DO BELIEFS IN CONSPIRACY THEORIES SPREAD THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA AFFECT WORK PERFORMANCE? A SURVEY OF MEMBERS OF THE MILITARY FORCES

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Abstract: Conspiracy theories spread through social and other media often bringing easy explanations of events that cannot be easily explained. Beliefs in conspiracy theories may lead to simplified and radical viewpoints that can negatively influence one's behavior and actions. The paper analyzes the association between beliefs in popular conspiracy theories spread through social media and work performance using the results of an authors' test of conspiracy theories applied to a sample of 178 students of the Faculty of Military Leadership, University of Defence in Brno, Czech Republic. The students were selected as representatives of high-profile professions that should be trained to deal with potential disinformation and conspiracy theories. The assumption was that the students would be generally immune to the impact of conspiracy theories. The analysis did not confirm a hypothesis that individuals with top work performance are less prone to beliefs in conspiracy theories than individuals with solid/poor work performance. The findings confirm the necessity to systematically train people working in high-profile professions to work with available information and deal with potential disinformation and conspiracy theories. The findings are useful in the HR management practice of organizations that care about the professional qualities of their people and encourage further research on the origin, spread, and impact of conspiracy theories in the workplace.

Keywords: conspiracy theories, work performance, management, military forces, Czech Republic

1 Introduction

Conspiracy theories are known as meaningful explanations of difficult-to-understand events helping people to make sense of changes around them (Allington et al., 2021). Such events may be political, economic, social, technical, cultural, natural, or other, and their explanations are often associated with the belief that certain events result from a secret conspiracy by some powerful group of conspirators who hide something very important from the public and manipulate the public with some negative intent (Apatov and Grimes, 2019). This brings the belief that nothing happens by chance and that there are bad people who mean bad things to good people (Mourad et al., 2020).

Many people are not interested in conspiracy theories at all. Other people, on the other hand, have unlimited faith in conspiracy theories. And some people use conspiracy theories to their advantage (Bessi et al, 2015). In other words, what some perceive as complete nonsense, others perceive as a clear thing, and some can benefit from it 5. (Boulianne and Lee, 2022). Conspiracy theories often take on a life of their own. They spread quickly and are hard to disprove (Bram, 2021). They serve mainly both people who feel a lack of information about events explained by them, and people who desire to achieve uniqueness and exceptionality through them (Cinelli et al., 2022). However, some people share conspiracy theories just for fun, as they find them exciting (Clarke, 2002).

The most famous conspiracy theories, such as the flat Earth concept, the moon landing, the UFO existence, the JFK assassination, Princess Diana's death, the events of September 11, 2001, the COVID-19 pandemic, and many others, are widely spread as a cultural phenomenon (Coady, 2007). Similar conspiracy theories are very difficult to disprove, while their persistence may be associated with many negative social effects (Douglas et al., 2016). Some sound like complete nonsense, but some others are very believable and attract the attention of many people who find in them both an explanation and excitement (Douglas and Leite, 2017). These are mostly connected with events that people experience directly or indirectly in some way (Douglas et al., 2017). They usually contain signs of truth and reinforce the beliefs of the people who believe in them or spread them with other supporting evidence. In today's world of social media, it's easier than ever (Douglas and Sutton, 2018). Individuals obtaining information primarily or exclusively from social media appear to be more prone to conspiracy beliefs than other individuals obtaining information from various sources (Douglas et al., 2019).

When people feel uncertain due to some unpleasant events, they welcome clear explanations that bring them peace of mind (Douglas, 2021). When something scares people, they want to believe that it cannot be true, which makes them more vulnerable to various conspiracy theories (Dow, 2021). From a workplace perspective, beliefs in conspiracy theories about some unforeseeable and unprecedented events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic affecting millions of people worldwide, may also have serious work performance consequences (Enders and Smallpage, 219). Different viewpoints on the origin and solution of certain events, such as the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic and the introduction of restrictive measures, can lead to disagreements and disputes, which can negatively affect workplace communication and cooperation and so the work performance of both individuals and teams (Enders et al., 2020).

Dealing with the spread of conspiracy theories in the workplace is relevant both for stable high work performance as well as for positive external impacts (Enders et al., 2023). This seems to be particularly important in the case of people working in high-profile professions, such as civil servants or members of the police and military forces. They work with sensitive information, make critical decisions, and influence other people's opinions, behaviors, and actions. Therefore, they should be highly immune to the influence of conspiracy theories.

Following known empirical findings about conspiracy beliefs, social media, and work performance, the paper aims to analyze the association between beliefs in popular conspiracy theories spread through social media and work performance using a sample of students of the Faculty of Military Leadership, University of Defence in Brno, Czech Republic representing members of high-profile professions.

First, a literature review is provided on the origin of conspiracy theories, the spread of conspiracy theories through social media, the prevention of conspiracy theories, and the effect of conspiracy theories in the workplace. Second, the paper's methods are defined and the way of applying an authors' test of conspiracy theories to the sample of students of the Faculty of Military Leadership, University of Defence in Brno, Czech Republic is described. Third, the authors' results are analyzed. Fourth, the authors' findings are discussed. Finally, conclusions about the main findings and suggestions are made.

2 Literature Review

The issue of conspiracy theories attracts constant attention from the public and researchers alike as evidenced by the number of published scientific articles. Most of them deal with the essence of conspiracy theories, especially with their origin, spread, and impact on society. Conspiracy theories are traditionally interpreted as an undesirable phenomenon (Federico et al., 2018), associated with the origin and spread of misinformation, propaganda, and mistrust in existing public institutions and current scientific knowledge (Frenken and Imhoff, 2021). The producers and propagators of conspiracy theories are seen as individuals with an irrational tendency to continue to believe in their conspiracy theories (Garcia et al., 2020). On the other hand, there are opinions that this traditional interpretation of conspiracy theories should be revised and that conspiracy

theories should be seen on a case-by-case basis (Green and Douglas, 2018). Conspiracy theories are not always a product of irrational thinking (Green et al., 2023). They may be a product of both extremist as well as mainstream ideologies and their producers and propagators may be absolute amateurs as well as generally respected representatives of intellectual and public institutions (Green and Douglas, 2018). This indicates that essentially no conspiracy theory should be dismissed without considering the relevant evidence (Grodzicka, 2021). At the same time, it is evident that there are conspiracy theories that certainly cannot be considered harmless, as they are associated with propaganda, reluctance, prejudice, violence, crime, or disengagement (Enders and Smallpage, 219).

2.1 The Origin of Conspiracy Theories

Conspiracy theories arise particularly in crisis times when people experience feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, and threat (Grodzicka and Harambam, 2021). People's belief in conspiracy theories seems to deepen when people try to understand the surrounding events, when they need to feel safer, or when they want to attract more attention (Bram, 2021). Some people also accept or reject certain conspiracy theories on purpose based on political, ideological, and other interests (Boulianne and Lee, 2022). Beliefs in conspiracy theories are typical of people suffering from mental disorders, perceptual disorders, or personality disorders (Douglas et al. 2016). Beliefs in conspiracy theories are also encouraged by various ideologies, whether political, religious, or scientific (Hagen, 2022). Conspiracy theories in this case help to advance certain interests and achieve certain goals (Harambam, 2021). Sharing conspiracy theories may bring some social benefits to individuals in the short term, although in general, sharing conspiracy theories is viewed negatively in society (Hart and Greather, 2018). Some short-term benefits of believing in conspiracy theories include finding one's sense of meaning and purpose, justifying one's beliefs, excusing one's behavior, encouraging one's self-esteem, and satisfying one's excitement. Many people find conspiracy theories believable and attractive, despite their long-term negative social effects (Douglas and Leite, 2017). A short-term reduction in feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, and threat due to conspiracy beliefs may, on the contrary, be replaced by a long-term intensification of feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, and threat (Dow et al., 2016). Paradoxically, these unpleasant feelings can further intensify the need for conspiracy beliefs, thus closing a vicious circle of the need to share conspiracy theories (Grodzicka and Harambam, 2021).

Beliefs in conspiracy theories are generally attributed to the irrationality of conspiracy believers who either do not see or do not want to see all the available facts (Mourad et al. 2020). In other words, conspiracy theories do not originate and spread just because of the irrationality of the people who believe in them. Beliefs in conspiracy theories result from both a general tendency toward conspiracy thinking (Imhoff and Lamberty, 2017), which may have roots in early childhood experiences (Imhoff, 2022), as well as life beliefs resulting from life experiences (Jolley and Lantian, 2022). Beliefs in conspiracy theories can be motivated by feelings of existential threat and failure to satisfy basic life needs as a result of unfavorable political, economic, and social developments (Krauk et al., 2021) as well as social ambitions (Lantian et al., 2017). People desiring higher social status may be more motivated to engage in conspiracy thinking than people concerned about their social status (Lantian et al., 2018). So, conspiracy thinking can motivate individuals to positive action to meet their needs and interests, whether personal or professional (Liekefett et al., 2022). On the other hand, rooted conspiracy thinking does not reduce feelings of an existential threat but instead may encourage further conspiracy thinking (Kauk et al., 2021).

2.2 The Spread of Conspiracy Theories through Social Media

One of the progressive ways of spreading conspiracy theories is social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, and others. An increasing number of people share information about current events through social networks, but this also increases the risk of sharing misinformation and conspiracies (Mancosu and Vassalo, 2022). Conspiracy theories spread through social media can negatively influence the way individuals perceive and interpret reality (Mari et al., 2022). This was most recently demonstrated during the coronavirus pandemic when social media mostly helped to share useful information and instructions but also allowed the spread of many conspiracy theories that often led to chaos and panic (Miller et al., 2016). Some users of social media are more susceptible to certain misinformation and conspiracies than others. The reason may be a greater tendency towards conspiracy thinking, which is further intensified by the influence of social media (Douglas et al., 2019).

Sharing conspiracy theories within social media intensifies conspiracy thinking and transforms conspiracy beliefs into real beliefs. These are further shared within social media, creating a vicious circle (Min, 2021). Additionally, within some social media (such as Facebook), conspiracy theories seem to spread more than within other social media (such as Twitter). It depends on both providers and users of social media (Ren et al., 2022), while unregulated social media can be a risky source of conspiracy theories (Mari et al., 2022). The beliefs of social media users in conspiracy theories vary by social status, economic situation, and political orientation (Hagen et al., 2022). These tendencies are amplified in times of social uncertainty when people use social media to search for information, interact with the community, and express their attitudes and feelings, which helps them cope with social reality (Ren et al., 2022). In difficult times, social media users are also more likely to follow the beliefs of anyone who offers a promising solution, regardless of its validity and reliability (Rutjens and Veckalov, 2022). Furthermore, social media users who are influenced by various conspiracy theories on social media have a greater tendency to actively engage in public protests against the current situation (Sadiq, 2022).

A clear understanding of how conspiracy theories spread through social media and how they influence the perception and reasoning of individuals is essential for effective and efficient prevention of the origin and spread of conspiracy theories (Shields, 2022) in families, communities, schools, workplaces, and the society as a whole (Shoaibi, 2022).

2.3 The Prevention of Conspiracy Theories

The traditional fight against conspiracy theories is based on presenting facts provided by official institutions. However, such a fight appears to be both ineffective and inefficient. The question is, whether official institutions can know the real truth, whether they should interpret the truth, and whether others will be willing to accept their truth (Sobo, 2021). Distinguishing between truth and false in the fight against conspiracy theories requires a broader social discussion and perspectives of all stakeholders, including the scientific community. Scientists who directly see irrational thinking behind conspiracy theories are more active in the fight against conspiracy theories than scientists who deal with conspiracy theories as a cultural phenomenon (Allington, 2021). However, knowing the truth or false in the case of conspiracy theories is not easy for any scientist. Conspiracy theories certainly require attention because they represent a potential societal threat, but their investigation requires a holistic approach examining all parts and relationships of the whole system behind conspiracy theories (Stasielowicz, 2022). If conspiracy theories cannot be disproved with clear empirical evidence, they should be challenged very sensitively concerning the particular circumstances and possible legitimate public concerns arising from them (Stecula and Pickup, 2021). Within social media, the approach of individual providers is crucial, as they can ban certain content or users from social media (Theocharis, 2021).

2.4 The Spread of Conspiracy Theories through Social Media

Empirical evidence shows that beliefs in conspiracy theories are a significant social phenomenon conditioned by many objective and subjective factors (Trevisan et al., 2021). Objective factors include political, economic, social, technical, cultural, natural, and other conditions in which people grow up, live, and work. Subjective factors include the abilities and motives of individuals determined by their personal qualities and expectations.

One of the qualities that allow individuals to successfully deal with conspiracy theories is their level of education, where it is assumed that lower levels of education are associated with higher conspiracy beliefs (Uscinski and Enders, 2022). In other words, people with low levels of education tend to believe in conspiracy theories more than people with higher levels of education, who are not as easily influenced by conspiracy theories.

The levels of education also determine the levels of professional employment, where it is assumed that higher levels of education are associated with higher levels of professional employment van Prooijen and de Vries, 2016). In other words, higher levels of education allow people to do work that is, on the one hand, more complex and responsible, but on the other hand, more interesting and challenging, in terms of overall earnings and career opportunities. People with higher levels of education usually work in high-profile professions, requiring higher levels of responsibility and performance (van Prooijen and Douglas, 2017). People working in high-profile professions deal with sensitive information, make critical decisions, and influence other people's opinions, behaviors, and actions, often as team leaders. Such people are expected to meet high standards of behavior and outcomes in the workplace. These people, mainly due to their high responsibility, should be highly immune to the influence of conspiracy theories and should be great at dealing with potential disinformation and conspiracy theories.

These ideas evoke the question of the association between beliefs in conspiracy theories and work performance, which is not addressed as often as other issues regarding conspiracy theories. A few studies in recent years show that beliefs in conspiracy theories have significant work performance consequences (Enders and Smallpage, 2019). The origin and spread of conspiracy theories in the workplace may be associated with individual tendencies to conspiracy thinking as well as unpleasant work experiences resulting from unsatisfactory working conditions, such as meaningless tasks and duties, unfair earnings, unfriendly working relationships, or insufficient career opportunities (van Prooijen and van Vugt, 2018). This corresponds to the general mechanism of the origin and spread of conspiracy theories in society, where people tend to believe in conspiracy theories when they experience uncertainty and anxiety due to the events around them (Krauk et al., 2021). One of the most common sources of people's dissatisfaction in the workplace is poor working relationships, both between team members and between team members and team leaders, which can also be the reason for people to leave the organization (van Prooijen, 2020). Individuals, often authoritative team leaders or ambitious team members, who try to advance personal interests at the expense of others may be easily producers and propagators of conspiracy theories in the workplace, who may also seduce others to conspiratorial thinking (van Prooijen, 2022). The origin and spread of conspiracy theories in the workplace due to individual tendencies to conspiracy thinking or general job dissatisfaction can lead to demotivation and disengagement, which can negatively affect the work performance of both individuals and teams (Enders et al.,2020). This is why the origin and spread of any conspiracy theories in the workplace require the serious attention of organization managers and team leaders, who must not allow themselves to be the source of conspiratorial thinking to advance their interests (Enders et al., 2023).

3 Data and Methods

The paper deals with the association between beliefs in popular conspiracy theories spread through social media and work performance using the results of an authors' test of conspiracy theories applied to a sample of 178 students of the Faculty of Military Leadership, University of Defence in Brno, Czech Republic representing members of high-profile professions.

The authors' test of conspiracy theories was applied in September 2022 and included ten yes/no/don't know statements about popular conspiracy theories spread through social media: 1) the existence of cures for cancer; 2) the non-existence of Covid-19 disease; 3) the origin of the warming of the planet; 4) the origin of HIV; 5) the moon landing; 6) the events of September 11, 2001; 7) the origin of the Covid virus; 8) the effect of the microwave oven; 9) the existence of aliens; 10) the negative effect of the sugar.

The students of the Faculty of Military Leadership, University of Defence in Brno, Czech Republic were selected as representatives of high-profile professions that should be trained to deal with potential disinformation and conspiracy theories. The assumption was that the students would be generally immune to the impact of conspiracy theories and that most of them would not be aligned with defined conspiracy theories.

The authors' test of conspiracy theories was distributed in paper form among students of the Leadership course within the four-year study program Management and Employment of the Armed Forces. The Leadership course is taught in the second year and is focused on the development of the personality of students, including their character and personality traits. Their quality is important for students' choice of further specialization and their future careers. The test was distributed to a total of 230 students and it was completed by 178 students.

All students confirmed that they regularly use social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube, or Twitter. At the same time, all students confirmed that they know what conspiracy theories are and that they know some of them. The students' responses were analyzed concerning their work performance review provided by their superiors. The students' work performance was defined on a three-level rating scale – top (above level performance, exceeds expectations), solid (at level performance, meets expectations), and poor (below level performance, doesn't meet expectations). The sample of 178 students included 37% of top performers, 60% of solid performers, and 3% of poor performers. Within the analysis, hypothesis H was verified:

H: Individuals with top work performance are less prone to believe in conspiracy theories than individuals with solid/poor work performance.

The hypothesis was based on the assumption that top students achieving above-level performance and exceeding expectations would demonstrate a high level of professionalism based on rational reasoning, including working with available information and dealing with potential disinformation and conspiracy theories. To perform the analysis and verify the hypothesis, a Pearson's correlation analysis, an analysis of variance (ANOVA), and an independent t-test using Microsoft Excel were carried out. The significance level (α) was set at 0.05.

4 Results

Based on empirical findings about the phenomenon of conspiracy theories, an authors' test of conspiracy theories was compiled to analyze the association between beliefs in popular conspiracy theories spread through social media and work performance using a sample of 178 students of the Faculty of Military Leadership, University of Defence in Brno, Czech Republic. The students representing members of high-profile professions were asked to answer ten yes/no/don't know statements about commonly known conspiracy theories. Table 1 summarizes students' responses to each statement.

Students most often agreed with the non-existence of covid-19 disease (S2) and the existence of aliens (S9). On the other hand, the students expressed a relatively clear no in the case of the existence of cures for cancer (S1), the negative effect of sugar (S10), the origin of HIV (S4), and the origin of the warming of the planet (S3).

Table 1: The responses to conspiracy theory statements

Conspiracy Theory Statements (S)	Yes	No	Don't know
S1. There are cures for cancer, but they are hiding from us. Cancer is artificially induced to reduce the amount of humanity.	1%	92%	7%
S2. The Covid-19 disease does not exist. It is a government invention and an attempt to control people and the world.	16%	64%	20%
S3. Human activity does not play a role in the warming of the planet. It is just a group of scientists and businesspeople trying to use the topic for profitable business and manipulation of the public.	6%	86%	8%
S4. HIV was created by the CIA as a means of reducing the world's population.	2%	87%	11%
S5. The Americans did not land on the moon within the Apollo program. It was all an elaborate hoax.	4%	79%	17%
S6. The US government intentionally enabled the events of September 11, 2001, as a pretext for future warfare in the Middle East.	10%	61%	29%
S7. The Covid virus was created in Chinese laboratories to weaken the world economy.	8%	59%	33%
S8. Microwave oven is harmful to health by destroying nutrients in food.	9%	62%	29%
S9. Information about the existence of aliens is kept secret from the world public.	15%	42%	43%
S10. Sugar is a secret poison created by governments.	2%	88%	10%

Source: authors' data, 2023.

Table 2 summarizes students' responses to conspiracy theory statements (S) depending on the students' work performance comparing responses of students with top work performance and solid/poor work performance.

The analysis showed no or negligible association between the students' beliefs in conspiracy theories and work performance (WP). No significant differences in yes/no/don't know responses to conspiracy theory statements depending on work performance were found. Students, regardless of work performance, most often agreed with the existence of aliens (S9), the non-existence of covid-19 disease (S2), and the events of September 11, 2001 (S6). Students with top work performance agreed more than students with solid/poor work performance with the existence of cures for cancer (S1), and vice versa, students with solid/poor work performance agreed more than students with top work performance with the negative effect of the sugar (S10). The greatest harmony of the students' yes/no/don't know responses was in the origin of the Covid virus (S7) and the origin of the warming of the planet (S3). Following these findings, hypothesis H that individuals with top work performance are less prone to believe in conspiracy theories than individuals with solid/poor work performance was not confirmed.

Table 2: The responses to conspiracy theory statements depend on the work performance

	WP	Yes	No	Don't know	r	p-val
S1	T	3%	91%	6%	0.09	0.26
	S/P	0%	92%	8%		
S2	T	12%	71%	17%	0.00	0.99
	S/P	18%	60%	22%		
S3	T	9%	85%	6%	0.10	0.20
	S/P	4%	87%	9%		
S4	T	3%	88%	9%	0.05	0.49
	S/P	2%	87%	12%		
S5	T	6%	74%	20%	-0.02	0.77
	S/P	4%	81%	15%		
S6	T	14%	56%	30%	0.03	0.68
	S/P	8%	63%	29%		
S7	T	9%	52%	39%	-0.08	0.29
	S/P	8%	63%	29%		
S8	T	12%	61%	27%	0.07	0.38
	S/P	7%	63%	30%		
S9	T	18%	39%	42%	0.04	0.64
	S/P	13%	44%	43%		
S10	T	0%	91%	9%	-0.03	0.71
	S/P	4%	86%	11%		

Source: authors' data, 2023.
(Notes: WP=Work Performance, T=Top, S/P=Solid/Poor, p-val=p-value)

Concerning the spread of conspiracy theories, Pearson's correlation analysis revealed some interesting associations between specific conspiracy beliefs (see Table 3 and Table 4). For example, the analysis revealed a strong positive association ($r > 0.4000$) between the moon landing (S5) and the origin of HIV (S4), or the origin of HIV (S4) and the existence of cures for cancer (S1), or the events of September 11, 2001 (S6) and the origin of the Covid virus (S7). These findings show that people tend to believe in similar conspiracy theories, mostly those that have been popular for a long time or are topical.

Table 3: The associations between specific conspiracy beliefs (part 1)

Pearson's correlation coefficients (r) – part 1					
	S1	**S2**	**S3**	**S4**	**S5**
S1	1				
S2	0.3149	1			
S3	0.3076	0.1723	1		
S4	0.4009	0.3045	0.2897	1	
S5	0.3399	0.2746	0.2909	0.4747	1
S6	0.1956	0.1490	0.1615	0.2728	0.2281
S7	0.2452	0.2545	0.2853	0.1728	0.2061
S8	0.1619	0.2153	0.2670	0.1642	0.1847
S9	0.2227	0.1033	0.1730	0.0878	0.1769
S10	0.3546	0.3666	0.2962	0.2731	0.3782

Source: authors' data, 2023.

Table 4: The associations between specific conspiracy beliefs (part 2)

Pearson's correlation coefficients (r) – part 2					
	S6	**S7**	**S8**	**S9**	**S10**
S6	1				
S7	0.4089	1			
S8	0.2435	0.2320	1		
S9	0.2870	0.2293	0.2861	1	
S10	0.1736	0.2382	0.3135	0.1652	1

Source: authors' data, 2023.

5 Discussion

The authors' test of conspiracy theories applied to a sample of students of the Faculty of Military Leadership, University of Defence in Brno, Czech Republic representing members of high-profile professions did not confirm a hypothesis that individuals with top work performance are less prone to beliefs in conspiracy theories than individuals with solid/poor work performance. The findings revealed that students most often agreed with the non-existence of covid-19 disease and the existence of aliens. The covid-19 disease is an extraordinary and hard-to-believe global issue that raises many questions. Maybe that is why there are so many conspiracy theories about the origin of the covid-19 disease that persist, although they are systematically disproved by the scientific community (Mourad et al., 2020). The covid-19 disease seems to be exactly the case where there are still more worrying questions than satisfactory answers, and thus many people still tend to accept other than scientifically proven viewpoints, even conspiratorial ones (van Prooijen et al., 2022). Conspiracy theories about the existence of aliens are not new, but they are still topical and perhaps also the vaguest ones, as evidenced by the largest share of "don't know" answers. This might be the case of conspiracy theories that still attract the attention of many different people who find in them both an explanation and excitement (Douglas and Leite, 2017). On the other hand, students most often disagreed in the case of the existence of cures for cancer, the negative effect of sugar, the origin of HIV, and the origin of the warming of the planet. These conspiracy theories have been discussed for a long time and disproved by fairly clear empirical evidence, so they don't generate as much attention and excitement. However, any conspiracy theories regarding human life and health should be discussed and disproved very sensitively concerning the particular circumstances and possible legitimate concerns of the public (Stecula and Pickup, 2021).

The analysis showed that the students tested were more or less equally prone to believe in some conspiracy theories, regardless of their work performance. This proves that influenced by social and other media, various conspiracy theories gain more or less popularity over time as public opinion changes (Yongkwang, 2022). However, in general, popular conspiracy theories tend to persist over time (Douglas and Leite, 2017). The students' conspiracy beliefs may be motivated by a general tendency toward conspiracy thinking (Imhoff and Lamberty, 2017) as well as a current feeling of missing something important (Jolley and Lantian, 2022). The students with solid/poor work performance may lack success due to subjective or objective limits to their work performance. On the other hand, the students with top work performance may lack more growth and development opportunities. Generally speaking, students desiring to achieve something more, maybe more motivated to engage in conspiracy beliefs (Lantian et al., 2018) and take some action to meet their needs and interests (Liekefett et al., 2022). The danger, however, lies in the fact that rooted conspiracy beliefs do not reduce feelings of missing something but instead may encourage further conspiracy beliefs (Kauk et al., 2021). In other words, sharing conspiracy theories may bring them some benefits in the short term, but in the long term, it will be viewed negatively by those around them and may bring them many problems, whether personal or professional (Hart and Graether, 2018).

All discussed findings demonstrate that realizing the motivation and consequences of conspiracy beliefs is necessary for effective and efficient dealing with the origin and spread of conspiracy theories in society to avoid their negative effects (Shoaibi er al., 2022). In this context, the role of the scientific community, which can both suppress and support the origin and spread of conspiracy theories, is crucial (Zembylas, 2021). People generally tend to trust scientific authorities, but when they do not get satisfactory answers from them, they tend to accept other viewpoints, even conspiratorial ones (van Prooijen and Lighart, 2022).

In the context of the authors' analysis, special attention should be paid to the impact of conspiracy beliefs on people working in high-profile professions who deal with sensitive information, make critical decisions, and influence other people's opinions, behaviors, and actions. Such people should be systematically trained to work with available information and deal with potential disinformation and conspiracy theories. Such people should also have high moral credit to avoid spreading and using conspiracy theories to advance their interests or the interests of other stakeholders.

The authors' findings are useful in the HR management practice of organizations that care about the professional qualities of their people, including their abilities, motivation, results, behavior, and attitude towards work and other people. Such organizations are civil service institutions or institutions of the police and military forces. These institutions should pay increased attention to the professional qualities of their people during all HR management activities, from recruitment and selection to performance management and compensation to training and development.

From a workforce perspective, the gateway to the organization is represented by the process of recruitment and selection. At this stage, it is necessary to carefully examine all the professional qualities of the candidates and predict their future potential work performance. This makes the future management of work performance in the organization much easier. At this stage, the authors' test of conspiracy theories or another similar tool could be useful to reveal potential tendencies of candidates towards conspiracy thinking and beliefs that could negatively affect their future work performance in the organization. A similar test of conspiracy theories could be a part of regular performance reviews to prevent the undesirable spread of conspiracy thinking and beliefs across the organization with a negative impact on the work performance of both individuals and teams.

6 Conclusion

The authors analyzed the association between beliefs in popular conspiracy theories spread through social media and work performance using the empirical findings about the phenomenon of conspiracy theories and the authors' test of conspiracy theories applied to a sample of students of the Faculty of Military Leadership, University of Defence in Brno, Czech Republic representing people working in high-profile professions that should be highly immune to the influence of conspiracy theories. The analysis showed no or negligible association between the students' beliefs in conspiracy theories and work performance. On the other hand, the analysis showed that the students were more or less equally prone to believe in some conspiracy theories, regardless of their work performance. These findings prove that influenced by social and other media, various conspiracy theories gain more or less popularity over time and that popular conspiracy theories tend to persist over time. Individual beliefs in conspiracy theories may be motivated by a general tendency toward conspiracy thinking as well as a current feeling of uncertainty or dissatisfaction. The danger of conspiracy beliefs lies in the fact that rooted conspiracy beliefs may encourage further conspiracy beliefs with a negative impact on one's behavior and actions both in personal and professional life.

From a workforce and workplace perspective, any organization caring about the professional qualities of its people should pay increased attention to any conspiracy thinking and beliefs across the organization with a potentially negative impact on the work performance of both individuals and teams. Efforts to prevent negative conspiracy thinking and beliefs should be part of all HR management activities, from recruitment and selection to performance management and compensation to training and development. Similar tools such as the authors' test of conspiracy theories could help with this.

The generalization of the findings is limited by the focus of the analysis on the members of the military forces represented by students of the Faculty of Military Leadership, University of Defence in Brno, Czech Republic as well as by the limited number of respondents and conspiracy theories surveyed. However, the findings encourage further research on the origin, spread, and impact of conspiracy theories in the workplace, especially their impact on workforce qualities and individual, team, and organizational performance. Achieving better-quality findings would require a larger number of respondents and organizations.

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Primary Paper Section: A

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