

Original Research Paper

# Perceived Anomic Threat, Beliefs in LGBTQ Conspiracy Theories and Support for Violence Against LGBTQ Minorities in a Highly Heteronormative Context: The Case of Cameroon

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**Abstract:** The literature on conspiracy theories reports that they are generated by a feeling of threat and are catalysts for the extremist and violent behavior of which many minority groups are victims, including members of the LGBTQ community. However, the fact that LGBTQ conspiracy theories are poorly documented in the scientific literature does not allow us to know what link they could have with the extremist behavior against LGBTQ people that are reported in many contexts, including sub-Saharan Africa in particular, a region considered one of the most hostile in the world for these people, but which, paradoxically, is of little interest to researchers. This study contributes to filling this gap by proposing that because individuals perceive the threat of LGBTQ people to their communities from the perspective of their values, they are inclined to believe in LGBTQ conspiracy theories that proliferate in their social environment and consequently support violent behaviors against LGBTQ people, with the aim of trying to restore the social fabric perceived as being fractured because of their lifestyle. The research is conducted in the Cameroonian context with a sample of 861 heterosexuals, aged between 17 and 49 years ( $M = 29.40$ ;  $SD = 8.15$ ), to whom we administered a set of measures relating to perceived anomic threat, beliefs in LGBTQ conspiracy theories and endorsement of violent behavior towards LGBTQ people. In addition to the main measures, emotional reactions towards LGBTQ minorities (disgust, fear, anger, hate and distrust) were also measured, with instruments presenting acceptable reliability indices. The results provide empirical support for the hypothesis of the study. They report that in the highly heteronormative Cameroonian context, the perception of anomic threat, materialized by the perceived disintegration of the social structure, leads heterosexuals to support violence against LGBTQ people via beliefs in the LGBTQ conspiracy theories.

**Keywords:** LGBTQ Conspiracy Theories, Perceived Anomic Threat, Support for Violence, LGBTQ Community, Sub-Saharan Africa, Cameroon

## Introduction

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) people continually face difficulties integrating into the societies in which they live, in particular, because they are frequently victims of discriminatory, hostile, aggressive and violent attitudes and behaviors (Martínez *et al.*, 2015; Moleiro *et al.*, 2021; Tillewein *et al.*, 2023). To explain these attitudes and behaviors, the literature has paid great attention to the status of homosexuality in fundamentally heteronormative social contexts (Gulevich *et al.*, 2018),

including in particular Muslim, Asian and African societies (Flores, 2019). It shows that: (1) This sexual orientation would represent a threat to the survival and values of communities in these societies (Tjijto *et al.*, 2019); and (2) The perception of this threat would be the source of individuals' beliefs in conspiracy theories around the question of gender and sexual orientation (Marchlewska *et al.*, 2019), especially since these theories can be used by these individuals to oppose the adoption of anti-discrimination laws against LGBTQ people (Salvati *et al.*, 2023). If the first reason is relatively

well documented in the specialized literature, the fact remains that we know little about conspiracy theories relating to LGBTQ people, which are almost completely excluded from the literature on conspiracy beliefs (Dzuetso Mouafo, 2023; Salvati *et al.*, 2023). It follows that in a theoretical context where the links between conspiratorial beliefs and extremist and radical behavior are nevertheless highlighted in the specialized literature (Bartlett and Miller, 2010), research does not report empirical data on the links between these beliefs and violence against members of the LGBTQ community. In this vein, the aim of this research is to fill this gap by examining these potential links.

Due to the fact that conspiracy beliefs generally emerge in situations of threat (Van Prooijen and Van Dijk, 2014; Van Prooijen and Van Lange, 2014), this study highlights the role of anomic threat as a catalyst for beliefs in LGBTQ conspiracy beliefs leading to support for violence against members of the LGBTQ community; this threat being a potential source of social conflicts linked to the perception of a disintegration/deregulation of the social structure due to the decline of social values and beliefs (Teymouri *et al.*, 2016; 2017). Indeed, unlike intergroup threat (Gulevich *et al.*, 2016; 2018), anomic threat has not yet been used in the specialized literature to explain extremist and violent behavior against members of the LGBTQ community; hence the interest in evaluating its impact, especially since homosexuality seems to come into conflict with the values and beliefs of certain populations (Kiye, 2019; Ndjio, 2020; Nfobin, 2014). The current study is conducted in Cameroon. This country is located in sub-Saharan Africa; a region considered to be one of the most hostile in the world towards the LGBTQ community (Lyonga, 2022; Van Heerden, 2019), but which, despite this status, does not receive much attention from researchers who are interested in extremist and violent behaviors against members of this community.

### *The Perceived Threat of Homosexuality and Violence Against LGBTQ People in a Heteronormative Context: The Case of Cameroon*

Homophobic violence is a major problem facing many Societies (Lyonga, 2022). They are extreme manifestations of heteronormative socio-cultural practices. Heteronormativity refers to all the norms that govern gender roles (Herek, 1987; 2000; 2007). The specialized literature provides explanations for its prevalence and dwells on its attitudinal and behavioral consequences for members of the LGBTQ community (Falomir-Pichastor and Mugny, 2009; Herek, 2007; Martínez-Guzmán and Íñiguez-Rueda, 2017). This norm inclines individuals to expect not only that the behavior of biologically male and female persons conforms to specific norms of masculinity and femininity respectively, but also that each individual is sexually attracted to a person of the

biological opposite sex (Herek, 1994). Concretely, this means that men are expected to be strong, independent, anti-feminine, assertive and sure of themselves. Women, on the other hand, should be sensitive, emotional, fragile, warm and caring (Bourguignon *et al.*, 2018). These behavioral expectations then define gender identity and the distinctive character between men and women, just as they considerably affect behavior in the social environment (Bem, 1981; Falomir-Pichastor *et al.*, 2019). It follows that all people who do not conform to these norms are considered deviant; hence the difficulties of social integration that they will face (Torres Rosado, 2019). Thus, stigma, prejudice and homophobic violence are the embodiment of negative attitudes towards all people and communities that do not conform to the norm of heteronormativity, such as members of the LGBTQ community (Lehtonen, 2021). This is the case in Cameroon, a country in sub-Saharan Africa, where homosexuality is criminally, socially and culturally condemned (Messanga *et al.*, 2008; Messanga and Sonfack, 2017).

For many years, acts of violence against LGBTQ in Cameroon have been a worrying problem denounced by many international organizations (Amnesty International, 2013; HRW, 2021). In their reports, they reveal that in this country, these people are victims of humiliation, ambushes, public insults, arbitrary arrests, beatings, torture and even assassination. These acts are committed in a legal context where homosexuality is condemned by article 347-1 of the Penal Code, which provides that: "Is punishable by imprisonment from six (06) months to five (05) years and a fine of twenty thousand (20,000 [32,33 USD]) to two hundred thousand (200,000 [323,33 USD]) francs, any person who has sexual intercourse with a person of his sex". This criminalization of homosexuality is consistent with the negative perception of this sexual orientation on the sociocultural level. Indeed, Cameroonian society seems to feel a strong revulsion towards homosexuals (Messanga *et al.*, 2008). Considered as sorcerers or followers of sects, they are rejected with a certain virulence. This legal and sociocultural rejection forms the basis for the institutionalization of many homophobic attitudes and behaviors among citizens of this country, whether civilians or members of the security forces (Amnesty International, 2013; HRW, 2021).

Faced with the obstacle that prevents their fulfillment, members of the LGBTQ community living in the Cameroonian context have developed strategies to camouflage their real sexual orientation (Gueboguo, 2006). Thus, although identifying and accepting themselves as such, some, to look good, choose to maintain fictitious relationships with partners of the opposite sex. Others go so far as to celebrate marriages with circumstantial partners while having a parallel relationship with another

partner of the same sex (Messanga and Sonfack, 2017). In short, Cameroonians belonging to the LGBTQ community are condemned to clandestinity and bisexuality because of social constraints and internalized ambient homophobia (Gueboguo, 2006).

Despite their discretion, a number of them were beaten, arrested and sentenced. Indeed, according to the report published by the Human Rights Campaign (2013), Cameroon was the country in the world where individuals were most likely to be arrested because of their sexual orientation. This report indicated that for 84% of Cameroonians, their country was not a good place to live for members of the LGBTQ community. By way of illustration, we can cite the sentencing, in April 2011, of a man named Roger Mbédé to thirty-six (36) months in prison for having sent another man an SMS in which he declared that he was in love with him (Lyonga, 2022; Messanga and Sonfack, 2017); the murder of gay rights activist Eric Lembembe in July 2013 (Messanga and Sonfack, 2017); or more recently, the sentencing, in May 2021, of two transgender people to five (5) years in prison. They had been arrested by the security forces because they were dressed in a typically feminine way despite their biological sex being male ([hrw.org/fr/news/2021/05/12/in-cameroon-two-women-transgender-people-were-sentenced-five-years-in-prison](http://hrw.org/fr/news/2021/05/12/in-cameroon-two-women-transgender-people-were-sentenced-five-years-in-prison)). In short, blackmail, persecution, beatings, arrests and sometimes assassinations are the components of the situation that LGBTQ people face in Cameroon (Olivier, 2019).

In Cameroon, homosexuality is considered a curse, a sin, a dishonor, a mental imbalance, or a sectarian practice (Lado, 2011; Menguele Menyengue, 2014). The negative cognitions and affects generated by this sexual orientation are due, in part, to the fact that it does not fit into the perspective of the ideology of survival (Adamczyk and Pitt, 2009) to which the cultural communities of this country adhere (Kiye, 2019; Ndjio, 2020). This ideology consists of the perception of sexuality as a practice whose objective is not pleasure, but the reproduction of the species; hence the rejection of homosexuality, considered as an unproductive sexuality. This perception is in the same wake as the declarations of the former Gambian president Yaya Jammeh who affirmed in 2013, at the rostrum of the United Nations, that homosexuality is wrong, opposed to God and to humanity and that promoters want the demise of the human species (Nichols, 2013). By the recurrence of these considerations, a significant number of heterosexuals adhere to the idea that there is a LGBTQ conspiracy. Its purpose would be to spread this “non-African” sexual orientation imported onto the continent by the colonizers (Da Costa Santos, 2013), whose intention was to pervert local communities by questioning their values and beliefs (Epprecht, 2008; Lyonga, 2022), based in particular on the ideology of survival. From this perspective, homosexuality

constitutes a threat to these communities, not only to their survival, but also to their value systems.

### *Perceived Threat of Homosexuality and Beliefs in LGBTQ Conspiracy Theories*

The literature reports that threats can be associated with negative intergroup attitudes (Stephan *et al.*, 2000). In intergroup circumstances, individuals may perceive two types of threats: Realistic and symbolic. The first refers to the feeling that the group’s resources, privileged position, economy, territory, political power and physical traits are threatened. The second relates to the perception that the group’s worldview, values, morality, belief systems, identity and way of life are threatened (Stephan *et al.*, 2005; 2016). These perceived threats can then lead the members of the said group towards negative intergroup reactions. These can be cognitive reactions such as dehumanization and stereotyping; emotional reactions such as distrust, fear, anger, disgust, or hatred; and defensive behavioral reactions such as discrimination and lying, or offensive ones such as aggression or violence (Gulevich *et al.*, 2018; Stephan *et al.*, 2016). In social contexts where the presence of LGBTQ minorities is considered a real or symbolic threat, their members may face reactions of this nature (Tjijto *et al.*, 2019). This feeling of threat can, in certain cases, generate beliefs in conspiracy theories (Van Prooijen and Van Lange, 2014).

Conspiracy theories are attempts to explain important political and social events and circumstances highlighting conspiracies hatched by two or more powerful actors (Douglas *et al.*, 2019; Jolley *et al.*, 2022). They propose that there is a small group of people who constantly manipulate reality to achieve objectives that can be considered illicit and malicious. Several studies provide empirical evidence on why individuals are motivated to believe in these theories. For the most part, they report that people believe in it when certain important psychological problems are not solved. For example, psychological stress, high political cynicism, low self-esteem, experiences of anxiety and uncertainty and the threatening potential of a situation for a group can predict beliefs in conspiracy theories (Cookson *et al.*, 2021; Douglas *et al.*, 2017; Imhoff and Lamberty, 2018; Lantian *et al.*, 2017; Liekefett *et al.*, 2023; Swami *et al.*, 2016; Van Prooijen and Van Dijk, 2014). These beliefs can lead an individual to distance himself from people or communities that do not share them (Bilewicz *et al.*, 2019). They can also increase prejudice against individuals considered to be the main conspirators since they appear to be the source of the perceived threat (Bruder *et al.*, 2013; Imhoff and Bruder, 2014; Swami, 2012).

Although widely commented in popular imagery, newspaper articles and political debates, especially those related to gender theory, the so-called LGBTQ conspiracy is very little documented in the scientific literature. It flourishes particularly in the American context

(Friedersdorf, 2012), within conservative and religious circles. This is why Kirchick (2022) suggests that it is necessary to consider homophobia not only as a form of prejudice on the same level as others but also as a conspiracy theory. Beliefs in a gender conspiracy fall into the same register. Indeed, Marchlewska *et al.* (2019) report that for some Polish religious leaders, gender theory and gender studies represent an ideology that poses a threat to society. In this vein, scientists and activists who share the idea that gender is not only a biological but also a psychological phenomenon, are likened to enemies of human nature. Feminists and the LGBTQ movement would have the intention of triggering conflicts between the sexes, fostering hostility to fatherhood and motherhood and destroying the family, considered by Catholics to be a sacred institution.

Regarding LGBTQ conspiracy theories specifically, Salvati *et al.* (2023) report that although studies of conspiracy theories are growing considerably, this literature has a significant gap in that it has almost completely excluded conspiracy beliefs related to LGBTQ people. However, the belief in a “gay lobby” exists. This would aim to propagate homosexuality through the indoctrination of minors, the upheaval of the natural/moral order and the promotion of a dictatorial ideology based on “gender theory”. This theory, which some consider to be meaningless and without any scientific basis (Bettinsoli *et al.*, 2022) emphasizes the dimension relating to the social and non-biological construction of the meanings of femininity and masculinity; hence the controversy it raises, particularly in religious and conservative circles (Hamlin, 2021). In this wake, LGBTQ conspiracy theories are often used as arguments in political debates in the European context, to prevent the adoption of laws and negatively affect the popular consensus relating to the fight against discrimination towards members of the LGBTQ community, the promotion of anti-discrimination policies in educational and professional contexts and the advancement of civil rights. According to Salvati *et al.* (2023), to date, the few psychological studies focusing on conspiracy theories related to LGBTQ people have only scratched the surface of this phenomenon, with particular emphasis on the economic power of an alleged “gay agenda”. Consequently, they did not take into account all the characteristics that contribute to defining a conspiracy theory. This research aims to fill this gap by analyzing LGBTQ conspiracy theories in the Cameroonian context.

In Cameroon, one of the sources of the negative attitudes and behaviors towards homosexuality in public opinion relates to the fact that it is considered a practice akin to prostitution. Indeed, in this country, sexual relations between people of the same biological sex are perceived as a factor of social mobility and promotion, a trade maintained between the powerful and the underprivileged (Gueboguo, 2006). Situated in a context

of political clientelism, this profitable homosexuality would be an eminently elitist practice: A transactional (homo) sexuality (Menguete Menyengue, 2014). Concretely, due to a socio-economic context that has imposed harsh living conditions on populations, homosexuality has become a means of survival, a rite that conditions social ascent and is promoted by networks whose focal points would be in the high administration as well as in the political class. In this perspective, homosexual practices are not seen as the consequence of physical attraction to an individual of the same biological sex, but as the act of heterosexual people who have sexual relations with partners of the same biological sex, with the aim of entering circles of power and money (Messanga and Sonfack, 2017). This “political homosexuality” (Menguete Menyengue, 2014) appears to be the most pernicious form of sexuality insofar as it falls under “the dictatorship of minorities”. Indeed, in popular imagery, homosexual relations or the practice of sodomy are linked to a pact of domination and submission that can be concluded in the political sphere (Pigeaud, 2011). Thus, in the context of the quest for authority, the exercise of domination, or the materialization of power, it is considered that the “active homosexual” can manage to subjugate the “passive homosexual” through this rite. It is to this dictatorship of sodomy for a promotion that the neologism “homocracy” refers (Menguete Menyengue, 2014). As a result, campaigns against homosexuality materialize the refusal of subjugation and submission through “defilement”. They demonstrate the contestation of the humiliation of anal penetration (sodomy), to improve one’s living conditions or progress in one’s career.

In Cameroonian religious and popular circles, homophobic discourse is based on the supposed ritual and initiatory uses of homosexuality (Roxburgh, 2019). Indeed, it is often perceived there as an occult and initiatory practice (Menguete Menyengue, 2014). This explanation is systematically mobilized to arouse the repugnance of the population towards homosexual practices, based on the fact that any practice whose occult potential is suspected is generally feared and shrouded in a veil of mystery. Indeed, in the analysis of popular homophobia in Cameroon, we are struck by the fact that there is a part of irrationality in the way individuals perceive homosexuality. This relates to its alleged initiatory uses which, as a result, arouses fear and apprehension, since popular imagery sees in it “a kind of vampirism” that the Rosicrucian and Masonic esoteric brotherhoods would promote (Menguete Menyengue, 2014). Concretely, in the Cameroonian context, the members of these brotherhoods are attributed to practices such as incest, homosexuality, or ritual crimes (Tonda, 2002; Menguete Menyengue, 2014). These supposed ritual crimes, which are alleged to be accompanied by sodomy, helped to maintain the idea that homosexuality would consist of a physical and spiritual bond between members of the political class and would be a pact of submission.

To affirm this formidable ritual, initiation and occult properties of homosexuality, the idea is widespread in Cameroonian public opinion that certain sects linked to power use sodomy as a rite of passage to humiliate and submit the new initiate or within the framework of mystical beliefs (Pigeaud, 2011). As a result, many Cameroonians consider homosexuality to be unnatural. For them, it is more of a mystical practice into which powerful people can initiate individuals in precarious social situations. Anyone can therefore be converted to it (Machikou, 2009). Consequently, individuals who are reluctant to convert to it are condemned to unemployment or to spending their careers in subordinate hierarchical positions. As a result, they may feel the threat of homosexuality to their well-being and social values in general (Messanga *et al.*, 2008). It is this perceived threat that societal anomie refers to.

### *Perception of Societal Anomie and Conspiratorial Beliefs*

The concept of anomie was brought to light by the sociologists (Durkheim, 1897; Merton, 2017). They used it to refer to the effective lack of social regulation, likely to generate societal problems such as suicide or deviance. More recently, social psychology research has carried out an enriching conceptual revision of this concept, which now characterizes the perception that a particular society is disintegrating and deregulating (Teymoori *et al.*, 2016; 2017). This means that anomie is understood through two essential characteristics: Disintegration, which concerns the perception that the social structure is breaking down considerably, in particular, due to the decline of trust and social values, for example and deregulation, which reflects the perception that political leaders and governing authorities are ineffective and illegitimate. These two dimensions are interrelated so that the break made in one leads to the fracture of the other. For example, if individuals perceive that standards of morality are breaking dramatically, then attribution of this to a failure of policymakers will be unavoidable; which will lead to an obvious increase in perceived anomie threat.

The specialized literature reports that anomie is associated with beliefs in conspiracy theories (Douglas *et al.*, 2017). Indeed, in the face of large-scale societal problems, conspiracy theories tend to proliferate and because of this, people can easily see the society itself as deteriorating. More specifically, conspiratorial beliefs increase the degree of perception of society as anomie because they simultaneously increase the general feeling of dissatisfaction (Abalakina-Paap *et al.*, 1999). In addition, the feeling that a small powerful group could conspire against the ingroup increases the perception that societal norms are exceeded or that they are immoral since they would only benefit this small group. The consequence is that individuals will perpetrate hostile acts mainly to show their displeasure against authorities they consider ineffective, illegal and immoral (Jolley *et al.*, 2018; 2019).

Thus, the perception of society as anomie is likely to increase negative emotional reactions such as distrust towards groups considered to be the main instigators of degradation (Bornand and Klein, 2022). The question is whether these negative emotional reactions are likely to turn into violent intergroup acts, as is the case for beatings, physical and verbal assaults, or murders against LGBTQ people in the Cameroonian context (Messanga and Sonfack, 2017).

### *The Present Research: Beliefs in LGBTQ Conspiracy Theories Mediate the Link Between Perceived Anomie Threat and Support for Violence Against LGBTQ Minorities*

Conspiracy theories are catalysts for extremism and radicalization, thus fulfilling a remarkable social and functional role (Bartlett and Miller, 2010). In this sense, research reports that individuals who strongly believe in it tend to show extremist and violent behaviors against outgroups (Van Prooijen *et al.*, 2022), especially when the said groups are perceived as being manipulated by conspirators, who truly control society (Imhoff *et al.*, 2021). These behaviors then emerge when certain individual dispositions are present. This is the case when the perception of societal anomie is high, which inclines individuals to hypervigilance in the face of possible intergroup damage and increases social mistrust and ideological polarization (Crimston *et al.*, 2022; Van Prooijen and Krouwel, 2020). Thus, the present study notes that individuals' beliefs in conspiracy theories constitute a powerful mechanism to support extremist and violent behavior harmful to those targeted, who would act against in group interests (Jolley *et al.*, 2022). The threat of these interests could reinforce their perception of the disintegration and societal deregulation characterizing anomie and encourage them to demonstrate or support extremist and violent behaviors (Crimston *et al.*, 2022; Ionescu *et al.*, 2021; Messanga and Ekango Nzekai, 2022). However, while the specialized literature reveals the links between beliefs in conspiracy theories and intergroup violence, as well as the impact of the feeling of threat on the endorsement of these beliefs, little is known about the possible relationships between beliefs in LGBTQ conspiracy theories, stemming from perceptions of anomie threat and support for violence against members of the LGBTQ community. The objective of this research is to fill this gap in a highly heteronormative social context, that of sub-Saharan Africa, which is considered one of the most hostile in the world for members of the LGBTQ community (HRW, 2021) but to which, paradoxically, few studies are dedicated so far. It tests the idea that in this context, individuals' feeling that their society is disintegrating and deregulating impacts their beliefs in LGBTQ conspiracy theories, especially since they believe that it is the authorities who promote homosexuality (Menguete Menyengue, 2014;

Messanga and Sonfack, 2017; Pigeaud, 2011). This could lead them to backlash and support violence perpetrated against LGBTQ to restore the values and beliefs of their society that they perceive to be fractured due to these people's sexual orientation and lifestyle.

## Materials and Methods

### Participants

The sample of this study consists of 861 heterosexual Cameroonians. Their ages vary between 18 and 49 years ( $M = 29.40$ ;  $SD = 8.15$ ). To guarantee the ethics of the research, their agreement to participate voluntarily in the study was obtained and they were assured of respect for the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. These ethical standards were also applied during the data analysis phase so that no information allowing the possible identification of the participants was disclosed.

### Materials

In this research, participants, who were investigated individually, expressed their opinions on measures assessing the main and control variables, on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

### Measurements of the Main Variables of the Study

**Beliefs in LGBTQ conspiracy theories:** Participants expressed their beliefs in LGBTQ conspiracy theories on a scale composed of 4 items ( $\alpha = .85$ ), adapted from the study by Swami *et al.* (2017). A sample item posits that: "A small, secret group of people are responsible for all the major decisions that are made in the world, such as practicing homosexuality." We indicate that the data collection was done before the publication of the Gender Ideology and LGBTQ + Lobby Conspiracies (GILC) scale (Salvati *et al.*, 2023); hence the fact that it was not used in the present study.

**Perceived anomic threat:** Participants revealed their perception of the anomic state of Cameroonian society through 4 items ( $\alpha = .84$ ) inspired by the anomie scale (Teymoori *et al.*, 2016). These items assess the perceived decline of the social structure (example item: "In this country, moral standards are no longer truly respected"). The measurement relating to the perceived decline of leadership was made, but the internal consistency index of the scale being low ( $\alpha = .63$ ), the data collected were not taken into account in the results of the study.

**Support for violence against members of the LGBTQ community:** Thanks to 4 items ( $\alpha = .91$ ) adapted from the study by Yu *et al.* (2011), participants expressed their level of support for violence against LGBTQ minorities. One item suggests that: "People who engage in homosexual behavior should be caned."

### Measurements of the Control Variables of the Study

These are essentially emotional reactions against LGBTQ minorities, notably due to the fact that these emotions are theoretically linked to the feeling of threat (Bornand and Klein, 2022; Gulevich *et al.*, 2018; Stephan *et al.*, 2016).

**Distrust:** Participants revealed their degree of distrust towards members of the LGBTQ community using 4 items ( $\alpha = .89$ ) inspired by Rusk (2018). One of the items states that: "Homosexuals are very unreliable". **Fear:** Through 4 items ( $\alpha = .91$ ) adapted from the literature (Giner-Sorolla and Russell, 2019), participants expressed the degree of fear that members of the LGBTQ community inspire in them. For example, one item suggests that: "I am afraid of anything related to homosexuals".

**Anger:** Using 4 items ( $\alpha = .91$ ) adapted from the study by Giner-Sorolla and Russell (2019), participants expressed their degree of anger towards members of the LGBTQ community. For example, one item states that: "I can sometimes feel my heart beating faster because of the rage I feel when I start thinking about homosexuals".

**Disgust:** 4 items ( $\alpha = .75$ ) have been used to measure this emotional reaction towards LGBTQ people. One of the items proposes that: "I would ask for new bed sheets in a hotel if the previous occupant of the room was a homosexual" (Hodson *et al.*, 2013).

**Hate:** This emotion was measured with 4 items ( $\alpha = .89$ ) adapted from the study by Sternberg and Sternberg (2008). One item states: "I will join a movement that aims to fight against homosexuality."

When processing the data, for reasons of objectivity, the management of missing data was not done following the techniques for managing missing data present in the SPSS editor (the replacement of missing data by the average of the series or by the average of the midpoints, by linear interpolation for example). Therefore, in case data were missing in certain scales, these were simply removed from the database. Subsequently, the data were inserted into the SPSS editor.

## Results

This study establishes the links between the perception of anomic threat, beliefs in LGBTQ conspiracy theories and support for violence against LGBTQ minorities. Preliminary analyses, in particular the means and standard deviations of the scores obtained on these variables, as well as the correlation indices between them are estimated (Table 1), using the JASP.17.1.0 (Jeffreys's Amazing Statistics Program) data analysis software. The analyses for testing the research hypothesis, in particular the mediation analyses, are based on the statistical mediation model whose architecture takes into account latent and manifest variables. The mediation relationship of the tested hypothesis is specified in the structural model made up of the main variables of the study (Fig. 1) (Byrne, 2012; Civelek, 2018; Meydan and Sen, 2011). The

estimation of the mediation coefficient (or the indirect effect) and the estimation of the fit indices of the model to the empirical data are carried out using JASP.17.1.0 and SPSS-AMOS.23 (Statistical Package for Social Sciences-Analysis Of Moment Structures). These estimates make it possible to test the hypothesis of the study and make statistical inferences. The established statistical mediation model (Fig. 1) aims to obtain estimates of the direct and indirect (mediated) effects of perceived anomic threat on support for violence against LGBTQ minorities, through beliefs in LGBTQ conspiracy theories. The analyses also take into account the relationships between emotional reactions against LGBTQ minorities (control variables) and the main variables of the study. The evaluation of the models is made with reference to indices such as  $\chi^2$ , the values of the Comparative Fit Index (CFI >.90), the Turkey Lewis Index (TLI >.90), the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA <.05) and the Standard Root Mean Residual (SRMR) (Hu and Bentler, 1999).

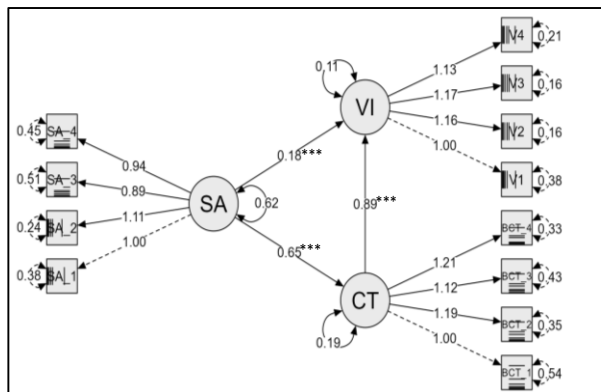
The results in Table 1 indicate that participants perceive the anomic threat (M = 24.10, SD = 4.47), believe in LGBTQ conspiracy theories (M = 22.99, SD = 5.11) and support

violence against members of the LGBTQ community (M = 23.96, SD = 5.47). Table 1 also reports participants' scores on emotional reactions against LGBTQ people. They are visible through disgust (M = 22.24, SD = 5.28), fear (M = 23.50, SD = 5.40), anger (M = 23.65, SD = 5.58), hate (M = 24.32, SD = 4.84) and distrust (M = 23.68, SD = 5.37). The correlation analyses carried out made it possible to obtain positive and significant links between the main variables of the study. More concretely, the perception of anomic threat is positively and significantly linked to beliefs in LGBTQ conspiracy theories ( $r = .60, p < .01$ ) and to support for violence against LGBTQ people ( $r = .62, p < .01$ ). Beliefs in LGBTQ conspiracy theories is also positively and significantly associated with support for violence against LGBTQ people ( $r = .79, p < .01$ ). These positive relationships are also observed between the main variables of the study and emotional reactions towards LGBTQ minorities. The results of the study therefore support the idea that there are significant and positive links between the constructs measured; which gives the possibility of carrying out tests for the hypothesis of the study, as reported by the model in Fig. 1.

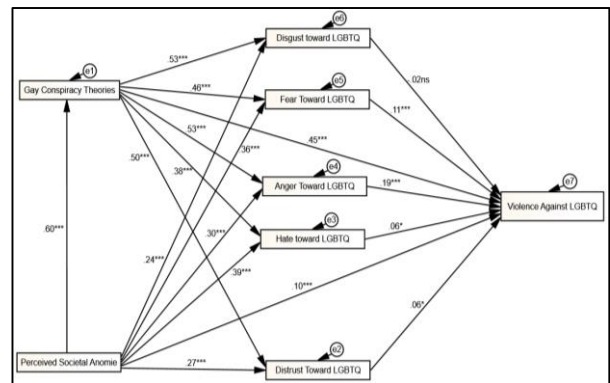
**Table 1:** Descriptive Statistics and correlation between variables (N = 861)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. PA	—							
2. GCT	.60***	—						
3. Violence	.62***	.79***	—					
4. Disgust	.56***	.67***	.64***	—				
5. Fear	.64***	.68***	.71***	.70***	—			
6. Anger	.61***	.71***	.73***	.77***	.83***	—		
7. Hate	.61***	.61***	.62***	.64***	.64***	.71***	—	
8. Distrust	.58***	.67***	.67***	.69***	.78***	.78***	.62***	—
M	24.10	22.99	23.96	22.24	23.50	23.65	24.32	23.68
SD	4.47	5.11	5.47	5.28	5.40	5.58	4.84	5.37

Note: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; PA= Perceived anomic threat; GCT = gay (LGBTQ) conspiracy theories; violence = support for violence against LGBTQ



**Fig. 1:** Mediation model between perception of anomic threat, beliefs in LGBTQ conspiracy theories and support for violence against LGBTQ minorities; Note: All scores are standardized. CT = Beliefs in LGBTQ Conspiracy Theories; SA = Perceived Anomic threat; VI = Support for Violence against LGBTQ people.  $\chi^2 = 241.72, Df = 51, \chi^2/Df = 4.73 < 5, \Delta\chi^2 = 241.72, \Delta df = 51, p < .001$ ; CFI = .99 > .95; TLI = .99 > .90, RMSEA = .0



**Fig. 2:** Structural model testing the relationships between perception of anomic threat, beliefs in LGBTQ conspiracy theories, negative emotions towards LGBTQ people and support for violence against LGBTQ minorities; Note: All scores are standardized; ns = not significant ( $p > .05$ ); \*\*\* = significant ( $p < .001$ ); \* = significant ( $p < .05$ );  $\chi^2 = 1295.279, Df = 10, p < .001, CFI = .80, RMSEA = .38, SRMR = .11$



The model in Fig. 1, produced using the JASP 0.17.1 software, considers the perception of anomic threat as an independent variable, beliefs in LGBTQ conspiracy theories as a mediating variable and support for violence against LGBTQ people as a dependent variable. It reveals an excellent fit to the data, given that its indices are acceptable overall, with  $\chi^2 = 241.72$ ,  $Df = 51$ ,  $\chi^2/Df = 4.73 < 5$ ,  $\Delta \chi^2 = 241.72$ ,  $\Delta df = 51$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = .99 > .95, T-size CFI = .99 > .90, Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = .99 > .90, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = .04 < .08, Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) = .03 < .08. The model indicates that perception of anomic threat positively and significantly predicts support for violence against LGBTQ people ( $\beta = .18$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $Ci [.10, .26]$   $p < .001$ ) and beliefs in LGBTQ conspiracy theories ( $\beta = .64$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $Ci [.60, .68]$ ). In turn, beliefs in LGBTQ conspiracy theories positively and significantly predict support for anti-LGBTQ violence ( $\beta = .89$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $Ci [.79, .99]$ ). In line with the analysis model adopted for this research, the results indicate that beliefs in LGBTQ conspiracy theories positively and significantly mediate the positive effect of the perception of anomic threat on the support for violence against LGBTQ people ( $\beta = .56$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $Ci [.41, .57]$ ). This mediational link reflects the idea that perceived anomic threat underlies the belief that the LGBTQ community conspires against heterosexuals and, in turn, this belief explains support for violence committed against members of this community. To further understand these results, additional analyses considering emotional reactions against LGBTQ people were conducted and are presented in Fig. 2.

The model in Fig. 2, produced using the SPSS-AMOS software, presents the relationships between the main variables of the study and takes into account the implication of emotional reactions against LGBTQ people. The data obtained show that the positive link between perception of anomic threat, beliefs in LGBTQ conspiracy theories and support for anti-LGBTQ violence can be explained by emotional reactions against LGBTQ people. More concretely, the perception of anomic threat positively and significantly predicts emotional reactions against these people, such as distrust ( $\beta = .27$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $p < .001$ ), hate ( $\beta = .39$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $p < .001$ ), anger ( $\beta = .30$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $p < .001$ ), fear ( $\beta = .36$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and disgust ( $\beta = .24$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Beliefs in LGBTQ conspiracy theories also positively and significantly predict distrust ( $\beta = .50$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $p < .001$ ), hate ( $\beta = .38$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $p < .001$ ), anger ( $\beta = .53$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $p < .001$ ), fear ( $\beta = .46$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and disgust ( $\beta = .53$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $p < .001$ ) against LGBTQ people. Finally, support for violence against LGBTQ people is predicted by negative emotions such as distrust ( $\beta = .05$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $p < .05$ ), hate ( $\beta = .06$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $p < .05$ ), anger ( $\beta = .19$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,

$p < .001$ ) and fear ( $\beta = .11$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Only disgust negatively predicts support for this violence ( $\beta = -.02$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $p > .05$ ).

Overall, the results of this study provide empirical evidence that, in a highly heteronormative society, when the state of society is perceived as anomic due to the threatening presence of LGBTQ people, beliefs in LGBTQ conspiracy theories lead heterosexuals to support violence against LGBTQ people.

## Discussion

This study tested the hypothesis that beliefs in LGBTQ conspiracy theories mediate the links between perceived anomic threat and support for violence against LGBTQ minorities. The observations made provide empirical support for this prediction. They indicate that in a context marked by the strength of the norm of heteronormativity, the feeling that the social structure is fracturing can lead individuals to believe in LGBTQ conspiracy theories which, in turn, favors support for violence against members of the LGBTQ community. This means that the support for violence against LGBTQ is linked to the fact that their sexual orientation and way of life are considered threatening to the values and beliefs that constitute the foundations of the society in which they live. The data collected also reveals that this support for violence is linked to the strong emotional reactions elicited by members of the LGBTQ community in the participants: Distrust, fear, anger and hate.

The data collected in this research contribute to the understanding of the role played by conspiracy theories in intergroup conflict. Indeed, they support the idea that these theories are catalysts for the adoption of harmful behaviors against any group of people considered to be potential conspirators (Jolley *et al.*, 2022). In this vein, they can also influence individuals to approve of intergroup violence, as reported in previous studies carried out in the political field (Imhoff *et al.*, 2021; Rottweiler and Gill, 2022). To do this, however, certain psychosocial mechanisms must be activated. More specifically, the results of empirical studies report that the relationship between beliefs in conspiracy theories and violent extremism is more observable in people who have low morality in relation to the law, low self-control and high self-efficacy (Rottweiler and Gill, 2022). The results of the present study indicate that these beliefs are generated by perceived anomic threat. Indeed, participants' perception of social disintegration and deregulation catalyzed their beliefs in a LGBTQ conspiracy, including the conversion of heterosexuals into homosexuals through the denial of all traditional forms of gender roles, which explains their support for violence against members of the LGBTQ community (Marchlewska *et al.*, 2019; Menguele Menyengue, 2014; Messanga and Sonfack, 2017).



It appears from this research that taking into account beliefs in conspiracy theories in predicting the link between anomic threat and support for violence against LGBTQ people is relevant. Indeed, this suggests that when one group feels the threat that another is conspiring against societal values, it may increase its perception that the values that regulate social behavior are becoming ineffective and illegitimate; hence the negative emotional reactions that will encourage it to adopt hostile, even violent attitudes and behaviors towards the group of conspirators (Crimston *et al.*, 2022; Ionescu *et al.*, 2021; Messanga and Ekango Nzekaih, 2022). Concretely, it has been observed that beliefs in conspiracy theories mediate the relation between perceived anomic threat and support for violence against LGBTQ people because it is likely to generate the emergence of homo-negative emotions such as distrust, fear, anger, disgust and hatred towards them. These observations are in the same perspective as those of the works that report that the perception of a conspiracy often involves the fear of being persecuted by other groups who have the illicit and malicious objectives of harming the in group, which characterizes paranoid thinking about reality (Greenburgh and Raihani, 2022; Raihani and Bell, 2019). Indeed, in the Cameroonian context, a feeling of threat to survival, values and beliefs, constituting an anomic threat, is likely to generate the beliefs in a LGBTQ conspiracy consisting in the conversion of heterosexuals into homosexuals, ritual and magical practices through sodomy, (homo) sexual transactions with individuals wishing to obtain a job or a promotion in the political or administrative apparatus. In response to this perceived anomic threat, individuals adopt hostile or even violent attitudes and behaviors towards members of the LGBTQ community, who are considered to be the source of the said threat (Bornand and Klein, 2022); the purpose being to restore the social fabric thus fractured from their point of view.

## Conclusion

The present research concluded that beliefs in LGBTQ conspiracy theories mediate the link between perceived anomic threat and support for violence against LGBTQ people in the Cameroonian context, which is characterized by the strength of communities' adherence to the norm of heteronormativity and to the ideology of survival (Messanga and Sonfack, 2017). The data collected thus contributes to the extension of the literature relating to the effects of beliefs in conspiracy theories in general and to conspiracy theories related to LGBTQ people in particular, which are much less documented in the scientific literature (Dzuetsou Mouafo, 2023; Salvati *et al.*, 2023), even though they flourish in popular imagery, particularly within conservative and religious circles. However, future research should extend these

investigations by studying the potential effect of individuals' socio-demographic characteristics (socio-economic level, geographical environment, level of education, or religious affiliation for example), which were not analyzed within the framework of this study, but which could impact the attitudinal dispositions measured. Additionally, future research should examine the involvement of paranoid thoughts, characterized by distrust, interpersonal sensitivity, ideas of references and ideas of persecution, in the prediction of extremist behaviors towards LGBTQ, in combination with perceived anomic threat and beliefs in conspiracy theories. Indeed, people who express a high degree of paranoid thoughts may also strongly endorse conspiracy theories (Greenburgh and Raihani, 2022; Marchlewska *et al.*, 2019). This research suggests that this relationship may be accentuated by the perception of the state of society as anomic and predict support for violence against LGBTQ people. In addition, a transnational study could be conducted in the context of sub-Saharan Africa to verify the validity of the results of this study in different countries which, even if they belong to the same subregion, do not necessarily have the same laws on homosexuality. For example, this sexual orientation is decriminalized in Gabon, Mali, or Angola, while it constitutes a criminal offense in Cameroon, Nigeria, or Burundi. However, it has been suggested that the criminalization of homosexuality constitutes one of the guarantees for violence against members of the LGBTQ community (HRW, 2021).

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## Authors' Contributions

All authors made a substantial, direct and intellectual contribution to the completion of this research.

## Ethics

All participants provided written informed consent to participate in the research.

## Data Availability Statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this research will be made available by the authors, without any undue reservation.

### Conflict of Interest

This research was conducted in the absence of any attitude or behavior that could be interpreted as a potential conflict of interest.

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