What Constitutes Belief in Conspiracy Theories? An Exploratory Insight Into Its Dimensions

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Abstract

What does belief in conspiracy theories entail? In a time where disinformation and misinformation spread rapidly and public trust in institutions declines, understanding how conspiracist ideation is structured has become increasingly important. However, while most existing studies focus on specific conspiracy beliefs, far less is known about how general conspiracist thinking manifests in different socio-cultural settings. The present study addresses this gap by examining the underlying dimensions of belief in conspiracy theories in a Malaysian sample (n = 145) using the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs scale (GCB-15). Descriptive results revealed moderate endorsement of conspiracy theory beliefs, with the highest agreement observed in domains involving malevolent global conspiracies and information control. Exploratory factor analysis yielded a four-factor solution: institutional secrecy and control, malevolent global conspiracies, extraterrestrial and organisational cover-ups, and state hostility and violence, accounting for 37.87% of the total variance. This structure diverged from the original five-factor model, reinforcing evidence that the dimensionality of conspiracist ideation is culturally contingent. The findings highlight the need for localised scale validation and demonstrate its value in understanding how belief systems can make populations more susceptible to media manipulation. Such insight is essential for building targeted counter-narratives and strengthening psychological resilience in contested information environments, which presents an avenue for future research.

Keywords: *Belief in Conspiracy Theories, GCB-15, Factor Structure, Malaysia, Psychometric, Reliability*

1.0 Introduction

In the digital age where information floods in abundance, what people believe may matter more than what is true. From COVID-19 cover-ups to shadowy groups allegedly controlling world affairs, conspiracy theory beliefs now occupy dual roles in the modern information landscape. First, they become targets of influence as disinformation campaigns deliberately exploit psychologically vulnerable populations and make them more susceptible to false narratives and manipulative messaging [1, 2]. Second, when the believers actively spread these narratives through social networks, they act as vectors of disruption that can give rise to polarisation, institutional distrust, and social division [3, 4, 5, 6].

It is therefore not surprising that the existing literature has documented a significant increase in research activity in this field over the past decade. The focus of these studies ranges from understanding the components, dissemination, and prevalence of such beliefs to examining their motives, predictors, impacts, and interventions [6, 7, 8, 9]. Understanding belief in conspiracy theories is important because the effects can be significant. For example, endorsement of conspiracy theories has been associated with prejudicial attitudes [10], extremist ideology [11, 12], and even political violence [13]. There is also evidence that such adverse effects can extend to increasing problematic civic disengagement, such as unwillingness to get vaccinations or receive medical treatments [14], hesitancy to accept COVID-19 vaccines [15, 16], refusal to follow COVID-19 pandemic guidelines [17], as well as denial of climate change [18] and reluctance to reduce one's carbon footprint [19].

Given the negative impacts this conspiracist ideation has, identification of such a belief using an appropriate tool or measure is crucial. Early detection or screening may be pivotal in the reduction of its

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spread and improvement of interventions targeting conspiracy beliefs altogether. However, measuring belief in conspiracy theories can be challenging, as content varies across cultures, contexts, and individuals. However, general instruments such as the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs scale [20] offer a structured approach to understanding this belief. Therefore, local validation of such instruments is essential, as belief structures may not generalise across socio-cultural contexts.

Based on the preceding premise, the present study addresses this gap by examining the structure and internal consistency of the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs scale [20] in a novel national context. In doing so, it contributes to the ongoing effort to map how conspiracy thinking takes shape across societies, with implications for both psychological research and the design of interventions in countering the broader impact of media manipulation and information security.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualising Belief in Conspiracy Theories

Belief in conspiracy theories refers to the tendency to endorse explanations for significant events that involve secret plots orchestrated by powerful and malevolent groups [4, 21]. These beliefs often challenge official or mainstream accounts and reflect a broader worldview of institutional distrust, hidden agendas, and systemic manipulation [2]. In the contemporary information ecosystem, conspiratorial narratives are weaponised in disinformation campaigns to erode trust in institutions, amplify polarisation, and shape public opinion through emotionally-charged misinformation [3-6, 22].

Several theoretical perspectives have been proposed to explain why people adopt conspiratorial beliefs. From a motivational framework, belief in conspiracy theories fulfils three key psychological needs: epistemic (need for understanding and certainty), existential (need for control and security), and social (need for a positive self or group image) [7, 23]. In contrast, cognitive models emphasise heuristic reasoning, such as pattern perception and agency detection, which can lead individuals to infer intentionality behind ambiguous events [7]. Meanwhile, socio-political theories argue that conspiracy theory beliefs serve as expressions of ideological discontent, collective grievance, or marginalisation, which often intensify during societal crises [7, 24]. Other factors that can predict beliefs in conspiracies include personality traits and psychological disorders [25], spirituality [26], media consumption [27], as well as trust, perceived well-being, and quality of life [28].

2.2 Measuring Belief in Conspiracy Theories

In an attempt to examine belief in conspiracy theories empirically, a number of scales have been developed (see Table 1). Some of these scales assess generic conspiracy ideation (i.e., instruments that do not refer to specific conspiracy theories), while others measure belief in specific conspiracy content (e.g., the 9/11 attacks, the moon landing, the death of Princess Diana, among others) [29]. Examples of scales in the former category include (i) the 15-item Generic Conspiracist Beliefs scale [20] and its short version, the GCB-5; (ii) the American Conspiracy Thinking Scale (ACTS) [24], which measures a generalised conspiracist worldview within the U.S. sociopolitical context; (iii) the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire [30], which evaluates a generalised conspiratorial mindset through five items; and (iv) the One-Item Conspiracy Measure [31], which although provides a rapid screening but has been suggested not to be used due to poor factorial and construct validity [25].

On the other hand, measures such as the Belief in Conspiracy Theories Inventory [32], the Conspiracy Theory Belief Scale [33], the Belief in Commercial Conspiracy Theories Inventory [34], the Flexible Inventory of Conspiracy Suspicions [35], the Vaccine Conspiracy Beliefs Scale [14], and the COVID-19 Conspiratorial Beliefs Scale [36] assess specific conspiracies. In comparing the two streams, [35] argue that generic scales are less influenced by culture and temporal contexts than specific questionnaires, since people's knowledge and beliefs about certain theories can vary across cultures and change over time.

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TABLE 1
Comparison of Scales about Conspiracy Theory Beliefs.

Scale	Acronym	Original study	Items	Focus (Generic or Specific)	Structure
Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale	GCB	[20]	15	Generic	5-factor
American Conspiracy Thinking Scale	ACTS	[24]	4	Generic	1-factor
Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire	CMQ	[30]	5	Generic	1-factor
One-Item Conspiracy Measure	OICM	[31]	1	Generic	Not specified
Belief in Conspiracy Theories Inventory	BCTI	[32]	15	Generic	1-factor
Beliefs in Specific Conspiracies Scale	BSCS	[37]	22	Generic	Not specified
Conspiracy Theory Questionnaire	CTQ	[38]	38	Generic	Not specified
General Measure of Conspiracism	GMC	[39]	5	Generic	1-factor
Composite Conspiracy Beliefs Scales	CCBS	[40]	5	Generic	Not specified
Generalised Conspiracy Belief Scale	-	[41]	8	Generic	1-factor
Conspiracy Thinking Inventory	CTi	[42]	23	Generic	2-factor
Vaccine Conspiracy Beliefs Scale	VCBS	[14]	7	Specific	1-factor
Conspiracy Theory Belief Scale	CTBS	[33]	17	Specific	Not specified
Belief in Commercial Conspiracy Theories Inventory	-	[34]	30	Specific	4-factor
Flexible Inventory of Conspiracy Suspicions	FICS	[35]	5	Specific	1-factor
COVID-19 Conspiratorial Beliefs Scale	COVID-19 CBS	[36]	10	Specific	2-factor
Specific Conspiracy Belief Scale	-	[41]	25	Specific	4-factor
Conspiracy Beliefs Scale	CBS	[43]	30	Specific	Not specified
Endorsement of Specific Conspiracy Theories	ESCT	[44]	12	Specific	Not specified
Belief in Conspiracy Theories about COVID-19	-	[45]	5	Specific	1-factor

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2.3 The Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale (GCBS-15)

Among the most widely used and cited measures is the 15-item Generic Conspiracist Beliefs scale developed by [20]. It is designed to assess underlying themes and dispositions that characterise conspiracy belief across non-specific time and context. The scale consists of 15 items that are categorised into five dimensions (each with three items). The first dimension is known as government malfeasance, which captures the beliefs that governments engage in unethical, illegal, or harmful activities that are often concealed from the public. Items here include views that state authorities experiment on citizens, mislead populations, or stage violence for political gain. In the second dimension, named malevolent global conspiracies, items were constructed to assess the idea that shadowy entities, such as elite groups or shadow governments, are manipulating world events behind the scenes for their own selfish or nefarious purposes. This often involves instigating wars or controlling global economies.

As the third dimension, the extraterrestrial cover-up reflects the belief that governments or secret organisations are hiding evidence of alien life and extraterrestrial contact or even colluding with extraterrestrial entities. While the personal well-being dimension assesses suspicions that institutions deliberately suppress information or technology that could improve individuals' health, safety, and freedom, the final dimension, i.e., the information control, involves the belief that governments, corporations, or media deliberately distort, censor, or withhold critical information from the public to maintain dominance and control over society.

Findings regarding the scale's factor structure are mixed. Studies such as those by [46] in Serbia, [47] in the United Kingdom, [48] in Spain, [49] in Poland, and [50] in Türkiye supported a five-factor model obtained in Brotherton et al.'s [20] work. However, the Serbian adaptation, although obtaining the five-factor solution, reveals differing factor endorsement levels influenced by sociopolitical context, e.g., higher belief in malfeasance and lower extraterrestrial cover-up in Serbia vs. the United Kingdom [47].

The scale has also been adapted and tested in other countries, such as the United States, Japan, and Iran. In their study with the United States participants, [29] found that the scale may only measure two clear factors (i.e., general conspiracist beliefs and extraterrestrial conspiracist beliefs) and thus emphasised the importance of checking its structure as part of the analysis. The Japanese validation supports the same two-factor structure of general conspiracist beliefs and extraterrestrial conspiracist beliefs [51]. The Persian adaptation of the scale by [52] also failed to replicate the original five-factor structure. Instead, the researchers obtained a three-factor structure consisting of political conspiracies, scientific conspiracies, and extraterrestrial cover-up. It is within this context that [25] raise concerns that the scale may not reflect a coherent, culture-invariant structure in all contexts. Consequently, [47] recommend that more studies be done to test the scale's factor structure.

2.4 Limited Psychometric Research on Belief in Conspiracy Theories in Malaysia

Despite growing interest in conspiracy theories in Malaysia, most studies tend to focus on specific conspiracy narratives, such as beliefs related to Jewish conspiracies or pandemic misinformation. For example, [53] developed a scale targeting belief in a Jewish conspiracy narrative among Malays and found that it is a unidimensional construct associated with anti-Israeli sentiment and racism, rather than general conspiracist disposition. Similarly, studies on COVID-19 conspiracies in Malaysia have mostly explored thematic beliefs tied to vaccine-related claims and hesitancies [15, 16], anxiety [54], and social media scepticism and personality [45], but have not assessed the general conspiracist tendency. What is missing, therefore, is a closer look at general conspiracist thinking, i.e., how likely people are to believe in hidden plots more generally, no matter the topic. This is important because generic scales help us see patterns in how people process uncertainty, distrust institutions, or find explanations for complex events, aspects of which cannot be captured by just asking about one type of conspiracy.

To date, there is no published psychometric validation of the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs scale or its shortened version in Malaysian samples. This contrasts with Western contexts, where these scales have been adapted and tested. The absence of such research indicates that researchers in Malaysia lack a validated tool to measure the underlying conspiracist worldview, limiting cross-study comparability and depth of analysis. Cultural, political, and informational conditions vary significantly across regions, and these factors may shape the way conspiracy ideation takes root and spreads. As such, reliance on

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psychometric models developed elsewhere may obscure context-specific patterns of belief that are central to both local media resilience and strategic communication efforts.

Generic measures like the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs scale offer theoretical advantages by abstracting conspiracist belief away from specific content and grounding it in broader psychological and communicative processes. The scales' five dimensions, i.e., government malfeasance, malevolent global conspiracies, extraterrestrial cover-up, personal well-being, and information control, provide a robust, theory-based typology of belief structure. Without local validation, researchers applying these frameworks in Malaysia cannot confirm whether these dimensions hold psychometrically or conceptually in the local context. Local validation will allow researchers to detect culturally specific factor structures, identify salient themes, and avoid imposing inappropriate theoretical models across cultures. Building on this reasoning, the present study was conducted to investigate what constitutes belief in conspiracy theories within the Malaysian context and explored the dimensions in which this belief is experienced.

3.0 Method

The present study was designed as a psychometric research where the focus falls on assessing the psychometric properties of the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs scale [20]. Participants were recruited from within the university and nearby communities. They were first briefed about the study, and informed consent was obtained before the scale was administered. All responses were anonymised, and no personally identifiable information was collected.

In all, 145 participants (78 females, 27 males; 40 did not disclose) completed the scale on paper. Age ranged from 17 to 26 years (M = 21.43; SD = 2.56). The majority of participants were Malay and from Malaysia. No reward was offered for taking part. With n = 145, the sample size adequacy is met based on the criteria by [55], [56], and [57], all of whom state that 100 participants are sufficient for factor analysis.

The scale assessed participants' beliefs about generic, non-specific event-based conspiracy theories via its 15 items in five dimensions (see previous sections). All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale, with labels associated with each point as follows: 1: Definitely not true, 2: Probably not true, 3: Not sure/cannot decide, 4: Probably true, and 5: Definitely true. No items are required to be reverse-coded. The overall scores as well as sub-scale scores were computed. For the overall scores with 15 items, higher scores indicate a greater belief in conspiracy theories. Similarly, higher scores on each sub-scale indicate more extreme beliefs about the respective conspiracy theory.

IBM SPSS Statistics version 21 was used to analyse the data. Descriptive statistics were produced to describe the characteristics of the data. An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed to examine and identify the number of constructs and the factor structure of the scale. An exploratory approach was selected over a confirmatory one due to the contextual novelty of administering the scale in Malaysia and the absence of prior psychometric studies in this setting. Given the exploratory nature of the study, EFA allowed for the identification of underlying dimensions without imposing a pre-specified factor structure [58]. [59] also assert that if the factor structure of the scale is not well-known or the scale is being tested in a new context or population, the confirmatory approach might not be appropriate.

Factor extraction was performed using principal axis factoring (PAF), which estimates latent factors based on shared variance, making it appropriate for psychological constructs measured with some degree of error [60]. An oblique rotation method via direct oblimin was applied to allow for correlations among factors, consistent with theoretical expectations that conspiracy theory beliefs are psychologically interrelated [61].

Factor retention decisions were guided by eigenvalues larger than 1, scree plot inspection, and theoretical interpretability. Items with factor loadings equal to or larger than .40 were considered salient, and pattern matrices were used for interpretation [62]. Sampling adequacy was assessed using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) statistic and Bartlett's test of sphericity. Finally, the internal consistency of the derived factors was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with values equal to or larger than .70 considered acceptable, which indicates satisfactory internal reliability for exploratory research [63].

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4.0 Results

Table 2 shows the results for the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs scale before factor analysis was conducted. The total scale demonstrated a moderate average endorsement (M = 50.35, SD = 7.73), suggesting a relatively consistent pattern of belief in conspiracy theories across the samples. Across sub-scales, the belief in malevolent global conspiracies domain yielded the highest mean score (M = 11.01, SD = 2.20), followed by concerns over information control (M = 10.85, SD = 1.78) and belief in personal well-being threats (M = 10.16, SD = 2.34). With the exception of the total scale, which has a Cronbach's α of .78, the sub-scales were below the commonly accepted threshold of .70, raising concerns about item coherence within these dimensions.

TABLE 2
Means, Standard Deviations, Cronbach's Alphas, and Intercorrelations of the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale before Factor Analysis (n = 145).

		Mean	Std. dev.	α	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Total scale: Belief in conspiracy theories.	50.35	7.73	.78	-	.71**	.74**	.65**	.76**	.62**
2	Sub-scale 1: Belief in routine governmental malfeasance.	9.86	2.24	.56		-	.44**	.24**	.45**	.33**
3	Sub-scale 2: Belief in the existence of malevolent global conspiracies.	11.01	2.20	.61			-	.29**	.44**	.44**
4	Sub-scale 3: Belief in the existence and cover-up of extraterrestrials.	8.47	2.50	.48				-	.41**	.22**
5	Sub-scale 4: Belief in conspiracies infringing on personal well-being and liberty.	10.16	2.34	.56					-	32**
6	Sub-scale 5: Concerns over the unethical control of information.	10.85	1.78	.17						-

***Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).*

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All subscales were significantly and positively correlated with the total score, with correlation coefficients ranging from .62 to .76 ($p < .01$), providing support for their contribution to the broader construct of generic conspiracist belief. The strongest associations with the total score were observed for belief in personal well-being threats ($r = .76$) and belief in malevolent global conspiracies ($r = .74$). However, intercorrelations among the subscales were modest, ranging from $r = .22$ to .45 (all $p < .01$). These results indicate that while related, the sub-scales may tap into distinct facets of beliefs or domains of conspiracist thinking.

The correlation matrix, Kaiser-Meyer Olkin (KMO) test, and Bartlett's test of sphericity were performed to examine the suitability and adequacy of the obtained data for factor analysis. Inspection of the correlation matrix revealed many coefficients of .30 and above, with the determinant of .036, indicating no multicollinearity. The KMO value obtained was .76, exceeding the value of .60 [64] and Bartlett's test of sphericity reached statistical significance ($p <.001$), with all diagonal elements of the anti-image correlation matrix greater than .50. These results indicate that the data met the premise of factor analysis and supported the factorability of the correlation matrices [62].

In the next step, with the assumption that the factors were correlated, a principal axis factor analysis was carried out with loadings rotated using oblique rotation. The pattern matrix, which has loadings that represent the unique contribution of each item to the factor, indicates the presence of four factors, explaining 37.87% of the total variance. As shown in Table 3, the eigenvalue of the first factor is 3.23, which accounts for 21.50% of the variance. The second factor, which explains 7.14% of the variance, has an eigenvalue of 1.07. The third and fourth factors explained 5.61% (eigenvalue = .84) and 3.61% (eigenvalue = .54) of the variance, respectively.

The four-factor structure obtained was then examined using the scree plot. Figure 1 revealed a clear break before the fifth factor in the graph, confirming a four-factor solution. Finally, the scale reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) of each extracted factor was computed (see Table 3). The results showed that Factor 1 demonstrated acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .68$), falling just below the conventional .70 threshold. Factor 2 exhibited marginal internal consistency ($\alpha = .61$), while Factor 3 ($\alpha = .46$) and Factor 4 ($\alpha = .38$) reflected poor internal reliability.

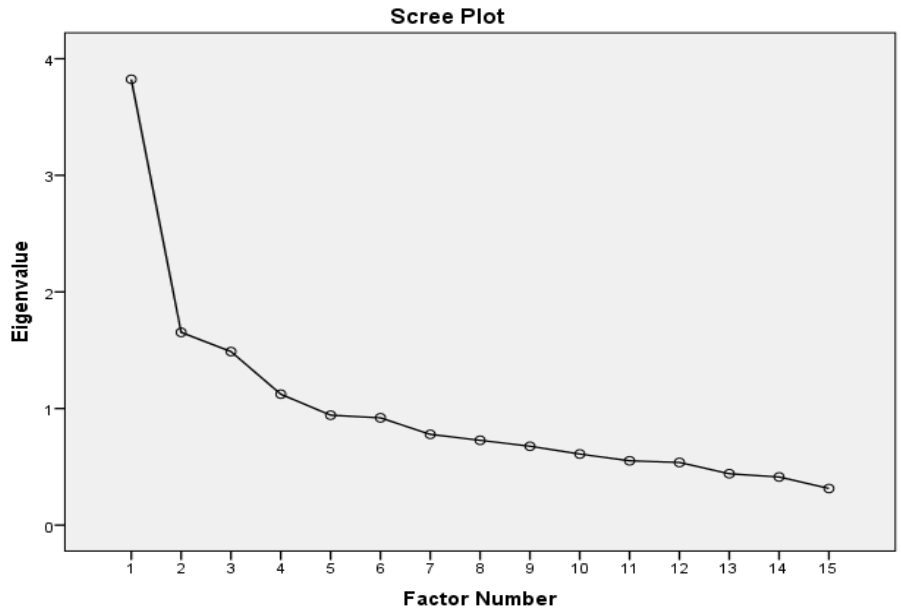

Figure 1. Scree Plot of the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale.

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TABLE 3
Principal Axis Factor Analysis Using Oblique Rotation and Cronbach's Alphas Results for the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale (n = 145).

Factor	α	Eigenvalue	Explained variance (%)	Item	Commu-nality	Mean	Std. dev.	Rotated component matrix			
								Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
1 Institutional secrecy and control	.68	3.23	21.50	Experiments involving new drugs or technologies are routinely carried out on the public without their knowledge or consent.	.499	3.39	1.12	.70			
				Technology with mind-control capacities is used on people without their knowledge.	.320	3.43	1.05	.59			
				The power held by heads of state is second to that of small unknown groups who really control world politics.	.504	3.43	1.02	.53			
				Secret organisations communicate with extraterrestrials, but keep this fact from the public.	.349	3.17	1.24	.43			
				A lot of important information is deliberately concealed from the public out of self-interest.	.183	3.85	.93	.34			
2 Malevolent global conspiracies	.61	1.07	7.14	Groups of scientists manipulate, fabricate, or suppress evidence in order to deceive the public.	.409	3.54	.99		.67		
				A small, secret group of people is responsible for making all major world decisions, such as going to war.	.332	3.71	1.08		.53		
				Certain significant events have been the result of the activity of a small group who secretly manipulate world events.	.331	3.87	.82		.50		
				The government uses people as patsies to hide its involvement in criminal activity.	.298	3.58	.89		.46		

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TABLE 3. continued
Principal Axis Factor Analysis Using Oblique Rotation and Cronbach's Alphas Results for the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale (n = 145).

Factor	α	Eigenvalue	Explained variance (%)	Item	Commu-nality	Mean	Std. dev.	Rotated component matrix			
								Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
3 Extraterrestrial and organisational cover-ups	.46	.84	5.61	Evidence of alien contact is being concealed from the public.	.590	2.54	1.21			.78	
				The spread of certain viruses and/or diseases is the result of the deliberate, concealed efforts of some organisation.	.389	3.34	1.04			.36	
				Some UFO sightings and rumours are planned or staged in order to distract the public from real alien contact.	.225	2.75	1.11			.29	
4 State hostility and violence	.38	.54	3.61	New and advanced technology which would harm current industry is being suppressed.	.441	3.46	.97				.47
				The government is involved in the murder of innocent citizens and/or well-known public figures, and keeps this a secret.	.457	3.06	1.20				.45
				The government permits or perpetrates acts of terrorism on its own soil, disguising its involvement.	.354	3.23	.96				.40

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5.0 Discussion

This study was set out to examine the factor structure of belief in conspiracy theories using the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs scale in a novel population context. Contrary to the five-factor structure proposed by Brotherton et al. [20], the present analysis yielded a four-factor solution, confirming that the scale structure may vary across contexts and cultures [32, 47]. The results further suggest that conspiracy theory beliefs may not be universally organised in a single, replicable manner but instead reflect underlying sociopolitical and cultural contexts relevant to the population [61].

The first factor, which included beliefs about covert experimentation, mind-control technology, elite power, and information suppression, appears to denote a broader "institutional secrecy and control" dimension. This factor highlights the perception of covert power structures and a general distrust in elite-controlled institutions, depicting a theme well-documented in the literature as central to conspiracist ideation [23]. Factor 2, which encompasses elite manipulation of events and scientific dishonesty, reflects a malevolent global conspiracy dimension. This result is consistent with what Brotherton et al. [20] termed "global conspiracies", which assert that secretive groups are controlling major world events and that evidence is actively distorted or hidden to deceive the public. Such beliefs have been associated with a generalised political distrust and a worldview that perceives societal systems as rigged or corrupt [2, 61].

In the third factor, items related to extraterrestrial and organisational cover-ups were captured. This pattern closely resembles Brotherton et al.'s [20] original beliefs in alien cover-ups and false flag distractions. The consistency of this factor across studies suggests that beliefs about alien contact form a relatively stable and domain-specific dimension of conspiracy theory thinking. Finally, the fourth factor combines beliefs about technological suppression and state violence, which align with findings linking technology-related conspiracy beliefs to violent intentions, political aggression, and tendencies to view institutions as hostile or controlling [24, 65]. While [20] divided such beliefs into multiple dimensions (e.g., government malfeasance, personal well-being), the emergence of this factor in the present study suggests that, in this context, such themes may be psychologically integrated into a single latent belief cluster.

Overall, the results demonstrate that while the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs scale remains a useful tool for measuring conspiracist ideation, its dimensional structure is not invariant across cultural contexts. The deviation from the original five-factor structure suggests that when scales are applied in new populations, validation must not be assumed. Instead, exploratory methods should be used as a first step to explore dimensionality in unfamiliar settings [58, 59]. As noted by [32], conspiracy theory beliefs are shaped by cultural, political, and historical conditions. Therefore, the current four-factor model provides valuable insight into how such beliefs are organised and interpreted within this population. In this regard, future work should consider confirmatory studies to evaluate the stability of this emergent four-factor structure in various samples.

From a practical perspective, understanding the structure of conspiracy theory beliefs within the Malaysian context can inform targeted public communication strategies, particularly in addressing misinformation, disinformation, and perhaps malinformation, especially in areas such as public health, technological distrust, and political narratives. If specific conspiracy themes, such as those surrounding health and science, are particularly salient, then contextualised counter-narratives or inoculation messages (e.g., pre-emptive refutation) may be more effective at reducing belief acceptance [66]. Consequently, public health agencies, educators, media professionals, and policymakers should consider these aspects when designing media literacy programmes and interventions.

The present study acknowledged four limitations of its scope and design. First, although the sample size meets the minimum standards for exploratory factor analysis, it remains relatively small, which limits the generalisability of the factor structure. Second, the sample was a homogeneous, younger group of Malay participants, with data originating from a self-report instrument. This homogeneity may restrict the representativeness of the findings across broader demographic groups. Third, while the four-factor solution was interpretable, one item within the extraterrestrial and organisational cover-ups factor demonstrated a low factor loading. Therefore, this item and factor should be interpreted with caution and may benefit from further refinement in future research, including item review, rewording, or scale expansion. Finally, the Cronbach's alpha for all four factors was not particularly high, suggesting that while the factors are conceptually coherent, they lack strong internal

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consistency, potentially due to a small number of items per factor, heterogeneity in item content, or cultural mismatch in item interpretation.

In light of the limitations discussed above, it is recommended that future studies be conducted to refine and revise the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs scale for local use by evaluating individual item performance, particularly the low-loading items. Researchers may also want to expand the item pools for underperforming factors to improve internal consistency and ensure adequate coverage of latent constructs. Finally, it is recommended that confirmatory studies be conducted on a larger, more diverse sample to validate the revised structure and assess model fit. Such studies could also include assessments such as test-retest reliability and predictive validity, particularly in relation to real-world behaviours such as trust in government, health decisions, or media consumption patterns.

6.0 Conclusion

This study presents one of the first efforts to examine the structure of belief in conspiracy theories in a Malaysian sample using the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs scale [20]. This self-report measure requires a short time to administer and is useful for both research and practical applications. In particular, the exploratory factor analysis provided evidence for a four-factor model that reflects both universal and contextually specific dimensions of conspiracist thinking. However, care is recommended as issues like a low-loading item in the cover-ups dimension and suboptimal internal consistency across all factors highlight the need for further refinement and validation of the scale within this population.

Nevertheless, the findings of this study reaffirm the importance of culturally sensitive measurement development in media and psychological research. Conspiracist ideation, while globally prevalent, manifests differently across sociopolitical environments. As information and media spaces become increasingly contested, elucidating the structure of conspiracy theory beliefs across cultural contexts offers a foundation for developing more targeted and effective educational, communicative, and policy-based responses against the spread of disinformation, misinformation, and engineered distrust.

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