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Exploring the Nexus between Conspiracy Beliefs and Creativity, Attitudes toward People, and Psychological Wellbeing: Insights from the 10th European Social Survey

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Abstract: Conspiracy beliefs can have a significant destructive impact on sustainable development. When individuals embrace conspiracy theories, it can result in social mistrust, polarization, and even harmful behaviors. Previous studies linked creativity to intelligence and fairly evidenced links between conspiracy beliefs and paranoid thinking and diminished psychological wellbeing. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the associations between conspiracy beliefs and creativity, negative attitudes toward people, and psychological wellbeing. Based on the data derived from the ESS10, several relationships using mediation and SEM analyses were disclosed. The study confirmed that positive attitudes toward people significantly negatively predict conspiracy beliefs and significantly positively predict psychological wellbeing and self-reported creativity, while psychological wellbeing significantly negatively predicts conspiracy beliefs and is a mediator in the links between attitudes toward people and conspiracy beliefs. The SEM model demonstrated an acceptable fit, χ^2 = 987.210; Df = 16; CFI = 0.989; TLI = 0.975; NFI = 0.989; RMSEA = 0.040 [0.038–0.042], SRMR = 0.039. The study supported the insights of A. Hon that "conspiracy theories thrive in the absence of trust". However, there are several avenues for future research to address potential limitations, including using more comprehensive scales, employing diverse research methods, controlling for confounding variables, or exploring potential moderating variables, such as personality traits or cultural factors.

Keywords: conspiracy beliefs; creativity; psychological wellbeing; European Social Survey

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1. Introduction

Conspiracy beliefs entail suppositions wherein multiple actors are believed to conspire covertly to attain concealed objectives characterized as unlawful or malevolent [1]. These beliefs are prevalent on a global scale and have received considerable focus in scholarly investigations [2,3].

Previous studies reported that beliefs in conspiracies are related to feelings of alienation, powerlessness, hostility, and being disadvantaged [4]. Research findings indicated that people believe in conspiracies not because they prefer simplified explanations of complex events [4], but because of delusionality, dogmatism, reduced analytic thinking [5], certain maladaptive personality traits [3,5,6], cognitive functions [5,7–12], loneliness [7], paranoia [13], anxious attachment [14], anxiety, uncertainty aversion, existential threat [15], narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy [16], avoidance coping [17], science rejection [18], socio-demographic factors [6], and socio-economic factors [19].

This study aimed to examine the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and creativity, attitudes toward people, and psychological wellbeing. Analyzing the links between these constructs is important for several reasons. Conspiracy beliefs can have a significant destructive impact on society and sustainable development [20], as when individuals embrace

conspiracy theories, it can lead to social mistrust [21], polarization [22], eroded relationships [23], and even harmful behaviors [21,24]. Therefore, the examination of conspiracy beliefs' predictors can help identify potential risks of being more vulnerable to conspirative thinking and, consequently, better understand the potential mechanisms for promotion of social cohesion and sustainable development through the targeted interventions and support systems addressing individual or collective vulnerabilities.

1.1. Conspiracy Beliefs

Conspiracy beliefs encompass the idea that individuals or groups engaging in conspiracies deliberately aim to deceive and manipulate those connected to, impacted by, or witnessing significant events, including but not limited to war, natural disasters, poverty, acts of terrorism, and similar occurrences [25,26]. Conspiracy beliefs can be specific or generic in their nature [3] and may incorporate pseudoscientific beliefs rejecting the well-established science [27].

Some conspiracy beliefs, such as a set of QAnon conspiracies, attract large groups of individuals (e.g., up to 45 million American adults) [28] although they are based on irrational ideas spreading through social media [29–31]: the idea of a "deep state" controlled by Satan-worshipping elites who run a global child sex-trafficking ring or the idea that there are malicious human–lizard hybrids living among humans, that COVID vaccines were tracking devices designed by Microsoft's Bill Gates to reduce the human population, etc. [32–38]. These beliefs negatively affect around 80% of those connected to QAnon believers [28], leading to emotional distress and threats of violence [39].

Conspiracy theories on climate change, e.g., that some secret forces are routinely spraying the planet with chemicals [40], might also lead to emotional distress. Moreover, conspiracy theories about climate change as a hoax, denying the human causes of climate change, which is not compatible with the scientific consensus [41], may lead to risky consequences in various sectors of the economy in relation to sustainable development: fear of open innovations and their contradictory perception, concerns about the implementation of diversity policy [42], education for sustainable development goals [43].

Numerous studies have reported that conspiracy beliefs are often held by individuals who feel disconnected from society [44]; unhappy [45,46]; have a subjective worldview that includes unusual beliefs, experiences, and thoughts; and do not perceive themselves as being in control of their lives [47–49]. Previous studies also documented that conspiracy beliefs could be related to cognitive biases and information processing errors [25,50] and highlighted the potential real-world impact of conspiracy theories on people's perceptions and behaviors [51] and the monological nature of conspiracy beliefs, where belief in one conspiracy theory is associated with belief in others [52]. Some research even revealed that individuals can simultaneously believe in contradictory conspiracy theories and suggested that cognitive processes may play a role in accepting conflicting conspiracy narratives [53].

On the whole, conspiracy beliefs are a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, and psychological profiles of individuals who are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories have been the subject of extensive research. The recurring findings indicated that individuals are more receptive to conspiracy theories due to anomie and alienation from mainstream society, as conspiracy theories may provide an explanation for perceived injustices or a sense of belonging to an alternative worldview [4]. People with a strong need for certainty and closure as well as those who are more inclined toward existential thinking (contemplating the meaning of life) may be more likely to endorse conspiracy theories as a way to make sense of a chaotic world or to feel more secure [11].

Conspiracy believers usually have a low level of trust in government institutions, the media, or other authorities and embrace conspiracy theories as alternative explanations for events or situations [54]. Research also suggests that people who exhibit a tendency to see patterns or make connections between unrelated events [55] or people on the political extremes, whether left or right, are more likely to endorse conspiracy theories that align with their beliefs [13]. Those who strongly identify with a particular social, political, or

cultural group may be more prone to conspiracy beliefs that reinforce the group's narratives or victimization [56], and some individuals may turn to conspiracy theories as a way to cope with feelings of uncertainty or to gain a sense of control [55].

The likelihood of conspiracy beliefs can increase because of exposure to conspiracy theories through media or alternative sources [5], as well as economic inequality [19], but as beliefs in conspiracy theories are consequential, universal, emotional, and social [57], a better understanding of the psychological conditions or predictors of conspiracy beliefs could viably lead to targeted prevention schemes and interventions to reduce the harmful effects of the conspiracy mindset and reach sustainable development goals [58].

Neuroscientist and experimental psychologist Adrian Hon proposed a unique perspective on the game-like nature of QAnon conspiracies. He suggested that conspiracies, like games, involve a process of discovery, where one revelation leads to the next, forming supposedly interconnected data to construct elaborate narratives. This process is deeply pleasurable and rewarding and motivates individuals to become more engaged. It also encourages them to explain any errors with new stories and theories, blurring the line between creator and player/believer. Those with special creativity, especially if they feel unrecognized elsewhere, may perceive themselves as valued contributors in the realm of stories. They suspect the "appearance of innocence" and "spot" that nothing happens by accident or coincidence, believing that everything is connected through a hidden pattern [59].

Based on the possible intersection of conspiratorial and creative thinking, this study aimed at examining factors that were fairly evidenced by previous studies as contributing to a conspiracy mindset: creativity, attitudes toward people, and psychological wellbeing.

1.2. Creativity

Creativity has historically been considered an exceptional quality that only a few people possess [60], a cognitive or personality trait 'located' inside the mind of the creative individual [61,62], but there is a growing interest in understanding creativity as a sociocultural phenomenon [63], and some studies imply possible links between creativity and conspiracy beliefs [64].

Although creativity is an important aspect of human cognition, the role of creativity in the conspiracy mindset is under-researched [65]. The findings of research on cognitive processes indirectly suggest that creativity can be channeled into imaginative conspiracy beliefs. Recent research investigated whether the feeling of lacking control (vs. control) can foster creative thinking and evidenced that a sense of a lack of control fosters illusory pattern perception, superstition, and conspiracy beliefs [66]. Researchers operationalized creative thinking as the ability to produce associative and dissociative combinations of either related or unrelated concepts, and their results showed that compensatory processes, triggered by experiencing a lack of control, can promote divergent thinking, i.e., a perceived lack of control might also promote creativity [66].

However, previous research also evidenced that creativity and intelligence are strongly positively related, even overlapping constructs [67–69], while the links between conspiracy beliefs and intelligence have proven to be negative [70]. Therefore, this study aimed to examine whether creativity is negatively linked to conspiracy beliefs. Understanding how creativity relates to conspiracy beliefs can provide insights into the cognitive processes that underlie the expansion of conspiracy theories which might have a harmful effect on sustainable development. Moreover, although the links between conspiracy beliefs and negative attitudes toward people were well documented in previous research [13,54,71–74], it has not been established whether creativity can function as a mediator yet.

1.3. Attitudes toward People

Attitudes toward others are one of the most researched constructs in the social sciences [75–80]. Extensive research demonstrated the effects of positive attitudes toward others [81,82] as well as the effects of negative ones [83–85].

Negative attitudes toward others can manifest in various ways, and they may be indicative of different psychological processes and social phenomena, including discrimination, prejudice, bias, stereotyping, and hostility toward individuals or groups based on numerous features, such as race, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, political affiliation, or even conspiracy beliefs.

Research findings indicate that negative attitudes might result from prejudice and biased and unfavorable opinions about individuals or groups, leading to real-world disparities and inequalities [86–88]. Previous studies reported the existence of implicit biases, which are automatic, subconscious attitudes and stereotypes that impact on judgments and behaviors, and even individuals who consciously reject prejudice may exhibit implicit biases, which reveals the complexity of negative attitudes [89].

Negative attitudes toward people might encompass various beliefs resulting in, e.g., mistrust in people: the belief that people cannot be trusted, the belief that most people would try to take advantage, or the belief that people mostly look out for themselves. Some studies demonstrated that psychological factors such as insecurity, fear, and low self-esteem can contribute to negative attitudes toward others [90,91], and individuals may project their insecurities onto humankind or different groups, leading to hostility or resentment. Furthermore, recent research revealed that conformity to a specific group norm can lead to the adoption of negative attitudes toward others or the reinforcement of existing biases [92,93]. On the whole, the causes and consequences of negative attitudes toward others are multifaceted and context-dependent. Recent studies provide evidence of the links between negative attitudes toward people and conspiracy beliefs, yet this area remains underexplored. A deeper analysis of these links is significant as it would help better understand the underlying mechanisms and societal implications of negative attitudes, ultimately contributing to efforts to reduce prejudice, discrimination, and hostility in society and to promote sustainable wellbeing [94].

1.4. Psychological Wellbeing

Psychological wellbeing is a multidimensional concept that encompasses emotional and cognitive aspects and reflects the individual's perceived quality of life or life satisfaction [95,96] and the balance of positive and negative emotional experiences [97,98]. Recent research focuses on different aspects of psychological wellbeing. The emotional wellbeing aspect concentrates on an individual's day-to-day emotional experiences, including overall happiness or the frequency and intensity of positive emotions (e.g., joy, happiness, gratitude) as well as the management and reduction of negative emotions (e.g., sadness, anxiety, anger), and a lot of recent studies focused on emotional wellbeing [99–103]. The cognitive aspect concentrates on life satisfaction, which is a cognitive component of wellbeing and pertains to an individual's overall evaluation of their life as a whole as well as the assessment of one's life circumstances, achievements, and the extent to which life goals and values are being met [96]. Some studies also focus on the eudemonic [104] wellbeing, which is rooted in the concept of self-realization and personal growth, and some focus on positive psychological functioning dimension, which encompasses various positive psychological traits and strengths, such as resilience, optimism, self-esteem, and a sense of autonomy [105]. Recent studies indicate that psychological wellbeing is also linked to the quality of an individual's social relationships and interactions, including social support, connectedness, and social capital, but it can also vary across cultures and contexts [106–109].

As psychological wellbeing is a complex construct, recent research frequently takes a holistic approach, recognizing that wellbeing reflects a combination of emotional, cognitive, social, and cultural factors. Analyzing the links between psychological wellbeing and conspiracy beliefs is significant because individuals who strongly believe in conspiracy theories may experience lower emotional wellbeing: higher levels of anxiety and distress [73]. Conspiracy beliefs can lead to tangible real-world consequences, affecting cognitions, emotions, and behaviors [73,110]. Therefore, a better understanding of the links

between psychological wellbeing and conspiracy beliefs can inform the development of mental health interventions, policies and educational programs aimed at countering the spread of misinformation and promoting media literacy, critical thinking, evidence-based decision-making, healthy skepticism, and sustainable wellbeing.

1.5. Present Study

An examination of the links between conspiracy beliefs and creativity, negative attitudes toward people, and psychological wellbeing is significant for understanding the broader societal and individual antecedents of conspiratorial thinking, as it can inform efforts to mitigate the conspiracy mentality and promote a more informed, rational, and cohesive society, which is one of the sustainable development goals [111].

The literature regarding predictors of conspiracy beliefs can be categorized into several approaches: one with a pathological emphasis (e.g., paranoia) and another with a socio-cultural (socio-political) focus (e.g., perceived powerlessness) [3]. However, a third factor of conspiracy predictors has gained considerable attention, particularly in the context of QAnon-related conspiracies in the United States [33,34,37,38,112]. As mentioned, Adrian Hon suggested that conspiracy theories function similarly to games or puzzles, attracting individuals through the appeal of solving a mysterious puzzle. Similar to games, conspiracy theories inherently demand imagination, and they can attract creative individuals who are eager to solve mysteries [59].

This study partly combines several approaches, as negative attitudes toward people can be considered a pathological aspect; next, psychological wellbeing and creativity can be characterized as a socio-cultural phenomenon [63], and creativity can also be considered a conspiracy "game-fueling" phenomenon [59].

By studying the predictors of conspiracy beliefs, it is possible to gain insights into the potential risks of susceptibility to such beliefs and to design specific interventions (aimed at promoting critical thinking skills or improving psychological wellbeing) and targeted education programs potentially preventing individuals from falling deeper into conspiracy thinking. As previous studies demonstrated that conspiracy beliefs can sometimes lead to actions that are harmful to public health or safety [6,16,24,110,113], identifying individuals at risk of embracing such beliefs can inform public health measures and crisis management strategies.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the links between conspiracy beliefs and creativity, negative attitudes toward people, and psychological wellbeing. This analysis could inform a wide range of interventions, policies, and educational strategies aimed at countering the spread of conspiracy schemes and contribute to the further development of psychological theories that explain the formation and persistence of conspiracy mentality, which, in turn, can lead to more effective models for understanding and addressing conspiracy beliefs.

The hypothesized links between conspiracy beliefs and creativity, attitudes toward people, and psychological wellbeing are presented in Figure 1.

Based on previous research, several hypotheses (H) were formulated:

H1: *Positive attitudes toward people are expected to predict conspiracy beliefs significantly negatively.*

H2: *Positive attitudes toward people are expected to predict psychological wellbeing significantly positively.*

H3: *Psychological wellbeing is expected to predict conspiracy beliefs significantly negatively.*

H4: *Positive attitudes toward people are expected to predict creativity significantly positively.*

H5: *Creativity is expected to predict conspiracy beliefs significantly negatively.*

H6: *The relationship between positive attitudes toward people and conspiracy beliefs will be significantly partially mediated by the mediator psychological wellbeing.*

H7: *The relationship between positive attitudes toward people and conspiracy beliefs will be significantly partially mediated by mediator creativity.*

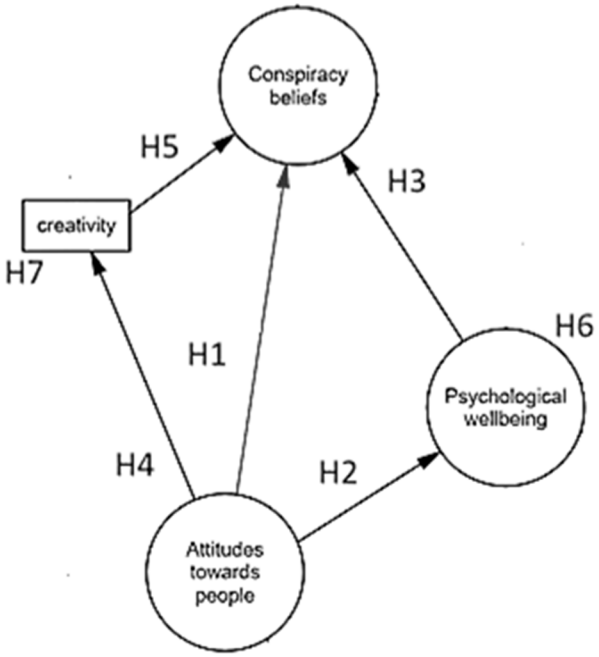

Figure 1. Model of associations between conspiracy beliefs and creativity, attitudes toward people, and psychological wellbeing.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. The Sample

This study applied the data of the European Social Survey round 10, which was a multinational, cross-sectional survey conducted in 2020. The ESS study aims to analyze and portray the evolution and persistence of social structures, conditions, and attitudes across Europe. Additionally, it seeks to provide an interpretation of the landscape in Europe's social, political, and ethical dimensions. The data were retrieved from the ESS10 database in September 2023 at https://doi.org/10.21338/ess10e03_1 accessed on 1 October 2023, and included the following countries: Belgium (n = 1341), Bulgaria (n = 2718), Switzerland (n = 1523), Czechia (n = 2476), Estonia (n = 1542), Finland (n = 1577), France (n = 1977), United Kingdom (n = 1149), Greece (n = 2799), Croatia (n = 1592), Hungary (n = 1849), Ireland (n = 1770), Iceland (n = 903), Italy (n = 2640), Lithuania (n = 1659), Montenegro (n = 1278), North Macedonia (n = 1429), Netherlands (n = 1470), Norway (n = 1411), Portugal (n = 1838), Slovenia (n = 1252), and Slovakia (n = 1418), total n = 37,611. Genders of females (n = 20,148, 53.6%) and males (n = 17,463, 46.4%) were almost equally represented. Almost half of the participants preferred not to disclosure their legal marital status (47.2%), and almost one third of the respondents (30.1%) were never married or in a legal civil union. The age of the participants ranged from 15 to 90, and the mean age in the total sample was almost 51 years old. All participating countries used some variant of probability sampling (simple, stratified, or multistage) to collect the data. Interviews were administered in local languages. The data collection modes were a face-to-face interview, computer-assisted interview, or paper-and-pencil interview, and it took about one hour to complete.

2.2. Measures

To analyze the links between conspiracy beliefs and creativity, attitudes toward people, and psychological wellbeing, several parts of core modules of ESS10 were used:

Conspiracy beliefs were assessed using two items of section K: "A small secret group of people is responsible for making all major decisions in world politics" and "Groups of scientists manipulate, fabricate, or suppress evidence in order to deceive the public". The respondents were asked how much they agree or disagree with these statements and had to choose an answer on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (Agree strongly) to 5 (Disagree strongly). In the data analysis, the answers were reversed. These items in the ESS10 data protocol were coded as 'secgrdec' and 'scidecpb'. Cronbach's alpha for these 2 items in the total study sample was 0.763.

Creativity was assessed using 1 item of section H (Schwartz human value scale). The respondents were given the following instruction: "Now I will briefly describe some people. Please listen to each description and tell me how much each person is or is not like you". The item to evaluate creativity was the following: "Thinking up new ideas and being creative is important to him. He likes to do things in his own original way". The respondents had to choose a response on a 6-point Likert scale from 1 (Very much like me) to 6 (Not like me at all). For the descriptive and SEM analyses, the reversed values were applied. Self-reported creativity item in the ESS10 data protocol was coded as 'ipcrtiv'.

Attitudes toward people were assessed using three questions of Section A: "Would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?", "Do you think that most people would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance, or would they try to be fair?", "Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful or that they are mostly looking out for themselves?". In this study, negative attitudes toward people encompassed: (1) the belief that people cannot be trusted, (2) the belief that most people would try to take advantage, and (3) the belief that people mostly look out for themselves. The respondents had to choose one of the answers on a 10-point Likert scale from 0 ("You can't be too careful", "Most people would try to take advantage of me", "People mostly look out for themselves") to 10 points ("Most people can be trusted", "Most people would try to be fair", "People mostly try to be helpful"). These items in the ESS10 data protocol were coded as 'ppltrst', 'pplfair', 'pplhlp'. Cronbach's alpha for these 3 items in the sample was 0.815.

Psychological wellbeing was assessed using two questions: to assess the cognitive aspect of psychological wellbeing, one item of section B was applied: "All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays?". The respondents were asked to choose one of the answers on a 10-point Likert scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means "extremely dissatisfied" and 10 means "extremely satisfied". To assess the emotional aspect of psychological wellbeing, one item of section C was applied: "Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are?". The respondents were asked to choose one of the answers on a 10-point Likert scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means "extremely unhappy" and 10 means "extremely happy". These items in the ESS10 data protocol were coded as 'stflife' and 'happy'. Cronbach's alpha for these 2 items in the study sample was 0.817.

2.3. Statistical Analysis

SPSS v.26.0, AMOS v.26.0, and JASP v. 0.14.1.0 software was used to analyze the data. JASP software was used for descriptives and mediation analysis [114], AMOS was used for structural equation modeling (SEM) [115], and SPSS was used for the rest of the analyses applied [116].

In SEM, model fit was evaluated based on the CFI (Comparative Fit Index), the Tucker–Lewis's coefficient (TLI), the normed fit index (NFI), RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error of Approximation), and SRMR (Standardized Root Mean Square Residual), and the χ^2 was used for descriptive purposes [117]. The values higher than 0.90 for CFI and TLI and values lower than 0.08 for RMSEA and SRMR were considered indicative of a good fit; *p*-values less than 0.05 were considered to be statistically significant [118,119].

3. Results

Means and standard deviations of conspiracy beliefs, psychological wellbeing, attitudes toward people, creativity, and age, by country, are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptives (means and standard deviations) of conspiracy beliefs, psychological wellbeing, attitudes toward people, creativity, and age by country.

Country	Conspiracy Beliefs M (SD)	Psychological Wellbeing M (SD)	Attitudes toward People M (SD)	Creativity M (SD)	Age M (SD)
Belgium	3.3385 (0.99385)	7.6975 (1.48649)	5.5691 (1.50275)	4.5506 (1.12566)	48.99 (19.121)
Bulgaria	2.4926 (0.99192)	6.1461 (2.25678)	3.7108 (2.15445)	4.2971 (1.29898)	52.68 (18.256)
Switzerland	3.6641 (1.00822)	8.1924 (1.36710)	6.1857 (1.58203)	4.7723 (1.07213)	49.59 (18.862)
Czechia	3.2625 (1.20930)	7.0027 (1.78882)	5.3251 (2.22638)	4.2614 (1.30735)	48.30 (17.719)
Estonia	3.2652 (1.02585)	7.4779 (1.60990)	5.6669 (1.68398)	4.0084 (1.28026)	51.65 (18.566)
Finland	3.7368 (0.93985)	8.1376 (1.37971)	6.7954 (1.49186)	4.3239 (1.22643)	52.61 (19.323)
France		7.2341 (1.77759)	5.1403 (1.55006)	4.3875 (1.30031)	49.54 (18.722)
United Kingdom	3.4573 (0.98742)	7.1866 (1.94146)	5.7568 (1.70321)	4.4239 (1.32010)	55.71 (18.292)
Greece	3.3097 (1.06698)	6.4723 (1.49313)	4.4253 (1.68675)	4.4986 (1.30594)	50.38 (16.974)
Croatia	2.7403 (0.89069)	7.3998 (2.01518)	4.7579 (2.09798)	4.2709 (1.38570)	50.26 (18.780)
Hungary	3.0408 (1.02124)	6.8720 (1.80489)	4.8519 (1.98411)	4.3559 (1.12429)	50.49 (18.768)
Ireland	3.2957 (1.04854)	7.4849 (1.63233)	6.0624 (1.77404)	4.4269 (1.27734)	53.46 (18.283)
Iceland	3.4094 (0.85083)	8.0569 (1.52732)	6.8035 (1.47942)	4.2483 (1.26642)	50.14 (18.774)
Italy	3.3960 (1.04483)	7.0142 (1.63916)	4.8649 (1.78679)	4.5014 (1.09679)	51.59 (18.690)
Lithuania	3.1992 (0.96209)	6.8968 (2.08096)	5.1715 (2.06412)	4.0508 (1.43161)	51.42 (18.126)
Montenegro		7.2542 (1.87905)	3.8456 (2.22558)	4.4952 (1.22343)	47.06 (17.665)
North Macedonia	2.4486 (0.94422)	6.5295 (2.19128)	3.4673 (2.13599)	4.3489 (1.26692)	51.45 (17.627)
Netherlands	3.6946 (0.99640)	7.9080 (1.26613)	6.4111 (1.34083)	4.5866 (1.09840)	48.62 (18.502)
Norway	3.8222 (0.90587)	7.8207 (1.57462)	6.7248 (1.45960)	4.3549 (1.21852)	47.31 (18.165)
Portugal	2.8792 (0.91242)	6.8612 (1.87279)	4.2805 (1.77986)	4.3519 (1.18467)	54.05 (18.467)
Slovenia	2.8156 (0.90656)	7.6659 (1.70694)	5.0876 (1.85198)	4.7846 (1.07374)	49.41 (18.985)
Slovakia	3.0046 (1.10796)	6.3960 (1.95506)	4.2501 (2.20290)	4.2282 (1.31671)	53.07 (16.759)
Total	3.2041 (1.07682)	7.1643 (1.86046)	5.1243 (2.07330)	4.3850 (1.25523)	50.85 (18.413)

As demonstrated in Table 1, the prevalence of conspiracy beliefs is highest in Norway and lowest in North Macedonia. Psychological wellbeing rates are highest in Switzerland and lowest in Bulgaria. Attitudes toward people are most negative in North Macedonia and most positive in Iceland. Self-reported creativity rates are highest in Slovenia and Switzerland and lowest in Estonia and Lithuania. It is important to note that the mean age of the sample was 50.85 (18.413), so these findings should not be generalized for other age groups.

The correlations between conspiracy beliefs, psychological wellbeing, attitudes toward people, creativity, and age are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Pearson correlation of conspiracy beliefs and psychological wellbeing, attitudes toward people, creativity, and age.

	Psychological Wellbeing	Conspiracy Beliefs	Self-Reported Creativity	Age
Attitudes toward people	0.328 **	−0.280 **	0.035 **	−0.017 **
Psychological wellbeing	1	−0.192 **	0.158 **	−0.114 **
Conspiracy beliefs		1	0.010	0.059 **
Self-reported creativity			1	−0.162 **

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

As evident from Table 2, positive attitudes toward people significantly positively correlated to psychological wellbeing, weakly positively correlated to self-reported creativity, and significantly negatively correlated to conspiracy beliefs and age. Psychological

wellbeing significantly negatively correlated to conspiracy beliefs and age and positively correlated to self-reported creativity. Age significantly positively related to conspiracy beliefs. No significant links between self-reported creativity and conspiracy beliefs were identified.

Furthermore, a multiple linear regression analysis was performed using conspiracy beliefs as the criterion and attitudes toward people, psychological wellbeing, and creativity as predictors (enter method). The results of the multiple regression analysis in the total sample and samples of females and males separately are displayed in Table 3.

Significant regression equations were found in the total sample (F (3, 30,562) = 1029.329, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.092$) and the samples of females (F (3, 16,103) = 483.299, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.082$) and males (F (3, 14,455) = 555.085, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.103$) separately. In the sample of females, conspiracy beliefs were equal to 3.659–0.056 (psychological wellbeing) −0.121 (attitudes toward people) + 0.038 (self-reported creativity) points. Conspiracy beliefs in the sample of females decreased 0.056 points for each psychological wellbeing point and 0.121 points for each attitude toward people point and increased 0.038 points for each self-reported creativity point. Psychological wellbeing (B = −0.056, $p < 0.001$) and attitudes toward people (B = −0.121, $p < 0.001$) contributed significantly negatively to the model, and self-reported creativity contributed significantly positively (B = 0.038, $p < 0.001$) to the model, and all these variables were significant predictors of conspiracy beliefs in the female group. Similar tendencies with slight differences were observed in the group of males: conspiracy beliefs were equal to 4.015–0.079 (psychological wellbeing) −0.138 (attitudes toward people) + 0.019 (self-reported creativity) points. Conspiracy beliefs in the sample of males decreased 0.079 points for each psychological wellbeing point and 0.138 points for each attitude toward people point and increased 0.019 points for each self-reported creativity point. Psychological wellbeing (B = −0.079, $p < 0.001$) and attitudes toward people (B = −0.138, $p < 0.001$) contributed significantly negatively to the model, and self-reported creativity contributed significantly positively (B = 0.019, $p < 0.001$) to the model; these were significant predictors of conspiracy beliefs in the female group. Overall, in the total sample, and the samples of males and females separately, attitudes toward people, psychological wellbeing, and creativity contributed significantly to the model and were significant predictors of conspiracy beliefs. Positive attitudes toward people and psychological wellbeing predicted significantly decreased conspiracy beliefs while self-reported creativity predicted just a very slight increase in conspiracy beliefs.

To test the hypotheses and to examine different aspects of the associations between the study variables, a structural equation modelling (SEM) analysis was conducted. Applying the SEM methodology is advantageous as it tests whether the theoretical structural relationships between the constructs are meaningful and significant. In this study, the covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM) methodology was applied, as the research required a global goodness-of-fit criterion and there were less than 5 constructs to explore.

The standardized results of the model are presented in Figure 2. Findings revealed that the fit of the model was good: $\chi^2 = 987.210$; Df = 16; CFI = 0.989; TLI = 0.975; NFI = 0.989; RMSEA = 0.040 [0.038–0.042], SRMR = 0.039.

Table 3. The multiple regression models in the total sample and the samples of males and females separately: the dependent variable is conspiracy beliefs, and the predictors are attitudes toward people, psychological wellbeing, and creativity.

Conspiracy Beliefs	Predictors/Models	UnstandCoeff.	Standardized Coefficients		*t*	Sig.	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	F	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta							
Total sample	(Constant)	3.823	0.031		124.060	0.000	0.303	0.092	0.092	1029.329 (3, 30,562)	<0.001
	Psychological wellbeing	−0.067	0.003	−0.113	−19.348	0.000					
	Attitudes toward people	−0.129	0.003	−0.247	−42.622	0.000					
	Self-reported creativity	0.029	0.005	0.034	6.127	0.000					
Females	(Constant)	3.659	0.041		88.538	0.000	0.287	0.083	0.082	483.299 (3, 16,103)	<0.001
	Psychological wellbeing	−0.056	0.005	−0.098	−12.139	0.000					
	Attitudes toward people	−0.121	0.004	−0.238	−29.724	0.000					
	Self-reported creativity	0.038	0.006	0.046	5.985	0.000					
Males	(Constant)	4.015	0.046		87.069	0.000	0.321	0.103	0.103	555.085 (3, 14,455)	<0.001
	Psychological wellbeing	−0.079	0.005	−0.130	−15.346	0.000					
	Attitudes toward people	−0.138	0.005	−0.256	−30.634	0.000					
	Self-reported creativity	0.019	0.007	0.021	2.614	0.009					

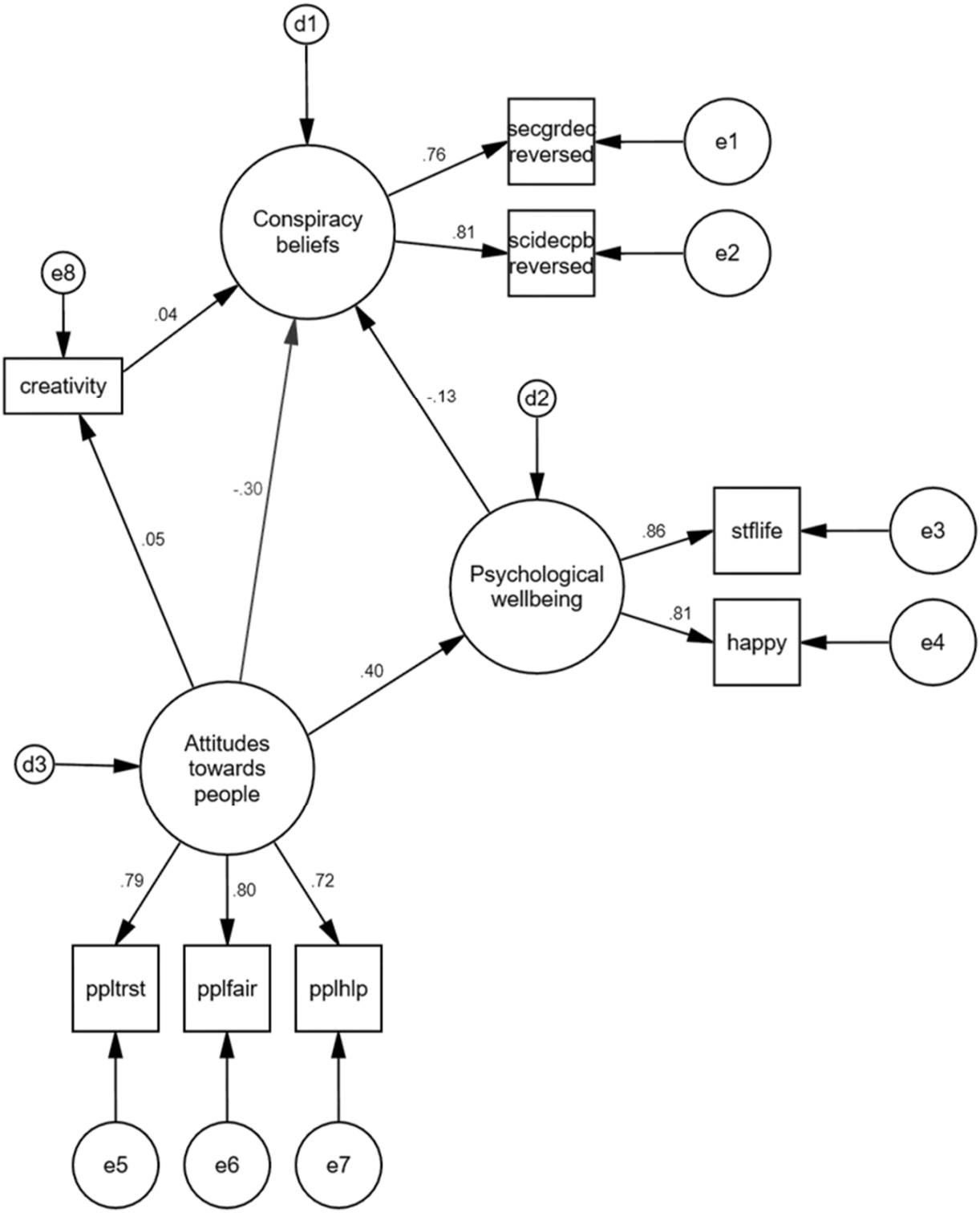

Figure 2. Standardized results on the model of associations between conspiracy beliefs and creativity, attitudes toward people, and psychological wellbeing.

The estimates of the model of associations between the study variables are displayed in Table 4.

The SEM findings suggested that attitudes toward people play an essential role in conspiracy beliefs. Therefore, H1, which assumed that positive attitudes toward people predict conspiracy beliefs significantly negatively, was confirmed. The results also confirmed H2, which presumed that positive attitudes toward people predict psychological wellbeing

significantly positively, and H3, which stated that psychological wellbeing would predict conspiracy beliefs significantly negatively. Next, the findings to some extent confirmed H4, which assumed that positive attitudes toward people would predict self-reported creativity significantly positively. However, H5, which presumed that creativity would predict conspiracy beliefs significantly negatively, as well as H7, which assumed that the relationship between positive attitudes toward people and conspiracy beliefs will be significantly partially mediated by the mediator creativity in the model, were not confirmed. Nevertheless, the findings indicated that H6, which presumed that psychological wellbeing would function as a mediator in the links between attitudes toward people and conspiracy beliefs, could be confirmed.

Table 4. Scalar estimates of the model of associations between conspiracy beliefs and creativity, attitudes toward people, and psychological wellbeing.

Regression			B	S.E.	C.R.	*p*	β
Attitudes toward people	→	Self-reported creativity (R)	0.038	0.004	9.136	<0.001	0.052
Attitudes toward people	→	Psychological wellbeing	0.416	0.007	60.236	<0.001	0.400
Psychological wellbeing	→	Conspiracy beliefs	−0.065	0.004	−16.446	<0.001	−0.127
Self-reported creativity (R)	→	Conspiracy beliefs	0.030	0.005	6.613	<0.001	0.040
Attitudes toward people	→	Conspiracy beliefs	−0.160	0.004	−36.091	<0.001	−0.301
Conspiracy beliefs	→	Consp1 (secgrdecR)	1.000				0.763
Conspiracy beliefs	→	Consp2 (scidecpbR)	1.011	0.019	54.353	<0.001	0.805
Attitudes toward people	→	pplhlp	1.000				0.724
Attitudes toward people	→	pplfair	1.073	0.008	129.641	<0.001	0.801
Attitudes toward people	→	ppltrst	1.152	0.009	129.250	<0.001	0.792
Psychological wellbeing	→	stflife	1.000				0.859
Psychological wellbeing	→	happy	0.862	0.011	77.813	<0.001	0.809

To additionally examine the findings on the links between attitudes toward people, psychological wellbeing, and conspiracy beliefs, an additional mediation analysis was applied. The outcome variable for the mediation analysis was conspiracy beliefs; the predictor was positive attitudes toward people, and the mediator variable was psychological wellbeing. The mediation analysis results indicating the role of psychological wellbeing are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Mediation analysis results: the role of psychological wellbeing.

Paths			Coeff.	Std. Error	z-Value	*p*	95 = % CI Lower	Upper
			Direct effects					
Attitudes toward people→	Conspiracy beliefs		−0.127	0.003	−42.218	0.000	−0.132	−0.121
			Indirect effects					
Attitudes toward people→	Psychological wellbeing→	Conspiracy beliefs	−0.019	0.001	−18.492	0.000	−0.021	−0.017
			Total effects					
Attitudes toward people→	Conspiracy beliefs		−0.146	0.003	−51.372	0.000	−0.151	−0.140
Conspiracy beliefs R^2 = 0.084; Psychological wellbeing R^2 = 0.209.								

Note. Delta method standard errors, normal theory confidence intervals, ML estimator.

As demonstrated in Table 5, the indirect effects of psychological wellbeing on conspiracy beliefs were statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). Attitudes toward people significantly predicted psychological wellbeing, which predicted conspiracy beliefs, and the total effect was also significant ($p < 0.001$). The path plot is presented in Figure 3.

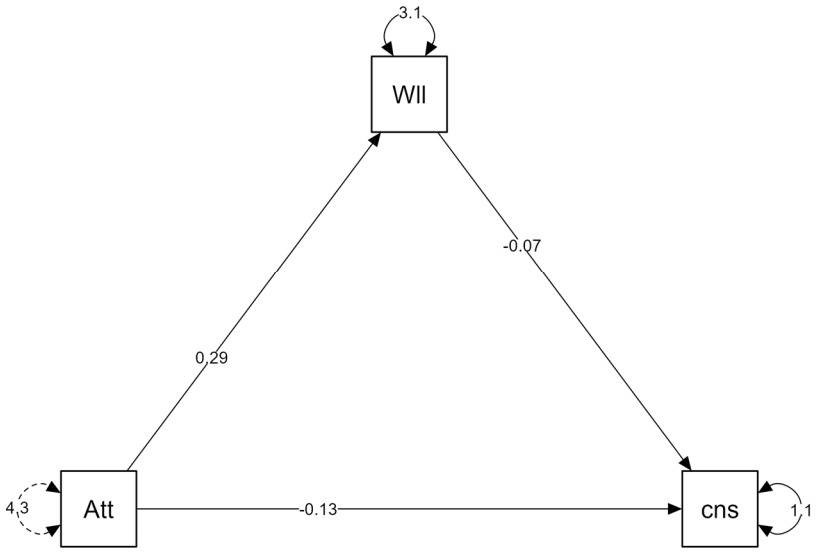

Figure 3. Path plot for the mediation analysis results. Att: Attitudes toward people; Wll: Psychological wellbeing; cns: Conspiracy beliefs; $p < 0.001$.

To sum up, the results indicated that conspiracy beliefs and creativity, attitudes toward people, and psychological wellbeing are inter-related constructs, yet their links need further investigation.

4. Discussion

This study targeted one of the concerns of modern societies worldwide: conspiracy beliefs, which might have a harmful effect on the implementation of sustainable development goals [120]. Numerous studies have evidenced that conspiracy beliefs might lead to destructive consequences for individuals and groups. They can promote social isolation [121], polarization, conflicts [122], stigmatization [123,124], victimization, and even violence [124,125]. The consequences of conspiracy beliefs are far away opposite to the directions pointed out by national and international organizations and documents reaching out for a better future for all [43,126–128].

However, conspiracy beliefs are a multi-faceted phenomenon, fueled by the society itself which they consequently affect. Societal challenges, threats, economic inequality, lack of social cohesion, political crises, armed conflicts, uncertainty, and other factors in innumerous combinations with individual and cultural dimensions channel ways to conspirative mindset. Is there any promise to break the vicious cycle? This study, along with many studies [129–133] conducted in the past, proposes the way out.

The insights based on the data of more than thirty thousand respondents from the 10th European Social Survey in 22 countries are as follows. First, and most importantly, conspiracy beliefs are linked to attitudes toward people. Positive attitudes toward people significantly contribute to the decrease in conspiracy beliefs, while negative attitudes toward people are one of the significant predictors of an increase in conspiracy beliefs. These findings align with many previous studies [71,134,135], but there is no blame for conspiracy believers. The findings suggest collective responsibility for what every single member of society experiences. Furthermore, it indirectly reminds us that a truly compassionate approach toward others, inclusiveness, and social cohesion, depicted in the sustainable development goals, can contribute to the minimization of conspiratorial thinking.

Much previous research evidenced that people are more prone to conspiracy beliefs when they are under threat [15] or feel themselves alienated [4]. The findings of the ESS10 indicated that people are less prone to conspiracy beliefs when they think that people are fair, careful, and can be trusted. Presumably, belief in a "good world" is based on real-life experiences, i.e., it implies trustful and compassionate relationships encountered. Interestingly, the study findings also linked attitudes toward people and psychological

wellbeing, which suggest that emotional states depend on what people perceive and, apparently, experience. Previous research revealed that individuals can accurately recognize a compassionate approach [136–138]; therefore, could it be supposed that global compassion [139], compassionate healthcare ("compassionomics") [140,141], compassionate education [142,143], or compassionate policies [144] are ways to less conspiracies in the world and the better future for all?

Next, the findings of the ESS10 suggested that conspiracy beliefs are linked to psychological wellbeing. High psychological wellbeing significantly contributed to the decrease in conspiracy beliefs, while low psychological wellbeing was one of the significant predictors of increase in conspiracy beliefs. These findings add to other studies, which revealed links between conspiracy beliefs and believer's emotional states or mental health [15,17,73,110,145]. The results indicate the importance of mental health and psychological wellbeing promotion programs to reduce the proneness to conspiracy beliefs. The implementation of the sustainable development goals, which reflect a true care for quality of life of individuals and societies, may significantly add not only to a more sustainable future, but also to less endorsement for conspiracies in the world.

Furthermore, the data of the ESS10 suggested that the role of creativity for conspiracy beliefs cannot be clearly defined. In this study, self-reported creativity was to some extent positively associated with attitudes toward people, which can be explained through self-esteem mechanisms [146,147]. However, in this study, creativity was extremely slightly but still positively linked to conspiracy beliefs, which is in line with some of the previous research [66,148,149].

To summarize the results, the study based on the data of ESS10 supported the insights of Adrian Hon that "conspiracy theories thrive in the absence of trust" and that it would be necessary "to restore faith in truth and knowledge itself" [59] and confirmed that positive attitudes toward people significantly negatively predict conspiracy beliefs (H1), positive attitudes toward people significantly positively predict psychological wellbeing (H2), psychological wellbeing significantly negatively predict conspiracy beliefs (H3), positive attitudes toward people predict self-reported creativity (H4), and psychological wellbeing is a mediator in the links between attitudes toward people and conspiracy beliefs (H6). However, this study did not confirm that creativity would predict conspiracy beliefs significantly negatively (H5), nor did it provide enough evidence that creativity is a mediator in the links between attitudes toward people and conspiracy beliefs (H7). The findings indicate that the links between conspiracy beliefs and other constructs, namely attitudes toward people, psychological wellbeing, and creativity, are complex and need further investigations.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although the results of this study provide some valuable insights into the relationship between attitudes toward people, psychological wellbeing, creativity, and conspiracy beliefs, there are several limitations. First, this study lacks strong methodological background. The calculations were not based on the data collected with validated scales on conspiracy beliefs (Ref. [150]), attitudes toward people (Ref. [87]), creativity (Ref. [67]), and psychological wellbeing (Ref. [96]), like in most trusted studies. Rather it used several sets of questions listed in the European Social Survey protocols. Moreover, the self-reported creativity was assessed based on just one observed variable; it could also be argued that this item reflects creativity as a human value and cannot fully disclose the self-reported creativity [151–154]. Therefore, though an SEM analysis demonstrated an acceptable fit and factor loadings, it would be strongly suggested to use validated scales for future research on conspiracy beliefs, psychological wellbeing, attitudes toward people, creativity, and the links between these constructs. Using more comprehensive scales or employing diverse research methods (e.g., qualitative interviews, experimental manipulations) and controlling for additional variables that might confound the relationships would provide more valuable insights on the antecedents and consequences of conspiracy beliefs.

Next, a significant limitation of this study was that this study courageously hypothesized links as predictions, although the causality or directionality based on the methodology of the survey cannot be specified. The study identified several significant relationships, but it is crucial to investigate the causality and directionality of these relationships. Do positive attitudes toward people lead to lower conspiracy beliefs, or is it the other way around? Longitudinal studies or experimental designs could help uncover causal links, and the generalizations based on the findings of this study should be made with concern.

Furthermore, further research can explore potential moderating variables that may influence the relationships observed, such as personality traits or cultural factors, which might impact the strength of these relationships. Next, if positive attitudes toward people were found to be protective against conspiracy beliefs and promote psychological wellbeing, the research could explore interventions to foster such attitudes, as attempted in previous studies [129]. This could have implications for public policy aimed at reducing the spread of conspiracy beliefs.

However, it is possible that individuals open to critical thinking interventions are already utilizing available programs, and stopping people from adopting conspiracy beliefs may prove challenging, as it may represent their primary means of community involvement. Attempting interventions to reduce conspiracy beliefs and enhance believers' psychological wellbeing could potentially have adverse effects, similar to the unintended consequences of eliminating well-integrated non-native species in a habitat, risking destabilization of the local ecosystem. Furthermore, it is conceivable that belief in conspiracies may function as an auxiliary mechanism in the symptom system [155–157], though these presumptions require further investigation.

Moreover, future research could delve deeper into the mechanisms underlying mediation or explore the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and creativity, attitudes, and wellbeing in more depth.

5. Conclusions

In summary, the study using ESS10 data affirmed several relationships: positive attitudes toward people were found to significantly relate to reduced conspiracy beliefs (H1) while also being positively related to psychological wellbeing (H2). Additionally, psychological wellbeing was established as a significant factor linked to reduced conspiracy beliefs (H3), and positive attitudes toward people were linked to self-reported creativity (H4). Furthermore, the study identified psychological wellbeing as a mediator in the connections between attitudes toward people and conspiracy beliefs (H6). However, it did not establish a significant negative relationship between creativity and conspiracy beliefs (H5) nor provide sufficient evidence to support creativity as a mediator in the associations between attitudes toward people and conspiracy beliefs (H7). These results suggest that the relationships between conspiracy beliefs and the examined factors, including attitudes toward people, psychological wellbeing, and creativity, are complex and require further investigation. While this study has provided significant insights to understanding of the relationships analyzed, there are several avenues for future research to deepen the knowledge and address potential limitations, including using more comprehensive scales, employing diverse research methods (e.g., qualitative interviews, experimental manipulations) and controlling for additional variables that might confound the relationships, or exploring potential moderating variables that may influence the relationships observed, such as personality traits or cultural factors. Hopefully, the insights based on the ESS10 would serve for future research or practical implications to diminish conspiracy beliefs in the world and to contribute to a more sustainable future.

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