.g., Toribio-Flórez et al., 2024), a recent dyadic study found little evidence for a similar effect when looking at the actual couple (dis)similarity in conspiracy mentality (Miculka and Imhoff, 2026), highlighting the importance of further dyadic research in this domain.

5 Conclusion

The present study brings novel findings showing that experiencing conspiracy conflicts in one's romantic relationships is not uncommon and importantly, such experiences are related to worse relationship quality, and the strain from experiencing conspiracy conflicts is also related to lower satisfaction with life in general. Besides confirming previous findings about higher relationship difficulties, and lower trust and closeness as mediators of the associations between conspiracy conflicts and lower relationship satisfaction, it also provides preliminary evidence about several additional relationship variables that could be important in broadening the understanding of the mechanisms by which conspiracy beliefs could affect interpersonal relationships—shared values, empathy, and especially, self-silencing. Given the importance of the quality of romantic relationships for one's health and wellbeing, it is essential to understand how conspiracy theories specifically affect these types of most intimate social bonds and whether there are any factors that could help protect relationships from their negative impacts. Moreover, as shown by Murray et al. (2023), the fulfilment of connectedness needs through high-quality romantic relationships might also be a viable way of reducing conspiracy believers' susceptibility to misinformation. Thus, we believe examining romantic relationships and how they can impact and be impacted by conspiracy beliefs is a crucial avenue for future research in this domain.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this study can be found in online repositories. The names of the repository/repositories and accession number(s) can be found at: OSF: https://osf.io/dcs6h/overview.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Psychology Ethics Team, University of Kent. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

JŠ: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. DG: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. KD: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Funding

The author(s) declared that financial support was received for this work and/or its publication. This study has received funding from the European Union's Horizon research and innovation

programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 101278206 ("CONspiRE: How conspiracy theory beliefs affect the quality of romantic relationships") awarded to JŠ, from the Slovak Research and Development Agency as part of the research project VV-MVP-24-0053 awarded to DG, scientific grant agency of the Ministry of Education, Research, Development and Youth of the Slovak Republic as part of the project VEGA 2/0020/25 awarded to DG, and the European Research Council project 101018262 ("CONSPIRACY_FX: Consequences of conspiracy theories") awarded to Karen Douglas.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

The handling editor TG declared a past co-authorship with the author KD.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that Generative AI was not used in the creation of this manuscript.

Any alternative text (alt text) provided alongside figures in this article has been generated by Frontiers with the support of artificial intelligence and reasonable efforts have been made to ensure accuracy, including review by the authors wherever possible. If you identify any issues, please contact us.

Publisher's note

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/frsps.2026.1827061/full#supplementary-material

References

Baranger, D. A., Finsaas, M. C., Goldstein, B. L., Vize, C. E., Lynam, D. R., and Olino, T. M. (2023). Tutorial: power analyses for interaction effects in cross-sectional regressions. *Adv. Methods Pract. Psychol. Sci.* 6. doi: 10.1177/25152459231187531

Chonody, J. M., Killian, M., Gabb, J., and Dunk-West, P. (2016). Understanding everyday relationship work: the development of a relationship maintenance scale. *Adv. Soc. Work* 17, 355–368. doi: 10.18060/21155

Cookson, D., Jolley, D., Dempsey, R. C., and Povey, R. (2021). "If they believe, then so shall I": perceived beliefs of the in-group predict conspiracy theory belief. *Group Process. Intergr. Relat.* 24, 759–782. doi: 10.1177/1368430221993907

Cramer, D., and Jowett, S. (2010). Perceived empathy, accurate empathy and relationship satisfaction in heterosexual couples. *J. Soc. Pers. Relat.* 27, 327–349. doi: 10.1177/0265407509348384

Davis, M. H. (1983). Measuring individual differences in empathy: evidence for a multidimensional approach. *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* 44, 113. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.44.1.113

Diener, E. D., Emmons, R. A., Larsen, R. J., and Griffin, S. (1985). The satisfaction with life scale. *J. Pers. Assess.* 49, 71–75. doi: 10.1207/s15327752jpa4901_13

Douglas, K. M., Green, R., Toribio-Flórez, D., Kamitz, L., Rowden, C., Biddlestone, M., et al. (2024). "Conspiracy beliefs and interpersonal relationships," in *The Psychology of False Beliefs*, ed. J. Forgas (Routledge), 288–305.

Douglas, K. M., and Sutton, R. M. (2023). What are conspiracy theories? A definitional approach to their correlates, consequences, and communication. *Annu. Rev. Psychol.* 74, 271–298. doi: 10.1146/annurev-psych-032420-031329

Douglas, K. M., van Prooijen, J. W., and Sutton, R. M. (2022). Is the label 'conspiracy theory'a cause or a consequence of disbelief in alternative narratives? *Br. J. Psychol.* 113, 575–590. doi: 10.1111/bjop.12548

Fletcher, G. J., Simpson, J. A., and Thomas, G. (2000). The measurement of perceived relationship quality components: a confirmatory factor analytic approach. *Pers. Soc. Psychol. Bull.* 26, 340–354. doi: 10.1177/0146167200265007

Funk, J. L., and Rogge, R. D. (2007). Testing the ruler with item response theory: increasing precision of measurement for relationship satisfaction with the couples satisfaction index. *J. Fam. Psychol.* 21, 572–583. doi: 10.1037/0893-3200.21.4.572

Gordon, A. M., Luciani, M., and From, A. (2025). I love you but i hate your politics: the role of political dissimilarity in romantic relationships. *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* 129, 692–713. 692–713. doi: 10.1037/pspi0000467

Gordon, A. M., and Chen, S. (2016). Do you get where I'm coming from?: perceived understanding buffers against the negative impact of conflict on relationship satisfaction. *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* 110:239. doi: 10.1037/pspi0000039

Joel, S., Eastwick, P. W., Allison, C. J., Arriaga, X. B., Baker, Z. G., Bar-Kalifa, E., et al. (2020). Machine learning uncovers the most robust self-report predictors of relationship quality across 43 longitudinal couples studies. *Proc. Nat. Acad. Sci.* 117, 19061–19071. doi: 10.1073/pnas.1917036117

Jolley, D., Marques, M. D., and Cookson, D. (2022). Shining a spotlight on the dangerous consequences of conspiracy theories. *Curr. Opin. Psychol* 47, 101363. doi: 10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101363

Jordan, M. M., and Whitmer, J. M. (2023). "I would give anything to talk about aliens now": QAnon conspiracy theories and the creation of cognitive deviance. *Sociol. Perspect.* 66, 992–1014. doi: 10.1177/07311214231181383

Kamitz, L. C., Green, R., Rowden, C., Toribio-Flórez, D., Biddlestone, M., and Douglas, K. M. (2026). "You lose the person; they're still there but you don't recognize them": a qualitative study examining the consequences of conspiracy beliefs for romantic partners. *Br. J. Soc. Psychol.* 65:e70033. doi: 10.1111/bjso.70033

Kenny, D. A., Kashy, D. A., and Cook, W. L. (2020). *Dyadic Data Analysis*. London: Guilford Publications.

Lantian, A., Muller, D., Nurra, C., and Douglas, K. M. (2016). Measuring belief in conspiracy theories: validation of a French and english single-item scale. *Int. Rev. Soc. Psychol* 29, 1–14. doi: 10.5334/irsp.8

Lantian, A., Muller, D., Nurra, C., Klein, O., Berjot, S., and Pantazi, M. (2018). Stigmatized beliefs: conspiracy theories, anticipated negative evaluation of the self, and fear of social exclusion. *Eur. J. Soc. Psychol.* 48, 939–954. doi: 10.1002/ejsp.2498

Leikas, S., Ilmarinen, V.-J., Verkasalo, M., Vartiainen, H.-L., and Lönnqvist, J.-E. (2018). Relationship satisfaction and similarity of personality traits, personal values, and attitudes. *Pers. Individ. Dif.* 123, 191–198. doi: 10.1016/j.paid.2017.11.024

Mastroni, L., and Mooney, R. (2024). "I one-hundred thousand percent blame it on QAnon": the impact of QAnon belief on interpersonal relationships. *J. Soc. Pers. Relat.* 41, 2478–2499. doi: 10.1177/02654075241246124

Miculka, A., and Imhoff, R. (2026). Dyadic dynamic in generalized political attitudes: homophily, relationship satisfaction, and convergence. *Int. Rev. Soc. Psychol* 39, 5–5. doi: 10.5334/irsp.1102

Moskalenko, S., Burton, B. S., González, J. F.-G., and Bloom, M. M. (2022). Secondhand conspiracy theories: the social, emotional and political tolls on loved ones of QAnon followers. *Democr. Secur.* 19, 231–250. doi: 10.1080/17419166.2022.2111305

Mousaw, C. (2022). *"I love who he was but hate who he's become": The Impacts of Conspiracy Theories on Interpersonal Relationships* (Master's thesis). ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global, University of Colorado. Available online at: https://www.proquest.com/docview/2681075725

Murray, S. L., Xia, J., Lamarche, V., Seery, M. D., McNulty, J., Griffin, D. W., et al. (2023). A moth to a flame? Fulfilling connectedness needs through romantic relationships protects conspiracy theorists against COVID-19 misinformation. *Curr. Res. Ecol. Soc. Psychol.* 4:100111. doi: 10.1016/j.cresp.2023.100111

Ogolsky, B. G., and Bowers, J. R. (2013). A meta-analytic review of relationship maintenance and its correlates. *J. Soc. Pers. Relat.* 30, 343–367. doi: 10.1177/0265407512463338

Okdie, B. M., Rempala, D. M., and Mustric, S. R. (2023). You believe what?!: relational closeness and belief relevance predict conspiracy belief tolerance. *Curr. Psychol.* 42, 27630–27645. doi: 10.1007/s12144-022-03891-5

Peacock, C., and Pederson, J. R. (2022). Love and politics: the influence of politically (dis) similar romantic relationships on political participation and relationship satisfaction. *Hum. Commun. Res.* 48, 567–578. doi: 10.1093/hcr/hqac011

Péloquin, K., and Lafontaine, M. F. (2010). Measuring empathy in couples: validity and reliability of the interpersonal reactivity index for couples. *J. Pers. Assess.* 92, 146–157. doi: 10.1080/00223890903510399

Pennycook, G., Binnendyk, J., and Rand, D. G. (2026). Overconfidently conspiratorial: Conspiracy believers are dispositionally overconfident and massively overestimate how much others agree with them. *Pers. Soc. Psychol. Bull.* 52, 2509–2528. doi: 10.1177/01461672251338358

Proulx, C. M., Helms, H. M., and Buehler, C. (2007). Marital quality and personal well-being: a meta-analysis. *J. Marriage Fam.* 69, 576–593. doi: 10.1111/j.1741-3737.2007.00393.x

Pummerer, L. (2022). Belief in conspiracy theories and non-normative behavior. *Curr. Opin. Psychol.* 47:101394. doi: 10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101394

Rathus, J. H., and O'Leary, K. D. (1997). Spouse-specific dependency scale: scale development. *J. Fam. Violence.* 12, 159–168. doi: 10.1023/A:1022884627567

Righetti, F., Faure, R., Zoppolat, G., Meltzer, A., and McNulty, J. (2022). Factors that contribute to the maintenance or decline of relationship satisfaction. *Nat. Rev. Psychol.* 1, 161–173. doi: 10.1038/s44159-022-00026-2

Robles, T. F., Slatcher, R. B., Trombello, J. M., and McGinn, M. M. (2014). Marital quality and health: a meta-analytic review. *Psychol. Bull.* 140, 140–187. doi: 10.1037/a0031859

Rosseel, Y. (2012). Lavaan: an R package for structural equation modeling. *J. Stat. Softw.* 48, 1–36. doi: 10.18637/jss.v048.i02

Schoemann, A. M., Boulton, A. J., and Short, S. D. (2017). Determining power and sample size for simple and complex mediation models. *Soc. Psychol. Personal. Sci.* 8, 379–386. doi: 10.1177/1948550617715068

Shulman, S., Norona, J. C., Scharf, M., Ziv, I., and Welsh, D. P. (2018). Changes in self-silencing from adolescence to emerging adulthood and associations with relationship quality and coping with relationship stressors. *J. Relatsh. Res.* 9:e21. doi: 10.1017/jrr.2018.20

Thomas, P. A., Liu, H., and Umberson, D. (2017). Family relationships and well-being. *Innov. Aging.* 1:igx025. doi: 10.1093/geroni/igx025

Toribio-Flórez, D., Green, R., and Douglas, K. M. (2024). Belief in conspiracy theories and satisfaction in interpersonal relationships. *J. Appl. Soc. Psychol.* 54, 603–627. doi: 10.1111/jasp.13061

Toribio-Flórez, D., Green, R., Sutton, R. M., and Douglas, K. M. (2023). Does belief in conspiracy theories affect interpersonal relationships? *Span. J. Psychol.* 26:e9. doi: 10.1017/SJP.2023.8

Umberson, D., and Thomeer, M. B. (2020). Family matters: research on family ties and health, 2010 to 2020. *J. Marriage Fam.* 82, 404–419. doi: 10.1111/jomf.12640

Valor-Segura, I., Expósito, F., Moya, M., and Kluwer, E. (2014). Don't leave me: the effect of dependency and emotions in relationship conflict. *J. Appl. Soc. Psychol.* 44, 579–587. doi: 10.1111/jasp.12250

van Prooijen, J. W., Bergmann, P. K., Cavojová, V., and Šrol, J. (2026). Everyone knows it's a Hoax: the role of perceived descriptive norms in conspiracy beliefs. *Eur. J. Soc. Psychol.* doi: 10.1002/ejsp.70111