

**“Who Wants to Silence Us?” Perceived Discrimination of Conspiracy Theory Believers
Increases “Conspiracy Theorist” Identification When it Comes From Powerholders –
But not From the General Public**

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Abstract

We examined how individuals that may be labelled “conspiracy theorists” respond to discrimination against “conspiracy theorists”. In line with the Rejection-Identification Model (Branscombe et al., 1999), we hypothesised that perceived group-based discrimination against conspiracy theorists would strengthen identification with the “conspiracy theorist” ingroup. We propose that this relationship might be mediated by meta-conspiracy beliefs, that is, the belief that the discrimination of conspiracy theorists is itself a conspiracy. Three studies ($Ns = 97, 364, 747$) among participants who had been labelled as “conspiracy theorist” in the past (Studies 1-2) or who had been labelled as such at the beginning of the experiment (Study 3) revealed robust positive relationships between perceived discrimination of conspiracy theorists, meta conspiracy beliefs, and identification. Furthermore, in Studies 2-3, identification was strongly associated with positive intergroup differentiation and pride to be a conspiracy theorist. However, there was no evidence that a manipulation of discrimination with bogus public opinion polls affected “conspiracy theorist” identification or meta-conspiracy beliefs. A Bayesian internal meta-analysis of the studies returned moderate (for group identification) to strong (for meta-conspiracy beliefs) support for the null hypothesis. In contrast, in Study 3, a manipulation of discrimination by powerholders enhanced both identification and meta-conspiracy beliefs. This suggests that the source of discrimination moderates the causal relationship between perceived discrimination of conspiracy theorists and group identification.

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Conspiracy theories (CTs) can be defined as “[proposed explanations] of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons—the conspirators—acting in secret” (Keeley, 1999, p. 116). Those who endorse conspiracy theories (CTs) are motivated by a desire to access knowledge forbidden to the public (Lantian et al., 2017; Moscovici, 2020). By extension, at a group level, individuals who embrace such beliefs might feel that they belong to a positive, “enlightened” ingroup (Franks et al., 2017).

However, belief in CTs also carries with it an important social cost because such beliefs are, after all, stigmatised (Harambam & Aupers, 2016; Husting & Orr, 2007; Lantian et al., 2018). It is therefore not surprising that those who advocate CTs publicly are aware that they may face social exclusion because of their beliefs (Lantian et al., 2018). However, those who endorse CTs continue to embrace these beliefs because they perceive people who endorse mainstream views as “the sheeple” (Franks et al., 2017).

In the current research, we take the perspective that CTs, and specifically, the derogatory labels “conspiracy theory” and “conspiracy theorist”, can create a shared social identity among individuals endorsing these beliefs—namely, a “conspiracy theorists” group identity. We empirically examine the consequences of perceived discrimination of CT believers. In line with the rejection-identification model (Branscombe et al., 1999), we hypothesise that enhanced perceived group discrimination might foster group identification among individuals to whom the label “conspiracy theorist” (potentially) applies. Moreover, we propose that CT believers’ tendency to interpret the discrimination of “conspiracy theorists” as a conspiracy (Nera et al., 2020) might be a specific mediator of the relationship between perceived discrimination and group identification. Finally, we examine whether this dynamic is conditional to situations where the source of discrimination is powerful.

Belief in Conspiracy Theories as Specific Social Identities

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There is a growing literature investigating how CTs shape—and are shaped by—group processes (Biddlestone et al., 2020; Biddlestone et al., 2021; van Prooijen & van Lange, 2014). With regards to group identities, it has been shown that individuals believing that their ingroup's greatness is not adequately recognised by other groups (i.e., “collective narcissists”, Golec de Zavala et al., 2009) have a stronger propensity to endorse CTs targeting outgroups (Cichocka et al., 2016; Marchlewska et al., 2019; but see also Golec de Zavala & Federico, 2018). CTs may also assume a rallying function in contexts of intergroup competition (e.g., political parties during elections, Smallpage et al., 2017; Uscinski & Parent, 2014). For instance, in the context of a partisan conflict, CTs may be endorsed because they protect the image of the ingroup (e.g., by blaming an electoral loss on a conspiracy of the competing party) and provide the ability to disparage the competing outgroup (Smallpage et al., 2017).

These studies, however, examine how CTs affect, and are affected by, pre-existing group identities (e.g., a national ingroup). In some circumstances, CTs can serve as basis for specific group identities. The limited work in this field suggests that such group identities can be shaped by a variety of dynamics. For instance, in interview-based research, Franks and colleagues (2017) showed that attendees of a “conspiracy” convention developed an identity as an enlightened ingroup (i.e., “truth seekers”), whose goal was to uncover the concealed truths behind official narratives. In other research, Bilewicz and colleagues (2019) showed that (dis)belief in a specific CT (regarding the Smolensk plane crash) was associated with reduced willingness to interact with individuals holding the opposite view. These findings suggest that belief in CTs can – in and of themselves – generate specific group identities and intergroup processes (e.g., positive group identification, social distancing from the outgroup) that determine subsequent attitudes and behavioural intentions.

Even though these examples focus on specific CTs, it is plausible that the endorsement of more generic conspiracist beliefs (Brotherton et al., 2013) are also associated with similar

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intergroup representations, enhancing the distinction between “believers” and “non-believers”. Indeed, even though the label “conspiracy theory” is applied to a great variety of beliefs, with diverse communities of supporters (Harambam & Aupers, 2016), CTs usually share similar assumptions about the world (i.e., that the elites are corrupted and that truths are actively concealed from the public, for an example see Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Lantian et al., 2016). Moreover, “conspiracy theorists” share the belief that they are pejoratively labelled as such by the many who disqualify their ideas (Dentith & Keeley, 2018; Husting & Orr, 2007). Therefore, we propose that “conspiracy theorists” can be characterized as both an opinion-based group (i.e., a group “primarily based on shared opinions”; Bliuc et al., 2007), and a stigma-based group (i.e., a group of individuals who share a common social stigma; Crocker et al., 1998). Indeed, conspiracy theorists share the core belief that official narratives cannot be trusted (Franks et al., 2017; Lantian et al., 2016). At the same time, conspiracy theorists share the belief that they are pejoratively called “conspiracy theorists” (Harambam & Aupers, 2016).

Responding to Discrimination: The Rejection-Identification Model

The Rejection Identification Model (Branscombe et al, 1999) offers a general framework for understanding the relationship between perceived discrimination and group identification. This model postulates that attributing the cause of negative events to pervasive prejudice against one’s group has an indirect positive impact on self-esteem, through increased identification with the stigmatised group identity. More generally, this model proposes that perceptions of discrimination strengthen group identification, which in turn helps individuals cope with the detrimental effects of discrimination, most notably by fostering a sense of support among individuals with shared experiences (Branscombe et al., 1999). Discrimination also fosters intergroup differentiation, that is, the belief that one’s

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ingroup is different from the stigmatizing outgroup (typically the majority; Jetten et al., 2001), by making an “Us” vs. “Them” intergroup context salient (Jetten et al., 2004).

Here, we focus only on the proposed relationship between perceived group discrimination and group identification. Evidence for this link has been demonstrated in a variety of social groups (see however Bobowik et al., 2017), including ethnic minorities (Branscombe et al., 1999; Schmitt et al., 2002), women (Redersdorff, 2004; Schmitt et al., 2002), people with disabilities (Bogart et al., 2018), and cultural minorities (e.g., atheists, Doane & Elliott, 2015; people with body piercings, Jetten et al., 2001). Furthermore, a causal direction has been confirmed in experimental studies inducing perceived discrimination of one’s stigmatised ingroup, demonstrating that this strengthens group identification (Jetten et al., 2001; Redersdorff et al., 2004; see also Ramos et al., 2017 for longitudinal evidence).

Meta-Conspiracy Beliefs as a Specific Mediator of Rejection-Identification

The Rejection-Identification Model suggests that the discrimination of CT believers by non-believers might strengthen group identification among believers. This prediction is originally derived from social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), according to which recognising that the majority illegitimately discriminates against a disadvantaged minority leads to stronger group identification among minority members. However, the discrimination of CT believers might lead to increased group identification through a more specific process. Indeed, recent research has shown that CT believers tend to endorse meta-conspiracy beliefs, that is, the belief that the label “conspiracy theory” is a rhetorical weapon used by the elites to silence legitimate questions (Nera et al., 2020). Thus, among CT believers, perceived discrimination against their ingroup is likely to not just create a sense of shared suffering, but also strengthen the belief that discrimination is the expression of a conspiracy against “conspiracy theorists”. Just like perceptions of shared suffering, meta-conspiracy beliefs might enhance the salience of an “us” (“conspiracy theorists”) versus “them” (those who

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discriminate against CT believers) intergroup representation, providing another pathway through which identification with “conspiracy theorists” as a social group is enhanced (Jetten et al., 2004). For this reason, we propose that belief in the notion that discrimination of “conspiracy theorists” is a conspiracy might mediate the relationship between perceived discrimination of CT believers and identification with “conspiracy theorists”.

A relationship conditional to power?

In addition to this specific mediating mechanism, rejection-identification dynamics among CT believers might be subject to other factors. In particular, CT believers are sensitive to power cues—they have negative attitudes towards powerful groups (e.g., Bankers, Imhoff & Bruder, 2014), and are less likely to give credit to sources of information holding power in society (e.g., academics, Imhoff et al., 2018; or people developing medical treatments, Lamberty & Imhoff, 2018, Studies 2-3). More generally, with regards to attitudes towards outgroups, CT believers seem to infer threat from power (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2020).

Hence, with regards to the rejection-identification dynamic, it is possible that the effect of discrimination of CT believers on “conspiracy theorist” identification might only be observed when discrimination emanates from a powerful group (e.g., the government). However, on the other hand, CT believers also tend to believe that fellow citizens blindly follow the propaganda of powerholders (e.g., Franks et al., 2017; Harambam & Aupers, 2016). As a result, discrimination coming from citizens holding no particular power might also fuel the sense that there is a conspiracy against “conspiracy theorists”—because such discrimination would demonstrate the pervasiveness of discriminatory propaganda against “conspiracy theorists”.

In sum, the question of whether those who discriminate against “conspiracy theorists” need to be perceived as powerful to enhance “conspiracy theorist” group identification remains unclear. Assuming there is a causal relationship between perceived discrimination

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and group identification, and that this relationship is mediated by meta-conspiracy beliefs, we envision two plausible empirical scenarios:

- 1) *Regardless of the source of discrimination*, inducing a sense of discrimination against “conspiracy theorists” will enhance group identification, through increased meta-conspiracy beliefs (tested in Studies 1-3)
- 2) *Providing that the discrimination comes from a powerful group*, inducing a sense of discrimination against “conspiracy theorists” will strengthen identification through increased meta-conspiracist beliefs (Study 3).

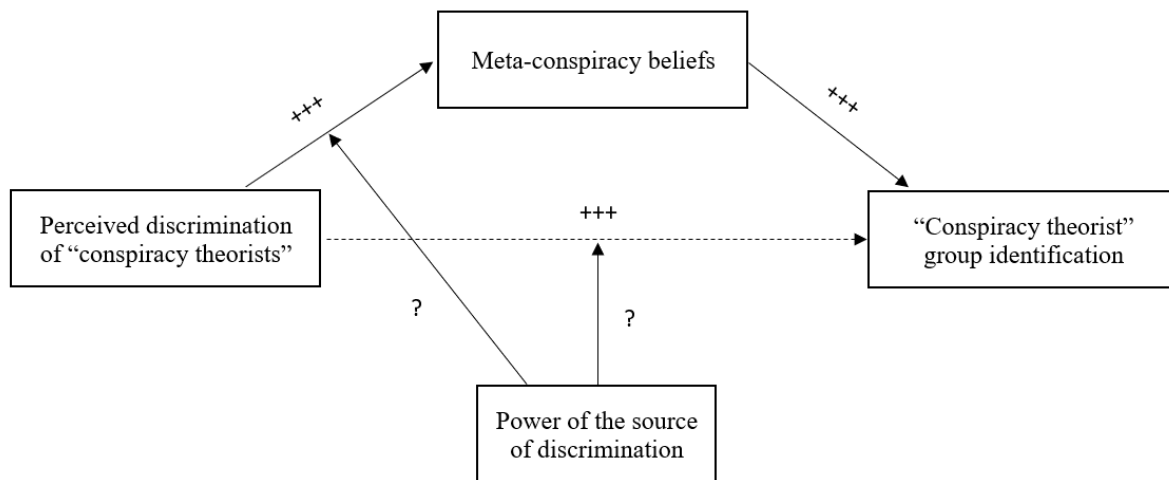
Overview of the research

In the current research, we hypothesised a positive, causal relationship between perceived discrimination against individuals who believe in CTs and group identification. We also hypothesised that meta-conspiracy beliefs should positively mediate this link. That is, we expected that among CT believers, discrimination of CT believers would strengthen the belief that there is a conspiracy against their ingroup. Such a belief, by making an “Us” vs. “Them” intergroup context salient, might in turn strengthen their ingroup identification. This relationship, however, might be conditional to situations where people who discriminate “conspiracy theorists” are powerful (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

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Generic rejection-identification model applied to “conspiracy theorists”



In order to test this model, we sought to recruit individuals who had experienced being called a “conspiracy theorist” (Studies 1-2) or thought that if they shared their opinion on some topics, they might be called a “conspiracy theorist” (Study 2). To circumvent the practical hurdles of recruiting people holding conspiracy beliefs (Franks et al., 2017; Wood & Douglas, 2015), we decided to recruit participants by asking whether they have ever experienced being labelled a “conspiracy theorist” in the past. Moreover, we decided to frame the questionnaire as investigating the perception of the label “conspiracy theory”, to defuse potential suspicions towards the authors of the study, and because conspiracy believers tend to reject the label “conspiracy theory” altogether (Nera et al., 2020).

In Study 3, we tested our hypotheses in a sample of participants that we categorised as “conspiracy theorists”, based on their own suspicions towards powerholders. Across all studies, samples were relatively diverse in terms of professional status, gender, age, and level of education (see the online supplements for detailed demographic information).

In all studies, we experimentally manipulated perceived discrimination against “conspiracy theorists”. Specifically, Studies 1-3 entailed a manipulation of the general public’s opinion regarding whether CTs should be censored. In addition to this manipulation, Study 3 also included a manipulation of censorship by powerholders – to examine the

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potential differential impact of discrimination coming from a powerful source. All studies were pre-registered.

Finally, across the studies, identification with conspiracy theorists was assessed with two measures: one referring to people who distrust “official versions” broadcasted by authorities (opinion-based identification, Studies 1-2), and one referring to people labelled as a “conspiracy theorist” (stigma-based identification, Studies 1-3).

The preregistration forms, cross-sectional pilot study (not included in the paper), data analyses, materials, detailed sociodemographic information, and differential attrition checks can be found on the Open Science Framework at

https://osf.io/mxw4d/?view_only=33a9b1ed147341759d0afa84a48b3266

Study 1

In Study 1, we hypothesised that in the “high discrimination” (vs. low discrimination) condition, participants would report higher levels of both stigma-based (H1) and opinion-based (H2) group identification. We further hypothesised that these differences would be mediated by meta-conspiracy beliefs (H1b, H2b).

Participants

The experiment was disseminated using a sponsored Facebook ad that read as follows (translated from French): “Have you ever been told that you were a “conspiracy theorist” or that you were defending a “conspiracy theory”? This short survey enables you to give your opinion regarding these expressions, and their use in society.” The ad targeted Belgian residents, and the experimental stimuli referred to the ingroup (i.e., the Belgian population). By clicking on the ad, participants were directed to our online questionnaire. They were given information about the purpose of the study (i.e., academic research), the anonymity of their responses, and were told that by continuing, they were giving their consent to participate

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Five hundred and fourteen participants completed the online experiment, leaving 396 once we excluded those who failed the attention or seriousness checks, were under 18 years old, or took more than three median absolute deviations (MAD) above the median completion time to complete the study (Leys et al., 2012). Among the remaining participants, 160 indicated they had been called a “conspiracy theorist” or had been told that they were advocating “conspiracy theories” (68 females, 4 non-binary, $M_{age} = 47.1$ $SD = 11.1$).

In the preregistration, we aimed for a sample of 207 conspiracist participants, allocated across the three conditions. The actual sample size ($n = 160$) was lower. Given a medium effect of $d = 0.41$ (Funder & Ozer, 2019), the achieved power for an independent means comparison between the “high” and “low” discrimination conditions among participants labelled as “conspiracy theorists” ($n = 98$) was .51.

Materials and procedure

The questionnaire started with sociodemographic questions: Gender (Male/Female/Other), age, occupation, political orientation, level of education, and the single item conspiracy beliefs scale (SICBS, Lantian et al., 2016). Participants were then randomly allocated to one of the three experimental conditions. On the next page, participants were asked the following question (main inclusion criterion): “In a discussion (for example, on social media), have you ever been told that you were defending a “conspiracy theory” or that you were a “conspiracy theorist”?” (Y/N).

On the following page group-based discrimination was manipulated. Participants first read a short text introducing the notion of conspiracy theorising, which was directly adopted from the introductory paragraph of the Single Item Conspiracy Beliefs Scale (Lantian et al., 2016): “Various important political or social events (such as the attacks of September 11, 2001, the death of Lady Diana, the assassination of JFK) are discussed. It is suggested that the “official version” of these events is an attempt to conceal the truth from the general public. In

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general, alternatives to the “official versions” are often referred to as “conspiracy theories” in the media.”

Participants then read a short text providing bogus data from a representative sample of the Belgian population—an approach commonly used to experimentally manipulate perceptions of discrimination (e.g., Hersby et al., 2011; Jetten et al., 2001; Schmitt et al., 2003). The short passage emphasised that ideas labelled as “conspiracy theories” were either rarely the basis of discrimination, or that these ideas were highly discriminated against in society, depending on the experimental condition (translated from French; text from the “low discrimination” condition is between square brackets):

“In our research centre, we study how the public perceives ideas labelled as “conspiracy theories”. In 2019, 63,6% [86,3%] of a representative sample of the Belgian population (1532 participants) either agreed or strongly agreed [disagreed or strongly disagreed] with the statement: “It is acceptable to restrict the freedom of speech of people spreading conspiracy theories. [...] Hence, it appears that nowadays, ideas labelled as “conspiracy theories” are highly discriminated [less and less discriminated] against.”

After reading the text, participants reported their agreement with this information on a scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). To increase participants’ cognitive elaboration of the text, they were asked to provide an explanation for this state of affairs in an open-ended question: “We are looking for an explanation for this phenomenon and we are interested in your point of view. [...] how would you explain the discrimination of people who defend ideas that are labelled “conspiracy theories” [the fact that conspiracy theories are less and less discriminated against]?”.

In the control condition, participants only read the introductory paragraph, without being presented with the manipulation or open-ended question. The control condition was

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introduced to account for the potential influence of our discrimination manipulation on increasing perceptions of discrimination against CTs.¹ Participants then completed the following scales (Cronbach's alphas ranged from .80 to .89):

Perceived discrimination of “conspiracy theorists” was measured using four items (adapted from Jetten et al., 2001).² Participants were asked “To what extent do you believe that these people [i.e., conspiracy theorists]...” (a) “are negatively perceived in society?”, (b) “may be despised because of this conviction?”, (c) “are exposed to discrimination because of this conviction?”, and (d) “have more problems in their daily life than people who trust authorities?” (1 = not at all; 5 = neutral; 9 = extremely). We used this measure as both a manipulation check and independent variable for correlational analyses.

Stigma-based group identification. This scale measured identification with people pejoratively labelled as “conspiracy theorists”: “How do you feel about this group of people [i.e., conspiracy theorists]?”. Participants reported their identification on an adapted four-item ingroup identification scale (“I identify with this group”; see Postmes et al., 2012; “I feel connected with this group”, “I feel close to this group”, and “I feel united with this group”; see Leach et al., 2008). Responses were recorded on a scale from 1 (“Not at all”) to 9 (“Completely”).

Opinion-based group identification. By contrast, this scale did not include the label “conspiracy theorists” and measured identification with people who distrust official narratives. The introductory paragraph for this scale was the following: “In general, a

¹ Note that the order of scales also differed for participants in the control condition: the identification scales were presented before the perceived discrimination scales to avoid affecting perceived discrimination ratings through their completion.

² These items were preceded by an open-ended question on the common features of individuals labelled as “conspiracy theorists” (responses are intended to be analysed in a separate project).

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significant number of people in society believe that the official version of events given by the authorities and relayed by the media very often hides the truth. Please report your level of agreement with the following sentences.” These items were identical to those used to measure stigma-based identification.

Belief in the meta conspiracy theory was measured with a four-item scale (e.g., “The label “conspiracy theory” was created to discredit opinions that bother powerholders”; Nera et al., 2020). Participants answered on a 5-point scale ranging from “Certainly not true” to “Certainly true”.

Results

Manipulation check

To compare the three conditions, we carried out ANOVAs with Tukey HSD post-hoc mean comparisons. The difference between the “high” ($n = 43$) and “low” discrimination ($n = 55$) conditions, although in the expected direction, did not reach statistical significance, $t(157) = 1.94, p = .13$ ($M_{High\ discrimination} = 6.79, SE = .22$; $M_{Low\ discrimination} = 6.22, SE = .19, d = 0.45$). No significant differences were found between the “high discrimination” and “control” conditions ($n = 62$) either, $t(157) = 0.92, p = .49, (M_{Control} = 6.53, SE = .21, d = 0.19)^3$.

Note that “conspiracy theorists” reported significantly higher levels of perceived discrimination against CTs than non-conspiracy theorists (i.e., participants excluded from the analyses), $t(245) = -5.60, p < .001$ ($M_{non-conspiracy\ theorists} = 5.44, SE = .12$; $M_{conspiracy\ theorists} = 6.47, SE = .13, d = 0.73$).

³ When considering all the participants who took part in the study, participants in the “high discrimination” condition ($n = 102$) reported significantly higher perceived discrimination than those in the “low discrimination” condition ($n = 145$), $t(393) = 2.95, p = .009$ ($M_{High\ discrimination} = 6.20, SE = 0.15$; $M_{Low\ discrimination} = 5.61, SE = 0.13, d = 0.41$). By contrast, the difference between the “high discrimination” and “control” condition ($n = 149$) was not significant, $t(393) = 0.94, p = .62$ ($M_{Control} = 6.01, SE = 0.13, d = 0.13$).

*Confirmatory analyses***Table 1***Descriptives and correlations (Study 1)*

	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4	5
1. Perceived discrimination of CTs	6.49 (1.45)	—				
2. meta-conspiracy beliefs	3.72 (0.89)	.33**	—			
3. Stigma-based identification	5.57 (2.16)	.35**	.54**	—		
4. Opinion-based identification	6.10 (2.06)	.31**	.50**	.61**	—	
5. SICBS	6.29 (2.15)	.26**	.43**	.50**	.52**	—

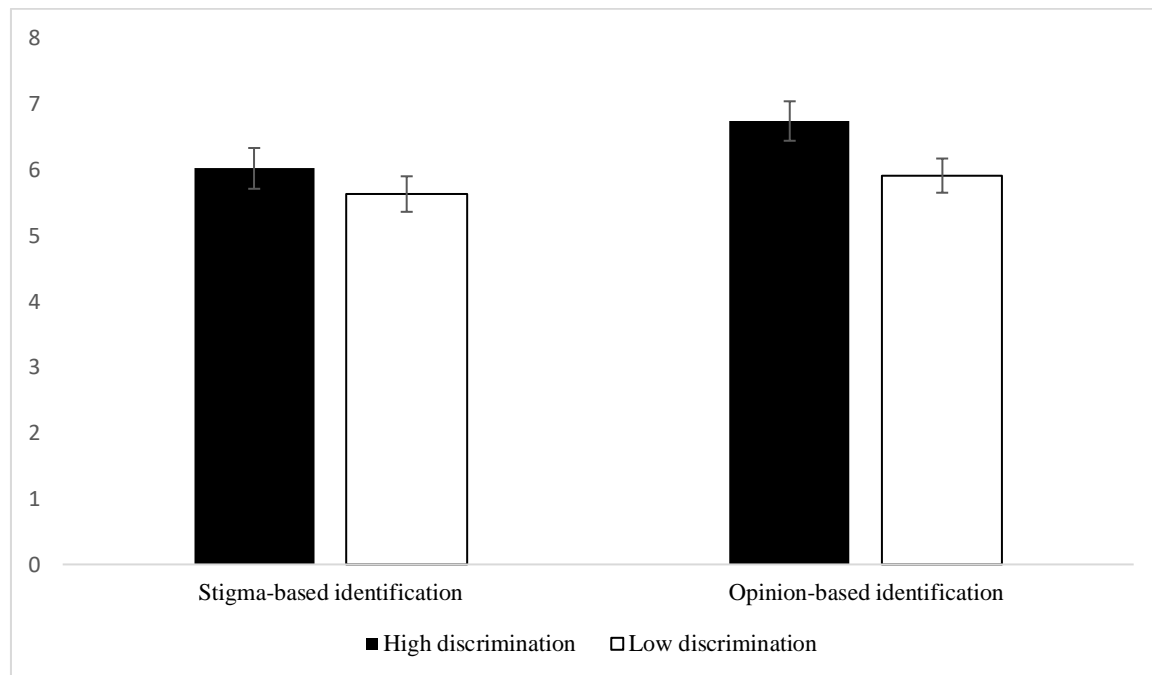
* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$. CT = Conspiracy Theory; SICBS = Single Item Conspiracy Beliefs Scale (Lantian et al., 2016). $N = 160$.

Descriptives and correlations between variables are displayed in Table 1. In the pre-registration, the control condition was meant to be compared with the experimental conditions if both experimental conditions induced a significantly stronger sense of discrimination compared to the control. Since this was not the case, the control condition was excluded from the confirmatory analyses. An ANCOVA controlling for gender (binary-coded) and age (which were the pre-registered covariates), with experimental condition as the independent variable showed that there was no significant difference between the high and low discrimination conditions in stigma-based group identification, $F(1,94) = 0.92, p = .34$, $partial \eta^2 = 0.01$ ($M_{high \text{ discrimination}} = 6.02, SE = 0.31$; $M_{low \text{ discrimination}} = 5.63, SE = 0.27$, see Figure 2). In contrast, we observed the expected difference for opinion-based identification, $F(1,94) = 4.43, p = .038, partial \eta^2 = 0.045$ ($M_{high \text{ discrimination}} = 6.74, SE = 0.30$; $M_{low \text{ discrimination}} = 5.91, SE = 0.26$, see Figure 2), corroborating H2. However, contrary to H2b, there was no difference between conditions regarding the hypothesised mediator: meta-conspiracy beliefs, $F(1,94) = 0.05, p = .83, partial \eta^2 = 0.00$ ($M_{high \text{ discrimination}} = 3.85, SE = 0.11$; $M_{low \text{ discrimination}} = 3.88, SE = 0.10$).

Figure 2

Mean comparisons between the high and low discrimination conditions, for stigma-based and opinion-based identification (Study 1)

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Note. Error bars are standard errors.

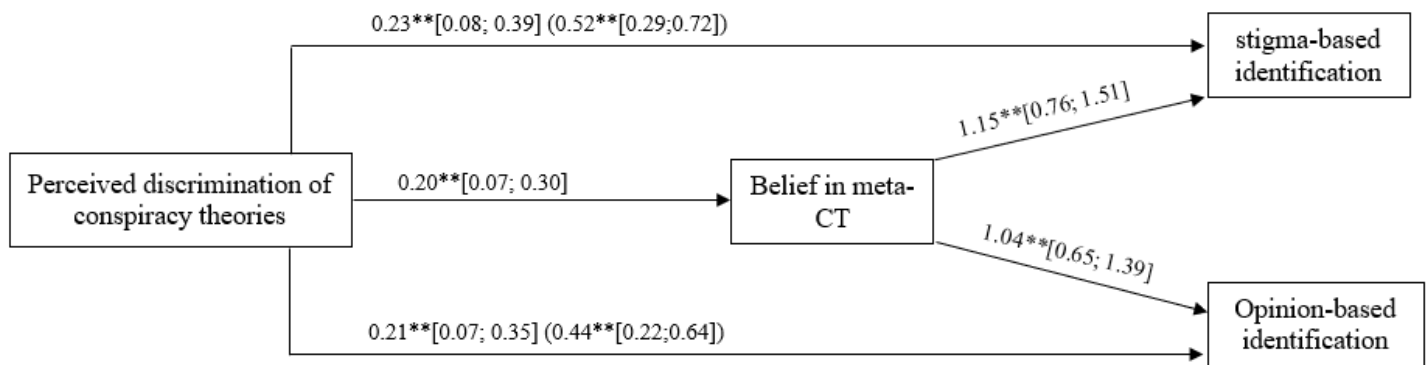
Exploratory analyses

We then examined if the data was compatible with our mediation model, by testing our hypotheses using a cross-sectional mediation model including all participants who were called “conspiracy theorists” (i.e., the three conditions, $n = 160$) using the Lavaan package in *R* (Rosseel, 2019). The total effect between perceived discrimination and stigma-based identification was significant, $B = 0.52$, 95% CI[0.29; 0.72], $z = 4.64$, $p < .001$ (see Figure 3). This relationship was mediated by meta-conspiracy beliefs, *indirect relationship* = 0.23 (44.9% of the total effect), 95% CI [0.08, 0.39], $z = 2.96$, $p = .003$. The total effect for opinion-based identification was also significant, $B = 0.44$, 95% CI [0.22; 0.64], $z = 4.16$, $p < .001$, and was partially mediated by meta-conspiracy beliefs, *indirect relationship* = 0.21 (47.2% of the total effect), 95% CI[0.07; 0.35], $z = 2.85$, $p = .004$.

Figure 3

Mediation analysis (Study 1)

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* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$. Unstandardised coefficients. Between square brackets are confidence intervals. Between round brackets are total effects.

Discussion

The manipulation of perceived discrimination of CT believers did not enhance stigma-based group identification (i.e., identification with “conspiracy theorists”). However, we observed the expected outcome for opinion-based group identification. Furthermore, the experimental manipulation did not impact the hypothesised mediator, namely, participants’ meta-conspiracy beliefs. However, Study 1 provided correlational support for our model. Even though cross-sectional mediation analyses do not allow us to infer causation, these results show that the data is somewhat compatible with our model.

Study 2

Study 2 was intended as a direct replication of Study 1, with some adjustments. Given that enhanced intergroup differentiation has been found to be a consequence of perceived discrimination (Branscombe et al., 1999; Jetten et al., 2001), we tested the same hypotheses as Study 1, but additionally examined whether perceived discrimination predicts intergroup differentiation (H3). To capture this, we measured endorsement of the belief that conspiracy theorists are perceived as smarter than the general population.

Furthermore, we aimed to address the main limitations of Study 1. First and foremost, we sought to achieve greater statistical power. To achieve this, we removed the control condition and used a broader inclusion criterion. Indeed, while some participants might never

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have been called a “conspiracy theorist”, it is possible that this is because they are afraid of publicly discussing controversial ideas (Lantian et al., 2018). Hence, in Study 2, we also included a sub-sample of individuals who had never been called “conspiracy theorists” but suspected they might be labelled as such if they discussed some of their ideas openly.

Finally, a potential weakness of Study 1 was a mismatch between the nationality of the sample (i.e., the majority of participants unexpectedly turned out to be French) and the nationality referred to in the experimental stimuli (i.e., a representative sample of the Belgian population). This mismatch may have potentially undermined the strength of the manipulation because of its reduced relevance to the national ingroup. Hence, in Study 2, we targeted both Belgian and French participants, adapting the experimental stimuli accordingly.

Methods

Participants

As in Study 1, the experiment was disseminated using a sponsored Facebook ad (the text was the same as the one used in Study 1). Six hundred and sixty-nine participants completed the online experiment, out of which 529 remained (191 females, 4 “other”, $M_{age} = 52.2$, $SD_{age} = 15.2$) after excluding participants who failed to correctly answer the attention or seriousness checks, had already participated in Study 1, were under the age of 18, or took more than 3 MAD above the median completion time to finish the study. The average political orientation was 3.84 ($SD = 2.07$) on a scale ranging from 1 (far left) to 9 (far right). Among these participants, 364 had either experienced being called a “conspiracy theorist” ($n = 219$) or reported that if they shared their opinion on some topics, they could be labelled as such ($n = 145$). This included slightly fewer participants than the planned sample size ($n = 382$), enabling us to detect a minimum mean difference of $d = 0.29$ with a power of .80 (two-tailed).

Procedure and materials

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The procedure was identical to Study 1, with small adjustments made to the experimental stimuli. Participants were exposed to bogus data from a representative sample of the French population and were told that similar data were found in the Belgian population. In the “low discrimination” condition, the sentence “it appears that conspiracy theories are less and less discriminated” was replaced by “it seems that nowadays, individuals who believe in [CTs] are not discriminated”. Moreover, if participants answered “No” to the inclusion question, they were subsequently asked if they could be called “conspiracy theorists” if they shared their ideas on some topics (“Do you think that if you shared your opinions on some topics, people could call you a “conspiracy theorist” or tell you that you are defending a “conspiracy theory”?” Y/N).

In addition to the measures used in Study 1, the questionnaire included a measure of intergroup differentiation. This variable captures the belief that “conspiracy theorists” are smarter than people who believe in official narratives (“In general, people who are being called “conspiracy theorists”... “are more rational than people who trust authorities”; “are less intelligent than people who trust authorities” [reverse coded]; “are more realistic than people who trust authorities”; “have better critical thinking than people who trust authorities”)⁴. Participants answered on a scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 9 (completely agree). For this study, Cronbach’s alphas ranged from .86 to .89.

Results

Manipulation check

As expected, participants in the “high discrimination” condition reported significantly higher levels of perceived discrimination against “conspiracy theorists” than in the “low

⁴ Note that the pre-registered study included an additional mediator (fear of experiencing opinion-based discrimination in the future) that we removed for brevity (see supplements for results regarding this variable).

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discrimination condition”, $t(362) = 2.29, p = .023$ ($M_{High\ discrimination} = 5.88, SE = 0.13; M_{Low\ discrimination} = 5.49, SE = 0.11, d = 0.24$).

As in Study 1, “conspiracy theorist” participants reported a significantly higher belief in the notion that CTs are discriminated against than other participants, $t(527) = 8.43, p < .001$ ($M_{Conspiracy\ theorists} = 5.68, SE = 0.14; M_{non-conspiracy\ theorists} = 4.33, SE = 0.09, d = 0.79$).

Confirmatory analyses

Table 2

Descriptives and correlations (Study 2)

	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Perceived discrimination of CTs	5.68 (1.65)	—					
2. Meta-conspiracy beliefs	3.50 (0.94)	.29**	—				
3. Stigma-based identification	5.14 (2.16)	.34**	.59**	—			
4. Opinion-based identification	5.74 (1.90)	.30**	.59**	.73**	—		
5. Intergroup differentiation	5.98 (1.80)	.24**	.68**	.71**	.61**	—	
6. SICBS	5.32 (2.40)	.20**	.46**	.49**	.51**	.49**	—

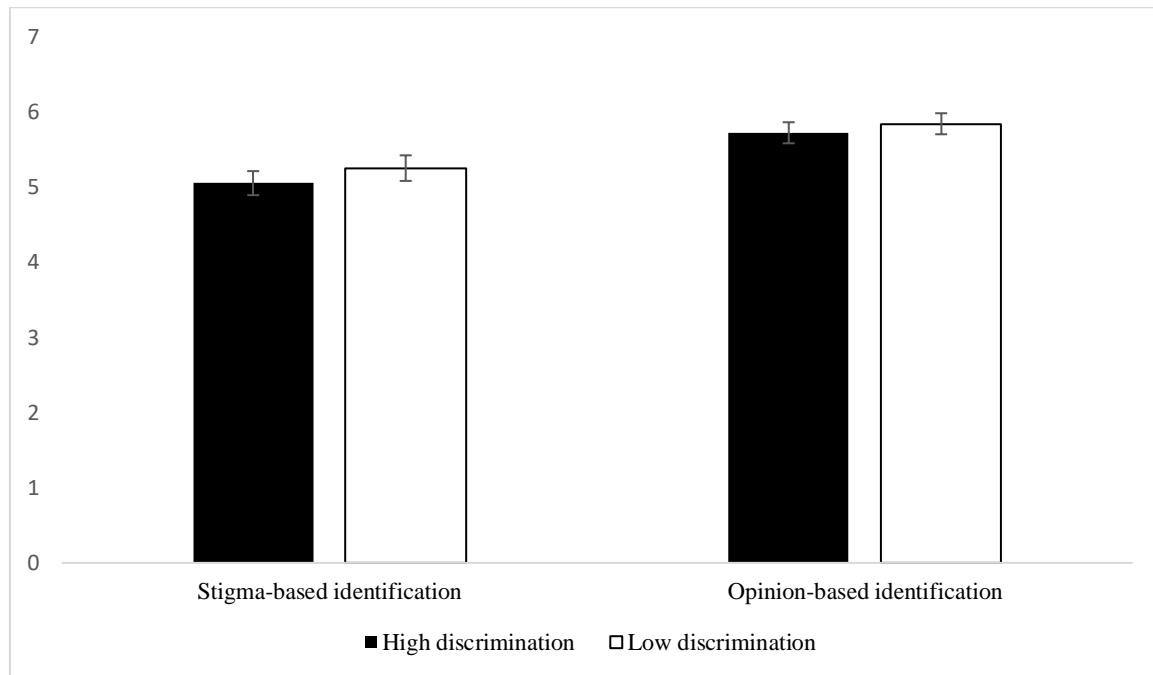
* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$. SICBS stands for Single Item Conspiracy Beliefs Scale (Lantian et al., 2016). $N = 364$.

Descriptives and correlations between main variables are displayed in Table 2. As preregistered, we conducted ANCOVAs controlling for age and gender to test our hypotheses. Contrary to our expectations, conditions did not differentially impact participants’ level of stigma-based identification, $F(1,360) = 0.78, p = .38, partial\ \eta^2 = .002$ ($M_{High\ discrimination} = 5.05, SE = 0.16; M_{Low\ discrimination} = 5.25, SE = 0.16$, see Figure 4), opinion-based identification, $F(1,360) = 0.35, p = .55, partial\ \eta^2 = .001$ ($M_{High\ discrimination} = 5.72, SE = 0.14; M_{Low\ discrimination} = 5.84, SE = 0.14$, see Figure 4), or intergroup differentiation, $F(1,360) = 0.76, p = .38, partial\ \eta^2 = .002$ ($M_{High\ discrimination} = 5.93, SE = 0.13; M_{Low\ discrimination} = 6.09, SE = 0.13$). Finally, meta-conspiracy beliefs did not differ between conditions either, $F(1,360) = 1.07, p = .30, partial\ \eta^2 = .003$ ($M_{High\ discrimination} = 3.45, SE = 0.07; M_{Low\ discrimination} = 3.55, SE = 0.07$).

Figure 4

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Mean comparisons between the high and low discrimination conditions, for stigma-based and opinion-based identification (Study 2)



Note. Error bars are standard errors.

In line with the pre-registration, we carried out a cross-sectional mediation analysis. Consistent with our proposed model, we found a significant total effect between perceived discrimination of conspiracy theorists and stigma-based identification, $B = 0.47$, 95% CI[0.34; 0.60], $z = 7.11$, $p < .001$ (see Figure 5). This relationship was mediated by meta-conspiracy beliefs, *indirect relationship* = 0.22 (47.3% of the total effect), 95% CI[0.15, 0.30], $z = 5.47$, $p < .001$. We also found a total effect between perceived discrimination and opinion-based identification, $B = 0.37$, 95%CI [0.26, 0.49], $z = 6.10$, $p < .001$, which was also mediated by meta conspiracy beliefs, *indirect relationship* = 0.22 (55.3% of the total effect), 95% CI[0.14, 0.28], $z = 5.69$, $p < .001$.

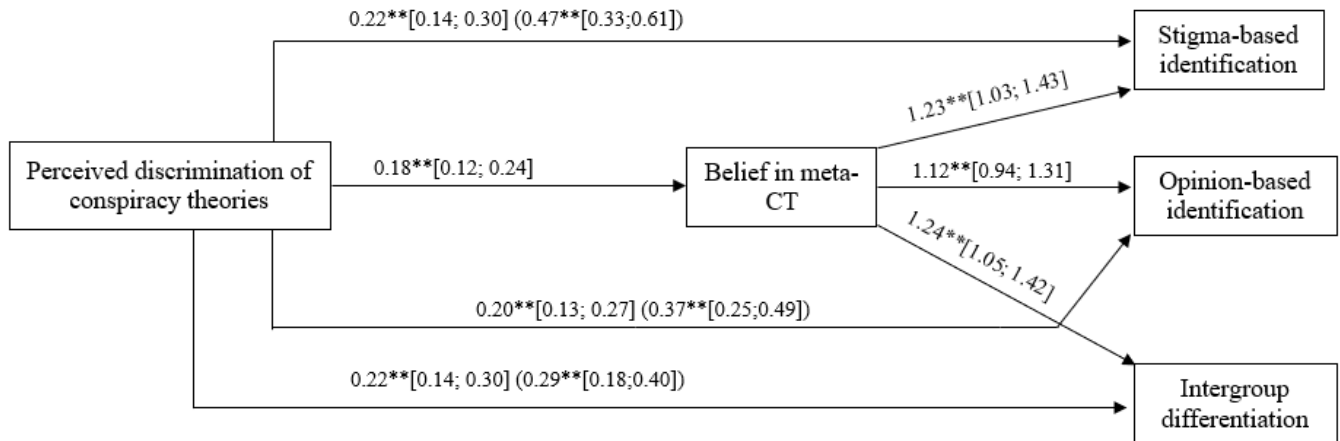
Finally, there was a significant total effect between perceived discrimination and positive intergroup differentiation, $B = 0.29$, 95% CI[0.18, 0.40], $z = 5.02$, $p < .001$, and this

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was mediated by meta-conspiracy beliefs, *indirect relationship* = 0.22 (77.3% of the total effect), 95% CI[0.15, 0.30], $z = 5.96$, $p < .001$.

Figure 5

Mediation analysis (Study 2)



* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$. Controlling for age, gender (binary-coded), and experimental condition.

Discussion

In Study 2, despite higher statistical power and further correlational support for our model, the experimental manipulation of discrimination of CT believers by the general public did not enhance group identification—nor meta-conspiracy beliefs. Two possibilities might account for the failure of our manipulation. First, as argued in the introduction, it is possible that the causal relationship between perceived discrimination of CT believers and group identification might depend on the power held by the group perceived as discriminating against CT believers. As such, a manipulation of discrimination by the general public might have little impact on CT believers' group identification, and we might benefit from distinguishing between different sources of discrimination—rather than only examining general perceptions of discrimination.

Second, the absence of experimental corroboration might be explained by the person-by-situation interactionist framework (e.g., Higgins, 1990; Lewin, 1935), which states that

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manipulations yield the strongest results among those who are chronically low in the construct being manipulated. Indeed, overall, “conspiracy theorists” reported relatively strong baseline levels of group identification and perceived discrimination compared to other participants (who were not included in the analyses). These issues are addressed in Study 3.

Study 3

In the final study, we pursued two goals. First, to examine the role of power, we experimentally manipulated two sources of discrimination, namely, the general public’s willingness to censor CTs, as well as censorship of CTs by a powerful group, namely, politicians.

Second, we sought to test our model among participants who would *potentially* identify as “conspiracy theorists”, but whose identification and sense of discrimination would be weaker to begin with. We therefore recruited participants from the general public (i.e., not “conspiracy theorists”), and addressed them as potential “conspiracy theorists” in relation to their own suspicions towards powerholders. Indeed, there are instances of misuses of the label “conspiracy theory” to discredit legitimate questions (e.g., the accidental lab leak theory of the origin of COVID-19, which has been labelled as a conspiracy theory while it does not correspond to the definition of a conspiracy theory, Calisher et al., 2020; Thacker, 2021). Hence, it is possible to unfairly label someone as a “conspiracy theorist”—leaving room for identification with other people labelled as such. Moreover, this is in line with how actual CT believers perceive the label “conspiracy theorist” and “conspiracy theory”: They believe they raise legitimate questions and that these are discarded as “conspiracy theories” (Harambam & Aupers, 2016; Nera et al., 2020).

Considering the small effects observed in our previous studies when manipulating perceived discrimination with fake poll data, we decided to use a scenario-based

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manipulation, in which both the general population and politicians take position in favour, or against the censorship of CTs.

First, we sought to test the main effects of perceived discrimination against CTs by the general population on the one hand, and of politicians' censorship of CTs on the other. Therefore, we expected that participants in the "population supports censorship" conditions would report stronger identification with "conspiracy theorists" than participants in the "population does not support the censorship" conditions (H1). Similarly, we expected that participants in the "politicians censor CTs" conditions would report stronger identification than participants in the "politicians do not censor CTs" conditions (H2⁵).

Second, as in the previous studies, we expected these effects to be mediated by meta-conspiracy beliefs (H1b-2b). Finally, we explored the interaction effect between perceived censorship of CTs by politicians and the perceived support from the general population for this censorship (H3). Specifically, we tested whether the effect of censorship by politicians on group identification would be stronger when the population is against the censorship, because the censorship may be perceived as more illegitimate than in the condition where it is supported by the population. Indeed, perceived illegitimacy of discrimination plays an important role in rejection-identification dynamic (Branscombe et al., 1999).

Methods

Design

The study followed a 2 (support for the censorship of CTs in the population vs. no support) × 2 (censorship of CTs by powerholders vs. no censorship) between-subjects design.

⁵ Note that the pre-registration included an additional hypothesis comparing the two most extreme forms of discrimination (censorship by politicians + the public supports the censorship) and non-discrimination conditions (no censorship by the politicians + the public is against the censorship). While corroborated, this hypothesis was removed for the sake of brevity, because it had less theoretical relevance than the main effects.

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Participants

Participants were recruited using a sponsored Facebook ad proposing to take part in a study as part of a PhD research—with no further precision. One thousand one hundred and seventeen participants were recruited through snowball sampling using both a sponsored Facebook ad. After excluding those who did not answer the attention or seriousness checks correctly, did not respond to the inclusion criteria, were under 18 years old, or took more than three MAD above the median completion time to complete the study, 747 participants remained (517 women, 16 non-binary, $M_{age} = 41.3$, $SD = 1.88$). The average political orientation was 3.7 ($SD = 1.88$, 1 = far left, 9 = far right). This is slightly below the preregistered sample size ($n = 800$). Accounting for the covariate (age), the achieved sample size enabled us to detect a main effect of $d = 0.24$ with a power of .90.

As expected, participants reported significantly less perceived “conspiracy theorist” group identification than in Study 1, $t(219) = 11.71$, $p < .001$ ($M_{Study\ 1} = 5.57$, $SD = 2.16$, Cohen’s $d = 1.05$), and Study 2, $t(663) = 12.96$ ($M_{Study\ 2} = 5.14$, $SD = 2.16$; $M_{Study\ 3} = 3.40$, $SD = 1.97$, Cohen’s $d = 0.84$). They reported less perceived discrimination than participants in Study 1, $t(247) = 7.16$, $p < .001$, ($M_{Study\ 1} = 6.49$, $SD = 1.45$, Cohen’s $d = 0.60$), but not than participants from Study 2, $t(696) = 1.06$, $p = .29$ ($M_{Study\ 2} = 5.68$, $SD = 1.65$; $M_{Study\ 3} = 5.57$, $SD = 1.59$, Cohen’s $d = 0.06$).

Materials and Procedure

The questionnaire started with the same sociodemographic information as Studies 1 and 2. On the next page, participants were asked to rate their agreement with five items measuring their endorsement of commonplace doubts about powerholders (e.g., “Politicians sometimes lie to protect their interests”; “Communication companies are not transparent regarding the use of their clients’ personal data”) on a scale ranging from 1 (Completely disagree) to 5 (Completely agree). They then answered the following question “Did you

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answer “moderately agree” or “completely agree” to one of these statements?” (Y/N), which was the first inclusion criterion.

On the following page, participants read a short text telling them that sometimes, legitimate doubts about powerholders are disqualified as “conspiracy theories”. They were told that if they agreed with any of the items on the previous page (which was the case for most participants), they could be labelled “conspiracy theorists”.

On the next page, participants were asked to imagine a fictitious situation:

“Imagine that the government of your country asks the population the following question: “Should conspiracy theories be censored?” The notion of “conspiracy theory” is not defined and left to the interpretation of the population. Note that this is a consultative referendum, and that the powerholders have no obligation to follow the opinion of the population.”

To further involve participants in the scenario, they were told the following: “You enter the voting booth to make your opinion count. Do you believe that conspiracy theories should be censored?” (Y/N). This was also the second inclusion criterion: Participants who answered that CTs should be censored ($n = 151$) were removed from the analyses, because voting “yes” to the censorship of CTs put these participants in a rather different situation from other participants. Indeed, for these participants, the censorship of CTs would appear as the desired outcome of the scenario, as opposed to the large majority of participants who voted against the censorship⁶.

The experimental manipulation was introduced on the following page. Two dichotomous independent variables were manipulated: Participants were randomly allocated to one of the political decision conditions (censorship of CTs vs. non-censorship) and then

⁶ Note that this inclusion criterion was not pre-registered. However, we believe that the reasons for removing these participants from the sample are valid.

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one of the referendum results conditions (75% in favour of the censorship vs. 75% against).

Participants read the following text, which also included an emphasis on the (in)congruence between the political decision and the result of the referendum:

“The following day, you hear the results: 75% of the population is in favour [against] the censorship of CTs. In accordance with the population [However, after discussion], politicians have decided that [to go against the population’s opinion. Thus,] conspiracy theories will [not] be censored, and that people propagating them will be sued [not be bothered].”

After the experimental manipulation, participants were asked to answer the rest of the questions as if they had just learned about the political decision. The scales were the same as in Studies 1 and 2 and were presented in the following order: perceived discrimination of conspiracy theorists (the scale included two manipulation checks specific to the general public and politicians: “[Do you believe that “conspiracy theorists”...] “are discriminated by the general public”; “are discriminated by powerholders”), identification with conspiracy theorists, and meta-conspiracy beliefs. Cronbach’s alphas ranged from .80 to .86. For exploratory purposes, we included the item “I am proud to be a conspiracy theorist” (1 = not at all, 5 = Totally). Perceived discrimination of conspiracy theorists and identification with conspiracy theorists were measured on a 9-point scale (with 1 = not at all, to 9 = completely), whereas meta-conspiracy beliefs and conspiracist pride were measured with a 5-point scale (1 = certainly not true to 5 = certainly true, and 1 = not at all, to 5 = very much, respectively).

Results

Manipulation checks

As expected, the manipulation of public support for the censorship of CTs significantly increased perceived discrimination of conspiracy theorists by the general public, $t(738.78) = -2.78, p = .005$ ($M_{No\ public\ support\ censorship} = 5.00, SE = 0.11, M_{Public\ support\ for\ censorship} =$

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5.41, $SE = 0.10$, $d = 0.20$). The manipulation of political censorship also yielded the expected impact on perceived discrimination of conspiracy theorists by politicians, $t(744.91) = -6.24$, $p < .001$ ($M_{No\ political\ censorship} = 5.22$, $SE = 0.11$, $M_{Political\ censorship} = 6.30$, $SE = 0.12$, $d = 0.46$).

Confirmatory analyses

Table 3

Descriptives and correlations (Study 3)

	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4
1. Perceived discrimination of CTs	5.57 (1.59)	—			
2. meta-conspiracy beliefs	2.69 (0.98)	.46**	—		
3. Stigma-based identification	3.40 (1.97)	.36**	.66**	—	
4. SICBS	4.06 (2.19)	.22**	.50**	.46**	—

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$. CT = Conspiracy Theory; SICBS = Single Item Conspiracy Beliefs Scale

(Lantian et al., 2016). $N = 747$.

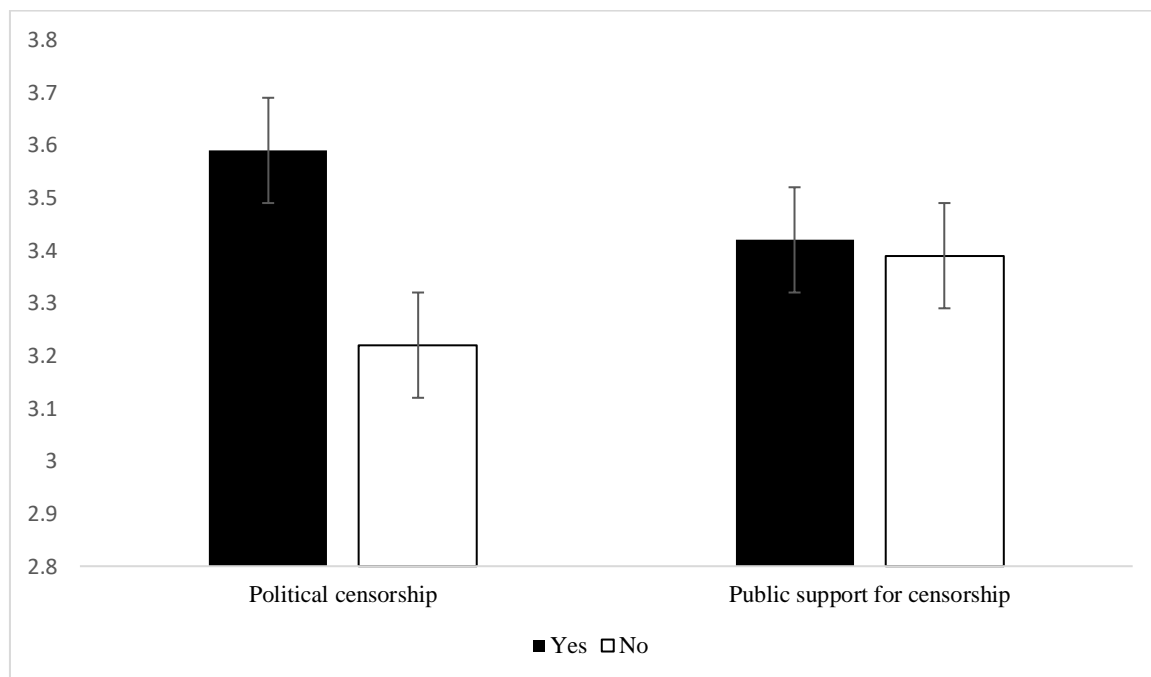
Descriptives and correlations are displayed in Table 3. Contrary to H1, we found no main effect of public support for the censorship of CTs on identification with conspiracy theorists, $F(1,742)^7 = 0.07$, $p = .78$, $partial\ \eta^2 = .00$ (see Figure 6). This independent variable did not impact meta-conspiracy beliefs either, $F(1,743) = 0.09$, $p = .76$, $partial\ \eta^2 = .00$.

In contrast, and congruent with H2, the manipulation of politicians' censorship of CTs significantly increased conspiracist identification, $F(1,742) = 6.72$, $p = .01$, $partial\ \eta^2 = .04$ ($M_{No\ political\ censorship} = 3.23$, $SE = 0.10$, $M_{Political\ censorship} = 3.59$, $SE = 0.10$, see Figure 6). This effect was mediated by meta-conspiracy beliefs, $indirect\ effect = 0.13$ (72.9% of the total effect), 95% CI[0.04, 0.22], $z = 2.97$, $p = .003$ (see Figure 7). Indeed, participants in the “political censorship” conditions reported significantly stronger meta-conspiracy beliefs than participants in the “no political censorship” condition, $F(1,744) = 8.32$, $p = .004$, $partial\ \eta^2 = 0.01$ ($M_{Low\ discrimination} = 2.59$, $SE = 0.05$, $M_{High\ discrimination} = 2.79$, $SE = 0.05$).

⁷ Age significantly correlated with conspiracist identification, $r = .19$, 95%CI [0.26, 0.12], $p < .001$. Therefore, in line with our pre-registration, we controlled for age in all subsequent analyses.

Figure 6

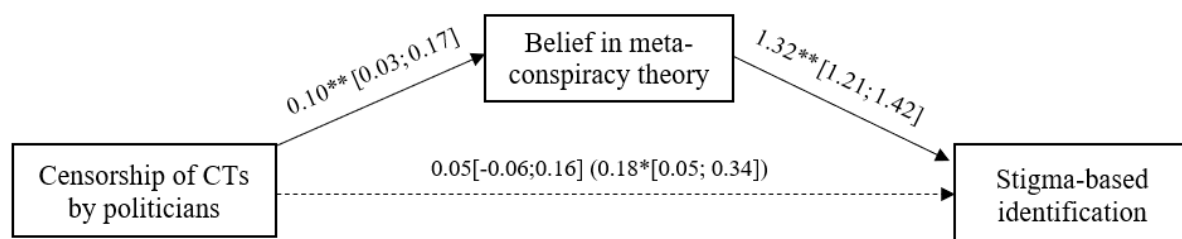
Adjusted marginal means for main effects (Study 3)



Note. On Y axis is stigma-based identification. Error bars are standard errors.

Figure 7

Mediation analysis (Study 3)



* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$. Controlling for age on all paths.

Finally, contrary to H3, we found no evidence for an interaction between political censorship of CTs and support for this censorship in the general population, $F(1,742) = 0.47$, $p = .49$, $partial \eta^2 = .001$.

Exploratory analyses

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Identification with conspiracy theorists significantly correlated with the statement “I am proud to be a conspiracy theorist”, $r = .57$, 95% CI [.53; .61], $p < .001$.

Discussion

In Study 3, congruent with Studies 1-2, an experimental manipulation of discrimination by the general public did not enhance stigma-based identification. In contrast, and supporting the role of power in this rejection-identification dynamic, a manipulation of discrimination by powerholders enhanced group identification through increased meta-conspiracy beliefs. Finally, this effect was not moderated by the general population’s support for censorship.

Internal meta-analysis

Perceived discrimination by the public was manipulated in all studies, and confirmatory analyses for this independent variable returned mostly non-significant results. To be able to interpret these results in terms of support for the null hypothesis, we conducted a random effect Bayesian meta-analysis using JASP (JASP team, 2020). Both stigma-based and label-based identification were included as DVs. The meta-analysis returned moderate support for the absence of an effect of the experimental manipulation of discrimination by the general public on group identification, $BF_{10} = 0.15$, suggesting that the data is 7.28 times more probable under the null than under the hypothesis of an effect. This corresponds to “some evidence” in favour of the null (Rouder, 2009). When considering the hypothesis of an increase of identification following the manipulation, the meta-analysis returned the same support for the null, $BF_{10} = 0.14$.

As for meta-conspiracy beliefs, the meta-analysis also returned moderate support for the null, $BF_{10} = 0.12$, meaning that the data is 8.5 times more probable under the null than under the directional hypothesis. When considering the directional hypothesis of an increase of meta-conspiracy beliefs following the manipulation, the meta-analysis returned strong

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support for the null, $BF_{10} = 0.07$, meaning that the data is 13.58 times more probable under the null.

General Discussion

Across three studies, we sought to test the causal relationship between perceived discrimination and group identification in the context of the “conspiracy theorist” identity, and hypothesised a specific mediating mechanism, namely, meta-conspiracy beliefs. In all studies, we found robust positive relationships between perceived pervasive discrimination of conspiracy theorists, meta-conspiracy beliefs, and “conspiracy theorist” group identification. Furthermore, in Studies 2-3 respectively, identification was strongly associated with positive intergroup differentiation (“Conspiracy theorists are smarter than the mainstream”) and pride to be a conspiracy theorist.

However, these are correlational findings that do not allow us to infer causation. In fact, experimental manipulations of perceived discrimination by the general public did not appear to enhance participants’ meta-conspiracy beliefs or identification with other “conspiracy theorists” (Studies 1-3). It was only when discrimination came from powerholders that it enhanced both group identification and meta-conspiracy beliefs (Study 3). Even though the effect size was small, this supports the second of the two empirical scenarios mentioned in the introduction, according to which the causal relationship between perceived discrimination of CT believers and identification may occur *under the condition that the source of discrimination is powerful*.

Hence, our results suggest that meta-conspiracy beliefs are not merely another route through which perceived discrimination may increase group identification—in addition to more generic social identity processes described in previous works (e.g., Branscombe et al., 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Rather, they suggest that perceived discrimination of CT believers may enhance identification *only to the extent that such discrimination fuels*

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individuals' meta-conspiracy beliefs. Moreover, meta-conspiracy beliefs were strengthened only when discrimination came from a powerful source (Study 3). Hence, the generic mechanism proposed by the rejection-identification model might not be sufficient to understand the particulars of how discrimination against CT believers might enhance “conspiracy theorist” identification. Notably, for this group, taking into account which outgroup discriminates against the ingroup—instead of only assessing perceptions of pervasive discrimination in society—seems necessary. More generally, future research could examine if the source of discrimination, or specific forms of discrimination, alter the way in which meta-conspiracy beliefs can be strengthened. Our results suggest that only in certain cases can discrimination lead to increased group identification.

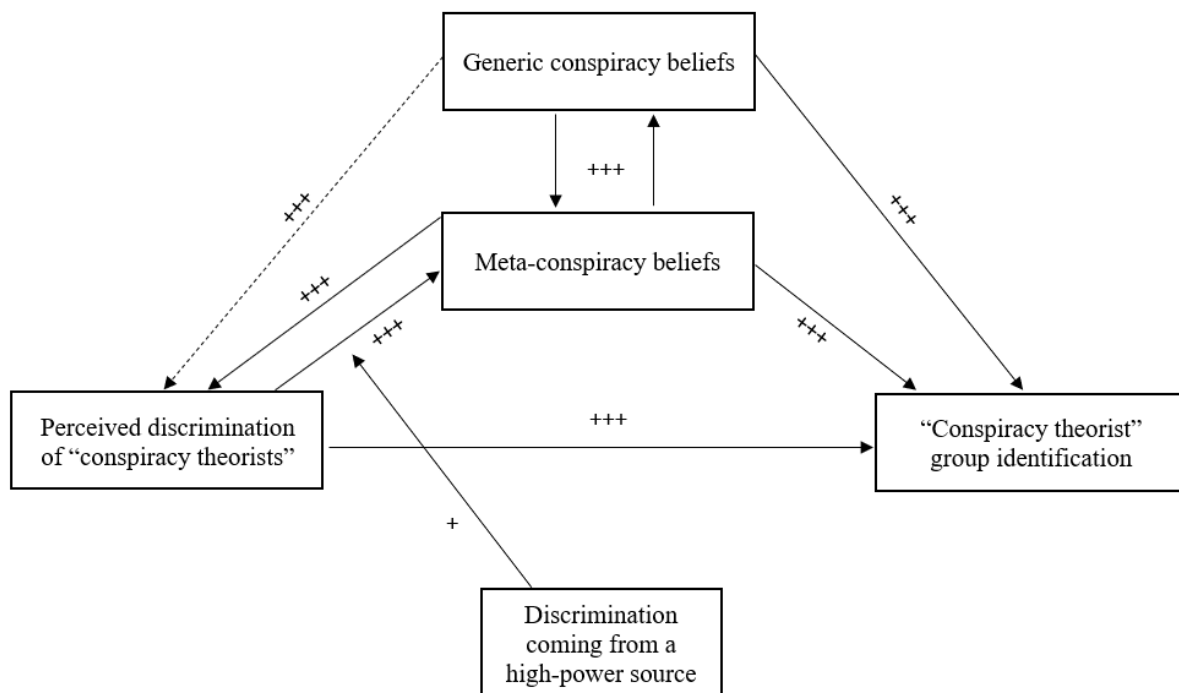
This specific impact of discrimination from powerholders on group identification, combined with the fact that CT believers were much more likely to believe that they are discriminated against and to identify as “conspiracy theorists”, invite us to consider alternative—but not exclusive—causal directions than the one postulated by the rejection-identification model. In our view, these findings suggest that the positive relationship between perceptions of discrimination against CT believers and “conspiracy theorist” identification might also be in part *caused* by meta-conspiracy beliefs and generic conspiracy beliefs—as these constructs are tightly related (Nera et al., 2020). Indeed, because they tend to endorse CTs pertaining to the weaponization of the label “conspiracy theory”, CT believers might be susceptible to believe that they are widely discriminated against (hence, an increased sense of perceived discrimination among CT believers), and to identify with people sharing the same beliefs and stigma (i.e., “conspiracy theorists”). In turn—and in line with the rejection-identification model—CT believers might view instances of discrimination coming from powerful groups as further confirmation of their meta-conspiracy beliefs, leading to a strengthening of their (meta-)conspiracy beliefs and, in turn, “conspiracy theorist”

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identification. Hence, it is plausible that meta-conspiracy beliefs can both strengthen, and be strengthened by, perceptions of discrimination. Such a model is represented in Figure 8.

Figure 8

Extended model of the causal relationships between perceived discrimination of conspiracy theory believers, (meta-)conspiracy beliefs, and “conspiracy theorist” identification.



Finally, the finding that discrimination coming from powerholders strengthens identification through the path of (meta-)conspiracy beliefs must be seen in the context in which these studies were conducted. While restrictions to freedom of speech can be legitimate in some instances (e.g., to prevent individuals from harming others, Mill, 1859; 2011), freedom of speech is a central tenet of democracy (e.g., Meiklejohn, 1948). Hence, the strengthening of the “conspiracy theorist” identification that we observed in Study 3 might in some contexts (e.g., democratic countries) also reflect legitimate concerns over what are perceived as undemocratic political decisions. This is less of a concern given the absence of an interaction effect with support from the public for the political decision to censor CTs.

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Indeed, according to this alternative explanation, participants should have been more concerned about the censorship of CTs in the condition where the population was against the censorship (as in such a case, the decision is straightforwardly undemocratic), which was not the case.

More generally, manipulating perceptions of discrimination is likely to elicit a number of unmeasured phenomena, such as feelings of anger, or a sense of injustice. Hence, even though we observed a relatively specific mediating role of meta-conspiracy beliefs, there might be other important mechanisms at play. These should be the focus of future research.

Limitations and future directions

First, in Studies 1-2, the manipulation check suggests that our experimental manipulation of perceived discrimination by the general public, while ecologically valid, did not affect participants' perception of discrimination. This might be because participants' a priori perceptions of discrimination against them were already high, preventing us to temporarily increase such perceptions even further through our experimental manipulation. We suggest that given the difficulties to experimentally manipulate perceptions of discrimination in this group, those interested in testing for causality might resort to cross-lagged longitudinal designs.

Second, while our results also suggest a reverse causal mechanism, such that CT beliefs may to some extent *cause* perceptions of discrimination, such a hypothesis needs to be substantiated by future experimental or longitudinal studies. To do so, one may first need to find ways to disentangle subjective perceptions of discrimination from the actual experience of discrimination against CT believers.

Third, while in our studies discrimination by the general public did not enhance “conspiracy theorist” identification, this may not always be the case. In this regard, we may note that we manipulated indirect discrimination by the general public (i.e., support for

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censorship), while our manipulation of discrimination by authorities involved direct discrimination (i.e., censorship). Thus, it is possible that the nature of the discrimination (e.g., direct or indirect) may have played a role in our (null) results. Hypothetically, if some form of discrimination by the general public is likely to influence the mediating mechanism in some way (i.e., meta-conspiracy beliefs), then these particular forms of discrimination by the general public may lead to increased group identification. One example could involve measuring meta-conspiracy beliefs capturing claims that public support for censorship is secretly paid for by nefarious groups. More generally, the rejection-identification model may be relevant to study situations in which discrimination against CT believers is susceptible to be interpreted as a conspiracy. Thus, once again, future research reflecting on the nature of the discrimination—in addition to the source of discrimination—is needed.

Fourth, support for the censorship of CTs may have been perceived as indicating a rejection of CTs by the general population. Therefore, we might have inadvertently manipulated this variable as well. Manipulations that do not risk inducing additional legitimate democratic concerns might therefore provide a useful avenue for future research.

Fifth, we did not reflect on the specific role of the label “conspiracy theorist” in group identification. In Studies 1 and 2, both stigma-based and opinion-based identification were positively correlated, which raises questions around the relevance of drawing a distinction between these two forms of “conspiracist” identification. McGarty et al. (2009) have argued that merely sharing ideas is not sufficient to develop a sense of group membership. In this regard, a potential hypothesis would be that the label “conspiracy theorist” might serve as a catalyst that turns a collection of individuals sharing a similar worldview into a stigma-based group.

Finally, in this research, we focused on “conspiracy theorists”. However, people who define themselves by their opposition to CTs might also develop specific group identities. For

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example, some groups may bind over the fact that they fight CTs and other forms of misinformation (e.g., skeptics, scientists, see Wood & Douglas, 2013). Investigating these group identities would enable us to acquire a more comprehensive picture of the group processes at stake when it comes to understanding the phenomenon of CTs at the identity level.

Conclusion

In sum, we have demonstrated the existence of robust relationships between perceived discrimination of conspiracy theorists, belief in (meta-)CTs, and identification with conspiracy theorists across three studies. Moreover, we showed that experimentally inducing a perception of discrimination against conspiracy theorists can strengthen participants' "conspiracy theorist" identification by strengthening their meta-conspiracy beliefs—providing the discrimination comes from powerholders. In contrast, experimental manipulations of discrimination by the general public did not enhance participants' meta-conspiracy beliefs nor their "conspiracy theorist" group identification.

These results should be taken into consideration when researchers and authorities reflect on attempts to mitigate the spread of CTs. Even though resentment against conspiracy theorists might be currently growing (notably because of how they negatively affect COVID-19 vaccination intentions, e.g., Bertin et al., 2020), one should be aware of the potential consequences of discriminating against CT believers—especially when it comes from authorities. However, it may be reassuring that discrimination of CT believers does not mechanically enhance "conspiracy theorist" identification. In our view, our results suggest that criticising CTs and the people who believe in them may not further fuel identification if such criticisms are not perceived as part of a conspiracy against CT believers.

More generally, this research provides the first quantitative evidence that the labels "conspiracy theories" and "conspiracy theorists" might be associated with specific group

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identities and intergroup processes. This self-referential group component to CTs represents a whole new field of investigation for future research. It encourages consideration of investigating classic intergroup processes associated with this identity, such as the influence of group norms, collective action, and stereotyping, among others.

Authors contribution

K.N. was in charge of conceptualisation, data curation, formal analyses, investigation, methodology, visualisation, writing of the original draft, addressing reviews and editing for successive versions of the manuscript. J.J. helped with conceptualisation, methodology, writing (editing) and provided supervision. M.B. helped with formal analyses (for the meta-analyses) and writing (review and editing). O.K. helped with formal analysis, writing (review and editing), and provided supervision.

Data availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available on the Open Science Framework at

https://osf.io/mxw4d/?view_only=33a9b1ed147341759d0afa84a48b3266

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