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**Do your own research (?): a weak link between conspiracism and preference  
for first hand evidence in a perceptual task.**

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### Author contributions

NB: conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, visualization, writing - original  
draft, writing - review & editing

SA: conceptualization, methodology, writing - review & editing

HM: conceptualization, methodology, writing - review & editing

### Statements and Declarations

#### *Ethical approval and informed consent statements*

All studies were conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and were  
approved by the IRB of the CER-Paris Descartes, N°2019-03-MERCIER.

Participants provided informed consent before answering surveys anonymously.

### *Declaration of conflicting interest*

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article

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### *Data availability*

Pre-registrations, materials, data and analysis codes for all individual studies and the meta-analysis are accessible at the following OSF repository: <https://osf.io/zh834>

**Keywords:** conspiracy mentality, conspiracy beliefs, epistemic individualism, epistemic autonomy, information-seeking

# Abstract

Conspiracy theorists often prompt others to “Do your own research.” Could a general desire for such epistemic autonomy—to make up one’s own mind rather than deferring to others’ testimony—explain why some people are attracted to conspiracy theories? In four pre-registered studies (US and UK, N = 1196), we test whether participants more likely to believe in conspiracy theories have a stronger preference for forming their own beliefs independently. Participants chose between doing a difficult perceptual task themselves or relying on an expert’s answer. Internal fixed-effect meta-analyses revealed a weak but statistically significant relationship between belief in conspiracy theories and preference for first-hand evidence. By contrast, the relationship between epistemic individualism and this preference was stronger and more robust. This suggests that, although individuals endorsing conspiracy theories express a stronger preference for “doing their own research,” their behavior mostly does not match this preference in non-conspiratorial contexts.

**Keywords:** conspiracy mentality, conspiracy beliefs, epistemic individualism, epistemic autonomy, information-seeking

# Introduction

“Do your own research” expresses an epistemological stance centered on first-hand evidence and individualism (Ballantyne et al., 2022; Levy, 2022). As such, philosophical work has described conspiracy beliefs as entailing a rejection of epistemic authorities (Levy, 2007) and as a way for individuals to reclaim their epistemic autonomy—their capacity to actively choose what to believe based on their own information—rather than relying on others (Harris, 2023). These theories describe conspiracy theorists as driven to discover the truth by themselves, relying on their own experience and intuitions rather than on the claims of sources they don’t recognize as legitimate. Qualitative studies have confirmed that this is how proponents of conspiracy theories present themselves. For example, Harambam and Aupers (2015, 2017) conducted semi-structured interviews with Dutch citizens who strongly adhere to conspiracy theories and found that they presented themselves as critical thinkers who question everything, especially the mainstream view of events. Interviews with US mothers who chose not to vaccinate their children revealed both distrust in the quality of existing scientific research and an emphasis on their own experience as an alternative way of producing knowledge (Carrion, 2018).

Many experiments have demonstrated the existence of a desire for autonomy (for a review see Murayama et al., 2016). For example, participants are willing to sacrifice rewards for the opportunity to choose which lottery to draw from (Munuera et al., 2023). This desire for autonomy extends to the value of new information, as participants are more curious about the outcome of a lottery they’ve chosen (Romero Verdugo et al., 2023). This desire for autonomy in the epistemic domain could translate into a preference for making up one’s own mind instead of following

someone else's opinion, a preference that might be heightened in conspiracy theorists.

## Previous findings

Some evidence already suggests that conspiracy theorists might have a stronger preference for epistemic autonomy. First, meta-analyses have found that low external control and powerlessness predict conspiracy beliefs (Biddlestone et al., 2025; Bowes et al., 2023). One interpretation is that individuals who feel they lack control or power adopt conspiratorial explanations as a way to restore control over their environment (Douglas et al., 2017). Similarly, the very act of forming their own opinions—independently of conspiratorial content—may help fulfill this need for control.

Two studies have found that participants more likely to believe in conspiracy theories presented themselves as more likely to seek information on their own. The first found that participants' responses to survey items measuring the depth of participants' daily information-seeking activities (asking questions such as "Do you ever find yourself researching a specific topic for an extended period of time?") predicted their beliefs in conspiracy theories related to COVID-19 and their score on a general conspiracy ideation scale (Georgiou et al., 2021). The second showed that a newly created scale of epistemic individualism (asking questions such as "Generally, I only trust the information that I have checked myself") correlated with participants' scores on two different conspiracy belief scales (Tomas et al., 2022). However, these correlations were found only in self-reported measures of information-seeking.

To the best of our knowledge, behavioral measures have never been used to directly test whether conspiracy theorists have a stronger preference for epistemic autonomy. However, two studies have examined the relative weight that conspiracy theorists put on their own beliefs relative to that of someone else, in non-conspiratorial contexts. Altay et al. (2023) found that conspiracy believers did not put less weight on someone else's opinion, relative to theirs, than other participants. Their exploratory Bayesian analyses provided strong evidence in favor of the null hypothesis when using the conspiracy mentality questionnaire ( $BF_{10} = 0.032$ ), and moderate evidence in favor of the null when using a single-item scale ( $BF_{10} = 0.11$ ). Similarly, in an internal meta-analysis of five studies, Pummerer et al. (2024) found no significant evidence that participants' scores on conspiracy measures predicted whether they would adopt the opinion of the majority on topics they knew nothing about. The absence of a significant effect in these studies casts doubt on the idea that conspiracy theorists value the opinions of others differently from other participants, at least in general contexts.

This gap between self-reports and behavioral measures might be explained in two ways. First, conspiracy theorists tend to score higher on narcissism (Stasielowicz, 2022) and need for uniqueness (Bowes et al., 2023) scales. Both these characteristics might plausibly push conspiracy theorists to "do their own research," in an effort to develop original ideas to distinguish themselves from the masses. However, these traits could also motivate conspiracy theorists to self-enhance by presenting themselves as more curious, inquisitive, and independent than they really are (on the benefits of forming beliefs independently for one's reputation, see Altay et al. 2020). Alternatively, this gap could be explained by previous designs failing to tap into participants' needs for autonomy. In both Altay et al. (2023) and Pummerer

et al. (2024), participants were not given the choice to receive social information; it was always provided. Therefore, it is possible that participants endorsing conspiracy theories have a stronger preference for epistemic autonomy, but that previous studies were not designed to capture this phenomenon.

In summary, philosophical work argues that the need for epistemic autonomy might explain the appeal of conspiracy theories, and both qualitative and quantitative evidence suggest that individuals more likely to adopt conspiracy theories report a stronger preference for independent opinion formation. However, previous studies failed to find that this led to observable differences in behavior, possibly because participants could not choose whether (or from whom) to receive information, which might be an important feature of doing one's own research. To address this limitation, we adapted a task designed to measure participants' preference for relying on the wisdom of crowds (Yonah & Kessler, 2021) and tested whether participants prone to believe in conspiracies were less likely to seek someone's advice in this task, instead of relying on their own opinion.

## Current study

In this task, participants choose between viewing an expert's answer or completing an almost-impossible perceptual task by themselves, with correct responses incentivized. This task aims at isolating a specific component of what "doing one's own research" might entail, namely, independent information-seeking motivated by a preference for epistemic autonomy. This is only one aspect of the relationship between conspiracism and independent information-seeking. For example, participants who want to "do their own research" in our task can seek direct

evidence, an option typically unavailable for conspiracy theories in the real world. However, previous studies have suggested that participants might find it difficult to distinguish between first- and second-hand information (Johnson et al., 1993), commonly confusing their own memories with others' testimonies (Lindsay & Johnson, 1989; Jalbert et al., 2021) or with information found online (Fisher et al., 2015; Siler et al., 2022). Thus, the main distinction may not be whether participants rely on perceptual evidence or on testimony, but rather whether they collect new information by themselves. Conspiracy theorists might also differ in which sources they consider reliable, in part because of their lower trust in science (Vranic et al., 2022, but see Pfander et al., 2025), which is likely to impact their information-seeking behavior. The design we propose aims at controlling for such factors, allowing us to focus on the role of basic cognitive processes such as a preference for epistemic autonomy, even if it might limit the generalizability of our results.

We conducted four studies between April 12 2024 and June 7 2024. First, we replicated the study in two samples from different countries (Study 1A, April 2024: N = 299, UK; Study 1B, May 2024: N = 300, US). Since some results differed between samples, we conducted a replication in each country (UK, June 2024: N = 300; US, June 2024: N = 297). All four studies were pre-registered (<https://osf.io/zh834/registrations>). Pre-registrations included the study design, planned sample size, exclusion criteria, all hypotheses and the analysis plan for each study. We then conducted an internal meta-analysis to conclude on the trend observed across individual studies. This meta-analysis was not pre-registered.

## Hypotheses

First, we aim at confirming the convergent validity of the task, by replicating well-known results from studies providing advice and measuring whether participants include this information in their decisions (Kendal et al., 2018). In these studies, participants rely more on the informant when they have lower confidence, lower subjective and objective competence, and a higher estimation of the informant's competence. Moreover, we hypothesized that participants' self-reported tendency not to rely on others' opinion would predict their behavior in the task, supporting the convergent validity of the epistemic individualism scale.

Our main hypothesis is that participants scoring higher on measures of conspiracism are more likely to choose to do the task themselves, rather than to rely on the informant's opinion. Since previous studies failed to show any significant evidence for similar effects, we use an equivalence test to compare this effect size against the minimal effect size we are powered to reject. This allows us to infer whether the effect should be deemed negligible, even if it differs from zero.

Finally, we predicted that participants scoring higher on these measures of conspiracism would be more confident, score higher on the epistemic individualism scale, and perceive themselves as more competent. However, we did not expect that they would differ in their objective competence nor in their perception of the informant's competence.

We planned to test our hypotheses using multiple measures of conspiracism. This was motivated by recent reviews' call to better differentiate between participants' general conspiracy mentality and their beliefs in specific conspiracy theories (Imhoff

et al., 2022; Nera, 2024), arguing that the two measures might reflect distinct, although strongly correlated, phenomena. Therefore, we test two versions of every hypothesis related to conspiracism, one using the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (Bruder et al., 2013) and one asking participants about specific conspiracies (see Procedure below).

Moreover, since the QAnon movement centers on collective knowledge production and populist expertise (Marwick & Partin, 2022), we also tested a third version of our hypotheses in US participants (who would be more likely to know of this community) using participants' feelings towards QAnon as the measure of conspiracism.

## General methods

This study's OSF repository (<https://osf.io/zh834>) contains all individual studies' pre-registrations, materials, a codebook and all data used in this manuscript and all analysis scripts.

## Sample

We predetermined our smallest effect size of interest to be  $\beta = 0.17$  for the main hypothesis, based on budget constraints. A pre-registered power analysis for an equivalence test following the two one-sided tests procedure showed that, with an  $\alpha$ -level of 5% and a power of 80%, we needed 294 participants to reliably test that the true effect size was smaller than  $\beta = 0.17$  in a linear regression with a single coefficient. Therefore, we recruited 300 participants in each study. All participants were recruited via Prolific, had an approval rate above 90%, and could only participate in one of the studies. Samples were balanced on gender. Since our

hypotheses concern individuals who endorse conspiracy theories, we attempted to oversample them by recruiting participants who reported not being vaccinated against COVID-19 on Prolific (representing 11% of the sample in study 1A, 50% in the others). Non-vaccinated participants consistently scored higher on all measures of conspiracism (see Supplementary Materials S1 for study-by-study comparison, as well as distribution of conspiracism measures).

## Procedure

After providing consent, participants passed an attention check and read a description of the study.

The study consisted of two phases. Video examples are available on this study's OSF repository (<https://osf.io/zh834>). In the training phase, participants were shown five random dot kinematograms (sets of moving dots) delivered via the jsPsych-rdk plugin (v6.3.1). All kinematograms contained 400 black dots, each with a 4-pixel radius, moving across a white background for 200 frames at a speed of 1 pixel per frame. Each kinematogram was visible for 1 second. On each trial, a small proportion of dots were moving in the same direction, either left or right. This proportion was randomly drawn from a uniform distribution ranging from 1% to 5% on every trial. Participants were asked to estimate the direction in which these dots were moving and their confidence in their answer, on a 9-point Likert scale from "Definitely to the left" to "Definitely to the right", with a neutral point labeled "I have no idea". After each trial, participants were told in which direction the dots were moving. Participants were told that they were matched with a previous participant (called here "the informant") for the duration of the study and were shown the answers from this

informant on every trial. These answers contained only the estimated direction, not the confidence ratings. In reality, the informant's answers were pre-determined to give the correct response on four out of five trials (we chose not to max out the competence of the informant to make their responses more plausible). The training phase aimed to familiarize participants with the difficulty of the task and demonstrate the informant's competence. At the end of the training phase, participants rated both their own and the informant's competence on a 0-100 slider initialized at 50, reading: "Imagine [you/the participants you are paired with] were to play 100 trials of this task. On how many trials do you think [you/the participants you are paired with] would find the correct direction?"

In the test phase, participants completed the same task, except that they did not receive feedback and had to choose between watching the dots themselves or seeing the answer of the informant. Participants received £0.02 per correct answer at the end of the study, for a maximum of £0.10. The informant always gave the correct answer in the test phase.

After completing the main task, participants completed three questionnaires in a randomized order.

First, participants rated their agreement on a 7-point Likert scale labeled from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree" with the three following statements measuring epistemic individualism (Tomas et al., 2022): "In general, I only accept information if I have verified it by myself first", "I rely solely on my own judgment to form opinions" and "The opinion of someone else has no value compared to my own experience".

Second, participants filled the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire which asks participants to rate their agreement with 5 statements on a 7-point Likert scale labeled from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree” (Bruder et al., 2013).

Third, participants reported their beliefs in the following four conspiracy theories, on a 7-point Likert scale labeled from “Definitely False” to “Definitely True”: “Humans have made contact with aliens and this fact has been deliberately hidden from the public”, “The 1969 moon landing was faked by the United States government”, “Effective cures for cancer and other fatal diseases are deliberately hidden from the public” and “Governments are encouraging people to switch to fluorescent light bulbs because such lights make people more obedient and easier to control”. These theories were chosen for their relative implausibility and low partisan bias in a previous study (Enders et al., 2023). The last conspiracy theory about fluorescent light bulbs was fabricated for a study (Oliver & Wood 2014), which revealed that this theory was more strongly associated with a general conspiratorial factor than with an ideological one in an exploratory factor analysis. Confirmatory factor analyses for those three questionnaires revealed a mediocre fit with the expected three-factor structure. This might either be due to the small number of questions asked in each questionnaire (in particular, only three items were used to assess epistemic individualism), or because the conspiracy beliefs scale and conspiracy mentality measure similar concepts, which likely correlate with one another (see Supplementary Materials S2 for the sample-by-sample results of the confirmatory factor analyses). Reliability was acceptable (Cronbach’s alpha between 0.72 and 0.86, see Supplementary Materials S3 for the full results).

Finally, in the US samples, participants were also asked whether they had heard of QAnon, and if so, reported their feelings toward it on a 0-100 slider labeled from “cold and unfavorable” to “warm and favorable”, with 50 indicating indifference.

We found a strong correlation between responses to the conspiracy mentality questionnaire and adoption of conspiracy beliefs (mean spearman-rank correlation = 0.70, see Supplementary Materials S4 for the sample-by-sample breakdown), and a weaker correlation between feelings towards QAnon and conspiracy measures (spearman-rank correlations between 0.36 and 0.46, see Supplementary Materials S5).

At the end of the survey, participants filled in simple demographics (age, gender, education level) and received feedback on their performance in the test phase.

## Statistical analysis

We report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions (if any), all manipulations, and all measures in every study.

All individual-level variables (conspiracy belief scores, conspiracy mentality scores, and epistemic individualism) were measured as the average of standardized answers on the relevant scales, meaning individual answers were centered and divided by their standard deviation before averaging (using the *scale* function in R, v4.2.0, R Core Team, 2022). Reliance on the informant was measured as the number of times a participant chose to see the informant’s answer in the test phase (from zero to five). Confidence was measured as the average confidence in participants’ answers in the training phase. For all individual studies, we used Ordinary-Least Square regressions conducted at the participant level using the *lm*

function from the base *stats* package in R (v4.2.0, R Core Team, 2022). All variables were standardized before data analysis (centered and divided by their standard deviation) using the *scale* function in R (v4.2.0, R Core Team, 2022). Equivalence tests in individual studies were conducted using the *hypotheses* function from the *marginaleffects* package (v 0.18.0, Arel-Bundock et al., 2024).

Linear regression models testing task validity and predictors of conspiracism included the following variables: number of successes and average confidence in the training phase, perceived competence of self and informant, and epistemic individualism. Models predicting reliance on the informant from conspiracism were simple linear regressions. As they are equivalent to Pearson correlations, we report them as correlations to clarify when covariates were or were not included.

## Results

### Study 1A: UK

#### Sample

Data collection occurred on April 12, 2024. One participant failed the attention check in this study. Our final sample comprises  $N = 299$  participants ( $M_{\text{age}} = 42.6$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 12.8$ , 147 men, 149 women, 2 non-binary, 1 prefer not to say). Mean value, standard deviation and correlations between the variables in our regressions can be found in Supplementary Materials S6.

## Results

The main hypothesis was not supported. On average, participants relied on the informant 2.77 times (SD = 1.96 times, see Supplementary Materials S7 for the distribution of participant decisions). However, this did not depend on either participants' score on the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire ( $r = -0.01$  [-0.12, 0.11],  $t(297) = -0.10$ ,  $p = 0.924$ ), or their beliefs in specific conspiracies ( $r = -0.04$  [-0.15, 0.08],  $t(297) = -0.67$ ,  $p = 0.504$ ). For both effects, the pre-registered equivalence test was significant, which confirms that these effects are smaller than our smallest effect size of interest (Conspiracy Mentality:  $p = 0.002$ ; Conspiracy Beliefs:  $p = 0.012$ ).

By contrast, all hypotheses regarding the validity of the task were supported. In a regression controlling for all following variables, participants were significantly less likely to rely on the informant if they performed better during training ( $\beta = -0.19$  [-0.33, -0.06],  $t(293) = -2.78$ ,  $p = 0.006$ ), had higher average confidence ( $\beta = -0.15$  [-0.26, -0.04],  $t(293) = -2.76$ ,  $p = 0.006$ ), or a higher estimation of their own competence ( $\beta = -0.22$  [-0.36, -0.08],  $t(293) = -3.00$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ). Participants were also more likely to rely on the informant if they thought the informant performed better in the training phase ( $\beta = 0.28$  [0.17, 0.38],  $t(293) = 5.06$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Moreover, participants scoring higher on the epistemic individualism scale were less likely to rely on the informant ( $\beta = -0.11$  [-0.21, -0.01],  $t(293) = -2.09$ ,  $p = 0.037$ ).

Most hypotheses concerning predictors of conspiracism were also supported.

Controlling for all other factors (see General methods - statistical analysis), participants scoring higher on the conspiracy mentality questionnaire ( $\beta = 0.13$  [0.01, 0.24],  $t(239) = 2.21$ ,  $p = 0.028$ ) or on the conspiracy beliefs questionnaire ( $\beta = 0.15$  [0.04, 0.26],  $t(293) = 2.60$ ,  $p = 0.010$ ) were more confident in the training phase.

Those participants also scored higher on the epistemic individualism scale (Conspiracy Mentality: ( $\beta = 0.33 [0.22, 0.44]$ ,  $t(293) = 6.03$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ); Conspiracy Beliefs: ( $\beta = 0.39 [0.29, 0.50]$ ,  $t(293) = 7.37$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). On the other hand, there was no significant relationship between participants' conspiracy scores and their estimation of the informant's competence (Conspiracy Mentality: ( $\beta = 0.05 [-0.07, 0.16]$ ,  $t(293) = 0.81$ ,  $p = 0.417$ ); Conspiracy Beliefs: ( $\beta = -0.05 [-0.16, 0.06]$ ,  $t(293) = -0.95$ ,  $p = 0.344$ ) or their performance in the training phase (Conspiracy Mentality: ( $\beta = -0.05 [-0.20, 0.09]$ ,  $t(293) = -0.76$ ,  $p = 0.450$ ); Conspiracy Beliefs: ( $\beta = -0.03 [-0.17, 0.11]$ ,  $t(293) = -0.40$ ,  $p = 0.692$ ). These null effects were mostly confirmed by the pre-registered equivalence tests. First, equivalence tests suggest that the size of the relationship between conspiracism and informant competence is negligible (Conspiracy Mentality:  $p = 0.017$ ; Conspiracy Beliefs:  $p = 0.019$ ). Second, equivalence tests offer significant evidence in favor of a negligible (positive) relationship between participants' performance in the training phase conspiracy beliefs ( $p = 0.022$ ), and non-significant evidence for conspiracy mentality ( $p = 0.057$ ). Finally, we find no significant relationship between participants' conspiracy scores and their estimation of their own competence (Conspiracy Mentality:  $\beta = -0.09 [-0.24, 0.06]$ ,  $t(293) = -1.17$ ,  $p = 0.243$ ); Conspiracy Beliefs:  $\beta = -0.06 [-0.20, 0.09]$ ,  $t(293) = -0.75$ ,  $p = 0.451$ ).

## Discussion

This first study confirmed the convergent validity of the task. Not only were all the effects observed in the advice-use literature replicated, but participants scoring higher on the epistemic individualism scale also were less likely to rely on the

informant. This finding supports the construct validity of the epistemic individualism scale.

However, we failed to find evidence supporting our main hypothesis. Instead, the results offer evidence in favor of a null or negligible relationship between participants' scores on our measures of conspiracism and their preference for doing the task themselves—rather than relying on the informant. This contrasts with the robust relationship found between conspiracism and both confidence and epistemic individualism in this sample. Overall, these results suggest that epistemic individualism is the more relevant predictor of participants' preference for relying on first-hand information instead of the informant in this task. Even though we found evidence of a moderate relationship between participants' epistemic individualism and their scores on the conspiracism scales, these results raise doubts about whether conspiracy theorists have a stronger preference for “doing their own research.”

## Study 1B: US

To ensure the robustness of our results, we conducted a replication in another sample on May 7th, 2024. We were interested in excluding alternative explanations for the null result obtained previously. First, we might have failed to recruit participants who held strong enough conspiracy beliefs. Second, we were interested in whether the main hypothesis might be verified in some conspiracy communities that specifically encourage independent knowledge-seeking activities. Believers in the QAnon conspiracy have been described as such a community (Marwick & Partin, 2022). Therefore, we ran a replication of our first study in a US sample, while

recruiting a larger proportion of non-vaccinated participants, and pre-registered hypotheses specific to participants' feelings towards the QAnon community.

## Sample

No participant failed the attention check. The final sample comprises  $N = 300$  participants ( $M_{age} = 45.0$ ,  $SD_{age} = 13.3$ , 149 men, 149 women, 2 non-binary). The mean value, standard deviation and correlation between all variables in our regressions can be found in Supplementary Materials S8.

## Results

On average, participants chose to rely on the informant 2.69 times ( $SD = 2.05$ , see Supplementary Materials S7 for the distribution of participant decisions). Analyses offer significant evidence for the main hypothesis in this US sample. Participants' conspiracy beliefs ( $r = -0.13 [-0.24, -0.02]$ ,  $t(298) = -2.27$ ,  $p = 0.024$ ) and their score on the conspiracy mentality questionnaire ( $r = -0.16 [-0.27, -0.05]$ ,  $t(298) = -2.77$ ,  $p = 0.006$ ) were both significant predictors of the number of times they relied on the informant. Pre-registered equivalence tests could not reject that the true effect was outside the  $[-0.17 ; 0.17]$  interval (Conspiracy mentality:  $p = 0.421$  ; Conspiracy beliefs:  $p = 0.245$ ). The main hypothesis was not supported when using participants' feelings towards QAnon to predict their behavior in the task ( $r = -0.10 [-0.23, 0.03]$ ,  $t(229) = -1.47$ ,  $p = 0.144$ ), even though we cannot confirm that this effect is negligible ( $p = 0.144$ ). This could be explained in part by a loss of power due to only 231 participants (77%) having heard of QAnon. However, results were similar when imputing missing values for feelings towards QAnon using predictive mean matching, as pre-registered ( $r = -0.04 [-0.27, 0.18]$ ,  $t(20.4) = -0.41$ ,  $p = 0.689$ ).

Most hypotheses confirming the validity of the task were supported. Controlling for all other predictors (see General Methods - statistical analysis), participants were significantly less likely to rely on the informant if they performed better in the training phase ( $\beta = -0.20 [-0.34, -0.07]$ ,  $t(294) = -3.02$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ), or were more confident ( $\beta = -0.20 [-0.31, -0.09]$ ,  $t(294) = -3.50$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) in the training phase. In support of our hypothesis, participants were more likely to rely on the informant if they found them more competent ( $\beta = 0.28 [0.17, 0.40]$ ,  $t(294) = 4.83$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Contrary to our hypothesis, there was no evidence that participants with higher self-rated competence were less likely to rely on the informant ( $\beta = -0.08 [-0.23, 0.07]$ ,  $t(294) = -1.00$ ,  $p = 0.319$ ). Supporting our hypothesis, participants scoring higher on the epistemic individualism scale were less likely to rely on the informant ( $\beta = -0.24 [-0.34, -0.14]$ ,  $t(294) = -4.65$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Regarding predictors of conspiracism, results are very similar to those in study 1A. In a regression controlling for all predictors of conspiracism we measure (see General Methods - statistical analysis), we first find that participants' conspiracy scores were positively linked to confidence (Conspiracy Mentality:  $\beta = 0.22 [0.10, 0.34]$ ,  $t(294) = 3.54$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; Conspiracy Beliefs:  $\beta = 0.14 [0.03, 0.25]$ ,  $t(294) = 2.58$ ,  $p = 0.010$ ), and epistemic individualism (Conspiracy Mentality:  $\beta = 0.25 [0.14, 0.36]$ ,  $t(294) = 4.47$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; Conspiracy Beliefs:  $\beta = 0.29 [0.19, 0.40]$ ,  $t(294) = 5.35$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Second, participants' conspiracy scores were not predicted by their estimation of the informant's competence (Conspiracy Mentality:  $\beta = 0.04 [-0.09, 0.16]$ ,  $t(294) = 0.59$ ,  $p = 0.553$ ; Conspiracy Beliefs:  $\beta = -0.03 [-0.16, 0.09]$ ,  $t(294) = -0.54$ ,  $p = 0.589$ ), nor by their performance in the training phase (Conspiracy Mentality:  $\beta = -0.02 [-0.16, 0.12]$ ,  $t(294) = -0.28$ ,  $p = 0.778$ ; Conspiracy Beliefs:  $\beta = -0.05 [-0.19, 0.09]$ ,  $t(294) = -0.66$ ,  $p = 0.511$ ). Equivalence tests support the hypotheses that both estimation of

the informant's competence (Conspiracy Mentality:  $p = 0.018$ ; Conspiracy Beliefs:  $p = 0.015$ ) and performance in the training phase (Conspiracy Mentality:  $p = 0.020$ ; Conspiracy Beliefs:  $p = 0.045$ ) are negligible predictors of conspiracism. Finally, contrary to our hypotheses, neither conspiracy mentality ( $\beta = -0.09 [-0.25, 0.07]$ ,  $t(294) = -1.08$ ,  $p = 0.282$ ) nor beliefs ( $\beta = 0.03 [-0.13, 0.19]$ ,  $t(294) = 0.39$ ,  $p = 0.694$ ) were linked to participants' estimation of their own competence.

When using feelings towards QAnon feelings as a measure of conspiracy beliefs, results are contrasted. First, neither participant competence ( $\beta = 0.05 [-0.14, 0.23]$ ,  $t(225) = 0.48$ ,  $p = 0.629$ ) nor confidence ( $\beta = 0.04 [-0.11, 0.18]$ ,  $t(225) = 0.52$ ,  $p = 0.601$ ) were significant predictors of feelings towards QAnon. In line with our hypothesis, we find that participants that felt warmer towards QAnon tended to score higher on our measure of epistemic individualism ( $\beta = 0.27 [0.14, 0.39]$ ,  $t(225) = 4.24$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). As expected, participants feeling warmer towards QAnon were not different in their estimation of the informant's competence ( $\beta = -0.00 [-0.14, 0.14]$ ,  $t(225) = -0.00$ ,  $p = 0.996$ ), and were not more likely to answer correctly in the training phase ( $\beta = 0.01 [-0.15, 0.17]$ ,  $t(225) = 0.12$ ,  $p = 0.901$ ). The pre-registered equivalence test rejects an effect size larger than 0.17 for either effect (partner competence:  $p = 0.009$  ; training phase performance:  $p = 0.028$ ). Results were virtually identical when imputing missing values for feelings towards QAnon using predictive mean matching, as pre-registered (see Supplementary Materials S9 for the detail of these results).

## Discussion

The replication in the US found a significant and sizable relationship between participants' preference for making up their own mind in the task and their sensitivity

to conspiracy theories—whether this was measured using the conspiracy mentality questionnaire or conspiracy beliefs. We find renewed support for the convergent validity of the task, and for all predictors of conspiracism, except participants' estimation of their own competence. Using feelings towards QAnon as a measure of conspiracy beliefs, we fail to find most hypothesized effects, except that participants feeling warmer towards QAnon report higher epistemic individualism. On the one hand, this might confirm that there is a specific relationship between conspiracy mentality (or beliefs) and relying on the informant in our task, which feelings towards QAnon could not capture adequately. On the other, this contradicts the intuition that communities encouraging independent knowledge-seeking would behave differently in our task. Overall, this second study makes it more difficult to interpret the null results found in the first UK sample.

## Study 2: Replication

In view of the inconsistent results we obtained when using US or UK samples in the first study, we conducted direct replications in each country. The goal of these replications was twofold: to test the robustness of the support for the main hypothesis discovered in the US, and the robustness of the potential difference between the US and UK populations on this point. To this end, in the replication we also recruited more unvaccinated participants in the UK sample.

## Study 2A: UK sample

### Sample

Data collection occurred on June 7th, 2024. In this sample, no participant failed the attention check. Therefore, we analyze the responses of  $N = 300$  participants ( $M_{\text{age}} = 41.6$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 12.9$ , 151 men, 158 women, 1 prefer not to say). The mean value, standard deviation and correlation between all variables can be found in Supplementary Materials S10.

### Results

In this sample, participants relied on the informant on 2.47 trials on average ( $SD = 1.98$ , see Supplementary Materials S7 for the distribution of participant decisions). Simple linear regressions offer contrasted evidence in favor of the main hypothesis. On the one hand, there is a significant negative relationship between conspiracy beliefs and participants' tendency to rely on the informant ( $r = -0.13 [-0.24, -0.02]$ ,  $t(298) = -2.24$ ,  $p = 0.026$ ), and the equivalence test cannot support the hypothesis that the effect is negligible ( $p = 0.237$ ). On the other hand, participants' score on the conspiracy mentality questionnaire was not a significant predictor of their decisions ( $r = -0.02 [-0.14, 0.09]$ ,  $t(298) = -0.39$ ,  $p = 0.699$ ), and the equivalence test supports the hypothesis that this relationship is negligible ( $p = 0.005$ ). Most hypotheses related to task validity were replicated in this sample, according to a linear regression including all relevant variables simultaneously (see General Methods - statistical analysis). Participants were less likely to rely on the informant if they performed better in the training phase ( $\beta = -0.20 [-0.34, -0.07]$ ,  $t(294) = -2.95$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ), or thought themselves more competent ( $\beta = -0.16 [-0.31, -0.01]$ ,  $t(294) = -2.15$ ,  $p = 0.032$ ). In

line with our hypothesis, participants were more likely to rely on an informant they perceived as more competent ( $\beta = 0.20$  [0.09, 0.32],  $t(294) = 3.52$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Finally, participants scoring higher on the epistemic individualism scale were also less likely to rely on the informant ( $\beta = -0.25$  [-0.36, -0.15],  $t(294) = -4.73$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), which supports our hypothesis. The only result that contradicts study 1A is that participants' confidence did not predict their behavior in the test phase ( $\beta = -0.02$  [-0.13, 0.08],  $t(294) = -0.41$ ,  $p = 0.680$ ).

Results regarding predictors of conspiracism were identical to the first study conducted in the UK. In line with our hypotheses, there was a significant relationship between conspiracism and both confidence (Conspiracy Mentality:  $\beta = 0.18$  [0.07, 0.30],  $t(294) = 3.13$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ; Conspiracy Beliefs:  $\beta = 0.16$  [0.05, 0.28],  $t(294) = 2.76$ ,  $p = 0.006$ ), and epistemic individualism (Conspiracy Mentality:  $\beta = 0.17$  [0.05, 0.28],  $t(294) = 2.92$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ; Conspiracy Beliefs:  $\beta = 0.20$  [0.09, 0.31],  $t(294) = 3.53$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). As expected, participants' conspiracy scores were not significantly related to either their estimation of the informant's competence (Conspiracy Mentality:  $\beta = -0.09$  [-0.21, 0.03],  $t(294) = -1.42$ ,  $p = 0.157$ ; Conspiracy Beliefs:  $\beta = -0.10$  [-0.22, 0.02],  $t(294) = -1.59$ ,  $p = 0.113$ ), or their performance in the training phase (Conspiracy Mentality:  $\beta = -0.05$  [-0.19, 0.10],  $t(294) = -0.65$ ,  $p = 0.518$ ; Conspiracy Beliefs:  $\beta = -0.11$  [-0.25, 0.04],  $t(294) = -1.44$ ,  $p = 0.150$ ). However, equivalence tests cannot support that there is a negligible relationship between conspiracism and participants' estimation of the informant's competence (Conspiracy Mentality:  $p = 0.091$ ; Conspiracy Beliefs:  $p = 0.121$ ). Equivalence tests also offer inconsistent evidence regarding participant's performance in the training phase (Conspiracy Mentality:  $p = 0.048$ ; Conspiracy Beliefs:  $p = 0.191$ ). Finally, neither conspiracy mentality ( $\beta = -0.11$  [-0.27, 0.05],  $t(294) = -1.34$ ,  $p = 0.182$ ) nor beliefs ( $\beta$

= 0.04 [-0.12, 0.20],  $t(294) = 0.50$ ,  $p = 0.621$ ) were linked to participants' estimation of their own competence when controlling for all other variables.

## **Discussion**

Contrary to our initial findings in the UK, this replication found evidence that participants who held stronger conspiracy beliefs were less likely to rely on the informant in the test phase. However, the same effect could not be detected using the conspiracy mentality questionnaire. Overall, this offers fragile evidence for the main hypothesis, and suggests that the differences found between the US and UK samples in the first study might not be related to country-specific factors, but instead to other relevant differences between the samples, such as the proportion of participants vaccinated against COVID-19 (11% in the first UK sample, compared to 50% in all other samples).

## **Study 2B: US sample**

### **Sample**

Data collection occurred on June 6th, 2024. In this sample, three participants failed the attention check, leading to a final sample size of  $N = 297$  participants ( $M_{age} = 41.89$ ,  $SD_{age} = 13.69$ , 148 men, 146 women, 3 non-binary). The mean value, standard deviation and correlation between all variables can be found in Supplementary Materials S11.

## Results

This replication fails to offer evidence in favor of the main hypothesis. On average, participants chose to rely on the informant on 2.44 trials (SD = 2.03 times, see Supplementary Materials S7 for the distribution of participant decisions). Participants' preference for doing the task themselves was not significantly associated with the conspiracy mentality questionnaire ( $r = -0.07 [-0.19, 0.04]$ ,  $t(295) = -1.29$ ,  $p = 0.200$ ), the conspiracy belief scale ( $r = -0.08 [-0.20, 0.03]$ ,  $t(295) = -1.43$ ,  $p = 0.153$ ), or their feelings towards the QAnon movement ( $r = -0.07 [-0.21, 0.06]$ ,  $t(224) = -1.05$ ,  $p = 0.294$ ). Pre-registered equivalence tests offer non-significant evidence that these effects were negligible (Conspiracy Mentality:  $p = 0.050$ ; Conspiracy Beliefs:  $p = 0.067$ , QAnon feelings:  $p = 0.076$ ). Results were virtually identical when imputing missing values for feelings towards QAnon using predictive mean matching, as pre-registered ( $r = -0.07 [-0.18, 0.04]$ ,  $t(120.2) = -1.25$ ,  $p = 0.213$ ).

All hypotheses regarding the validity of the task were supported in this sample. According to the pre-registered model (see General Methods - statistical analysis), participants were significantly less likely to rely on the informant if they were more confident ( $\beta = -0.15 [-0.25, -0.04]$ ,  $t(291) = -2.81$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ) more performant in the training phase ( $\beta = -0.16 [-0.29, -0.04]$ ,  $t(291) = -2.58$ ,  $p = 0.010$ ), or thought they performed better in training ( $\beta = -0.31 [-0.45, -0.17]$ ,  $t(291) = -4.36$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Participants were also more likely to rely on informants they perceived as more competent ( $\beta = 0.31 [0.20, 0.42]$ ,  $t(291) = 5.44$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). In line with our hypothesis, participants scoring higher on the epistemic individualism scale were less likely to rely on the informant ( $\beta = -0.28 [-0.38, -0.18]$ ,  $t(291) = -5.62$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

This replication offers limited evidence in favor of hypotheses concerning predictors of conspiracism, according to the pre-registered model which controls for all task-level predictors and epistemic individualism (see General Methods - statistical analysis). First, participants' confidence predicts their score on the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire ( $\beta = 0.15 [0.02, 0.27]$ ,  $t(291) = 2.31$ ,  $p = 0.021$ ), but not their beliefs in specific conspiracies ( $\beta = 0.01 [-0.12, 0.13]$ ,  $t(291) = 0.09$ ,  $p = 0.925$ ), nor their feelings towards QAnon ( $\beta = -0.00 [-0.15, 0.14]$ ,  $t(220) = -0.06$ ,  $p = 0.951$ ).

Conversely, participants' score on the epistemic individualism questionnaire predicted their conspiracy beliefs ( $\beta = 0.15 [0.03, 0.27]$ ,  $t(291) = 2.55$ ,  $p = 0.011$ ) and their feelings towards QAnon ( $\beta = 0.23 [0.10, 0.37]$ ,  $t(220) = 3.40$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), but not their conspiracy mentality scores ( $\beta = 0.09 [-0.03, 0.21]$ ,  $t(291) = 1.54$ ,  $p = 0.126$ ), offering mixed support for a significant relationship between epistemic individualism and conspiracism. Contrary to all other studies, participants who reported a higher estimation of their own competence also scored higher on the conspiracy beliefs scale ( $\beta = 0.18 [0.01, 0.35]$ ,  $t(291) = 2.11$ ,  $p = 0.036$ ) and reported more positive feelings towards QAnon ( $\beta = 0.20 [0.01, 0.38]$ ,  $t(220) = 2.13$ ,  $p = 0.035$ ), offering some evidence in favor of overconfidence. This could not be replicated using the conspiracy mentality questionnaire ( $\beta = -0.05 [-0.21, 0.12]$ ,  $t(291) = -0.53$ ,  $p = 0.595$ ).

Finally, participants scoring higher on measures of conspiracism did not differ in their estimation of the informant's competence (Conspiracy Mentality:  $\beta = -0.08 [-0.22, 0.05]$ ,  $t(291) = -1.23$ ,  $p = 0.221$ ; Conspiracy Beliefs:  $\beta = -0.12 [-0.25, 0.01]$ ,  $t(291) = -1.79$ ,  $p = 0.074$ ; QAnon feelings:  $\beta = -0.05 [-0.21, 0.10]$ ,  $t(220) = -0.69$ ,  $p = 0.489$ ) nor on their number of correct responses in the training phase (Conspiracy Mentality: ( $\beta = 0.04 [-0.11, 0.19]$ ,  $t(291) = 0.52$ ,  $p = 0.603$ ; Conspiracy Beliefs:  $\beta = -0.13 [-0.28, 0.02]$ ,  $t(291) = -1.66$ ,  $p = 0.098$ ;  $\beta = -0.14 [-0.31, 0.03]$ ,  $t(221) = -1.61$ ,  $p = 0.109$ ).

This suggests that participants scoring high on measures of conspiracism did not differ in their engagement with the task. However, pre-registered equivalence tests could not support that these effects, if they exist, should be deemed negligible, except for the relationship between conspiracy mentality and participants' objective performance in the training phase ( $p = 0.044$ ). All significant effects failed to replicate when using predictive mean matching to input missing values for predictors of feelings towards QAnon (see Supplementary Materials S12).

## Discussion

This replication in a US sample failed to find support for the main hypothesis, instead offering non-significant evidence that the relationship between conspiracism and making up one's own mind should be considered negligible. This contrasts with the significant and sizable effect detected in study 1B for both conspiracy mentality and conspiracy beliefs. The null result found in this study doesn't seem to be driven by differences in engagement with the task, as participants scoring higher on conspiracy measures did not differ in their performance in the training phase or their estimation of the informant's competence.

## Meta-analysis

The results of the individual studies suggest that the relationship between conspiracism and participants' preference for doing the task themselves might not be specific to one measure of conspiracism or to one country. Instead, results could be coherent with a very small effect, that individual samples might not be fully powered to detect. To offer a more robust conclusion, we conducted an internal meta-analysis, using the *metafor* package (v4.6.0) in R (Viechtbauer, 2010). This meta-

analysis was not pre-registered, but it does not test novel hypotheses. For robustness, we compare two specifications of our meta-analytical model that consider conspiracism as the outcome. The first one is a fixed-effect meta-analysis model, conducted on each measure of conspiracism separately. Fixed-effect models were chosen because all studies replicate the exact same protocol in different samples (Goh et al., 2016), and based on the results of a multigroup confirmatory factor analysis (see Supplementary Materials S2) which offer some evidence of measurement invariance, suggesting that each study can be considered a true replication. The second model we rely on is a multilevel mixed-effect meta-analysis model fitted via restricted-maximum likelihood. This model allows to aggregate effect sizes obtained by running regressions with different measures of conspiracism in the same study while accounting for the fact that these measures are obtained from the same sample. To do so, we introduce a random effect for the study sample in the meta-analysis. The code used to run this meta-analysis can be found on this study's OSF repository: <https://osf.io/zh834>

## Results

First, fixed-effect meta-analyses offer some evidence in favor of the main hypothesis. As can be seen in Figure 1, there is a significant but small negative association between participants' choice to rely on the informant and both conspiracy mentality ( $r = -0.07$  [-0.12, -0.01],  $z = -2.28$ ,  $p = 0.023$ ) and conspiracy beliefs ( $r = -0.10$  [-0.15, -0.04],  $z = -3.31$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). On the other hand, the association with feelings towards QAnon was not significant, although it went in the expected direction ( $r = -0.09$  [-0.18, 0.01],  $z = -1.78$ ,  $p = 0.074$ ). For all three effects, the 90% confidence intervals indicate that these effects, if they exist, are likely to be small (Conspiracy Mentality:

90% CI = [-0.11, -0.02]; Conspiracy Beliefs: 90% CI = [-0.14, -0.05]; Feelings Towards QAnon: 90% CI = [-0.16, -0.01]). Second, the fixed-effect meta-analysis offers robust evidence in favor of all hypotheses pertaining to task validity. Reliance on the informant's opinion was significantly reduced in participants that performed better during training ( $\beta = -0.19$  [-0.25, -0.12],  $z = -5.65$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), had higher average confidence ( $\beta = -0.13$  [-0.18, -0.08],  $z = -4.73$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), a higher estimation of their own competence ( $\beta = -0.20$  [-0.27, -0.12],  $z = -5.33$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), or a higher score on the epistemic individualism scale ( $\beta = -0.22$  [-0.27, -0.17],  $z = -8.58$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Moreover, participants were more likely to rely on the informant's opinion if they thought the informant was more competent ( $\beta = 0.27$  [0.21, 0.32],  $z = 9.43$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Figure 1: Fixed-effect meta-analyses of the association between participants' scores on different measures of conspiracism and the number of times they sought the informant's opinion in the test phase. Error bars represent the 95% CI.

Figure 2: Three-level mixed-effect meta-analysis of regression predicting participants' scores on measures of conspiracism. Error bars represent the 95% CI.

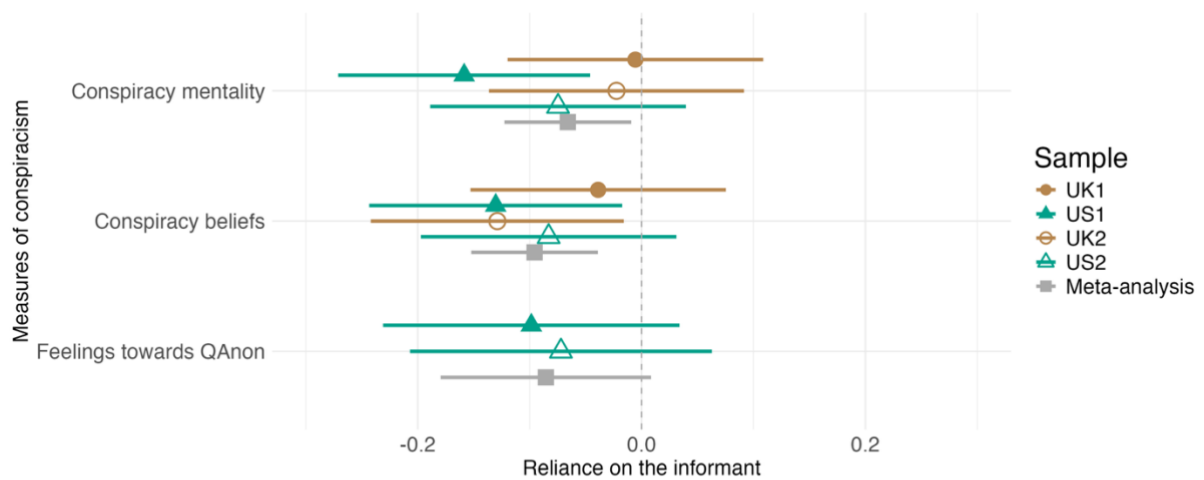


Figure 1: Fixed-effect meta-analyses of the association between participants' scores on different measures of conspiracism and the number of times they sought the informant's opinion in the test phase. Error bars represent the 95% CI.

Finally, we turn to predictors of conspiracism. Using fixed-effect meta-analyses, we find that higher confidence was associated with higher conspiracy mentality ( $\beta = 0.17$  [0.11, 0.23],  $z = 5.59$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and stronger conspiracy beliefs ( $\beta = 0.12$  [0.06, 0.18],  $z = 4.11$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), but not warmer feelings towards QAnon ( $\beta = 0.02$  [-0.08, 0.12],  $z = 0.32$ ,  $p = 0.746$ ). Second, epistemic individualism was positively associated with higher conspiracism across all measures used (Conspiracy Mentality:  $\beta = 0.21$  [0.16, 0.27],  $z = 7.57$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; Conspiracy Beliefs:  $\beta = 0.27$  [0.21, 0.32],  $z = 9.53$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; Feelings Towards QAnon:  $\beta = 0.25$  [0.16, 0.34],  $z = 5.42$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The fixed-effect meta-analyses offer inconsistent evidence in support of other hypotheses, depending on the measure of conspiracism used (see Supplementary Materials S13 for the detailed results). A multilevel meta-analysis across the different measures of conspiracism mostly confirms our hypotheses (see Figure 2). First, it shows that both average confidence ( $\beta = 0.13$  [0.08, 0.18],  $z = 4.84$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and epistemic individualism ( $\beta = 0.24$  [0.15, 0.33],  $z = 5.12$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) were significant predictors of conspiracism. Second, the multilevel meta-analysis finds no significant evidence of a relationship between participants' scores on our measures of conspiracism and their estimation of their own ( $\beta = -0.00$  [-0.08, 0.08],  $z = -0.01$ ,  $p = 0.993$ ) or the informant's ( $\beta = -0.04$  [-0.09, 0.01],  $z = -1.71$ ,  $p = 0.086$ ) competence. Finally, against our expectations, we find that participants scoring higher on measures of conspiracism might have had a slightly poorer performance in the training phase ( $\beta = -0.05$  [-0.10, -0.00],  $z = -2.13$ ,  $p = 0.033$ ), although the 90% CI ([-0.09, -0.01]) confirms that such an effect, if shown to be

reliable, is likely to be very small.

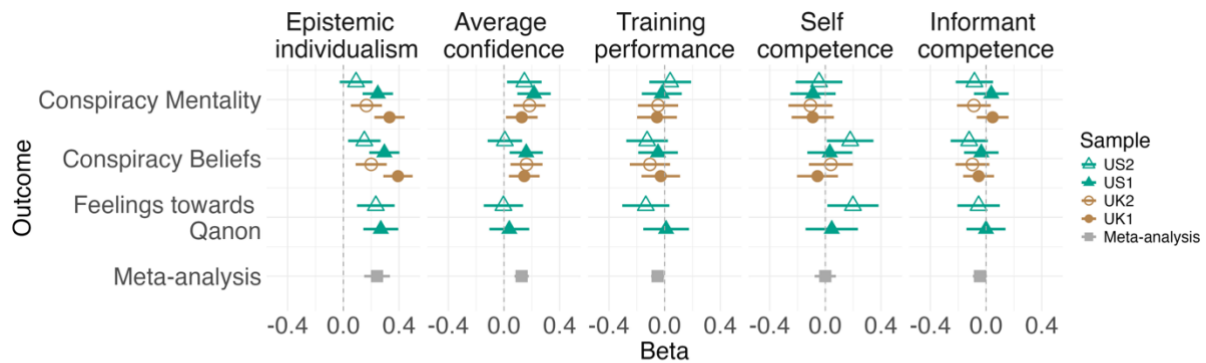


Figure 2: Three-level mixed-effect meta-analysis of regression predicting participants' scores on measures of conspiracism from other variables predicting participant behavior in the test phase. Error bars represent the 95% CI.

## Discussion

The meta-analysis offers very robust support in favor of the convergent validity of the task. In the test phase, participants were more likely to choose to do the task themselves if in the training phase they had performed better, were more confident in their answers, thought they were more competent, and thought the informant was less competent. Second, participants scoring higher on conspiracy measures did not differ in their estimation of the informant's or their own competence, suggesting that their behavior in the test phase is not driven by doubts towards the study's settings. Results also show that participants scoring higher on the epistemic individualism scale preferred to do the task themselves, supporting the convergent validity of this scale.

Finally, we find some support for the main hypothesis, as fixed-effect meta-analyses reveal a significant relationship between participants' scores on conspiracism scales and whether they choose to watch the stimulus themselves. However, effect sizes were very small, which might explain why this effect could not be consistently detected across populations or measures. Moreover, participants scoring higher on

the conspiracism scales tended to score higher on the epistemic individualism scale, and to be more confident in their answers in the training phase. Therefore, we cannot conclusively say which mechanism drives this effect.

## General Discussion

In four pre-registered studies (US and UK), we tested whether we could find behavioral correlates of conspiracy theorists' greater self-reported preference for making up their own mind (Georgiou et al., 2021; Tomas et al., 2022) in an abstract task unrelated to conspiracy theories. Participants had to choose between doing a low-level but very difficult perceptual task themselves, or relying on an informant's opinion, with correct answers incentivized. We found evidence for weak effects: scoring higher on the conspiracy mentality questionnaire or believing in more conspiracies was significantly, but weakly associated with choosing to complete the task independently. These findings suggest that there might be a small relationship between believing in conspiracies and having a slightly stronger preference for epistemic autonomy.

These results are coherent with evidence that individuals prone to believe in conspiracy theories also tend to experience greater feelings of powerlessness (Biddlestone et al., 2025; Bowes et al., 2023). Forming one's own opinions independently might be a way for individuals to fulfill their need for control in contexts where their options feel limited. At the same time, avoiding exposure to others' opinions might help develop unconventional opinions, satisfying a heightened need for uniqueness (Lantian et al., 2017). Moreover, we found no evidence that participants' estimation of the informant's competence was linked to their acceptance

of conspiracy theories. This suggests that even in the absence of distrust towards the source, there might still be differences in the type of information conspiracy theorists favor.

Given the limited strength of the relationship we uncovered, epistemic individualism is unlikely to be the main driver of conspiracy beliefs. This result is in line with prior work failing to observe a relationship between conspiracism and social information use (Altay et al., 2023; Pummerer et al., 2024). Nonetheless, our results have consequences regarding interventions aimed at reducing adoption of conspiracy theories, as they predict that individuals likely to believe in conspiracy theories could favor formats that let them explore autonomously. This could partly explain the success chatbot interventions, which encourage active questioning rather than passive reception, have found in past studies (Costello et al., 2024, although chatbots also seem effective in non-conspiratorial contexts, see e.g., Baudouin et al., 2025). Finally, results showed a robust relationship between epistemic individualism and the tendency to rely on the informant in the task, in contrast with Altay et al (2023) who did not find a link between epistemic individualism and advice use. This identifies epistemic individualism as one of the few factors that predict participants' preference for social information (Mesoudi et al., 2016), and more specifically social information seeking rather than social information use.

This study has several limitations. First, its correlational nature makes it impossible to determine whether participants' preference for epistemic autonomy drives adherence to conspiracy theories (for example by pushing individuals towards lesser-known sources) or whether the covariation of epistemic autonomy and conspiracy beliefs is just a by-product of other effects. Clarifying the causal

relationships between the variables used in this study might be of interest to future research. In particular, we found that participants scoring higher on our measures of conspiracism also expressed greater confidence during the training phase. This higher confidence might either represent a mediating factor, or a confounding one, depending on the true causal relationship between conspiracy beliefs, overconfidence and reliance on first-hand evidence (see e.g. Pennycook et al., 2025, Vranic et al., 2022 on the relationship between overconfidence and belief in conspiracy theories). Second, this study's goal was to test whether the finding that self-reported preference for epistemic autonomy correlates with conspiracism could be replicated in an abstract behavioral task unrelated to conspiracy theories. The advantage of using such an abstract task is that it allows us to focus on basic cognitive differences, which could be part of the process by which conspiracy beliefs form. However, a downside is that this study cannot conclude on whether conspiracy theorists might truly differ in their information-seeking behaviors in the real world. For example, conspiracy theorists might distrust institutional sources, as evidenced by their lower trust in science (Vranic et al., 2022, but see Pfander et al., 2025). This might push individuals to spend more time finding alternative sources and evaluating their credibility. This study was not designed to assess such effects. Another limitation of this study is that it suffers from two sources of measurement error. First, we did not include a question assessing whether participants answered in good faith. Some participants might endorse implausible theories provocatively, in the absence of genuine belief (Ross et al., 2025), which might add noise to the measure of conspiracy beliefs. Second, the confirmatory factor analysis showed a mediocre fit, suggesting that the items we used might not accurately capture conspiracism and epistemic individualism. These two sources of imprecision could help explain why

the relationship between conspiracy scores and participants' behavior in our task was inconsistent between studies. Finally, we might also have failed to recruit the most committed individuals, although we did oversample conspiracy theorists and include some implausible conspiracy theories. It could be that the desire for epistemic autonomy is strongest in individuals who actively develop new conspiracy theories and invest heavily in the community, and that such individuals are not sufficiently represented in our sample.

Future studies could explore whether conspiracy theorists' self-reported desire to "do their own research" translates into behavioral differences in other contexts, by using experiments that involve conspiracy-related materials, by focusing on the choice between different testimonies, or by tracking online activity. Future research could also focus on recruiting individuals who are more active in conspiratorial communities and ask participants about a larger range of beliefs. This could be used to test whether a relationship between conspiracism and epistemic autonomy can be detected in participants who believe in the least plausible conspiracies (as in Hattersley et al., 2022), or who actively engage in co-creating conspiracy theories. Another fertile avenue could be to focus on other correlates of epistemic individualism, as measured by the scale used here, and in particular testing whether it relates to systematic differences in social information seeking versus social information use.

The present results highlight the existence of a gap between conspiracy believers' self-professed desire to "do their own research" and the minimal differences in their behavior in our task. This leaves open the question of why conspiracy theorists express a stronger preference for epistemic autonomy, and whether this reflects true

differences in behavior driven by other factors or whether they might reap social benefits from expressing these preferences, at least in some contexts.

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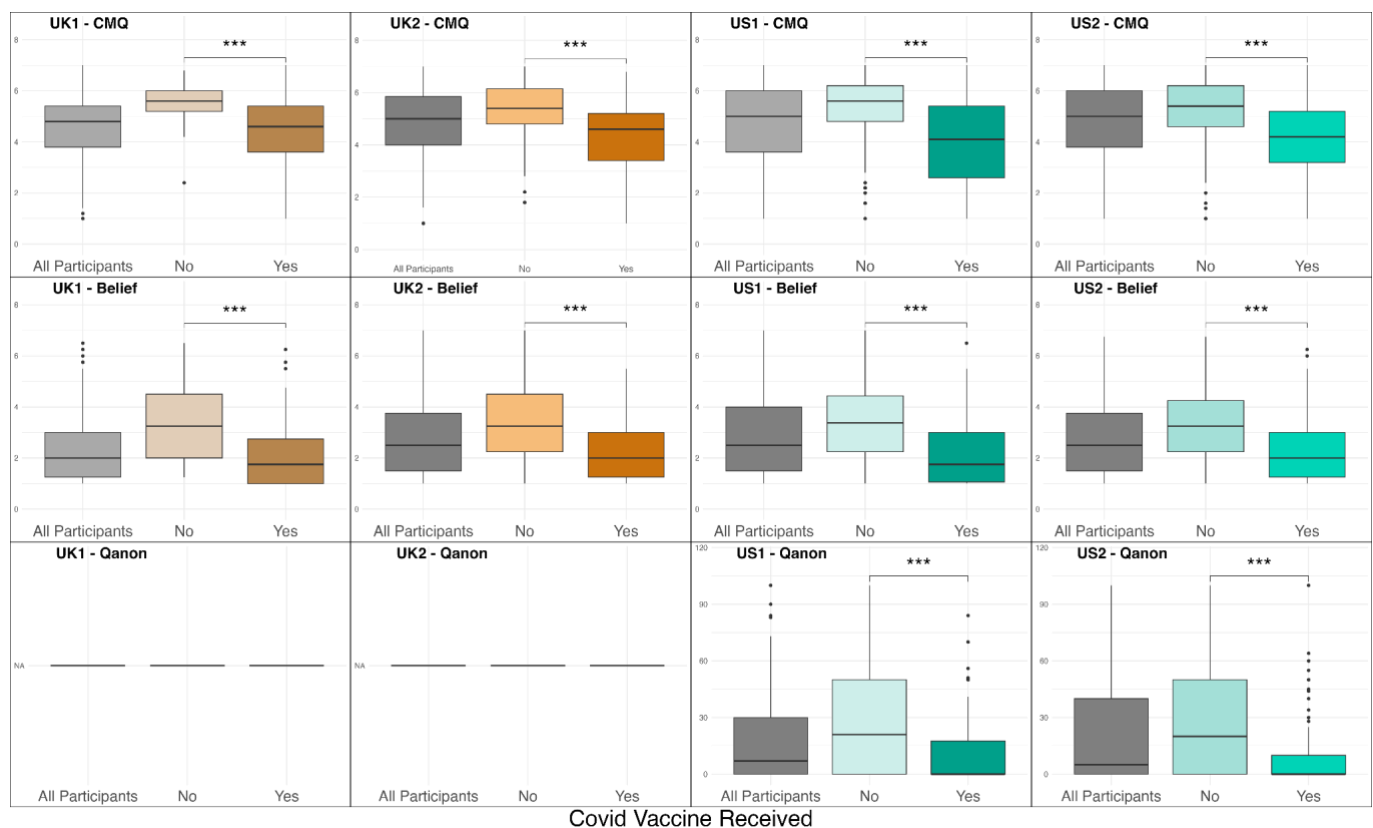
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# Supplementary Materials

## S1 - Conspiracy scores as a function of vaccinal status

Within each replication, we find a significant difference in conspiracism between participants vaccinated against Covid-19 and those that did not receive a single dose (see Supplementary Figure 1). The difference between vaccinated and non-vaccinated participants was significant in every sample for all measures of conspiracism (all  $p$ s < 0.001 according to Mann–Whitney U tests).



Supplementary Figure 1: Difference in conspiracy scores of vaccinated and non-vaccinated participants in each replication.

## S2: Confirmatory factor analyses

We ran a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) on the three personality questionnaires participants answered at the end of the test phase. Confirmatory factor analyses were conducted using the lavaan package (v.0.6.20) in R (v4.2.0), using the “MLM” estimator, suited for non-normal data. The CFA was conducted by specifying only one factor for each score we computed for the main analyses (epistemic individualism, conspiracy mentality, conspiracy beliefs).

Overall, the model fit was not fully satisfactory according to Hu & Bentler 's (1999)<sup>1</sup> rule of thumb (see supplementary table 1, below). The fit was poorest for the first UK sample (RMSEA = 0.089, 90% CI [0.075, 0.104], CFI = 0.920, TLI = 0.897, SRMR = 0.052), and best for the second UK sample (RMSEA = 0.056, 90% CI [0.040, 0.073], CFI = 0.969, TLI = 0.960, SRMR = 0.048). The fit for US samples was mediocre in both replications (US1: RMSEA = 0.078, 90% CI [0.063, 0.094], CFI = 0.953, TLI = 0.939, SRMR = 0.051; US2: RMSEA = 0.076, 90% CI [0.060, 0.092], CFI = 0.949, TLI = 0.934, SRMR = 0.053). This suggests that a three-factor structure in which conspiracy beliefs, conspiracy mentality and epistemic individualism represent three independent dimensions might not be the best description of our data. Such results might have been expected given that the conspiracy beliefs scale and the conspiracy mentality questionnaire are likely to measure very similar constructs and given that we use short assessments of each construct (3, 4 and 5 items for epistemic individualism, conspiracy beliefs and conspiracy mentality, respectively).

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<sup>1</sup> Hu, L. & Bentler, P. M. Cutoff criteria for fit indexes in covariance structure analysis: conventional criteria versus new alternatives. *Struct. Equ. Modeling* 6, 1–55 (1999).

Sample	Fit Indices			
	RMSEA [90% CI]	CFI	TLI	SRMR
UK1	0.089 [0.075;0.104]	0.92	0.897	0.052
UK2	0.056 [0.04;0.073]	0.969	0.96	0.048
US1	0.078 [0.063;0.094]	0.953	0.939	0.051
US2	0.076 [0.06;0.092]	0.949	0.934	0.053

Supplementary Table 1: Results of a confirmatory factor analysis on the three personality questionnaires.

In addition, we conducted a multigroup CFA to assess invariance of our measures across samples (see Supplementary Table 2 below). Once again, CFA fit results are mediocre (RMSEA = 0.076, 90% CI [0.068, 0.084], CFI = 0.948, TLI = 0.933, SRMR = 0.048), but similar to the results of CFA conducted on individual samples, which might offer limited evidence that participants in each sample interpreted the personality questionnaires similarly.

### S3: Internal consistency of all scales

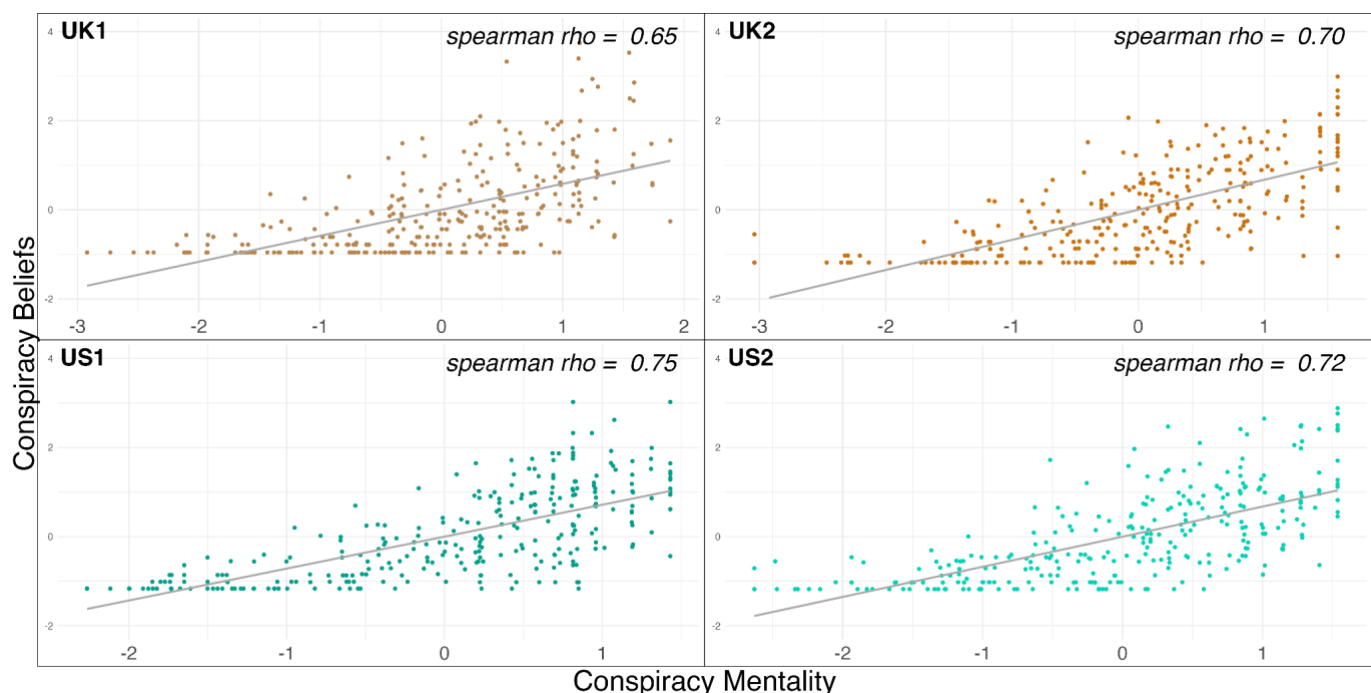
Sample	Cronbach's alpha		
	Epistemic Individualism	Conspiracy Mentality	Conspiracy Beliefs
UK1	0.73	0.87	0.81
UK2	0.73	0.87	0.82
US1	0.72	0.92	0.81
US2	0.72	0.90	0.80

Supplementary Table 3: Value of Cronbach's alpha of every scale used in each sample.

## S4: Correlation between conspiracy beliefs and conspiracy mentality

Spearman's rank correlations were computed between participants' score on the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire and their score on the conspiracy belief scale. There were no obvious differences between samples (see Supplementary Figure 2).

All correlations were significant ( $p < 0.001$ ).

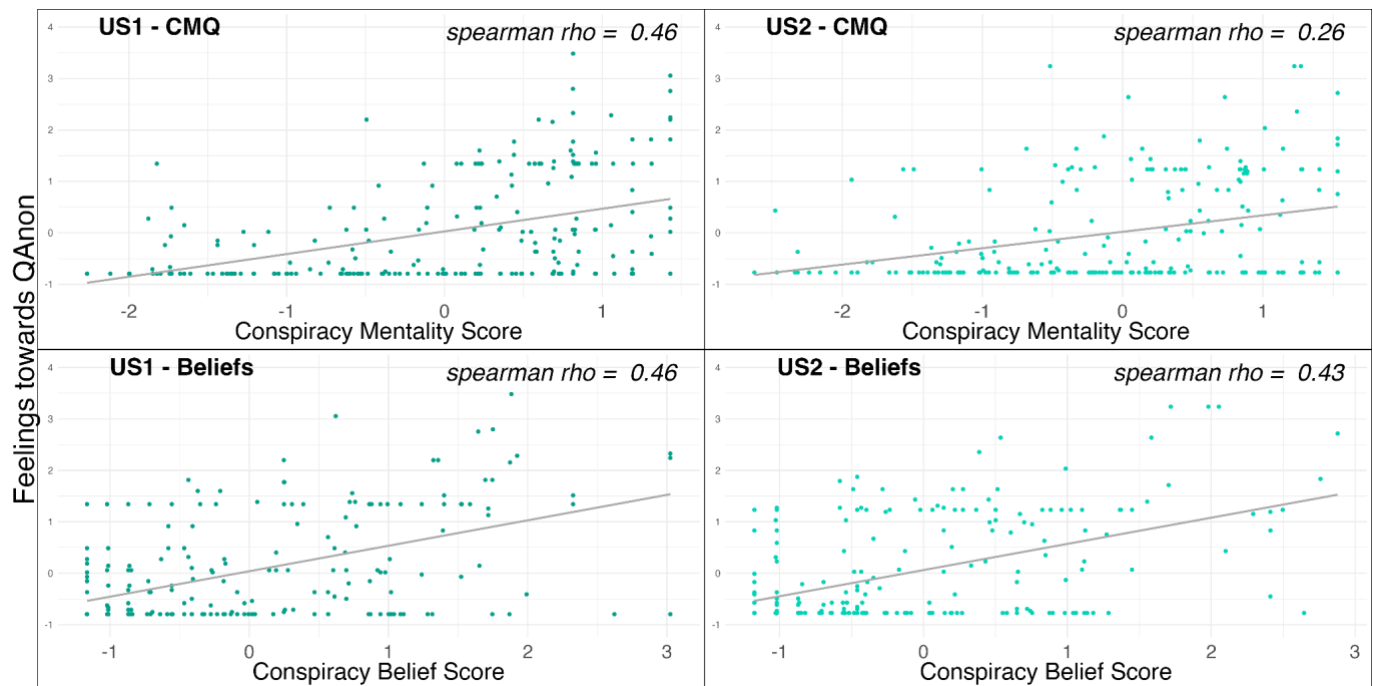


Supplementary Figure 2: Correlation between conspiracy beliefs score and score on the conspiracy mentality questionnaire in each sample.

## S5: Correlation between feelings towards QAnon and other measures of conspiracism

Spearman's rank correlations were computed between participants' self-reported feelings towards QAnon and their score on either the Conspiracy Mentality

Questionnaire or the conspiracy belief scale. Estimates were very similar between samples, except for the correlation with the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire in the US replication, which was somewhat smaller (see Supplementary Figure 3). All correlations were significant (all  $p$ s < 0.001).



Supplementary Figure 3: Correlation between conspiracy beliefs score and score on the conspiracy mentality questionnaire in each sample.

## S6: Correlation between all variables in study 1A

(UK)

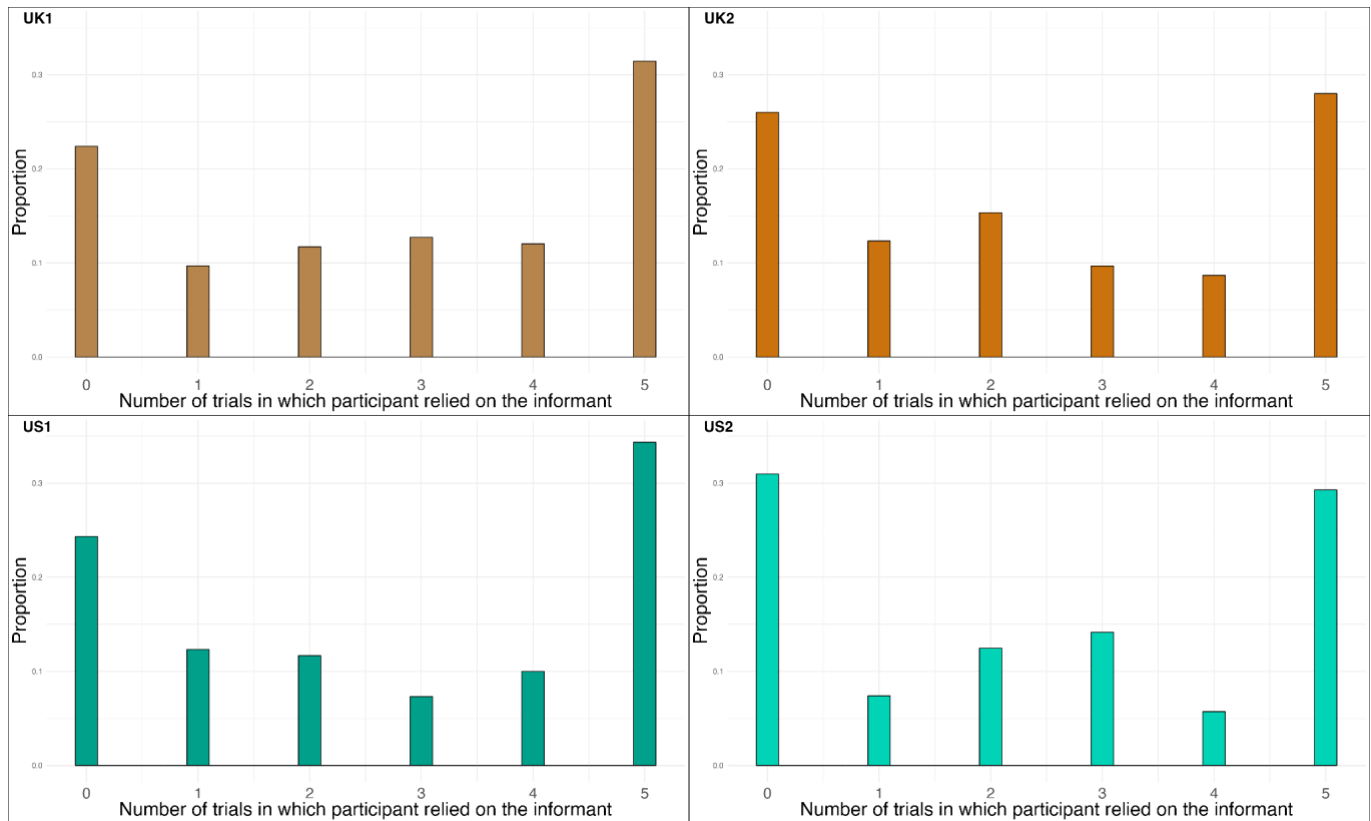
Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Epistemic Individualism	3.92	1.18							
2. Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire	4.58	1.27	0.29***						
3. Conspiracy Beliefs	2.22	1.23	0.34***	0.66***					
4. Reliance on informant	2.77	1.96	-0.16**	-0.02	0.00				
5. Estimated self-competence	50.60	22.47	0.03	-0.06	-0.06	-0.32***			
6. Estimated informant competence	69.39	17.22	-0.14*	-0.01	-0.08	0.21***	0.28***		
7. Number of successes in the training phase	2.31	1.16	-0.00	-0.08	-0.04	-0.32***	0.67***	0.10	
8. Average Confidence in the training phase	2.11	0.79	0.05	0.13*	0.09	-0.23***	0.30***	0.08	0.18**

Supplementary Table 32: Mean response and correlations between the main measures, aggregating all samples in the first study (UK sample).

(M = mean, SD = standard deviation, \*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ )

## S7 - Distribution of task decisions in all studies

In every study, the distribution of decisions was roughly bimodal (See Supplementary Figure 4), with a similar proportion of participants choosing to always rely on the informant (UK1: 31%, US1: 34%, UK2: 28%, US2: 29%) or to never rely on the informant (UK1: 22%, US1: 24%, UK2: 26%, US2: 31%).



Supplementary Figure 4: Proportion of participants who chose each strategy in the test phase

## S8 - Correlation between all variables in study 1B (US)

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Epistemic Individualism	4.09	1.27								
2. Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire	4.64	1.64	0.30***							
3. Conspiracy Beliefs	2.79	1.49	0.31***	0.77***						
4. Feelings towards QAnon	18.58	23.38	0.29***	0.47***	0.46***					
5. Reliance on informant	2.69	2.05	-0.31***	-0.16**	-0.14*	-0.11				
6. Estimated self-competence	50.71	23.72	0.06	0.05	0.05	0.06	-0.18**			
7. Estimated informant competence	66.69	19.53	-0.01	0.02	0.02	0.01	0.19**	0.45***		
8. Number of successes in the training phase	2.41	1.13	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.07	-0.26***	0.64***	0.18**	
9. Average Confidence in the training phase	2.27	0.88	0.09	0.23***	0.21***	0.06	-0.27***	0.38***	0.19**	0.28***

Supplementary Table 4: Mean response and correlations between the main measures, aggregating all samples in the second study (US sample).

(M = mean, SD = standard deviation, \*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ )

## S9 - Predictors of feelings towards QAnon in study

### 1B - using predictive mean matching

Results did not noticeably differ when using predictive mean matching to account for missing values for participants who never heard of the QAnon movement. Once again, participant competence ( $\beta = 0.05$  [-0.14, 0.24],  $t(50.4) = 0.51$ ,  $p = 0.613$ ) and (confidence:  $\beta = 0.08$  [-0.16, 0.33],  $t(28.2) = 0.7$ ,  $p = 0.491$ ) were not significant predictors of feelings towards QAnon, failing to support H3.3 and H5.3. Epistemic individualism was higher in participants feeling warmer towards QAnon ( $\beta = 0.24$  [0.06, 0.41],  $t(59.3) = 2.66$ ,  $p = 0.010$ ), supporting H4.3. In favor of H4.5 and H4.6, estimations of the informant's competence ( $\beta = 0.04$  [-0.13, 0.2],  $t(87) = 0.43$ ,  $p = 0.669$ ) and success rates ( $\beta = 0.0$  [-0.23, 0.23],  $t(32.2) = 0.0$ ,  $p = 0.997$ ) did not increase with participants' feelings towards QAnon

## S10: Correlation between all variables in study 2A (UK)

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Epistemic Individualism	4.00	1.23							
2. Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire	4.86	1.33	0.17**						
3. Conspiracy Beliefs	2.80	1.49	0.18**	0.71***					
4. Reliance on informant	2.47	1.98	-0.30***	-0.03	-0.13*				
5. Estimated self-competence	50.97	23.06	0.11	-0.10	-0.03	-0.23***			
6. Estimated informant competence	69.49	17.49	-0.10	-0.13*	-0.11	0.13*	0.37***		
7. Number of successes in the training phase	2.40	1.19	0.07	-0.07	-0.06	-0.26***	0.65***	0.21***	
8. Average Confidence in the training phase	2.19	0.77	0.06	0.12*	0.12*	-0.11	0.26***	0.08	0.20***

Supplementary Table 5: Mean response and correlations between the main measures, aggregating all samples in the first replication (UK sample).

(M = mean, SD = standard deviation, \* p < .05 \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001)

## S11 - Correlation between all variables in study 2B (US)

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Epistemic Individualism	4.07	1.26								
2. Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire	4.74	1.46	0.13*							
3. Conspiracy Beliefs	2.77	1.45	0.14*	0.73***						
4. Feelings towards QAnon	19.24	24.93	0.17*	0.27***	0.42***					
5. Reliance on informant	2.44	2.03	-0.35***	-0.10	-0.09	-0.03				
6. Estimated self-competence	50.22	23.72	-0.05	0.01	0.03	0.07	-0.32***			
7. Estimated informant competence	66.72	19.56	-0.18**	-0.11	-0.10	-0.07	0.16**	0.42***		
8. Number of successes in the training phase	2.34	1.17	-0.01	0.04	-0.05	0.01	-0.35***	0.64***	0.10	
9. Average Confidence in the training phase	2.26	0.85	0.07	0.11	-0.02	0.02	-0.27***	0.37***	0.23***	0.26***

Supplementary Table 6: Mean response and correlations between the main measures, aggregating all samples in the second replication (US sample).

(M = mean, SD = standard deviation, \* p < .05 \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001)

## S12 - Predictors of feelings towards QAnon in study 2B (US)

We could not find evidence in favour of any significant effect when imputing missing values for feelings towards QAnon using predictive mean matching, as pre-registered. This does not change our conclusions regarding participants' confidence ( $\beta = 0.02$  [-0.35, 0.38],  $t(17.1) = 0.1$ ,  $p = 0.921$ ), their estimation of the informant's competence ( $\beta = -0.08$  [-0.31, 0.16],  $t(32.4) = -0.69$ ,  $p = 0.498$ ) or their success in training ( $\beta = -0.01$  [-0.29, 0.28],  $t(23.5) = -0.04$ ,  $p = 0.967$ ). However, this means that we fail to replicate the relationship between feelings towards QAnon and epistemic individualism ( $\beta = 0.22$  [-0.08, 0.52],  $t(21.1) = 1.52$ ,  $p = 0.144$ ) or participants' estimation of their own competence ( $\beta = 0.06$  [-0.15, 0.28],  $t(39) = 0.57$ ,  $p = 0.570$  when imputing missing value).

## S13: Results of internal fixed-effect meta-analyses on predictors of conspiracism.

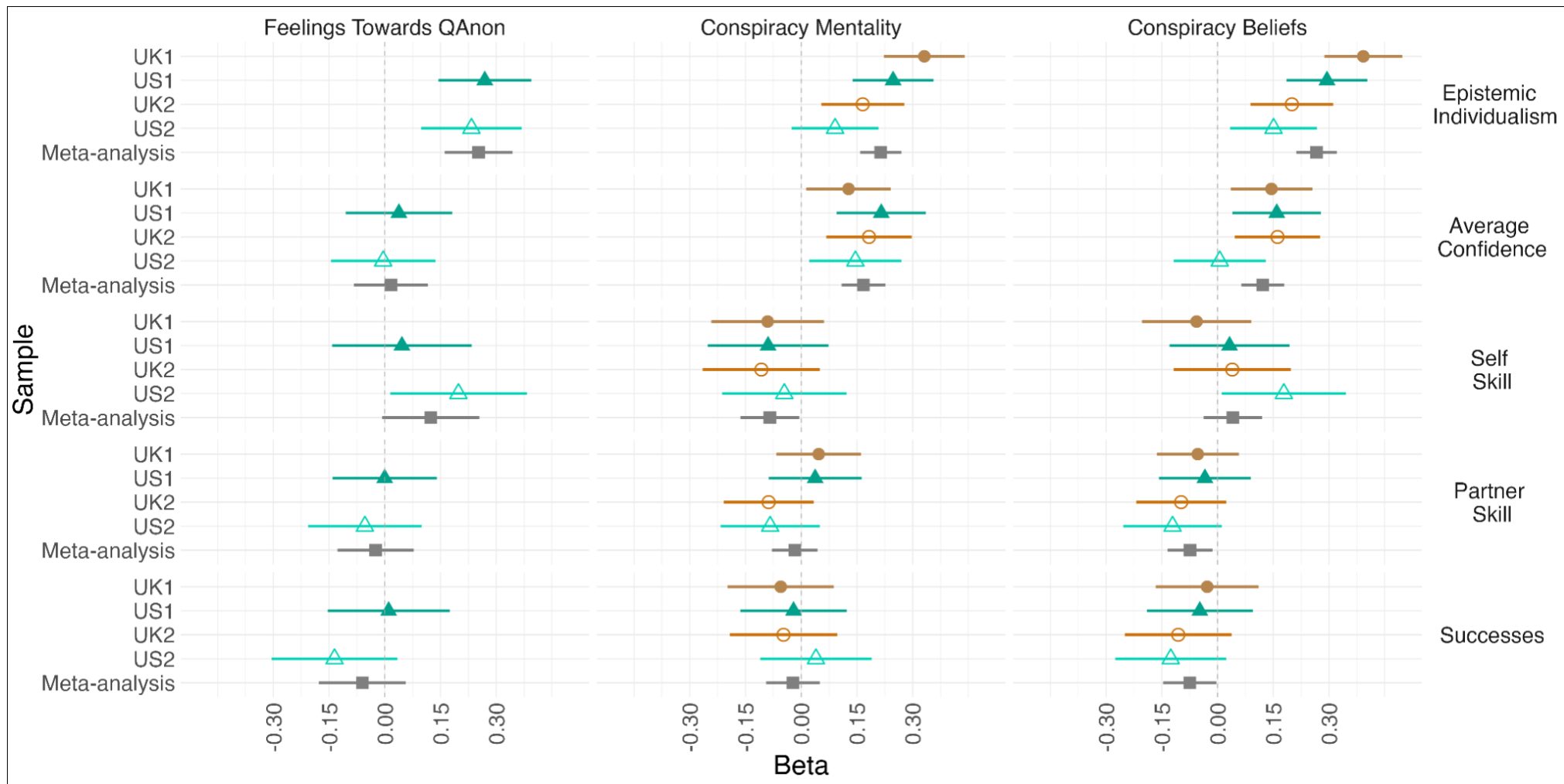
On the one hand, as mentioned in the main manuscript, fixed-effect meta-analyses mostly support the relationship between conspiracism and participants' score on the epistemic individualism scale and their average confidence in the training phase.

On the other hand, it offers inconsistent evidence regarding our hypotheses on the relationship between conspiracism and participants' estimation of their own competence, and their understanding of the paradigm (see Supplementary Figure 4).

Regarding the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire, we first find against our hypothesis that participants scoring higher on the conspiracy mentality questionnaire had significantly lower estimations of their own competence ( $\beta = -0.08 [-0.16, -0.00]$ ,  $z = -2.07$ ,  $p = 0.038$ ). In line with our expectations, we find no evidence that participants scoring higher on the conspiracy mentality questionnaire differed in their number of successes in the training phase ( $\beta = -0.02 [-0.09, 0.05]$ ,  $z = -0.60$ ,  $p = 0.548$ ), and we find no significant relationship between participants' score on the conspiracy mentality questionnaire and their evaluation of the informant ( $\beta = -0.02 [-0.08, 0.04]$ ,  $z = -0.55$ ,  $p = 0.580$ ).

Regarding participants' beliefs in conspiracy theories, we did not find a significant relationship between participants' conspiracism and their estimation of their own competence ( $\beta = 0.04 [-0.04, 0.12]$ ,  $z = 1.03$ ,  $p = 0.303$ ). Against our expectations, we find that participants scoring higher on the conspiracy beliefs scale are less likely to succeed in the training phase ( $\beta = -0.07 [-0.15, -0.00]$ ,  $z = -2.05$ ,  $p = 0.040$ ), and that participants scoring higher on the conspiracy beliefs scale evaluate the informant as less competent ( $\beta = -0.07 [-0.13, -0.01]$ ,  $z = -2.40$ ,  $p = 0.017$ ).

Regarding participants' feelings towards QAnon, we find a marginally significant relationship with participants' evaluation of their own competence ( $\beta = 0.12 [-0.01, 0.25]$ ,  $z = 1.86$ ,  $p = 0.063$ ). In line with our expectations, we find no significant relationship between participants' feelings towards Qanon and their number of successes in the training phase ( $\beta = -0.06 [-0.18, 0.06]$ ,  $z = -1.01$ ,  $p = 0.313$ ), nor with their evaluation of the informant ( $\beta = -0.02 [-0.13, 0.08]$ ,  $z = -0.47$ ,  $p = 0.637$ ).



Supplementary Figure 5: Results of fixed-effect meta-analyses on predictors of all measures of conspiracism, for the full sample.