Assessing the informational credibility of conspiracy theories: online discussion about the Nord Stream damage

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Abstract

Purpose – To elaborate the picture of credibility assessment by examining how participants of online discussion evaluate the informational credibility of conspiracy theories.

Design/methodology/approach – Descriptive quantitative analysis and qualitative content analysis of 2,663 posts submitted to seven Reddit threads discussing a conspiracy operation, that is, the damage of the Nord Stream gas pipelines in September 2022. It was examined how the participants of online discussion assess the credibility of information constitutive of conspiracy theories speculating about (1) suspected actors responsible for the damage, (2) their motives and (3) the ways in which the damage was made. The credibility assessments focussed on diverse sources offering information about the above three factors.

Findings – The participants assessed the credibility of information by drawing on four main criteria: plausibility of arguments, honesty in argumentation, similarity to one's beliefs and provision of evidence. Most assessments were negative and indicated doubt about the informational believability of conspiracy theories about the damage. Of the information sources referred to in the discussion, the posts submitted by fellow participants, television programmes and statements provided by governmental organizations were judged most critically, due to implausible argumentation and advocacy of biased views.

Research limitations/implications – As the study focuses on a sample of posts dealing with conspiracy theories about a particular event, the findings cannot be generalized to concern the informational credibility conspiracy narratives.

Originality/value – The study pioneers by providing an in-depth analysis of the nature of credibility assessments by focussing on information constitutive of conspiracy theories.

Keywords Conspiracy theories, Conspiracy operations, Credibility assessment, Information credibility, Online discussion

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Similar to misinformation, disinformation and fake news, conspiracy theories have become an integral element of today's information environments. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic has given rise to number of conspiracy theories about the origin of the coronavirus and the nature of COVID-19 vaccines (Cheng *et al.*, 2022; Moffitt *et al.*, 2021). Such theories claim, for example, that the coronavirus was deliberately manufactured in a Chinese laboratory to wage war on the West. Assumptions such as these are characteristic of a *conspiracy*. In general, it refers to a secret arrangement by a group of powerful people, usually driven by nefarious or malevolent intentions to usurp political or economic power or violate established rights (Keeley, 1999, p. 116). A *conspiracy theory* represents an explanation of such arrangements (Uscinski, 2018, p. 235). Conspiracy theories tend to thrive under

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conditions of causal uncertainty such as pandemics and wars when people have incomplete, second hand, conflicting, or ambiguous information about the cause(s) of an event or an ongoing process (Van der Wal *et al.*, 2018, p. 972; p. 981). In such conditions, conspiracy theories reflect declining trust in official (factual) sources, replacing trustworthy information with speculation. Thereby, conspiracy theories are particularly characteristic of *post-truth* information environments, where everything might be equally true or false because there are no longer collectively agreed upon criteria to assess the veracity of information (Fuller, 2018; de Zeeuw *et al.*, 2020).

From a historical perspective, conspiracy theories have been part of Western culture for ages. Belief in such narratives is quite common among citizens. For example, 60% of Americans continue to believe that the CIA killed President John F. Kennedy in November 1963 (Douglas *et al.*, 2019, p. 5). Social media forums have markedly facilitated the dissemination of conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 pandemic in particular (Mahl *et al.*, 2022). The present study focuses on recent conspiracy theories closely related to the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war, that is, the damage of the *Nord Stream* underwater gas pipelines in September 2022. It is speculated that the damage is not an accidental event but a sabotage, resulting from a conspiracy operation motivated by the above war. The topic of the study is relevant because in information behaviour studies so far, only occasional attention has been paid to the informational aspects of conspiracy theories explaining such operations. Wilson and Maceviciute (2022) have recently characterized the creation, acceptance and dissemination of conspiracy theories as a form of *information misbehaviour* – a set of activities which may be seen as pathological to some degree. The findings of the present study suggest that despite the negative connotation, information offered by conspiracy theories may be found – at least partly – meaningful when people try to make sense of a significant event which lacks a publicly accepted explanation.

The Nord Stream damage exemplifies well events of this kind. So far, there is no conclusive evidence about actor(s) responsible for the damage; similarly, the motive(s) behind the secret operation, as well as the ways in which the pipelines were destroyed are subject to speculation. As the damage occurred in times of the war raging in Ukraine, speculations were soon disseminated in newspapers, television programmes and social media forums about state-level perpetrators and their motives. The speculations became elements of conspiracy theories claiming, for example, that Russia exploded the pipelines in order to cause economic damage to West European countries that give weapons to Ukraine. As conspiracy theories tend to constitute of a mix of rumours, opinions and guesses, occasionally backed by individual facts, the assessment of the informational credibility of such theories is a complicated issue.

The present study contributes to information behaviour research by elaborating the above issue. To achieve this, an empirical study was made by exploring how participants of online discussion assess the credibility of information offered by conspiracy theories about the suspected actors of the Nord Stream damage, as well as their motives and the ways in which the damage was carried out. The study is based on the analysis of a sample of posts submitted to *Reddit* discussion threads debating the sabotage. The findings refine the picture of credibility assessment occurring in times of uncertainty when people have to make sense of socially significant events by drawing on ambiguous and conflicting information.

The rest of the article is organized as follows. First, to create background, the nature of conspiracy theories is reviewed, including a concise description of the Nord Stream damage and the characterization of the main features of information credibility assessment. Thereafter, the research framework and empirical research setting will be specified, followed by the reporting of the findings. The last sections discuss the empirical results and reflect their significance.

Literature review

Conspiracy theories

There is no consensus among researchers about the criteria by which a narrative can be labelled as a conspiracy theory (Douglas and Sutton, 2023; Uscinski, 2018). The definitional problems are rendered more difficult due to the existence of closely related terms such as *misinformation* (i.e. non-intentional deception), *disinformation* (i.e. intentional deception), *fake news* (i.e. a genre of fabricated news reports) and *rumour* (i.e. unverified information) (Mahl *et al.*, 2022). Conspiracy theories can incorporate elements from the above constructs. Different from them, however, conspiracy theories can provide alternative (though simplified) explanations for phenomena that are difficult to understand otherwise. On the other hand, conspiracy theory is a misnomer because the word *theory* does not refer to a scientifically acceptable general principle offered to explain phenomena. This is because the secrecy feature of conspiracy operations makes it virtually impossible to verify or falsify the claims presented in conspiracy theories (Cheng *et al.*, 2022, pp. 1174–1175). While some conspiracy theories may turn out to be factually true later on, the key defining element of the concept is that credible evidence to support the conspiratorial claim is not available to the public or verified by reliable sources at the time when the claim is made (Radnitz, 2021, p. 8).

Van Prooijen and van Vugt (2018) have identified five fundamental elements of conspiracy theories. They (1) indicate a causal relationship between actors and events; (2) indicate the agency, that is, the intentionality and deliberate planning in the conspiracy narrative; (3) include a coalition of more than one conspirators or groups in the process; (4) show threats in a relatively sizeable socio-political scale; and (5) carry some elements of secrecy that cannot be falsified or validated. The key characteristic of conspiracy theories is that they question the "official truth" about an issue (Renard, 2015, pp. 72–73). Thereby, they involve a distinctive pattern of distrust in standard sources of information which other people rely upon, for example, leading newspapers (Hawley, 2019, p. 974). This suggests that conspiracy theories themselves are justified more on the grounds of disbelief than of positive belief (Wood, 2017, p. 510). Therefore, a person assessing the credibility of information offered by conspiracy theories may draw on one's "gut instincts". It provides a means for remaining sceptical of facts which "don't feel right, yet credulous from the perspective of claims presented in a conspiracy theory" (Marmura (2014, p. 2390).

There is a paucity of investigations examining the informational aspects of conspiracy theories in online environments. Moffitt *et al.* (2021) identified COVID-19-related conspiracy theory tweets to analyse communities, spreaders and characteristics of conspiracy theory narratives. It appeared that tweets about conspiracy theories were supported by news sites with low fact-checking scores. In a related study, Zeng and Schäfer (2021) examined how COVID-19-related conspiracy theories are articulated on *8kun* and *Gab* online forums. It appeared, for example, that sources related to *QAnon* – an American political conspiracy theory and political movement – are particularly popular on posts submitted to 8kun, while Gab users shared more far-right fake news available in websites such as *InfoWars*. Overall, low-credibility sources were prevalent on 8kun and Gab. On the other hand, the users of these platforms also drew on more established information sources, for instance, Twitter and YouTube, as well as legacy media. This is because the active engagement with authoritative narratives offered by leading newspapers, for example, enables the proponents of conspiracy theories to achieve intellectual legitimacy.

Finally, Kou *et al.* (2017) analysed the features of conspiracy talk on Reddit online discussion forums during the Zika virus outbreak. In order to differentiate conspiracy theories from rumours and misinformation, the researchers decided that a conspiracy theory should be able to answer three questions: 1) who are conspirators? 2) what malicious purposes do they have? and 3) what secretive actions do they do and how? The findings indicate that the most frequent antecedent for Reddit users proposing conspiracy theories was

dissatisfaction with the mainstream news shared by the original Reddit post. Responders thus started proposing conspiracy theories to challenge mainstream (official) information about Zika. Such information was questioned in two ways: casting doubts about its validity and the accountability of mainstream media, and proposing alternate theories to counter mainstream information. The proponents of conspiracy theories also brought numerous items into their interpretive frameworks to explain what really happened in the Zika crisis (Kou *et al.*, 2017, pp. 16–17). While assessing the credibility of new information thus created, the participants placed the main emphasis on the plausibility of information, while accuracy of information was valued less. Conspiracy theorists valued plausible information presented by others particularly if it supported their own narratives. They also cited authoritative information selectively to support a conspiracy theory.

Conspiracy theories about the Nord Stream damage

Nord Stream underwater pipeline pairs are about 1,200 kilometres long. They were built to transport natural gas from Russia to Germany through the Baltic Sea and are majority owned by *Gazprom*, a Russian gas company. Pipeline 1 became operational in 2011 and pipeline 2 was ready for use in 2021. Pipeline 2 was filled with gas but it was never taken for consumption because Germany suspended its certification in February 2022, due to the official recognition of the Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic by the Russian State Duma and President Putin. Both pipelines were damaged on 26 September 2022 in Baltic Sea, near Bornholm, Denmark. The damage and gas leaks point to sabotage because it is believed that the damage was caused by intentional explosions; however, the perpetrators' identities and motives remain debated (Brown, 2022). The lack of conclusive evidence offered a fertile ground for conspiracy theories which named Russia, the United States and the United Kingdom as the main suspects (Aris, 2022).

In the speculations presented in newspapers and television programmes, US right-wing media pushed conspiratorial claims by blaming the Biden administration. For example, Fox host Tucker Carlson claimed on 27 September 2022 that the sabotage was an "escalation" by the American government in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine" (Lawron and Horowitz, 2022). In this context, a powerful argument against USA was presented by drawing on President Biden's statement in February 2022, before the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war. In a press conference, Biden told reporters, "If Russia invades . . . then there will be no longer a Nord Stream 2. We will bring an end to it." After a reporter asked how the US planned to end a project that was under German control, Biden responded, "I promise you, we will be able to do that" (Greene, 2022). Moreover, after the Nord Stream damage, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken characterized it as a "tremendous opportunity to once and for all remove the dependence on Russian energy" (Greene, 2022). In this light, USA would have an ample motive to destroy the pipelines.

Unsurprisingly, the White House categorically denied its culpability for the damage (Brown, 2022). On the other hand, speculations presented by various European and US officials regarding the culprit pointed to Russian President Putin. As might be expected, Russian officials denied any involvement; according to them, it is absurd to claim that Russia would damage its own pipelines (Lawron and Horowitz, 2022). Kremlin-backed accounts were amplified by a tweet submitted by Radek Sikorski, a member of the European Parliament and a former defence and foreign minister of Poland. A day after the damage, he tweeted a picture of gas rising to the surface of the Baltic Sea and the text, "Thank you USA." Comments such as these fuelled conspiracy theories claiming that the United States exploded the pipelines in order to increase its gas sales to European customers and to render obsolete German demands to open Nord Stream 2 (Brandt and Wirtschafter, 2022).

Russia has also made use of another piece of information offered by conspiracy theories, that is, the claim that the sabotage was carried out by British scuba divers. To bolster this claim, Russia drew on the observation that British diving exercises were going on over three days right next to the Nord Stream gas pipeline when the damage occurred (Finch, 2022). Somewhat later, Russia accused Britain and the United States of conspiring to blow up the pipelines by drawing on a text message sent by former Prime Minister Liz Truss. Immediately after the damage, she wrote to US Secretary of State Antony Blinken "It's done" (Phillips, 2022). The above message was retrieved from Truss's iCloud after Russia hacked her phone while she was Foreign Secretary. Again, the US Government refuted the claim as a baseless accusation with no factual basis. Aris (2022) summarized well the problems originating from the oppositional conspiracy theories discussed above: "we will probably never know the truth, because if either of the above theories are true, neither government will ever admit to it".

Approaches to information credibility

Credibility is a semantically rich construct that researchers have characterized by qualities such as believability, trust, reliability, accuracy and objectivity (Hilligoss and Rieh, 2008; Metzger *et al.*, 2003). The above qualities are also constitutive of the construct of *information credibility*. In general, it can be defined as the extent to which one perceives information to be believable (Li and Suh, 2015, p. 315). Savolainen (2011) distinguished between *information quality* and *information credibility* while examining how online discussion participants assess information dealing with two controversial topics: the usefulness of health food and racism. Information quality was analysed by focussing on the features of the message while information credibility was examined by concentrating on the characteristics of the author of the message. It appeared that while assessing information quality, the most frequently used criteria pertained to the usefulness, correctness and specificity of information. In the judgment of information credibility, the author's reputation, expertise and honesty appeared to be a particularly important.

More recently, Savolainen (2021) examined the credibility of COVID vaccine mis/disinformation by analysing the posts submitted to *VaxxHappened* – a Reddit discussion group which is dedicated to the critique of claims presented by anti-vaxxers. To achieve this, the study made use of the conceptual framework developed in Savolainen's (2011) prior investigation. However, as information quality primarily deals with the extent to which people perceive the message's information content as credible, Savolainen (2021) preferred the term credibility of information content. Second, the term information credibility was replaced by the term credibility of the author creating mis/disinformation, more briefly, credibility of the author. This term indicates more clearly that the credibility assessment focuses on the believability of the author generating the message's information content. The findings revealed that judgments concerning the person's reputation, expertise and honesty in argumentation are key criteria used in the assessment of the author's credibility. Moreover, it appeared that objectivity and accuracy of information, as well as plausible argumentation are highly important in the evaluation of the credibility of the message's information content. Similarly, Lee and Shin (2021, p. 263) demonstrated that one of the factors affecting the credibility assessment is the extent to which people are aware of whether the material available in social media platforms represents truthful (objective) information. On the other hand, health-related mis/disinformation may be found useful and credible because people tend to seek evidence that corroborates their existing beliefs. As mis/disinformation is closely related to conspiracy theories, this conclusion is also applicable to the credibility assessment of such theories.

Summing up: the literature review indicates that so far, the relationship of credibility assessment and conspiracy theories is seldom discussed in prior investigations. However,

there are a few important observations clarifying the ways in which people assess the believability of information offered by conspiracy theories. Wood (2017, p. 510) found that conspiracy theories themselves are justified more on the grounds of disbelief than of positive belief, and that people tend to assess the credibility of information offered by conspiracy theories by drawing on one's "gut instincts". Zeng and Schäfer (2021) demonstrated that the credibility of COVID-19-related information offered by conspiracy theorists tends to be low. Finally, Kou *et al.* (2017) found that while assessing the credibility of Zika virus–related conspiracy theories, people devote particular attention to the plausibility of information. Conspiracy theories are also found informationally credible to the extent to which they support people's own narratives about an issue.

Research framework

The literature review suggests that conspiracy theories are narratives explaining a conspiracy – an event by the causal agency of a small group of people acting in secret, usually driven by malevolent intentions. More specifically, conspiracy theories (1) name perpetrator(s) actor(s) suspected to be responsible for a conspiracy, (2) speculate about their motive(s) and (3) make assumptions about the ways in which the conspiracy was implemented (Douglas and Sutton, 2023; Kou *et al.*, 2017). As described above, shortly after the Nord Stream damage, conspiracy theories of this kind were presented in television programmes, for example. People may assess differently the credibility of information offered by conspiracy theories. Such information may be found believable simply because it is in accord with people's values, beliefs and attitudes, for example (Kou *et al.*, 2017). Others can refute the same information for ideological reasons because they simply find it impossible to accept the claim that Biden's administration, for example, is responsible for the damage.

The present study elaborates further the above issues by examining how the participants of online discussion assess the credibility of information offered by conspiracy theories about the Nord Stream damage. To this end, five categories of credibility assessment used in Savolainen's (2021) study on the judgment of COVID-19 vaccination-related mis/disinformation were employed. These categories were selected for two reasons. First, as misinformation and disinformation are closely related to conspiracy theories as informational phenomena, similar categories can be used while making credibility assessments (Mahl *et al.*, 2022). Second, the preliminary analysis of the empirical data revealed that these five categories capture best the variation of articulations dealing with credibility assessments made by the participants. A selective approach is justified because it became evident that categories such as *expertise of the author* and *usefulness of information* used in Savolainen's (2021) study are not relevant for study of assessments dealing with the informational credibility of conspiracy theories. Therefore, the following five categories were used in the present study:

(1) *Honesty in argumentation*: the extent to which an author offering conspiracy-related information about the Nord Stream damage is able to consider it in a sincere way

(2) *Similarity to receiver beliefs*: the degree to which conspiracy-related information offered by an author is found acceptable, due to compatibility with one's own views

(3) *Plausibility of arguments*: the extent to which conspiracy-related information content is based on valid and logical argumentation

(4) *Provision of evidence*: the extent to which conspiracy-related information content is supported by reference to external sources of information

(5) *Accuracy of information*: the extent to which conspiracy-related information content provides an exact description of the event.

Of the above categories, honesty in argumentation and similarity to one's beliefs deal with the credibility of the author of information, while the rest are indicative of the credibility of information content. Together, these five categories are indicative of the *informational credibility* of conspiracy theories presenting assumptions about the Nord Stream damage. More specifically, informational credibility of conspiracy theories is assessed when participants judge the believability of conspiracy-related assumptions dealing with the perpetrators, their motives, as well as the ways in which the damage was carried out. Assumptions of this kind convey conspiracy-related information available in diverse sources, for example, television programmes, newspaper articles and posts submitted by fellow contributors to online discussion. Drawing on the above specifications, the research framework of the present study is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1 suggests that conspiracy theories incorporate three major assumptions used to explain the Nord Stream damage as a result of a conspiracy operation: actor(s) responsible for the operation, their motives and the ways in which the operation was carried out. A conspiracy theory presented in an information source, for example, a newspaper article may explain that Russia damaged the pipelines in order to cause economic damage to countries that give weapons to Ukraine. While assessing the credibility of such assumptions, a participant of online discussion can make use of one or more criteria, for example, the extent to which such assumptions are supported by the provision of evidence. As the discussion continues, other participants can make their own assessments about the believability of information obtained from diverse sources.

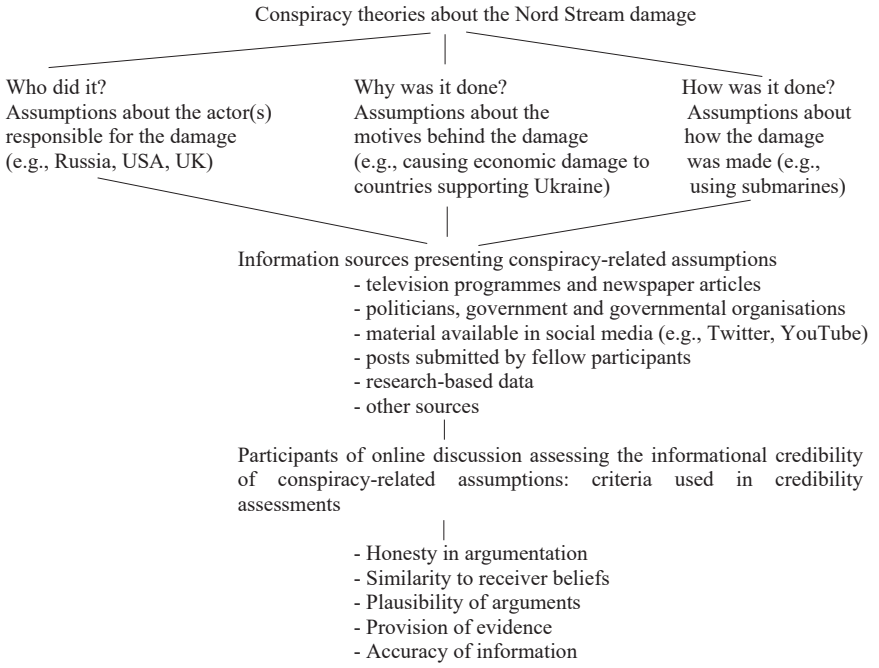

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Figure 1.
The research framework

Drawing on the above framework, the present study sought answer to the following research question: Using the criteria specified in Figure 1, how do the participants of online discussion assess the credibility of conspiracy-related information about the Nord Stream damage?

Empirical data and analysis

The empirical data were gathered from *Reddit* – a major social media platform (https://www.redditinc.com). This platform was chosen because it offers a rich variety of publicly available material speculating about the Nord Stream damage. Reddit users (Redditors) share news stories and hold conversations within Reddit's subreddits, i.e. subforums. To obtain an overall picture of how the Redditors discuss the Nord Stream damage, subreddits focussing on this topic were read tentatively. At the time of the gathering of the empirical data in the mid of November 2022, there were altogether 172 Reddit discussion threads on the above topic. However, the majority of them, that is, 141 threads merely contained an opening post but no comments from the Redditors. Therefore, these threads were excluded from the data. The length of the remaining 31 threads varied a lot; some of them contained only 1–5 posts while longest attracted no less than 1,079 posts. The above 31 threads were then read carefully to find out whether they explicitly discuss at least one of constituents of the conspiracy, that is (1) actors responsible for the Nord Stream damage, (2) the motives behind the damage and (3) the implementation of the damage. Second, attention was devoted to whether the threads contain sentences indicative of information sources used by the participants, as well as sentences depicting how the contributors assessed the credibility of information sources. By the above criteria, 24 threads were excluded because the posts submitted to them contained no explicit credibility assessments of information sources. The remaining seven threads with 2,663 posts met the above criteria, and they were chosen for analysis. Since the study does not aim at producing statistically representative generalizations, the sample of seven threads appeared to be sufficient for the needs of descriptive quantitative analysis. Moreover, the sample is sufficient for the needs of the qualitative content analysis because the data became saturated; it is evident that inclusion of additional threads initiated after the mid of November 2022 would not have essentially changed the qualitative picture of the credibility assessments.

The empirical data were collected from seven subreddits, including, for example, *r/conspiracy*, *r/politicaldiscussion* and r*/worldnews*. The 2,663 posts included in the sample were submitted within the period of 27 September – 5 November 2022. The number of posts per thread varied from 143 to 1,079. Altogether 1,425 individual participants contributed to the discussion. Most of them submitted only one post. In contrast, there was a handful of frequent contributors; of them, the most active submitted no less than 52 posts. All in all, the topic attracted a relatively large number of contributors but only a few of them engaged more deeply in the discussion by commenting the posts submitted by fellow participants. The chosen threads were downloaded and the posts were coded using categories presented in Table 1.

The coding was an iterative process in which the data were scrutinized several times by one person, that is, the present author. The pre-defined categories specified in Table 1 were then used to code all the data – while still allowing new codes to emerge. However, all credibility assessments fit into the existing categories defined in Table 1 and no new categories were needed to cover the data. The 2,663 posts were assigned with altogether 2,690 codes dealing with the categories specified in Table 1. Posts out of topic such as political jokes were excluded from the coding. A post was coded only once for a criterion category, for example, *motive behind the damage*, *television programmes* and *honesty in argumentation* once it was identified for the first time in the post. In long posts, it was not unusual that the same category, for example, *honesty in argumentation* was identified in several segments of

Category	Example taken from the empirical data
Actor responsible for the damage	"I doubt it is Russia". (Thread 1)
Motive behind the damage	"It might be for internal Russia politics to blame the USA for it". (Thread 6)
Implementation of the damage	"All you have to do is get a bomb and drop it on the pipe". (Thread 4)
Information sources	
Newspaper articles	"The original claim is from the Daily Mail". (Thread 3)
Television programmes	"Fox news should have to clearly state they are a fictional news agency". (Thread 5)
Politicians, government and governmental organizations	"President Biden on Nord Stream 2 Pipeline if Russia Invades Ukraine: We will bring an end to it". (Thread 1)
Material available in social media (e.g. Twitter and YouTube)	"US does have much to gain from this: https://insiderpaper.com/us-ready-to-provide-support-to-europe-after-nord-stream-pipeline-leaks-official/". (Thread 7)
Posts submitted by fellow participants	"You really think Putin is thinking things through at this point?" (Thread 5)
Research-based data	"Seismologists confirmed they were explosions rather than earthquakes". (Thread 1)
Other sources	"They tracked one US navy helicopter flying out to those locations 3 times before this happened". (Thread 1)
Credibility criteria	
Honesty in argumentation	"Kim Dotcom is also an inveterate liar and fraud". (Thread 3)
Similarity to receiver beliefs	"Absolutely possible that this could be FSB or similarly. I'm with you on the speculation game". (Thread 6)
Plausibility of arguments	"You should give long jump a try. Your leaps in logic are truly special". (Thread 5)
Provision of evidence	"It is impressive how fast the various bits of 'evidence' are dropping that it is all Biden's doing". (Thread 6)
Accuracy of information	"These explosions kicked up a 2.1 on the Richter Scale". (Thread 1)

Source(s): Created by the author

Table 1.
The coding categories

the same post. In these cases, once a post was coded for this criterion category, for example, other instances indicative of *honesty of argumentation* were simply ignored. On the other hand, a post could be assigned with several criteria, for example, plausibility of arguments and provision of evidence. While coding the posts speculating the motives behind the conspiracy, as well as the ways in which the damage was caused, subcategories such as "gaining economically" and "divers attaching explosives to pipelines" were inductively identified from the data.

The internal reliability of the coding was improved in that the coding categories specified in Table 1 are built on the solid foundation of research on information credibility (Hilligoss and Rieh, 2008; Savolainen, 2011, 2021). To strengthen the reliability of the coding, only sentences explicitly dealing with the damage were coded using the categories listed in Table 1. Moreover, the initial coding was refined by repeated reading of the data. Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 65) noted that check-coding the same data is useful for the lone researcher and that code–recode consistencies should be at least 90%. Following this advice, the coding was refined until it was found that the codes appropriately describe the data and that there are no anomalies.

To obtain an overall quantitative picture of the online discussion, the percentage distributions of codes assigned to the data were calculated. More importantly, however, the data were scrutinized by means of qualitative content analysis. To achieve this, the constant

comparative method was used to capture the variety of Redditors' articulations about the conspiracy, as well as the assessments of informational credibility of the conspiracy theories explaining it (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, pp. 339–344). More specifically, the Redditors' articulations systematically compared per individual criteria. In this way, it was possible identify similarities and differences in the ways in which the Redditors speculated, for example, the motives behind the conspiracy operation, and assessed the plausibility of arguments presented in television programmes.

The reporting of the qualitative findings incorporates an ethical issue because they are illustrated by quotations taken from the Redditors' posts. Since they are freely accessible to all readers, these posts can be seen as contributions which are intended to elicit public interest in the Nord Stream damage. Due to their public nature, the posts submitted to online forums may also be utilized for research purposes, provided that the identity of an individual contributor is sufficiently protected. To achieve this, participants were identified by technical codes. For example, P650 refers to a participant who appears in the 650th place in the alphabetical list of 1,425 contributors. Moreover, individual threads were referred to by using a technical code. For example, T4 refers to a post submitted to Thread 4. Second, all information about the submission dates for posts was deleted from the illustrative quotations presented in the findings section. This procedure makes it more unlikely that an individual post and its author could be identified from the discussion threads.

Findings

Who did it?

In the online discussion, assumptions were presented about the actors responsible (or not responsible) for the Nord Stream damage. Table 2 specifies further the participants' assumptions about this issue.

In most cases, the posts dealing with this topic were short, typically containing only one or two sentences. Usually, these posts were indicative of the participants' personal opinions or guesses about the perpetrator(s). Sometimes, however, the participants drew on external sources of information, for example, Radek Sikorski's tweet suggesting that the United States exploded the pipelines. As Table 2 indicates, Russia and USA were named as the key

Table 2. Percentage distribution of the codes assigned to the actor(s) culpability for the Nord Stream damage

	Responsible for the damage (n = 616) (%)	Not responsible for the damage (n = 339) (%)
Russia	54.1	52.0
United States	29.1	33.6
Poland	4.2	1.4
United Kingdom	3.1	7.1
Ukraine	2.4	3.2
Germany	1.3	1.5
Norway	0.8	0.3
China	0.3	0.6
Baltic states	0.3	0.3
European Union	0.3	0
North Korea	0.3	0
Saudi Arabia	0.3	0
Iran	0.2	0
Israel	0.2	0
Others	3.1	0
Total	100.0	100.0

Source(s): Created by the author

suspects. Moreover, it was speculated that Poland, United Kingdom, Ukraine or Germany could have committed the damage. In addition to state-level actors, the participants named a few actors of other types, for example, ecoterrorists.

> I have no doubt that Russia would do something like this. (P93-T1)

> The US did it; means, motive and opportunity. (P658-T6)

Similarly, while naming actors least likely responsible for the damage, Russia was mentioned most frequently, followed by the United States and the United Kingdom. Overall, this finding suggests that most Redditors were divided in this issue. They categorically claimed that Russia or USA is – or is not – culpable for the damage. However, characteristic of speculative identification of culprits, some participants showed hesitation because in times of the debate, there was no conclusive evidence about the perpetrator(s).

> It is impossible to discern who is behind it because everything is so convoluted. (P865-T1)

Why was it done?

The participants also speculated about why the pipelines were damaged. Table 3 specifies the main motives identified by the Redditors.

While identifying the motives behind the damage, the Redditors often drew on their personal opinions. However, they also made use of external sources of information such as television programmes and the statements presented by politicians. The role of external sources is discussed in greater detail later on while reporting the findings about the credibility assessments.

The participants identified a variety of factors explaining why the pipelines were damaged. As Table 3 indicates, it was commonly believed that they were destroyed in order to gain economically. It was assumed that the United States in particular would gain from the damage because Russia could no longer deliver gas to Western Europe.

> Blowing up the Nord Stream damages Russia and forces Europe to buy more overpriced gas from the USA. (P644-T4)

It was also believed the perpetrator will gain politically from the damage, for example, to strengthen one's position of power.

Motive	%
Gaining economically	20.7
Gaining politically	14.3
Decreasing economic dependency on a country	13.6
Providing an opportunity to blame an opponent	9.8
Causing economic damage to others	8.1
Misleading the opponent by means of a false flag operation	7.1
Giving a signal of a nation's military and technological capabilities	6.0
Sowing mistrust between nations	5.0
Continuing the tradition of sabotage against enemy targets	4.8
Escalating the war	3.5
Undermining the unity of allied countries	3.3
Strengthening the unity of allied countries	2.8
Other motives, for example, pushing for sustainable energy	1.0
Total	100.0

Source(s): Created by the author

Table 3. Percentage distribution to codes assigned to assumed motives behind the damage ($n = 396$)

> My guess is Putin destroyed the pipes to help prevent himself from moderates attempting a coup. (P1407-T1)

Many participants also stressed that the United States in particular would gain both economically and politically if West European countries become less dependent from Russia. Another motive could be opportunity to blame the opponent by executing a false flag operation.

> It is a classic trick: attack your own country and blame it on another country you want to start a conflict with. (P10-T7)

The damage could also be motivated by the need to give a warning signal of the technological capabilities of a nation. It was believed that Russia in particular is willing to draw on this motive.

> Blowing their own pipeline up sends a pretty clear message that we can strike any other undersea infrastructure - pipelines, internet cable junctions. (P832-T7)

Finally, the damage may also serve wider political goals, for example, to weaken the opponent by undermining the unity of allied countries giving weapons to Ukraine.

> By blowing it up and blaming the UK, they are trying to sow mistrust and further division between us and Europe. Presumably looking to reduce military support for the Ukraine and possibly weaker sanctions. (P956-T2)

On the other hand, the participants speculated why certain motives would not make sense, thus rendering it difficult to understand why the pipelines were destroyed. As there was no conclusive evidence about the perpetrator, many participants found it difficult to make sense of why the damage was made. An actor destroying the pipelines would act against its interests and lose economically. This assumption was applied to Russia in particular.

> So, they blew up infrastructure that cost billions (in a NATO controlled zone), lost billions in revenue and repair costs - when all they had to do was shut off a tap in Russia itself? You don't need a brain in your head to believe that one! (P333-T2)

It was also believed that USA or UK is unlikely to destroy the pipelines because it could endanger the unity of West European countries. On the other hand, Russia was not believed to have a meaningful motive because the damage of the pipelines means that Russia loses its political leverage to put pressure on European countries.

> Gas pipelines are literally Russia's only bargaining chip with the rest of Europe and all that, so I'm not entirely sure why they would blow their own pipeline up. (P1022-T1)

How was it done?

The participants were less active to speculate how the pipelines were (or were not) damaged in practice. Table 4 specifies further this issue.

Again, most of the speculations were based on the participants' personal opinions or guesses. The most popular explanation was that the pipelines were destroyed by making use of submarines, underwater drones or even missiles. One of the participants supported his or her claim by drawing on an article published in The Times – a leading newspaper.

> It is already known it was Russia using underwater drones.
>
> https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/russia-probably-bombed-nord-stream-pipeline-with-underwater-drone-says-defence-source-wkkcgshzv (P1359-T1)

It was also commonly believed that divers had attached explosives to pipelines and then detonated them. Alternatively, it was suggested that explosives were set beforehand within the pipelines.

> You could use an inspection pig loaded with explosives on a timer and run it down the pipeline. No diving or military necessary, just basic electronics knowledge and access to explosives. (P197-T1)

Suggested reasons causing the damage also included unsuccessful attempts to manage the gas pressure. The participants also made attempts to make sense of the sabotage by excluding certain alternatives. For example, it was claimed that a natural damage is highly improbable because the pipelines were destroyed separately within a few hours.

Assessing the credibility of conspiracy-related information about the damage

While speculating about the perpetrators, their motives and the ways in which the damage was made in practice, the participants drew on assumptions constitutive of conspiracy theories claiming, for example, that Russians exploded the pipelines in order to cause economic damage to European countries supporting Ukraine. Such assumptions convey conspiracy-related information that often originates from external sources such as newspaper articles and material published in social media forums. References to external sources were mainly made while the Redditors speculated about the motives behind the damage and the ways in which it was implemented. Table 5 specifies distribution of information sources referred to by the participants.

Table 5 indicates that the participants most frequently drew on the statements presented by politicians or representatives of government. In this regard, President Biden's statement about the closing of the pipelines was particularly popular. The participants also used the posts written by fellow contributors as sources of information, as well as other material available in the social media, for example, websites and YouTube videos. To some extent, the

Method	%
Using ships, submarines, underwater drones or missiles	32.5
Divers attaching explosives to pipelines	30.1
Detonating explosives placed beforehand within a pipeline	13.3
Malfunction of the pipeline or natural damage	10.9
Mismanaged pressure or incompetence in repair work	7.2
Unknown method by which the pipelines were damaged	6.0
Total	100.0

Source(s): Created by the author

Table 4. Percentage distribution of codes assigned to the methods by which the pipelines were damaged ($n = 83$)

Information source	%
Politician or representative of government or intergovernmental organization	31.2
Posts submitted by fellow contributors to online discussion	28.2
Material published in social media	17.6
Television programmes	11.8
Newspaper articles	7.1
Researchers and domain experts	2.5
Other sources	1.6
Total	100.0

Source(s): Created by the author

Table 5. Percentage distribution of codes assigned to external sources of information ($n = 398$)

participants also drew on television programmes and newspaper articles. The role of sources of other types remained marginal.

While assessing the credibility of sources of information, the participants made use of diverse criteria specified in Table 6.

Plausibility of arguments

Plausibility of arguments was clearly the most frequent criterion used in the credibility judgments. Almost 49% of the codes assigned to credibility criteria dealt with this criterion. It was particularly popular while assessing the believability of information about the motives behind the damage. Most of the judgments were negative in nature in that they assessed an argument presented in an information source as implausible. Critical judgments were directed to sources of diverse types, ranging from television programmes to the views presented by fellow participants. Most of the assessments were expressed while engaging in dialogue with a fellow contributor. In these cases, the plausibility of an argument presented by a fellow participant was often questioned by asserting that it does not correspond to factual circumstances.

> But this principle can also be applied to the United States, because it is also a supplier. If the opponent's channel is damaged, the demand for its own channel will increase sharply. (P732-T1)

> That sounds good but does not stand up to scrutiny. The US is already at 100% export capacity. It is literally unable to send more. Blowing up a pipeline to create more demand when you already have more demand than you can fulfil makes no sense. (P197-T1)

The plausibility of an argument presented by a fellow contributor was also questioned by asserting that a suggested way of implementing the damage would not be believable. For example, it was doubted whether ecoterrorists would be able to detonate the underwater pipelines because they lack access to relevant technology. Another way to question the credibility of information offered by a fellow participant was to show that his or her reasoning is faulty in some respect.

> This causes panic on the gas market, increasing prices which is beneficial to Russia. (P1192-T6)

> So, in a single move, Russia increases gas prices, but also cripples its capability to sell gas to its main customer. Genius! (P953-T6)

The plausibility of arguments was also undermined if a claim is based on a strong pre-judgment which excludes the consideration of alternative scenarios.

> Everyone just assumes Russia did it and worked backwards to come up with reasons why. It is nonsense. (P650-T7)

Moreover, the plausibility of arguments presented in mainstream media was assessed critically. In particular, it was felt that the arguments for President Biden's culpability

Table 6. Percentage distribution of codes assigned to credibility criteria (n = 628)

Criterion	%
Plausibility of arguments	48.9
Honesty in argumentation	18.3
Similarity to one's (political) views	17.0
Provision of evidence	12.3
Accuracy of information	3.5
Total	100.0

Source(s): Created by the author

presented in the Fox News programme hosted by Tucker Carlson are not worthy of approving, due to the opinionated nature of the television show.

> It has always been an opinion-based show. It is not news. It never has been. No one with half a brain has ever been confused about that. Late night "news" shows are generally opinion based. (P26-T5)

Honesty in argumentation

The participants also were keen to evaluate whether an author of information, for example, television news host is able to consider an issue in a sincere way. Honesty in argumentation was a particularly important criterion while assessing the credibility of information about the perpetrators and their motives. Again, reflecting the tone of the discussion, the assessments were critical, and they often reflected deeply-ingrained doubts about the impartiality of mass media sources. As noted above, the Fox News programme was accused for a biased approach to the Nord Stream damage. This was reflected in the negative assessments dealing with the honesty of news host Tucker Carlson who was suspected about the dissemination of Russian propaganda.

> Tucker Carlson is busy brainwashing his viewers to believe the US did this. In fact, he suggested it was the US before Russia even made a statement. (P271-T7)

Similarly, it was doubted whether governments and governmental organization would offer an unbiased and sincere picture about the motives behind the damage. In particular, information disseminated by Russian officials gave rise to sceptical judgments.

> More pathological dishonesty from the Kremlin. They must have a list of lies somewhere so they can keep track, right? (P497-T2)

The posts submitted by fellow participants were almost without exception doubted about insincere argumentation. The critical assessments were particularly common in cases in which a fellow contributor was suspected as a troll pushing certain ideological views.

> The problem when you say absurd lies is that it burns your credibility. So, when you actually say the truth, nobody believes you. (P1290-T7)

Similarly, material available in social media was often criticized for insincere argumentation and even downright lying, as exemplified by Kim Dotcom's tweet revealing Premier Minister Truss's message "It's done", hacked from her phone.

> The hack happened prior to the pipeline attack. Kim is lying. The question is, who convinced him to do so? (P470-T3)

Similarity to one's views

The criterion of similarity to one's view was mainly used when assessing the believability of information about the perpetrators and their motives. Different from the credibility assessments reviewed above, the criterion of similarity to one's views was more often used in a positive sense. Agreement with a like-minded fellow participant's views manifested itself in comments such as "Absolutely possible that this could be FSB or similarly. I'm with you on the speculation game" (P632-T6). The positive judgments based on the similarity with one's views can be further illustrated by taking an example of a dialogue between the participants.

> Creating more demand by blowing up pipelines, one of which was never even turned on, makes no sense from a $$$ perspective. None. (P197-T1)

> You are right, it does not make sense. I edited my earlier comment, too. All of your points are well taken. (P356-T1)

Nevertheless, negative judgments of credibility, based on dissimilarity with one's views were more frequent. They manifested themselves in comments such as "I was with you, right up to the part where you said 'Russia says'. Then I switched right off" (P940-T7). The following example taken from a dialogue between the participants illustrates further the nature of negative judgments. Some of them were emotional and made use of *ad hominem* expressions.

> Again, the same logic, asking me to do all the work and then you will probably just say I'm not listening to some random guy on the internet. Use your own brain and do your own research that's all I'm saying. (P707-T7)

> I have done my research. You are a moron. (P1280-T7)

Provision of evidence

While judging the credibility of information, the participants also drew attention to the extent to which an information source is able (or unable) to offer evidence about the perpetrators and their motives in particular. The paucity of evidence appeared to be a difficult problem hindering a deeply-going discussion about the damage. One of the participants (P253-T7) summarized well this sentiment by stating that "No definitive pointing of fingers should be done until there is an inspection of the pipe and concrete evidence". On the other hand, even if some evidence would be offered to the public, its credibility is questionable. Participant P-698-T7 voiced this dilemma well: "Even if the US did do it, Russia cannot be the ones that provide evidence of the fact, since they have destroyed all possible credibility they may have had".

Similar to criteria discussed above, the participants directed more attention to negative qualities of information sources by criticizing them for the lack of evidence. The participants criticized, for example, the ways in which president Biden's statement was taken as indisputable evidence for the culpability of the United States.

> The only thing I can find Biden saying is that "we will put an end" to Nord Stream 2, which is plenty ambiguous. Considering he said this while standing next to the German chancellor in a joint press conference and the German chancellor did put an end to Nord Stream 2 by shutting it down before it was opened, there is no need to bomb the thing since that objective was already achieved, just like Biden said it would be. In short, you have nothing. No evidence, no plausible reason, no plausible means of execution. (P689-T2)

In a similar manner, evidence offered for the culpability of the United Kingdom was refuted by asserting that the words "It's done" by Prime Minister Truss are subject to multiple meanings.

> It is not like they wrote "I blew up the pipeline". She wrote "It's done" which could be about anything. If you don't have good evidence, then you simply don't know who did it. This is not good evidence. (P981-T-3)

Accuracy of information

The participants seldom drew on accuracy of information while judging the credibility of conspiracy-related information. This criterion was mainly used to assess the believability of information dealing with the ways in which the pipelines were destroyed and how the damage was revealed by means of seismographic measurements, for example. In many cases, information offered by governmental organizations was evaluated positively since it was believed that they provide factual information.

> Denmark's armed forces on Tuesday released video showing bubbles rushing to the surface of the Baltic Sea above the pipelines and said the largest gas leak had caused surface disturbances of well over one kilometre in diameter. (P791-T1)

In contrast, the accuracy of conspiracy-related information available in fellow contributors' posts was almost without exceptions assessed critically, thus reflecting the negative tone of the discussion.

> Are you aware of British personnel, i.e. Navy, SBS, other SF's have been in Ochakov for a few years now, building a port and gathering intelligence? (P451-T2)

> It is not even anywhere near Nord Stream. It is literally on the other side of the continent from it, in the Black Sea. (P689-T2)

Discussion

The present study contributed to research on information credibility assessment by examining how the believability of information is judged when it originates from conspiracy theories. They offer information that people tend to use particularly in times of uncertainty when there is very little conclusive evidence about a socially significant event. Conspiracy operations such as the damage of the Nord Stream pipelines in times of the Russo-Ukrainian war exemplify well events of this kind. The findings indicate that while trying to make sense of the damage, the participants of online discussion primarily drew on the statements presented by politicians and governmental organizations, complemented by information obtained from media and networked sources of diverse kind. The main findings concerning the assessment of the informational credibility of conspiracy theories are summarized in Table 7.

Table 7 suggests that the use of five key criteria enables a multi-faceted assessment of the credibility of information offered by conspiracy theories. Overall, by all five criteria, the credibility of such information was more often doubted than accepted, independent of the type of information source. This suggests that the informational basis of conspiracy theories is relatively weak. Nevertheless, such theories can help people comprehend complex events that are difficult to understand otherwise. On the other hand, the findings lend support to the view that people endorsing conspiracy beliefs tend to accept a simplified explanation for an event, for example, that Russia exploded the pipelines in order to blame the United States. The negative tone of the credibility assessments is in line with Wood's (2017, p. 510) observation that conspiracy theories themselves are justified more on the grounds of disbelief than of positive belief. On the other hand, similar to the findings of Zeng and Schäfer (2021), discussion about conspiracy operations does not merely draw on information offered by like-minded people or websites advocating propagandistic views. To support their views, the participants of online discussion can also made use of more established and authoritative information sources, for instance, leading newspapers. However, similar to the observation made by Kou *et al.* (2017), the credibility of such sources may be doubted, particularly if they advocate an "official truth" which conflicts with one's values and beliefs.

The findings of the present investigation also support the conclusions drawn by Kou *et al.* (2017) about the credibility assessment of information dealing with the Zika virus epidemic. Similarly, the participants debating the Nord Stream damage placed the main emphasis on the plausibility of arguments, while less attention was devoted to accuracy of information. Similarly, in both studies, the participants valued arguments presented by others if they supported their own narratives. The present investigation complements the picture of credibility assessment presented by Kou *et al.* (2017) by demonstrating that honesty in argumentation and provision of evidence also plays a significant role when people judge the

Criterion of credibility assessment	Main features in credibility assessment
Plausibility of arguments	- criterion mainly used to assess the credibility of information about the motives behind the damage - emphasis on the questioning of the plausibility of arguments presented by fellow participants - identifying cases in which the arguments do not correspond to reality - identifying logical fallacies in reasoning
Honesty in argumentation	- criterion mainly used to assess the credibility of information about the perpetrators and their motives - emphasis on the critique of the lack of honest argumentation - critique of biased interpretations presented in television programmes and fellow contributors' posts - accusations of lying and distribution of propagandistic views
Similarity one's beliefs	- criterion mainly used to assess the credibility of information about the perpetrators and their motives - acceptance of information presented by like-minded fellow contributors - refutation of information offered by ideological opponents
Provision of evidence	- criterion mainly used to assess the credibility of information about the perpetrators and their motives - awareness of the paucity of conclusive (factual) evidence - criticizing the use of available evidence out of context
Accuracy of information	- criterion mainly used to assess the credibility of information about how the damage was made - reliance on factual and visual information published by governmental organizations - criticizing factual errors in the posts submitted by fellow participants

Table 7.
Summary of the main findings

Source(s): Created by the author

believability of conspiracy-related information. Similar conclusions were drawn in Savolainen's (2021) investigation examining the credibility assessments made by Redditors about COVID-19 vaccine mis/disinformation offered by anti-vaxxers. Redditors in the above studies also exhibited similar features with regard to the doubt, disbelief and negativity as a dominant feature of credibility assessments.

However, these sentiments differed among the Redditors criticizing anti-vaxxers and those doubting the believability of conspiracy-related information. The former participants represented a group of like-minded people sharing the negatively coloured judgments while those assessing the credibility of conspiracy theories were divided in many issues. Nevertheless, their assessments were occasionally supported by the fellow participants with similar (ideological) views. In both groups, however, there appeared to be another common factor explaining the dominance of negative credibility assessments. This is due to the strong pre-message expectancies of the nature of information originating from the claims presented by anti-vaxxers and conspiracy theorists. Pre-message expectancies are based on the fact that information type can signal a relative persuasive intent (Flanagin and Metzger, 2007). For example, a Russian government official claiming in a newspaper article that USA is responsible for the Nord Stream damage can elicit in the readers a corresponding level of trust or scepticism they might bring to bear on source, message or site credibility. Therefore, due to pre-message expectancies, messages that exist in an online context where explicit persuasive intent may be present are subject to lower credibility assessments. Thus, online participants tend to expect that conspiracy theories are low in credibility, because they are sceptical about the intentions of authors submitting opinionated messages, as well as the veracity of online information of this kind. As exemplified by the harsh critique of Fox News host Tucker

Calson, perceived honesty of the author of information is particularly important for the credibility judgement dealing with conspiracy theories.

The present study makes two theoretical contributions to the existing literature. First, the findings elaborate the informational nature of conspiracy theories – an aspect that has largely been neglected in prior studies. These investigations have mainly examined the philosophical, psychological and political aspects of such theories (e.g. Douglas and Sutton, 2023; Keeley, 1999; Radnitz, 2021). The findings of the present study refine the picture of conspiracy theories by demonstrating that ultimately, they are constituted by information explaining why and how a harmful event was secretly caused. The constituents of conspiracy theories, for example, assumptions about the perpetrators and their motives are based on information of diverse kind, for instance, personal opinions and guesses. Second, the results of this study suggest that the credibility of information constitutive of conspiracy theories can be assessed by drawing on a set of core criteria. In this regard, honesty in argumentation, plausibility of arguments, similarity to one's beliefs and provision of evidence are particularly important.

Finally, the findings also have a practical implication for individuals seeking information about ideologically laden topics such as wars and terrorist attacks. Since topics of this kind tend to offer a fertile ground for conspiracy theories to bloom, individuals should search for information from multiple sources using critical thinking. In particular, information obtained from social media forums should be treated cautiously. Arguments used to blame or scapegoat a group of people for nefarious deeds should not be taken at face value, without fact-checking them. Therefore, a realistic and critical approach to conspiracy theories, similar to rumours, misinformation and disinformation is one of the most demanding tasks of teaching media and information literacy (Haider and Sundin, 2022). In an ideal case, there is a well-educated, self-confident person, knowing what and how to trust and gauge information against well-established and societally accepted value systems and norms, always considerate of their own role in searching and using information (Haider and Sundin, 2022, p. 36). However, it is evident that most people fail to meet requirements such as these. It is also not realistic to expect that people who search for, share, or believe in conspiracy theories can be educated to stop doing so. The difficulty lies in information and media literacy teaching, there are no easy ways to develop an alternative and constructive approach to the assessment of conspiracy theories. Nevertheless, as Haider and Sundin (2022, p. 116) suggest, the solution may be found by fostering a fundamental trust in society and its knowledge institutions, for example, schools and universities. If people find these institutions worthy of that trust, they can adopt a more deliberate approach to conspiracy theories.

Conclusion

The findings highlight that the assessment of the informational credibility of conspiracy theories is a complicated issue. This is mainly due to the paucity of publicly available factual evidence about a conspiracy operation, as well as the existence of contradictory assumptions about the perpetrators, their motives and the ways in which the operation was carried out. Therefore, credibility assessments tend to emphasize negative judgments, sentiments of doubt and mistrust in sources offering "official" explanations. The major contribution of the present study to research on information credibility assessment is the conclusion that in the judgment of the believability of speculative material advocating conspiracy theories, as well as conveying mis/disinformation, people tend to draw on a few key criteria. In this regard, honesty of argumentation, plausibility of arguments, similarity to one's beliefs and the provision of evidence are particularly significant.

As this study explored credibility assessments made by online participants focussing on a specific topic, that is, the Nord Stream damage, the findings cannot be generalized to concern

the judgment of informational believability of conspiracy theories about other topics. More research is required to capture a broader picture of the ways in which people accept or refute information offered by conspiracy narratives. For example, conspiracy theories about the nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war may offer relevant topics for comparative investigations. Such studies may also elaborate the ways in which people assess the credibility of related phenomena, that is, rumours and fake news characteristic of today's "post-truth" information environments.

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