

Article

Individual-Level Predictors of Conspiracy Mentality in Germany and Poland

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Abstract

Conspiracy mentality (CM), the general propensity to believe in conspiracy theories, has been linked to political behaviors, prejudice, and non-compliance with public health guidelines. While there is increasing evidence that conspiracy beliefs are pervasive, research on individual-level predictors of CM is scarce. Specifically, we identify three gaps in research: First, evidence on the question which individual-level characteristics predict CM is inconsistent and often based on small samples. Second, personality, political, and religious predictors are usually examined in isolation. Third, differences on the societal level have been mostly neglected. In the present research, we gathered CAWI (Study 1) and CATI (Study 2) data on generalized interpersonal trust (GIT), right-wing authoritarianism (RWA), and religiosity in two politically and culturally different European countries, namely Germany (N = 2,760) and Poland (N = 2,651). This allowed for a well-powered test of three theoretically relevant predictors of CM, including their unique predictive value. Moreover, we were able to explore whether these associations replicate across or are moderated by country context. Our findings underline the role of GIT and RWA in predicting CM in both countries. Analyses based on RWA subdimensions yielded a differentiated picture of the role of RWA. Furthermore, we found cross-country differences with stronger associations of GIT and RWA with CM in Germany. Findings are discussed concerning political and religious differences between the examined countries.

Keywords

conspiracy mentality; generalized interpersonal trust; personality; religiosity; right-wing authoritarianism

Issue

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1. Introduction

Conspiracy mentality (CM) is defined as a general propensity to believe in conspiracy theories (Bruder et al., 2013; Dyrendal et al., 2021). CM has been shown to predict disengagement from normative and engagement in non-normative political action (Douglas, 2021; Imhoff et al., 2021) and prejudices towards outgroups (Bruder et al., 2013). CM is moreover predictive of critical public health behaviors such as vaccine hesitancy and lower adherence to governmental health guidelines (Pummerer et al., 2022; Winter et al., 2022). Conspiratorial thinking exists, although to varying

degrees, across cultures and populations which has been recently shown in two studies conducted across 26 countries (Imhoff et al., 2022; see also Bruder et al., 2013). Furthermore, previous research has yielded numerous individual-level predictors as potential predictors of CM (Bowes et al., 2021; Lantian et al., 2020). However, existent research on individual-level predictors of CM is incomplete and inconsistent, was often based on small samples in a selected country context, and examined personality, political, and religious predictors in isolation. We aim at a joint analysis of personality, political, and religious predictors of CM in the German and Polish general population, more specifically focusing on

generalized interpersonal trust (GIT), right-wing authoritarianism (RWA), and religiosity. While interpersonal trust is acknowledged as a central personality trait for explaining conspiracy beliefs, previous research either examined its role in the belief in very specific conspiracy theories or measured interpersonal trust concerning very specific groups of individuals and institutions (see Wood & Douglas, 2018). RWA is considered a central sociopolitical attitude for the prediction of conspiracy beliefs but was also mostly examined with respect to the belief in specific conspiracy theories (e.g., Grzesiak-Feldman, 2015; Wood & Gray, 2019), furthermore yielding inconsistent relationships with conspiracy beliefs (Hartman et al., 2021; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). Finally, despite growing interest in the relationship between religiosity and conspiracy beliefs in the face of contradicting theoretical expectations, previous findings are still inconclusive as they yielded mixed results (Frenken et al., 2022). Here, we examine the association of CM with GIT, RWA, and religiosity based on two surveys with large national samples in Germany and Poland. This allows us (a) to provide a well-powered test of three theoretically relevant predictors of CM, (b) to investigate their unique predictive value, and (c) to explore whether these associations replicate across or are moderated by country context.

2. Individual-Level Predictors of Conspiracy Mentality

CM is a complex construct that can be influenced by personality, political, and religious characteristics; however, it is typically examined concerning only one of these groups of individual-level variables and in comparatively small samples. For instance, in a comprehensive review of psychological research on conspiracy beliefs, Goreis and Voracek (2019) identified 96 studies of which only six (Furnham, 2013; Galliford & Furnham, 2017; Gumhalter, 2012; Lahrach & Furnham, 2017; Mancosu et al., 2017; Oliver & Wood, 2014) investigated personality, political, and religious variables jointly. Of these, four were conducted on comparably small samples ($181 \leq N \leq 335$; for details see Goreis & Voracek, 2019, Supplementary Table 1). Furthermore, numerous studies on psychological predictors of conspiracy beliefs focus on explaining belief in specific conspiracy theories instead of CM. Conspiracy theories are explanations of (typically unusual) events based on alleged secret intentions and actions of (typically powerful) actors (Wood & Gray, 2019). They can differ from each other, e.g., regarding their narratives, degree of (im)probability, and popularity (Bilewicz et al., 2015). Thus, the study of the endorsement of specific conspiracy theories needs to be distinguished from the study of CM which refers to a general tendency to endorse conspiracy beliefs irrespective of the specific content of conspiracy theories (Imhoff, 2015). Taken together, it is still not known how robustly personality, political, and religious variables are associated with CM and what their unique contribution to explaining CM is. We will focus on one variable of each of these

groups which we consider particularly important based on theoretical and empirical considerations—namely GIT, RWA, and religiosity—and will examine these jointly. This will allow us to examine both the robustness of their predictive power as well as their unique contribution to predicting CM.

2.1. Generalized Interpersonal Trust and Conspiracy Mentality

Individuals low in GIT disbelieve the goodness of the world and have a generalized expectancy that other individuals or groups cannot be relied on (Rotter, 1980). Due to its role in social interactions and relationships, interpersonal trust is a personality variable of central interest in personality as well as psychological research more generally (Fleeson & Leicht, 2006; Krueger & Meyer-Lindenberg, 2019). Regarding conspiracy beliefs, interpersonal trust is considered one of the “earliest subjects investigated” (Wood & Douglas, 2018, p. 246) among personality traits. From a theoretical point of view, interpersonal trust should be a meaningful personality variable in explaining conspiracy beliefs as narratives of secretly colluding groups are consistent with the hostile worldview of individuals low in interpersonal trust. Accordingly, CM might be associated with lower GIT. Indeed, numerous studies found a negative relationship between interpersonal trust and conspiracy beliefs. However, most of them focused on the belief in specific conspiracy theories or measured trust with respect to specific individuals (e.g., neighbors, relatives) or specific institutions (e.g., authorities, government; see Jovančević & Miličević, 2020; Lantian et al., 2016; Marques et al., 2022; Wood & Douglas, 2018) with the latter often being included as actors in conspiracy theories (Van Prooijen, 2018). In contrast, research on the relationship between GIT (i.e., trust towards other humans in general) and CM is scarce. Here we aim to fill this gap. We expect GIT to be negatively related to CM (H1).

2.2. Right-Wing Authoritarianism and Conspiracy Mentality

RWA is a key construct regarding individual differences in the political domain (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010). Previous research suggests the existence of (at least) two dimensions of political ideology: Preferences for more versus less equality and preferences for openness versus tradition, with the former being more strongly related to attitudes towards economic issues and the latter being more strongly related to attitudes towards sociocultural issues (Federico & Malka, 2021). The dual-process motivational model of ideology and prejudice (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010) proposes that these attitudinal dimensions are reflected in the individual's social dominance orientation (a preference for hierarchical intergroup relations) and RWA. Already early conceptualizations of authoritarianism suggested a relationship with conspiracy beliefs

considering conspiratorial belief as an integral characteristic of authoritarian individuals originating from the projection of their own dangerous impulses onto the world (Adorno et al., 1950; Imhoff, 2015). Modern conceptualizations define RWA as individual differences in the propensity for submission to authorities, conventionalism, and aggression towards those who deviate from social norms (Altemeyer, 1998; Duckitt & Sibley, 2010). As outlined by the dual-process motivational model, RWA is closely linked to the belief that the social world is an inherently dangerous place and predicts negative attitudes towards individuals perceived as socially deviant (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010; Sibley & Duckitt, 2008). Following these conceptualizations, individuals high in RWA should show a general tendency to endorse conspiracies that build around groups perceived as threatening ingroup and societal values and stability (Wood & Gray, 2019). According to another line of argumentation, politically right-leaning as compared to left-leaning individuals should be more susceptible to conspiracy beliefs due to their higher levels of institutional distrust (van der Linden et al., 2021). Some scholars argue that certain cognitive predispositions related to RWA, such as cognitive rigidity and intuitive thinking, predispose them to a higher susceptibility to conspiracy theories due to difficulties in otherwise grasping the complexity of the world (Richey, 2017). In sum, there are strong theoretical reasons to expect an association between RWA and CM.

As suggested by some authors, however, individuals high in RWA may be resistant to the belief in conspiracy theories that challenge the existing societal order, e.g., depicting authority figures as conspiratorial actors (Hartman et al., 2021; Wood & Gray, 2019). Considering that the measurement of CM usually includes items referring to authorities, it seems plausible to assume that the RWA subdimension “authoritarian submission” (RWA(AS)) shows different relationships with CM compared to the subdimensions “conventionalism” (RWA(C)) and “authoritarian aggression” (RWA(AA)). Previous research, including research on potential differential effects of the RWA subdimensions, focused on the relationship between RWA and the belief in specific conspiracy theories (e.g., Grzesiak-Feldman, 2015; Wood & Gray, 2019). Research regarding the relationship between RWA and CM, however, is scarce. While most of the few existent studies found significantly positive relationships (Bruder et al., 2013; Đorđević et al., 2021; Dyrendal et al., 2021; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014, Studies 3, 4, 5), others did not (Hartman et al., 2021; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014, Studies 1, 2). In a recent international project spanning 26 countries (combined $N = 104,253$), Imhoff et al. (2022) found CM to be related to (right-wing) political orientation and to be more prevalent among voters of politically extreme parties with stronger effects found for the extreme right. However, the authors did not include a measure of RWA. We aim to add to this research by explicitly focusing on RWA as a central attitudinal, political personality variable and CM

as a dispositional conspiracy mindset. Against the background of numerous theoretical arguments surrounding the nature and correlates of RWA as well as previous findings, we expect RWA to be positively related to CM (H2). Furthermore, based on theoretical considerations and previous empirical evidence (Hartman et al., 2021; Wood & Gray, 2019), we expect the relationship between RWA(AS) and CM to be non-significant (H3).

2.3. Religiosity and Conspiracy Mentality

Religiosity is a multifaceted construct including a range of related aspects such as religious beliefs, devotion, and practice (Hackney & Sanders, 2003; Rowatt & Al-Kire, 2021). It is either assessed with measures of these different aspects or measures of self-ascribed religiousness that aim to capture the core of religiosity (McAndrew & Voas, 2011). In our study, we are interested in the core of religiosity which better reflects the overall religious identity of individuals than specific religious aspects. The link between religiosity and CM has often been discussed given analogies between religions and conspiracy theories, including the ascription of agency to invisible forces, the distinction between good and evil forces, and the conviction that everything is connected (Franks et al., 2013; Ladini, 2022). How exactly religiosity is linked to CM is, however, disputed. According to the “complement hypothesis” (Frenken et al., 2022, p. 5), the same individuals should be inclined towards both religious and conspiracy beliefs due to similar cognitive tendencies to interpret the world. According to the “belief replacement hypothesis” (Jasinskaja-Lahti & Jetten, 2019, p. 940), non-religious individuals should be more likely to endorse conspiracy theories due to a natural human need to believe in some higher entity that gives individuals a sense of meaning, to understand the world, and to thereby perceive some sense of control. Empirical evidence on these questions is still scarce. In a meta-analysis including studies that used either measures of specific or generic conspiracy beliefs, Stasielowicz (2022) found a small positive correlation between religiosity and conspiracy beliefs ($r = .14$). Investigating the relationship between religiosity and generic conspiracy beliefs across nine studies ($N = 4,804$), Frenken et al. (2022) found mixed results across studies and overall, a significantly positive correlation of small size ($r = .10$). In a series of additional studies, the authors’ findings were again inconsistent. We aim to provide more empirical evidence on the link between religiosity and CM with two well-powered studies across two countries (RQ1).

3. The Role of Country Context

Previous research on the prediction of CM has mostly been conducted in one specific country and neglected the influence of societal characteristics such as religious and political culture. While there is initial evidence that the spread of conspiracy theories and the mean level

of CM differ across countries with differences in the political and religious spheres (e.g., Bruder et al., 2013; Salali & Uysal, 2021; Schlipphak et al., 2021), it is still unclear whether these differences affect the relationship between personality, political, and religious characteristics and CM. It is thus an open empirical question, whether the prediction of CM by GIT, RWA, and religiosity is influenced by or invariant across country contexts. We argue that there is reason to expect cross-country differences.

As previous studies have demonstrated, conspiracy narratives constitute a particular characteristic of populist rhetoric (Imhoff et al., 2022). Some authors suggest that the communication of conspiracy theories by elites should lead to a lower societal stigma of believing conspiracy theories in general, resulting in higher mean levels of CM in countries led by populist governments (Schlipphak et al., 2021; but see also Imhoff et al., 2022). The communication of conspiracy theories by political elites may not only foster the individual emergence of a conspiratorial mindset, but also influence how strongly personality, political, and religious characteristics affect CM. For GIT, two diverging expectations can be derived: On the one hand, as argued earlier, it seems plausible that individuals with a weaker GIT are particularly susceptible to conspiracy narratives due to their hostile worldview. In a country led by populists whose communication includes the spread of conspiracy theories, individuals with lower GIT might therefore develop a particularly strong conspiratorial mindset. Following this argument, the relationship between GIT and CM should be stronger in countries led by populists. On the other hand, the narratives communicated by political elites who rely on conspiracy theories may be more consistent with the worldview of distrustful individuals, which may promote felt closeness towards political elites and weaken the conspiratorial idea of collusions, considering that conspiracy theories often refer to actions allegedly conducted by powerful groups including governmental institutions (Uscinski & Parent, 2014). Following this reasoning, we would expect a weaker relationship between GIT and CM in populist-led countries. Here, we explore the moderating role of country context regarding the association between GIT and CM (RQ2).

When it comes to RWA, there is also reason to assume differences in its relationship with CM across countries with political differences. Some authors maintain that “conspiracies are for losers” (Uscinski & Parent, 2014) meaning that individuals whose preferred political candidate or party has lost the elections and who do not feel represented by their government are more susceptible to conspiracy theories than those whose interests are politically represented. In a country led by a right-wing government, individuals high as compared to low in RWA should have stronger perceptions of political representation and political control (for a discussion of the link between political control and conspiracy beliefs see Imhoff et al., 2022). Consequently, the

association between RWA and CM should be weaker in countries with a right-wing government than in countries with politically moderate or left-wing governments (H4). In an exploratory manner, we will also examine potential cross-country differences in the association between the three subdimensions of RWA and CM.

Regarding the role of country context in the link between religiosity and CM, there is to date little empirical evidence. Therefore, it is still an open question whether a potential relationship between religiosity and CM differs depending on the political and religious culture. Here, we explore a potential moderating role of country context regarding the association between religiosity and CM (RQ3).

The present research tests the moderating role of country context by focusing on Germany and Poland, two countries with significant differences in the political and religious spheres. While the Polish government is ruled since 2015 by the populist right-wing party PiS which is characterized by semi-authoritarian politics (Meijers & van der Veer, 2019), Germany’s right-wing party AfD obtained a minority of the votes in the past federal elections and remained in the opposition. Furthermore, while Germany and Poland are both predominantly Christian countries, Poland displays a significantly higher level of religiosity as well as low political and religious pluralism (Joshani & Gebauer, 2020; Karpov, 2002). In addition, in Poland, church attendance is substantially higher and more closely related to religiosity than in Germany (Storm, 2017). Overall, we consider the selected countries to represent adequate cases to test the hypothesized cross-country differences in the association between individual-level GIT, RWA, and religiosity on the one hand and CM on the other hand.

4. The Present Research

The present research aims at investigating three classes of potential correlates of CM—namely personality, political, and religious characteristics—thereby focusing on GIT, RWA, and religiosity. Within the scope of an interdisciplinary project between psychology and political science, we conducted two surveys with large national samples in Germany and Poland. This allowed us to provide robust tests of (a) the predictive value of GIT, RWA, and religiosity in explaining CM, (b) their unique predictive power, and (c) the replicability and potential moderation of these associations across two countries with differences in the political and religious sphere. In sum, the following hypotheses and research questions will be tested:

H1: GIT is negatively associated with CM.

H2: RWA is positively associated with CM.

H3: RWA(AS) is non-significantly associated with CM.

RQ1: Is religiosity associated with CM?

RQ2: Is the association between GIT and CM different in Poland as compared to Germany?

H4: The association between RWA and CM is weaker in Poland as compared to Germany.

RQ3: Is the association between religiosity and CM different in Poland as compared to Germany?

5. Methods

5.1. Participants

Data for the present article are based on a computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI) survey (Study 1) and a computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) survey (Study 2). Each study was conducted respectively in Germany and Poland by the survey agency Kantar TNS. Study 1 was fielded in June 2018 and Study 2 was fielded in November–December 2020. The recruitment was based on random address-based sampling (Study 1) and dual-frame sampling based on fixed and mobile network numbers (Study 2). The target group was aged between 18 and 99 years in Study 1 and entitled to vote at the national parliamentary elections at the time of study in Study 2. This resulted in random samples of the populations. The total German sample size was $N = 2,760$ and the total Polish sample size was $N = 2,651$. The sample size was determined based on the resources available for the study implementation. Our hypotheses were not preregistered. Details on the criteria for data exclusion are presented in the Supplementary File.

In Study 1, 1,358 respondents participated in the German survey and 1,451 respondents in the Polish survey. After data cleaning, the final samples consisted of 1,087 respondents in Germany (52.16% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 47.04$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 13.28$) and 1,047 respondents in Poland (52.24% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 41.13$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 12.95$).

In Study 2, 1,402 respondents participated in the German survey and 1,200 respondents in the Polish survey. The final sample consisted of 1,265 respondents in Germany (46.17% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 53.66$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 16.46$) and 1,092 respondents in Poland (45.33% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 50.37$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 16.44$).

5.2. Materials

The items used in Study 1 and Study 2 can be found in the Supplementary File.

In Study 1, we measured CM based on four items of the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (CMQ; Bruder et al., 2013; eleven-point scale: 0% = certainly not to 100% = certain; $\alpha = .84$). To measure GIT, we asked respondents to indicate whether they believe that most people can be trusted or that one cannot be too careful in dealing with other people (eleven-point scale: 1 = one cannot be careful enough to 11 = one can trust most people; Roßteutscher et al., 2019). To mea-

sure RWA, we administered the Authoritarianism Short Scale by Beierlein et al. (2014) consisting of nine items (five-point scale: 1 = do not agree at all to 5 = agree completely; $\alpha = .86$), with respectively three items measuring RWA(AA), RWA(AS), and RWA(C). Religiosity was assessed with an item asking respondents how religious they consider themselves (eleven-point scale: 0 = not religious at all to 10 = very religious; European Social Survey, 2021).

In Study 2, we measured CM with a single-item measure based on the items of the CMQ (Bruder et al., 2013): “There are many important things happening in the world that are controlled by influential groups without the public’s knowledge” (six-point scale: 1 = do not agree at all to 6 = fully agree). To measure GIT, we used the same item as in Study 1 with a six-point scale. RWA was measured using three items of the scale used in Study 1, respectively measuring one of the three dimensions of RWA (six-point scale: 1 = do not agree at all to 6 = fully agree; $\alpha = .48$). We used one item per subdimension to maintain the scale’s validity and chose the items according to their highest loading on the respective RWA subdimension as reported in the validation studies conducted by Beierlein et al. (2014, p. 35; see also Table 1). The low level of Cronbach’s alpha of the RWA scale used in Study 2 reflects a common problem of short scales. It can be explained by the low number of items as Cronbach’s alpha increases with the number of items and by comparatively heterogeneous items covering different subdimensions resulting in small inter-item correlations (Rammstedt & Beierlein, 2014). Some authors suggest using the test-retest reliability as a more reliable indicator of the reliability of short scales (for a summary see Rammstedt & Beierlein, 2014). Religiosity was assessed with a single-item measure asking respondents how religious they consider themselves (six-point scale: 1 = not religious at all to 6 = deeply religious). Overall, due to time constraints limiting the length of the questionnaire, we chose fewer items in Study 2 compared to Study 1. However, all items used in Study 2 were also used in Study 1, apart from minor differences in wording and differences regarding the scale range (see the Supplementary File).

6. Results

6.1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlational Analyses

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of our study variables. Mean levels of CM, RWA, and religiosity were higher in the Polish than in the German samples. Correlations among all variables can be found in the Supplementary File. To derive meta-analytic correlations for each country, we applied the R package “metafor” (R Core Team, 2021; Viechtbauer, 2010) and calculated sample-size weighted correlations across the country-specific samples. In both countries, we found negative correlations between GIT and CM ($r_{\text{Germany}} = -.25$,

$p < .001$, 95% CI [-.29, -.21]; $r_{Poland} = -.15$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.19, -.11]), positive correlations between RWA and CM ($r_{Germany} = .20$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.16, .24]; $r_{Poland} = .11$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.06, .15]), and non-significant correlations between religiosity and CM ($r_{Germany} = .03$, $p = .21$, 95% CI [-.01, .07]; $r_{Poland} = .04$, $p = .06$, 95% CI [-.00, .08]).

Our analyses of the relationship between the RWA subdimensions and CM yielded positive correlations between RWA(AA) and CM ($r_{Germany} = .21$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.17, .25]; $r_{Poland} = .13$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.08, .17]) and between RWA(C) and CM ($r_{Germany} = .20$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.16, .24]; $r_{Poland} = .13$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.08, .17]) in both countries. RWA(AS), however, was not significantly related to CM in either of the countries ($r_{Germany} = .04$, $p = .07$, 95% CI [-.00, .08]; $r_{Poland} = -.01$, $p = .69$, 95% CI [-.05, .03]).

6.2. Prediction by Individual-Level Predictors

To assess the unique contribution of GIT, RWA, and religiosity in predicting CM, we applied multiple linear regression analyses. All continuous variables were z-standardized prior to the analyses. To derive meta-analytic effect sizes for each country, we used again the R package “metafor” and fitted meta-analytic fixed-effects models by weighting the effect sizes by study sample size. In both countries, CM was negatively predicted by GIT ($b_{Germany} = -.24$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.28, -.19]; $b_{Poland} = -.14$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.18, -.09]), positively predicted by RWA ($b_{Germany} = .18$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.13, .22]; $b_{Poland} = .10$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.06, .14]) and non-significantly predicted by religiosity ($b_{Germany} = .03$, $p = .16$, 95% CI [-.01, .07]; $b_{Poland} = .03$, $p = .16$, 95% CI [-.01, .07]; see also Figure 1). Results of the analyses including sociodemographic control variables did not differ substantially and can be found in the Supplementary File.

Regarding the analyses based on the RWA subdimensions, we found CM to be positively predicted by RWA(AA) ($b_{Germany} = .19$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.14, .23]; $b_{Poland} = .12$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.07, .16]) and RWA(C) ($b_{Germany} = .18$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.14, .22]; $b_{Poland} = .15$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.10, .19]), but non-significantly predicted by RWA(AS) ($b_{Germany} = .03$, $p = .16$, 95% CI [-.01, .07]; $b_{Poland} = -.02$, $p = .35$, 95% CI [-.06, .02]) in both countries (see also Figure 2).

6.3. Moderation by Country

Figure 3 visualizes interactions of country and, respectively, GIT, RWA, and religiosity, on CM in Study 1 (Panel A–C) and Study 2 (Panel D–F). Meta-analytically pooled across all samples, we found a significantly positive interaction of country (Germany = 0, Poland = 1) and GIT ($b = .11$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.05, .16]), indicating that the negative prediction of CM by GIT was weaker in Poland as compared to Germany (see Figure 3 Panel A and D; Table S8 additionally presents the results of simple slopes analyses). We also found a significantly negative interaction of country and RWA ($b = -.08$, $p < .01$, 95% CI [-.14, -.02]), indicating that the positive prediction of CM by RWA was weaker in Poland as compared to Germany (see Figure 3, Panel B and E). No interaction was found for country and religiosity ($b = .00$, $p = 1.00$, 95% CI [-.06, .06]; see Figure 3, Panel C and F).

Regarding our exploratory analyses on interactions of country and the RWA subdimensions on CM, only the pooled interaction with RWA(AA) was significant and negative ($b = -.08$, $p < .01$, 95% CI [-.13, -.02]), indicating that the positive prediction of CM by RWA(AA) was weaker in Poland as compared to Germany (see also Supplementary File, Figure S1, Panel A and D). In the Supplementary File, the results of the interaction analyses on the other two subdimensions (Table S10) as well as the respective simple slopes analyses (Table S11) can be found.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the study variables.

Variable	Germany				Poland			
	Study 1		Study 2		Study 1		Study 2	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
CM	7.44	2.08	3.74	1.67	7.65	1.94	4.39	1.57
Age	47.04	13.28	53.66	16.46	41.13	12.95	50.37	16.44
Female	0.52	0.50	0.46	0.50	0.52	0.50	0.45	0.50
Education	14.65	3.20	4.45	2.11	16.42	3.47	4.92	1.94
GIT	5.71	2.47	3.82	1.29	5.49	2.47	2.94	1.54
RWA	3.28	0.77	3.58	1.12	3.78	0.70	4.17	1.18
Religiosity	4.06	2.99	2.67	1.52	6.10	3.10	3.40	1.64
N	1,087		1,265		1,047		1,092	

Notes: *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation; N = total sample size; gender was dummy-coded (0 = male, 1 = female); education indicates the years spent at any educational institution in Study 1 and the educational level following the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) ranging from ISCED 0 to ISCED 8 in Study 2.

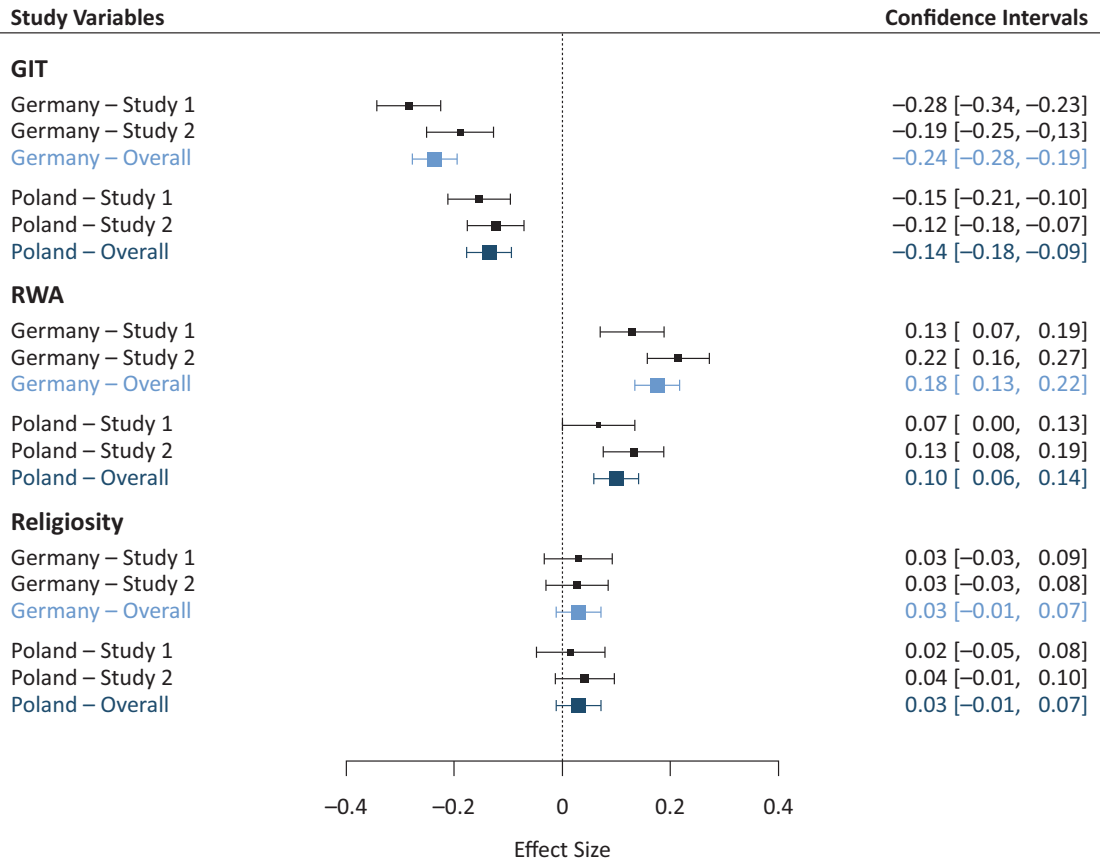


Figure 1. Study-specific and meta-analytic predictions of CM by GIT, RWA, and religiosity in Germany and Poland.

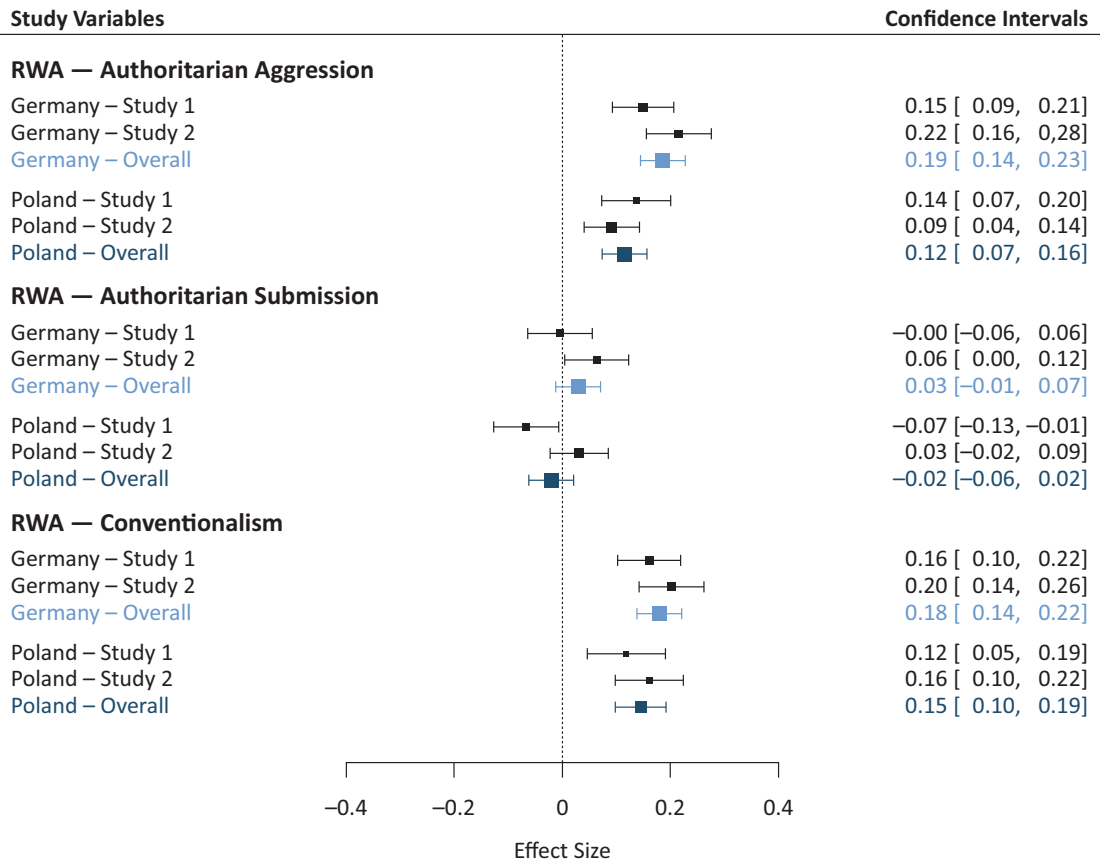


Figure 2. Study-specific and meta-analytic predictions of CM by the three subdimensions of RWA in Germany and Poland.

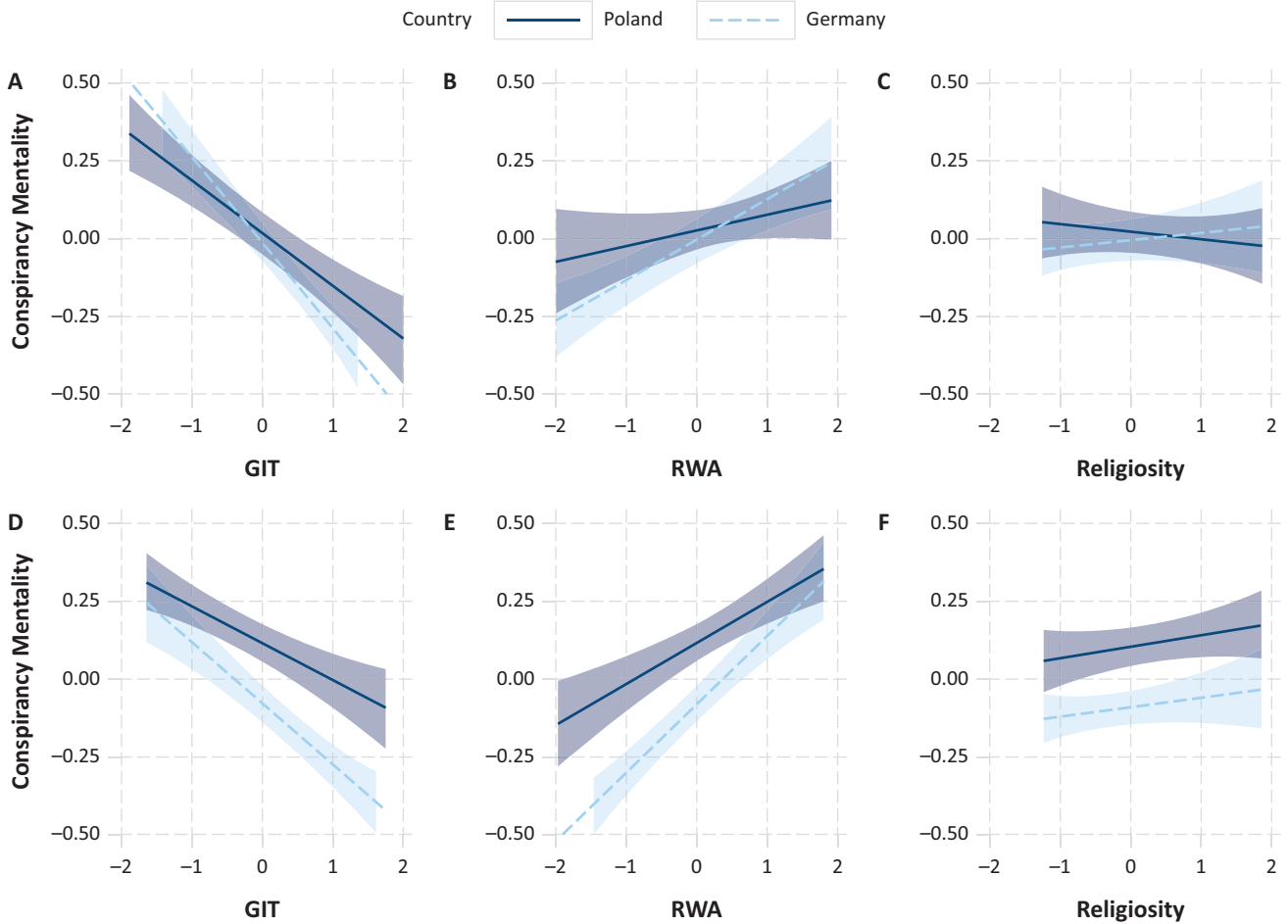


Figure 3. Interactions of country and, respectively, GIT, RWA, and religiosity in Study 1 (Panel A–C) and Study 2 (Panel D–F).

7. Discussion

The present research sought to investigate how GIT, RWA, and religiosity are related to CM in two countries with marked differences in the political and religious spheres. We analyzed this question based on respectively two studies in Germany and Poland. In both countries, we found unique negative predictions by GIT, positive predictions by RWA, and non-significant predictions by religiosity. The positive prediction of CM by RWA also applied to RWA(AA) and RWA(C). In addition, we found weaker predictions of CM by GIT and RWA in Poland as compared to Germany.

Our findings support the argument that distrustful individuals are generally more inclined to believe conspiracy theories as conspiracy theories are consistent with their hostile worldview. Furthermore, they are in line with previous findings on the relationship between CM and interpersonal trust with respect to specific groups (Lantian et al., 2016; Marques et al., 2022; Wood & Douglas, 2018). Our research adds to this research by providing first robust insights on the relationship between GIT, that is interpersonal trust towards other humans in general, and CM.

The overall positive prediction of CM by RWA is consistent with earlier conceptualizations of RWA (Adorno

et al., 1950) as well as the modern dual-process motivational model of ideology and prejudice (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010) which both consider a dangerous worldview as an integral part of RWA. It is also in line with arguments made based on correlates of RWA, such as institutional distrust and specific cognitive predispositions (van der Linden et al., 2021), and most empirical findings (Bruder et al., 2013; Đorđević et al., 2021; Dyrendal et al., 2021; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). Importantly, they add to previous research which mainly focused on the relationship between RWA and the belief in specific conspiracy theories (Grzesiak-Feldman, 2015; Wood & Gray, 2019) and political ideology in general (Imhoff et al., 2022). Also, in line with arguments based on the multidimensional nature of RWA and some existent empirical findings (Hartman et al., 2021; Wood & Gray, 2019), CM was not significantly predicted by RWA(AS) while being positively predicted by RWA(AA) and RWA(C).

The non-significant relationship found between religiosity and CM is not consistent with either of the proposed implications of “conspiracism as religion” (Frenken et al., 2022; Ladini, 2022); neither with the idea that non-religious individuals are attracted to conspiracy beliefs as the latter satisfy needs that otherwise would be satisfied by religion (“belief replacement hypothesis”) nor with the idea that the same individuals are drawn

towards both conspiracy and religious beliefs due to specific cognitive predispositions (“complement hypothesis”). Empirically, our result is consistent with about half of the studies included in Frenken et al.’s (2022) meta-analysis but inconsistent with the overall finding of Frenken et al. (2022) and Stasielowicz (2022). Our research adds to the few existent studies on the relationship between religiosity and CM and indicates that different mechanisms may be at play resulting in an overall non-significant relationship.

The weaker negative predictions by GIT found in Poland as compared to Germany support the idea that distrustful individuals feel more associated with governments that fall back on conspiracy narratives due to the shared hostile worldview. The weaker positive predictions by RWA found in Poland as compared to Germany align with the idea that “conspiracies are for losers” (Uscinski & Parent, 2014): Polish individuals high in RWA should feel more represented by their government, accordingly, perceive higher political control and therefore be less drawn to conspiracy theories than their German counterparts. However, when conducting the analyses separately for the RWA subdimensions, we find this result only for RWA(AA). Finally, our finding of a consistently non-significant relationship between religiosity and CM in both countries does not suggest effects of political and religious culture on the relationship between religiosity and CM. While our findings on cross-country differences regarding GIT and RWA are supported by a range of theoretical arguments, our results contradict some findings of Frenken et al. (2022). The authors found a stronger positive relationship between CM and right-wing political orientation in Poland than in Germany and a (weakly) negative relationship between CM and religiosity in both countries. Compared to our studies, the studies of Frenken et al. (2022) display some differences, e.g., regarding the scale labeling (e.g., the use of labels that assess the strength of belief instead of religiosity when asking for the respondents’ religiosity), the measurement of political ideology (e.g., the use of a left-right self-placement and therefore assessment of both the economic and social dimension of political ideology), and the societal context of the studies (their data collection in both countries took place before the Covid-19 pandemic). The potential role of these different study characteristics in explaining inconsistent findings should be the subject of further studies.

Following effect size guidelines in research on individual differences (Gignac & Szodorai, 2016), the relationships we found between GIT and CM as well as RWA and CM are mostly small to medium in size, with GIT being more predictive of CM than RWA in both countries. The country-specific differences to which our data point suggest that the relationships found between personality, political, and religious individual-level characteristics and CM are context-dependent. That is, while GIT and RWA seem to predict CM across different countries, the effects vary in size (see also Hornsey & Pearson, 2022).

Being consistent with the idea that “conspiracies are for losers,” our data suggest that stable societal conditions in which individuals feel politically represented and perceive some sense of control may help to reduce the prevalence of conspiracy beliefs. The propensity to believe in conspiracy theories may be particularly harmful if individuals with high CM are embedded within a context in which they are exposed to conspiracy theories that foster beliefs with vast implications for the physical and psychological well-being of individuals. Examples of such conspiracy theories are specific Covid-19-related conspiracy theories that question the necessity of adhering to health guidelines or conspiracy stereotypes targeting specific (e.g., ethnic) groups of individuals. Thus, to better understand the implications of cross-country differences as found in our work, it is of interest to understand the relative role of CM and its individual-level predictors regarding societal consequences as a function of the popularity of certain conspiracy theories within the given context.

Future research that builds on the present findings is needed both to increase their generalizability across countries and measures and to zoom into the relevant psychological and political communication processes. First, future research should include a larger range of country contexts. Here, we focused on two countries characterized by substantial differences in the political and religious spheres. To increase the generalizability of our results, the present research should be replicated in other politically moderate, democratic as well as semi-authoritarian, right-wing states. In addition, including measures of left-wing authoritarianism and samples of countries governed by left-wing parties would help to differentiate between the influence of content-specific aspects of political attitudes and aspects related to the extremity of attitudes on CM. Both left- and right-wing extremism might be associated with conspiracy beliefs due to the common tendency of the political extremes to believe in simple answers and to display intolerance towards deviating opinions (Imhoff et al., 2022). Finally, if possible, future research should also account for the overall political context, widening the perspective beyond the political orientation and conspiracy theory communication of the reigning government.

Second, future research might apply both more intensive and fine-grained assessments of relevant variables. Regarding CM, we applied relatively brief measures and even a single-item measure in one study. Although such measures of CM display good psychometric properties (Lantian et al., 2016), they do not allow to adequately test whether the specific item content plays a role when it comes to country-specific differences. Conspiracy items referring to authorities, for instance, might be more strongly affected by differing political contexts than others. Similarly, more comprehensive measures of religiosity including a variety of religious beliefs, attitudes, and practices, would allow for a more in-depth understanding of the relationship between religiosity

and CM. Although it seems that single-item measures of religiosity represent well various religious dimensions (Klein et al., 2012), CM may still be uniquely and differentially related to specific aspects of religiosity while being unrelated to others. First attempts to consider the multidimensionality of religiosity indeed yielded different predictions (Ladini, 2022; Stasielowicz, 2022).

Finally, as both studies were cross-sectional, they do not allow for causal inferences. To establish a better sense of the assumed underlying mechanisms, future studies should employ both longitudinal data and experimental designs including manipulations which increase the salience of specific political or religious aspects of the respective country.

8. Conclusion

Investigating the role of GIT, RWA, and religiosity in predicting CM in Germany and Poland, we replicated earlier findings that point towards negative predictions by GIT, positive predictions by RWA, and non-significant findings regarding religiosity. We also found that unlike RWA(AA) and RWA(C), RWA(AS) is not related to CM. In addition, we found cross-country differences, namely weaker predictions by GIT and RWA in Poland as compared to Germany. These findings underline the important role of contextual differences: The political and religious culture may not only affect the general propensity to believe in conspiracy theories but also shape who is more inclined to believe in conspiracy theories.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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