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Correlations Between Interpersonal Trust and Agreeableness with Belief in Conspiracy Theories

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Introduction

In previous studies it was suggested that agreeableness was negatively correlated with conspiracy beliefs, but this finding was inconsistent with other studies (Goreis & Voracek, 2019).

Agreeableness is composed of six facets: trust, morality, sympathy, altruism, cooperation, and modesty (Johnson, 2014).

We attempted to find a facet to help explain this discrepancy in the data. Levels of institutional trust are a predictor of conspiracy beliefs (Karić & Međedović, 2021). We wished to determine whether interpersonal trust would produce similar results.

Research Question & Hypothesis

Question: Is a facet of agreeableness (trust) a stronger predictor of conspiracy beliefs than the entire domain of agreeableness?

Hypothesis: Trust will be negatively correlated with conspiracy beliefs and will serve as a better predictor than agreeableness.

Method

Participants:

- 65 Longwood University Psychology Students
- Age: (M = 19.2, SD = 1.28)
- 10 Male, 53 Female, 2 Other

Material and Procedures:

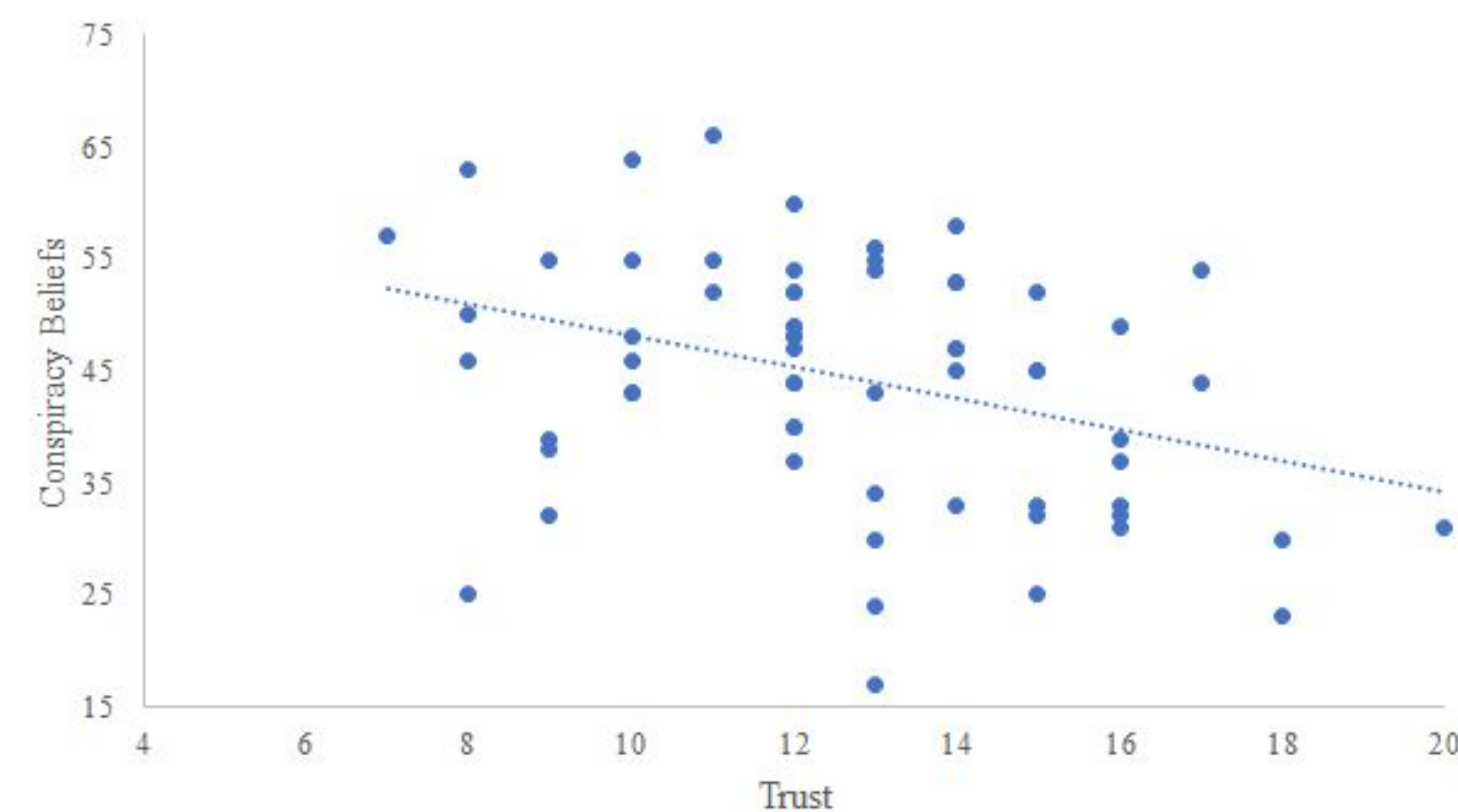
- Participants were assessed by a 24 question test in which agreeableness were assessed (interpersonal trust included), with the IPIP-NEO scale.
- Participants then took the 15-question Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale to assess their belief in conspiracy theories.
- The study was done online where participants accessed the assessments through the university study participation portal.
- Students were awarded credit upon completion of the study.

Results

The Pearson Correlation Coefficient between trust and conspiracy beliefs was significant, the correlation between agreeableness and conspiracy beliefs was not. The figures below plot the sum of scores for trust and conspiracy beliefs, followed by agreeableness and conspiracy beliefs

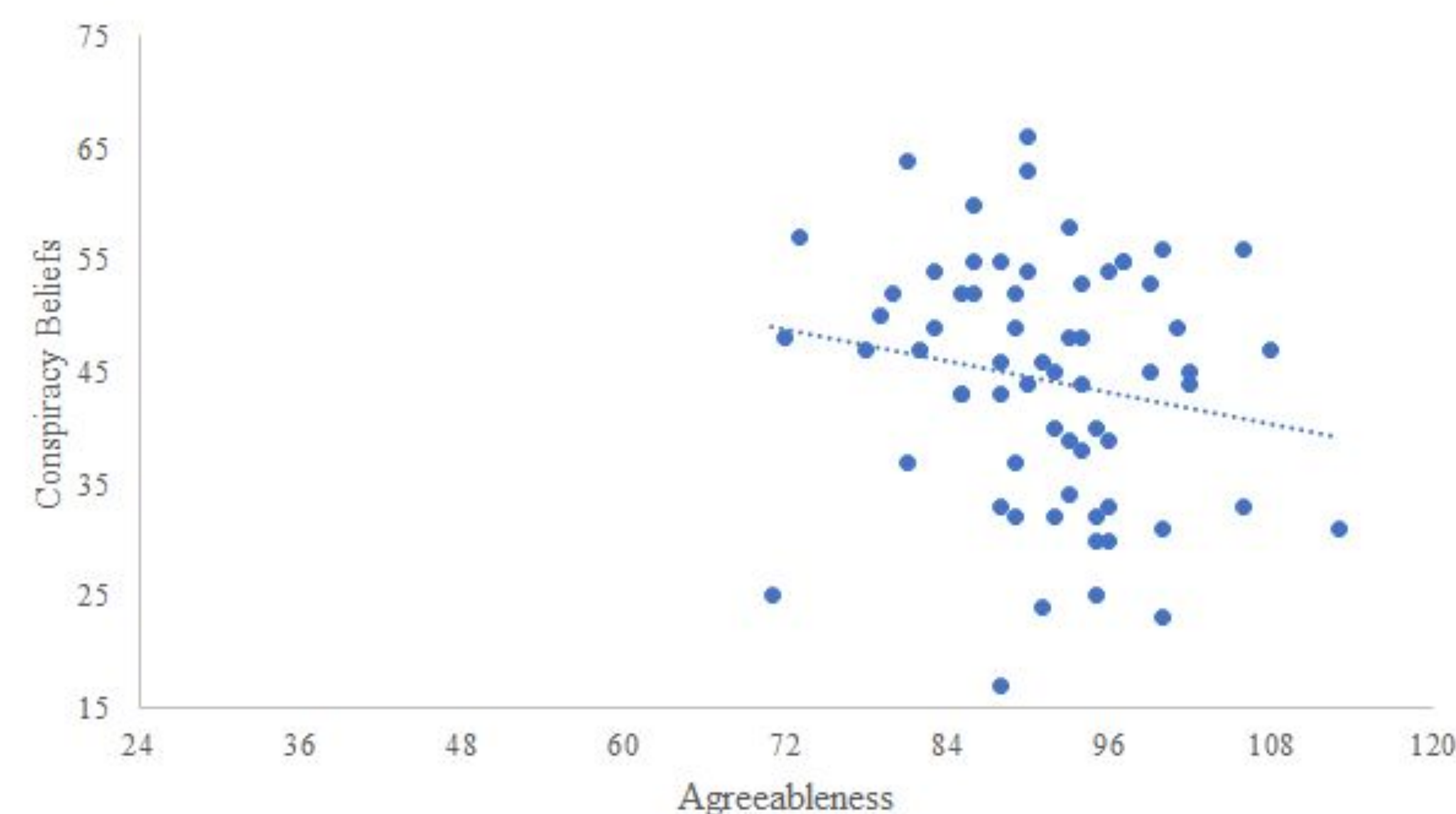
Results: Trust and Conspiracy Beliefs

- Pearson $r: r(65) = -0.355, p = .002$



Results: Agreeableness and Conspiracy Beliefs

- Pearson $r: r(65) = -0.174, p = .165$



Discussion

Our results supported our hypothesis, with a low to moderate significant negative correlation between conspiracy beliefs and interpersonal trust, and with agreeableness having a statistically insignificant correlation. As a person's level of interpersonal trust increases, the tendency to believe in conspiracy theories decreases. This supports behavioral results by Meuer & Imhoff (2021). The insignificant correlation for agreeableness supports the results by Goreis & Voracek (2019).

Future research:

- Measure other facets of agreeableness with conspiracy beliefs.
- Experiment to see if less trusting people will believe new conspiracy theories.

Limitations:

- We did not measure other domains and facets, a significant factor may have been missed due to this.
- The COVID-19 pandemic led to an influx of new conspiracy theories, which may have influenced responses to questions pertaining to diseases and government secrecy.
- We cannot accurately determine how this relationship is formed or how much one influences the other.

References

1. Goreis, A., & Voracek, M. (2019). A systematic review and meta-analysis of psychological research on conspiracy beliefs: Field characteristics, measurement instruments, and associations with personality traits. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10. <https://doi-org.proxy.longwood.edu/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00205>
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3. Meuer, M., & Imhoff, R. (2021). Believing in hidden plots is associated with decreased behavioral trust: Conspiracy belief as greater sensitivity to social threat or insensitivity towards its absence? *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 93. <https://doi-org.proxy.longwood.edu/10.1016/j.jesp.2020.104081>