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ARTICLE

Conspirituality: Predicting COVID-19 Conspiracy Beliefs Using, Spirituality, Purity, and Political Orientation

Malcolm Schofield

m.schofield@derby.ac.uk

Chris Howard

c.howard1@derby.ac.uk

Stu Rimmer

s.rimmer3@unimail.derby.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

Conspirituality refers to the link between spirituality and the belief in conspiracy theories. This has been linked to the new age and wellness movement, and specifically, COVID-19 conspiracy theories surrounding the vaccine. This study aimed to be one of the first to conduct an empirical study exploring the validity of the term conspirituality and some other variables that might explain this relationship. In this case, moral purity and political orientation. An online survey recruited 240 participants via social media. COVID-19 and general conspiracy theories, political orientation, and spirituality were measured using individual scales; moral purity was measured via a subscale of the Moral Foundations Questionnaire. A multiple regression found that spirituality, purity, and political orientation (right-wing) significantly predicted COVID-19 conspiracy theory belief. Further investigation found that moral purity and political orientation mediated the relationship between COVID-19 conspiracy and general conspiracy theory beliefs, except for political orientation, which was not a mediator between spirituality and general conspiracy beliefs. The network analysis confirmed that political orientation and purity are at the model's centre. In conclusion, conspirituality is a valid term and potentially contributes to anti-vaccination sentiments. However, this study shows that moral purity and political orientation are key variables when explaining the relationship between spirituality and conspiracy belief.

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KEYWORDS

conspirituality, spirituality, political orientation, purity, COVID-19, conspiracy, moral foundations, mediation, network analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Conspirituality refers to the hypothesised link between spirituality, and belief in conspiracy theories or a conspiratorial mindset (Ward & Voas, 2011). The term has come into sharper focus with the advent of the pandemic, which led to a proliferation of COVID-19 and anti-vaccination conspiracy theories and has been embedded in the new age wellness movement (Sandlin & Gómez, 2023). The term

conspirituality was first coined by Ward and Voas (2011), but the link between spirituality and conspiracy theories has been acknowledged for many years (Asprem & Dyrendal, 2015). It has also been used in a religious context (Maurer, 2024) and more recently it has been used to describe people who think that social media posts are 'meant' for them to see and referred to as 'algorithmic conspirituality' (Cotter et al., 2024; Kanthawala et al., 2023). Also, there is a popular podcast called Conspirituality that examines 'Dismantling

New Age cults, wellness grifters, and conspiracy-mad yogis.' (*Conspirituality*, n.d.). A conspiracy is defined via the legal terms of two or more people conspiring to commit a criminal act. The term conspiracy theory has been defined as 'Explanations for important events that involve secret plots by powerful and malevolent groups' (Douglas et al., 2017). However, there has been some debate over whether 'true' conspiracies (conspiracy theories that have since been proven, e.g., Watergate or MK Ultra) can still be identified as conspiracy theories and the role played by a conspiracy mindset (Sutton & Douglas, 2020).

The spirituality aspect has generally been referred to as 'new age' when talking about it in terms of conspiracy theories (Asprem & Dyrendal, 2015). Defining spirituality is notoriously difficult and has been described as 'fuzzy' (Zinnbauer et al., 1997), but one definition states that it is subjective and based on the individual experience rather than being institutional or traditional (Voas & Crockett, 2005). While being 'spiritual' has often been associated with higher well-being (Gomez & Fisher, 2003), belief in conspiracy theories has been seen to be the opposite and is either a consequence or leads to lower well-being (Van Prooijen et al., 2023). However, other bodies of research have examined the 'darker' side of spirituality (Köteles et al., 2016), indicating that the link between conspiracy belief and spirituality may not be as counterintuitive as previously thought. Ward and Voas (2011), when first positing conspirituality made the following observations: It is a hybrid system of belief that is growing online that reflects people's dissatisfaction with the political system. It has two main components: that a secret group is trying to control world events, and that humanity is experiencing a major shift in consciousness. It does beg the question, is this new form of conspiracy theory a new religion? Given the popularity of the wellness market and its various proponents in the public eye, such as David Icke, Russell Brand, and Joe Rogan, it would seem so. Furthermore, anti-vax conspiracy theories have focused on purity, the logic being that vaccinations pollute our bodies, go against nature and therefore cause various medical conditions or deaths. Most papers that identified conspirituality directly were opinion pieces, and an empirical study has yet to be carried out, although several studies have examined the link between spirituality and belief in conspiracy theories. Therefore, this study will examine conspiracy beliefs and their link to spirituality. Based on the theoretical underpinnings of conspirituality, it will also examine the role political orientation and purity play in this relationship.

Two studies have directly examined spirituality and conspiracy beliefs. One was qualitative, using thematic analysis, and showed an overlap between narratives in QAnon and new age wellness on an alternative health influencer's Facebook page (Demuru, 2022). They did refer to conspirituality in the paper. The other found that holistic spirituality positively correlated with conspiracy mentality (Jedinger & Siegers, 2024). While there is a shortage of studies looking at spirituality and conspiracy belief directly, other studies have examined religiosity (e.g. Frenken et al., 2023), paranormality (e.g. van Prooijen et al., 2022), and conspiracy theories. While there is a connection between religious, spiritual and paranormal beliefs (Schofield et al., 2018) the nature of that relationship is debatable, with spirituality often being framed as a rejection of traditional religiosity. One aspect of conspirituality is dissatisfaction with the political system, therefore, political orientation may play a role in the relationship between conspiracy belief and spirituality.

Studies looking at political orientation have generally found that the more right-wing a person is, the more they subscribe to conspiracy theories. For example, Santirocchi et al. (2023) found that right-wing thinking was linked to vaccine hesitancy. And more specifically Akyol and Atli (2023) found that right-wing thinking was associated with belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theories. However, other studies found that extreme left and right political orientations correlated with conspiracy beliefs (Imhoff et al., 2022), but Alper and Imhoff (2023) found that it depends on the type of conspiracy theory on whether extreme in right or left-wing political orientation is related to conspiracy theory beliefs. Alternatively, one study found no association between authoritarianism and conspiracy thinking (Smallpage et al., 2023), and Jolley and Douglas's (2014) study found that belief in conspiracy theories reduced people's wish to engage in political activity. More related, two studies found that there was a relationship between political orientation and conspiracy belief and found that religiosity played a role (Frenken et al., 2023; Jabkowski et al., 2023). The findings are clearly mixed regarding a direct relationship between political orientation and conspiracy belief, and this could indicate other variables being at play, in particular relating to moral foundations.

Moral Foundation Theory (Graham et al., 2011) consists of two key elements, the first concerns how the individual fits in with group norms (authority/respect, in-group/loyalty, and purity/sanctity) known as binding.



The second is to do with the individual and how their rights are protected (harm/care and fairness/reciprocity) and referred to as individualising. For this study, the moral concept of purity will be examined. Previous research has supported the link between moral foundations and political orientation (Kivikangas et al., 2017), with Leone et al. (2019) finding that binding moral foundations, the group norms aspect (that includes purity), positively correlate with general conspiracy theory belief. With potential relation to spirituality, one study looked at an Italian sample and found that binding was positively correlated with political orientation and religiosity (Di Battista et al., 2018). However, further studies looked at moral foundations in relation to how people behaved regarding health mandates during the pandemic, such as social distancing. Coelho et al. (2024) looked at political orientation and moral foundations in relation to the introduction of a vaccine passport and found that the more left-wing you are and the lower the binding foundations, the more you were in favour of a vaccine passport. Tarry et al. (2022) found that if you were left-wing and had more individual moral foundations, then you were more likely to engage in social distancing. Bringing in conspiracy theories, Gkinopoulos et al. (2022) found that believing in conspiracy theories reduced the likelihood of engaging in COVID-19 health mandates, but this was moderated by moral identity and morality as cooperation. While not looking at purity specifically, this study highlights both individual and group moral foundations, but this study looks at behaviour rather than belief. However, Vaal et al. (2022) found a correlation between COVID-19 conspiracy theory belief and willingness to engage in COVID-19 health mandates. While some of these studies have looked at religiosity, none have focused on spirituality directly, and given the nature of the above findings, focusing on purity/sanctity in relation to the other variables in the first instance, should be followed by a wider, more exploratory analysis of the further elements of moral foundations.

The following is hypothesised:

H1: Spirituality, purity, and political orientation (right-wing) will positively predict COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs.

H2: Purity, and political orientation (right-wing) will act as mediators between spirituality and COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs and general conspiracy beliefs.

H3: Is an exploratory analysis of the network of the variables of the subscales of the MFQ, spirituality, political orientation, COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs and general conspiracy beliefs.

METHOD

Design

The study employed a cross-sectional, correlational design. The predictor variables were spirituality, purity, and political orientation. The outcome variable was COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs. Ethical approval was provided by the University of Derby, College of Health, Psychology and Social Care Research Ethics Committee: ETH2223-4193.

Participants

The study sample consisted of an opportunity sample collected through the University of Derby Research Participation Scheme, word of mouth, and social media. Participants were entered into a £50 prize draw. Exclusion criteria were that participants must be over 18, and live in the UK to participate in the study. G*Power (Faul et al., 2009) calculated the appropriate number of participants for this study to be 77 for a medium-effect size. Three hundred and eighty-nine participants started the study, and 240 participants completed the whole study (61.7%). However, 10 did not complete the POS scale, so the $N = 250$ for all other variables. Participants' age and gender were recorded (range between 18 and 78 years old, mean = 38.64, SD 15.76); 71 male (28.4%), 167 female (66.8%), 6 non-binary (2.4%), 5 preferred not to say (2%), and 1 preferred to self-describe (0.4%).

Materials

The online survey was hosted using Qualtrics, and the following scales were used:

Intrinsic Spirituality Scale (ISS)

Spirituality was measured using the Intrinsic Spirituality Scale (ISS) (Hodge, 2003), which features six items rated on an eleven-point Likert scale. The items present incomplete statements such as, "When I am faced with an important decision, my spirituality," followed by a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 might indicate "plays absolutely no role" and 10 might indicate "is always the overriding consideration." The ISS has high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.960$)

and is considered a reliable measure of spirituality (average reliability coefficient of 0.80).

COVID-19 Conspiracy Beliefs (CovCB)

The CovCB questionnaire (Vaal et al., 2022) was utilised to assess beliefs in COVID-19 conspiracies. This 10-item questionnaire employs a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”), allowing participants to express their agreement with statements like “COVID-19 was created artificially” and “COVID-19 is a hoax”. Scores range from 10 to 50, with higher scores reflecting stronger belief in COVID-19 conspiracies. The scale demonstrated good internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.87$).

Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ)

The Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ) (Graham et al., 2011) was used to assess levels of moral purity. This 32-item questionnaire employs a 6-point Likert scale and includes subscales that measure endorsement of the five moral foundations proposed by Moral Foundations Theory (MFT): Harm/Care (MFQHC), Fairness/Reciprocity (MFQFR), Ingroup/Loyalty (MFQIL), Authority/Respect (MFQAR), and Purity/Sanctity (MFQPS). The subscales show reasonable internal consistency, with an average Cronbach’s α of .73, ranging from .64 to .84.

Beliefs About the World (BatW)

General conspiracy belief was measured using the Beliefs about the World (BatW) scale (Brotherton et al., 2013). The BatW scale is a 15 item, 6-point Likert scale that measures general conspiracist ideation, which includes five subscales measuring belief in governmental malfeasance (GM), extra-terrestrial cover-up (ET), malevolent global conspiracy (MG), infringements on personal wellbeing, health and liberty (PW), and control of information (CI). Participants rated statements such as “secret organisations communicate with extraterrestrials but keep this fact from the public” on a scale from 1 (“definitely not true”) to 5 (“definitely true”). Overall scores range from 15 to 75, with higher scores indicating higher belief in general conspiracy theories. The internal reliability of the scale is extremely high ($\alpha = 0.95$).

Political Orientation Scale

The Political Orientation Scale (POS) (Krieger et al., 2019) was used to assess political orientation. This single-item,

10-point Likert scale measures political ideology, with participants rating their political stance from 1 (left-wing) to 10 (right-wing). Higher scores indicate a stronger right-wing orientation, while lower scores indicate a stronger left-wing orientation.

Procedure

Once participants were recruited, they were given a study link in Qualtrics, after reading an information section which provided details of the study. The survey began with participants being presented with basic demographic questions before being allowed to proceed to the next stage, which consisted of the presentation of CovCB, MFQ, BatW, ISS, and POS which were randomised to provide counterbalancing. Upon scale completion, participants received a debriefing, which included additional study information.

Transparency and Openness

We report how we determined our sample size (using G*Power), all data exclusions, all manipulations, and all measures in the study. Data are available on request. Data were analysed using SPSS version 29 and JASP Version 0.19.3. This study’s design and its analysis were not pre-registered.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for the measures of spirituality, COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs, general conspiracy beliefs, political orientations, and the subscales of the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, in-group/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity).

Z scores were mostly within range, with the subscales of the MFQ Harm/care (-3.97) and Fairness/reciprocity (-3.39) showing possible outliers. However, all Cook’s distances were <1 , indicating no outliers being present. VIF (highest 2.67), showing an acceptable amount of multicollinearity, and Durbin-Watson (1.97), showing no correlation between the residuals. Due to missing data on the POS scale, all analyses were carried out using the pairwise method.

Main Analyses

Multiple Regression

Multiple regression using the enter method was used to examine if spirituality, political orientation, and purity/

Table 1. Table showing correlations between key variables.

	CovCB N = 250	BatW N = 250	ISS N = 250	POS N = 240	MFQHC N = 250	MFQFR N = 250	MFQIL N = 250	MFQAR N = 250
CovCB	—							
BatW	0.761***	—						
ISS	0.341***	0.368***	—					
POS	0.399***	0.283***	0.276***	—				
MFQHC	-0.03	0.165**	0.15*	-0.185**	—			
MFQFR	-0.038	0.16*	0.04	-0.219***	0.674***	—		
MFQIL	0.181**	0.214***	0.244***	0.337***	0.21***	0.158*	—	
MFQAR	0.202**	0.211***	0.278***	0.408***	0.188**	0.105	0.658***	—
MFQPS	0.367***	0.397***	0.439***	0.381***	0.29***	0.198**	0.65***	0.665***
Mean	26.644	43.68	21.564	3.104	27.972	27.836	19.388	21.364
SD	9.833	14.783	18.416	1.564	5.034	4.672	5.602	5.881

CovCB = COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs, BatW = General conspiracy beliefs, ISS = Spirituality, POS = Political orientation (higher score indicates more right-wing), MFQHC = Harm/care, MFQFR = Fairness/reciprocity, MFQIL = In-group/loyalty, MFQAR = Authority/respect, MFQPS = Purity/sanctity.
 * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 2. Table showing beta values and significance levels.

	β	t	p
ISS	0.156	2.442	0.015
POS	0.28	4.512	<.001
MFQPS	0.199	2.987	0.003

ISS = Spirituality, POS = Political orientation (higher score indicates more right-wing), MFQPS = Purity/sanctity.

sanctity predict COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs. The model was significant, explaining 63% ($r^2 = .63$) of the variance, indicating a large effect size (Gignac & Szodorai, 2016), ($F(8,231) = 49.23, p < .001$). Spirituality, political orientation, and purity/sanctity were significant predictors of COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs. For beta values and significance levels, see Table 2.

Mediation Analysis

Mediation analysis (see Figure 1) showed a significant indirect effect of spirituality on COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs ($\beta = 0.042$ 95% BCa CI [0.011, 0.074]) and general conspiracy beliefs ($\beta = 0.088$ 95% BCa CI [0.038, 0.138]) through moral purity/sanctity. Also, spirituality had a significant indirect effect on COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs through political orientation ($\beta = 0.042$ 95% BCa CI [0.016, 0.067]). Still, there was no indirect effect of spirituality and general conspiracy beliefs ($\beta = 0.029$ 95% BCa CI [-.001, 0.059]) through political orientation. These effects showed partial mediation in all significant cases.

Network Analysis

For details of the network analysis, see Figure 2. Purple lines indicate a positive relationship, while orange lines indicate a negative one. The thicker the line, the stronger the relationship.

DISCUSSION

The initial analysis found that spirituality, political orientation, and purity positively (in the case of political orientation, toward the right-wing) predicted belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theories, supporting the first hypothesis. The second analysis found that both political orientation and purity acted as mediators between spirituality and both COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs and general conspiracy beliefs. The significant relationships were all positive. However, political orientation was not a mediator between spirituality and general conspiracy beliefs. Therefore, hypothesis two was partially supported. Finally, the exploratory network analysis demonstrated that purity and political orientation are, indeed, at the centre of the network; it also demonstrated that while the binding and individualisation aspects of moral foundations clustered together, it was only purity out of all the subscales that directly linked to spirituality and conspiracy beliefs. However, the binding subscales positively correlated with political orientation (more right-wing thinking), whereas individualisation negatively correlated.

Although the link between spirituality and conspiracy theories, in terms on the concept of conspirituality is



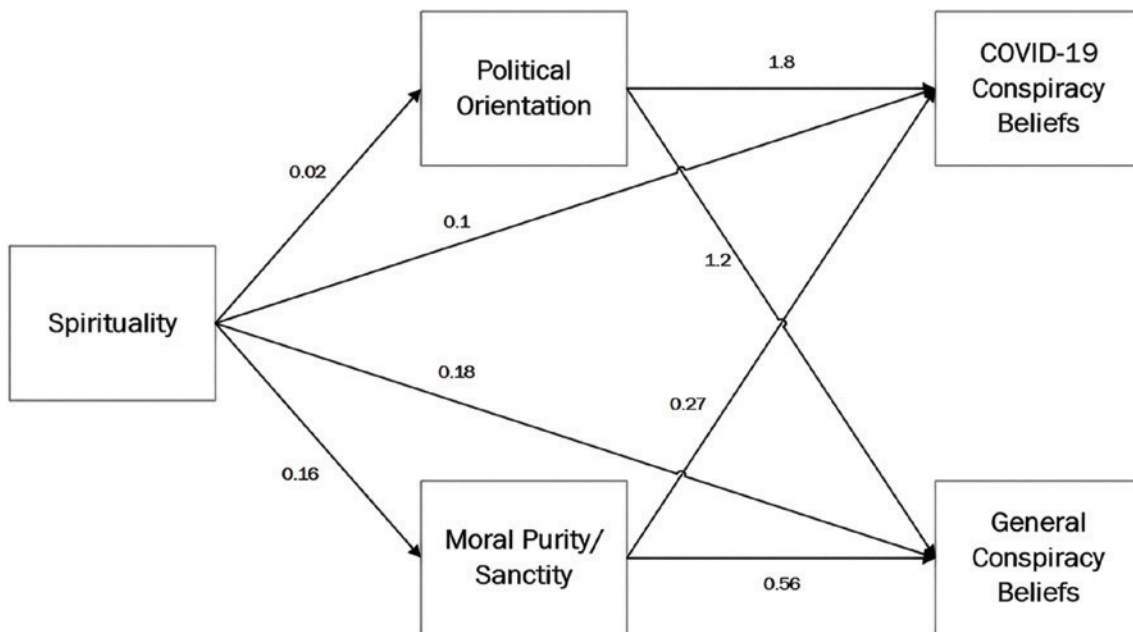


Figure 1. Mediation model showing path coefficients between spirituality, purity, and political orientation, COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs and general conspiracy beliefs.

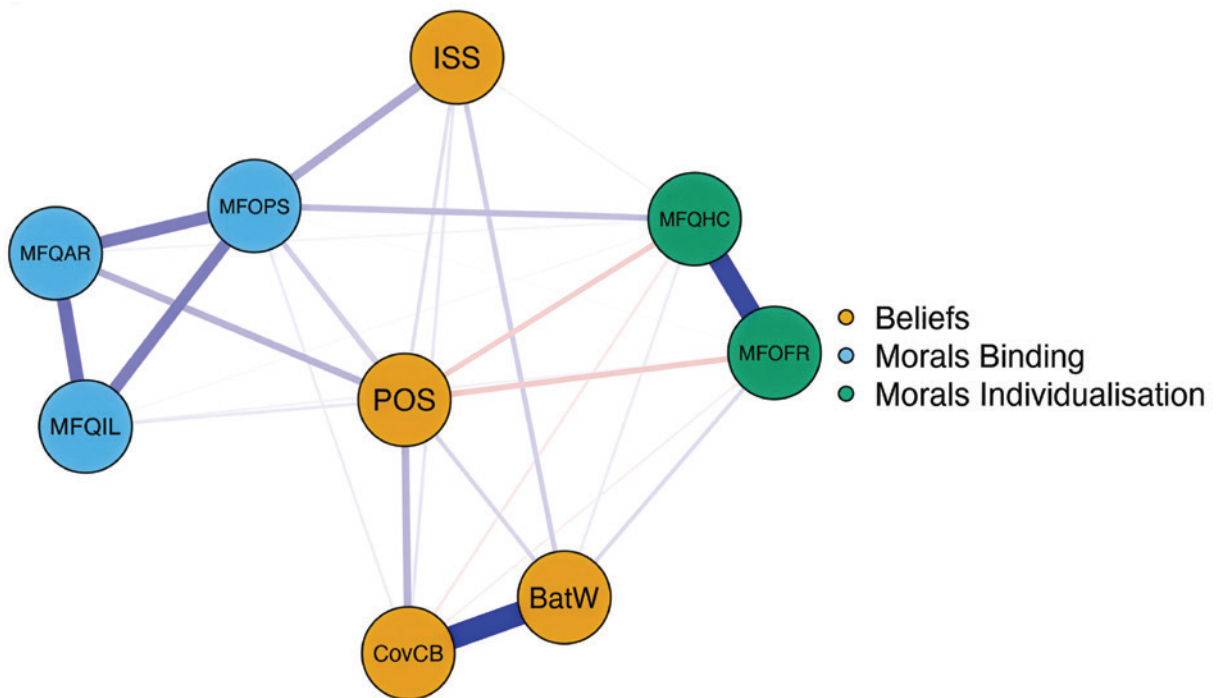


Figure 2. Network model of CovCB = COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs, BatW = General conspiracy beliefs, ISS = Spirituality, POS = Political orientation (higher score indicates more right-wing), MFQHC = Harm/care, MFQFR = Fairness/reciprocity, MFQIL = In-group/loyalty, MFQAR = Authority/respect, MFQPS = Purity/sanctity.

largely exploratory in this study, it does align with previous research (Smith, 2004). This would appear to support Ward and Voas (2011), and their theory of conspirituality. Furthermore, this study supports previous research that

found right-wing thinking to be a key part of conspirituality (Akyol & Atli, 2023; Santirocchi et al., 2023). However, this only shows in the direction of right-wing thinking, whereas some previous research has indicated that it is the

extremes of both left and right that are linked to conspiratorial thinking (Alper & Imhoff, 2023). Finally, purity was also significant, supporting limited previous research that looked at binding, rather than purity directly (Kivikangas et al., 2017; Leone et al., 2019).

The initial analysis supported the mediation, which, again, was in line with the previous research in terms of variable relationships. But the mediating aspect of the study was largely new. The interesting finding was that the only pathway that was not significant was political orientation and general conspiracy beliefs. This indicates that while political orientation does explain the relationship between spirituality and COVID-19, it does not explain it for general conspiracy theories. This could be due to the recency of COVID-19 conspiracy theories and the greater number of political conspiracy theories being related to COVID-19. However, purity was a mediator for both types of conspiracy theory, which could indicate that it is not the vaccine element of COVID-19 conspiracy theories that is salient here, and that purity is playing another role in conspiracy theory belief, and could be acting on it in a different way; for example, group loyalty and binding, possibly via political orientation, as demonstrated by previous research (Coelho et al., 2024).

This importance of binding can be seen in the exploratory network analysis. This, again, is in line with previous research that links the binding element (Kivikangas et al., 2017; Leone et al., 2019), and they are clearly groups in the network and have stronger positive edge connections, while the two individualisation elements of the moral foundations are, again, clustered and have negative relationships. However, the only pathway from spirituality is through purity, the network analysis supports the mediation analysis in that purity and political orientation should be the focus. The network analysis also supported the mediation regarding the role of political orientation and that there is a direct line between spirituality and general conspiracy theories but not COVID-19 conspiracy theories. Furthermore, the network analysis suggests that purity is not a direct mediator between spirituality and conspiracy theory belief. Instead, it is a mediator between spirituality and political orientation. Rather than being parallel mediators, purity and political orientation are working in a 'chain', with a heightened sense of purity causing right-wing thinking and then leading to conspiracy belief. Caution should be taken when examining mediation results, just as one would not infer causation from a simple correlation. It should be noted that the mediations were all partial, which is also supported by the network analysis.

The main problem with this study is that it is cross-sectional in nature. While it indicates relationships between variables, causation can be difficult to infer, and the self-report nature of the scales may limit generalisability. Furthermore, while the mediation analysis lends a bit more weight to how the variables interact, caution should be taken; just because the model is significant, it does not mean that that is the best model, and as the network analysis shows, other models could be more robust. Also, spirituality is complex to measure, along with conspiracy theories. Our scales may therefore have only measured belief in conspiracies, not conspiratorial mindset. Finally, the sample could have been wider in demographics to represent a broader cross section of the population. Future studies should use an experimental design with priming paradigms, perhaps looking at emotions, to establish causation.

The results of this study support Ward and Voas (2011) and their term *Conspirituality*. This is one of the first empirical studies that validates the concept and links spirituality and belief in conspiracy theories. Furthermore, it acknowledges the role of political orientation and the theoretical concept of purity. If you are spiritual, right-wing in thinking, and believe in moral purity, then you are more likely to believe in COVID-19 conspiracy theories. However, right-wing thinking and purity are the mediators potentially working in serial in this relationship. Spirituality leads to purity, leading to right-wing thinking, resulting in conspiracy beliefs. The results of this study shed further light on the variables at play when people believe in conspiracy theories, and future research should try to establish whether purity and political orientation are involved in the formation of these beliefs. Experimental research can potentially find out how we can stop people from forming or continuing to believe conspiracy theories based on misinformation and disinformation that could potentially damage the well-being of the individual and society.

DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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