

Information about Past Beliefs Influences Current Beliefs

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INTRODUCTION

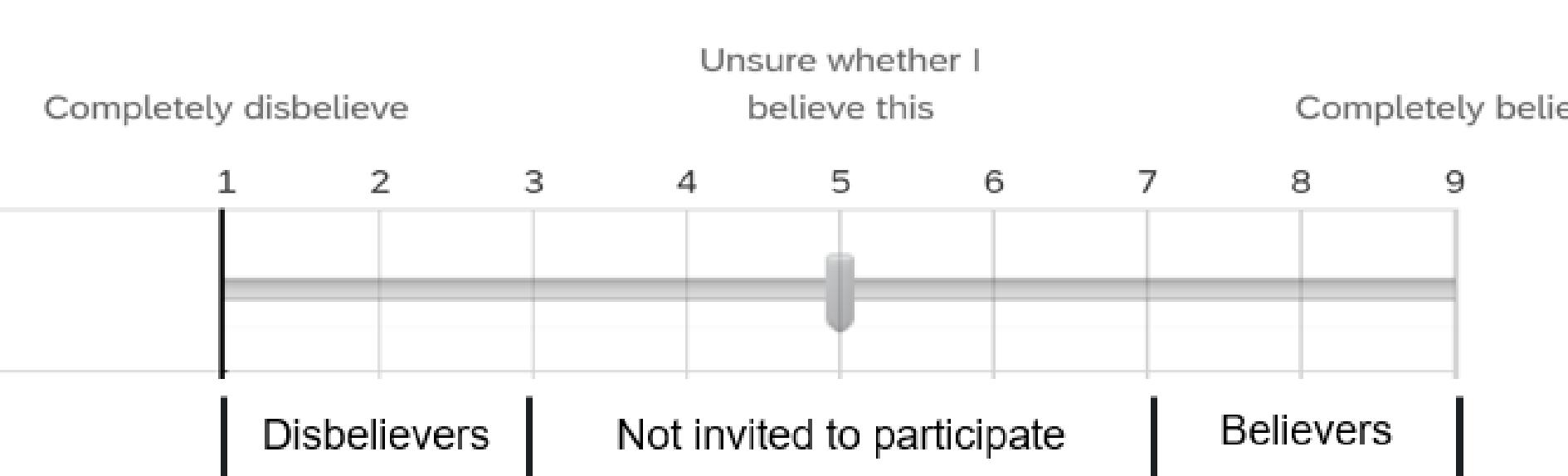
Research suggests easily available information in memory influences judgments about our selves. Examples: attitudes (Schwarz, 2007), and metacognitive judgments (Benjamin & Bjork, 1998). We propose that beliefs are similarly constructed in context and influenced by salient information. We test this hypothesis by examining whether knowledge of prior beliefs influences current beliefs following belief change.

Research Questions:

1. Will we elicit belief change on a contentious topic (gun control)?
2. When verifying initial beliefs, will subjects distinguish accurate from false initial beliefs?
3. Will verification of initial beliefs influence reporting of current beliefs?

METHODS

- N = 324 undergraduate students
- Initial beliefs assessed during on-line prescreening: “To what extent do you believe that increased gun control will reduce gun violence in the United States?” (9-point scale)



Materials:

“Pro text” – argues gun control is effective.
“Con text” – argues gun control is not effective.

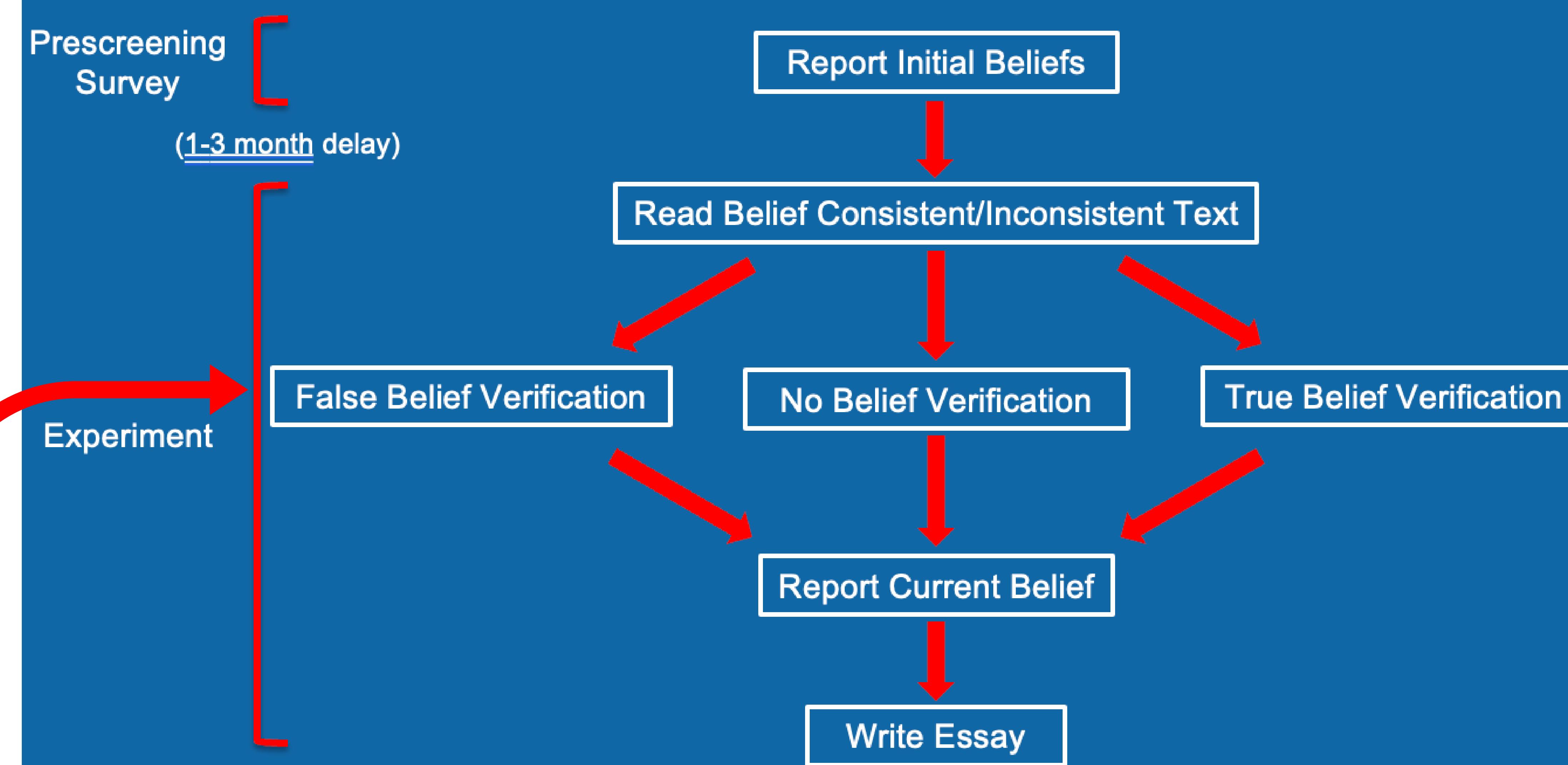
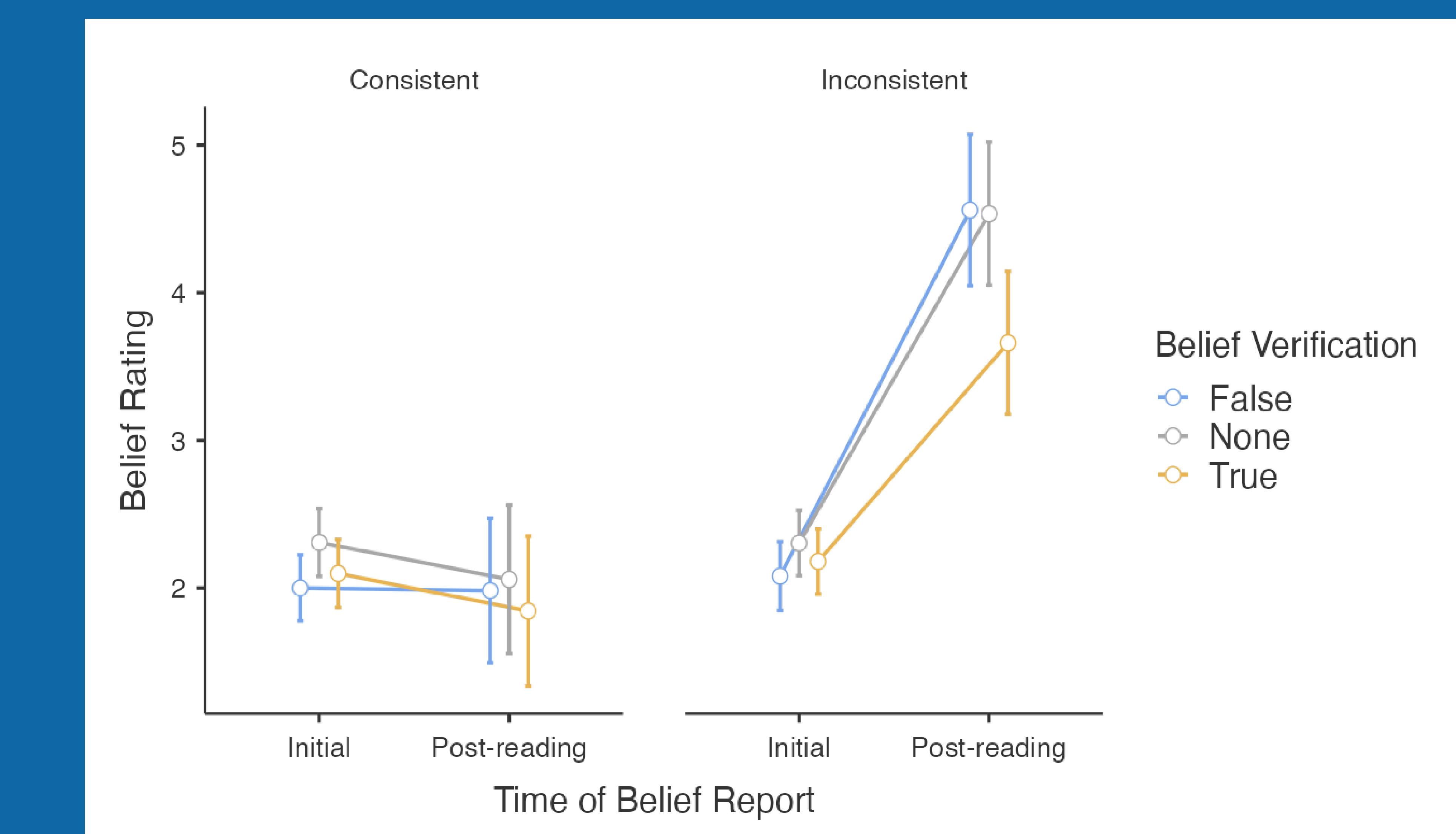
Design: Reading belief consistent / inconsistent text

Text position	Initial subject gun control beliefs	
	Believer	Disbeliever
Pro text	Belief Consistent	Belief Inconsistent
Con text	Belief Inconsistent	Belief Consistent

Belief verification: After reading, participants verified true or false information about past beliefs, or did not verify past beliefs.

Beliefs can be swayed by reading belief inconsistent information

Reminders of previous beliefs moderate current beliefs



RESULTS

The belief verification task was effective

- 82% verified false initial beliefs to be true
- 91% verified true initial beliefs to be true

Influence of consistency and feedback on belief change

- Reading a belief inconsistent text resulted in belief change.
- Verifying true information about initial beliefs led to less belief change than verifying false information, or not verifying.
- No difference in belief change between verifying false information about initial beliefs and not verifying

DISCUSSION

- Reading a belief inconsistent text leads to more moderate beliefs – even on a contentious topic like gun control effectiveness
- Subjects were not accurate in distinguishing true from false initial beliefs, suggesting poor awareness of belief change.
 - 82% verified false beliefs to be true
- Verifying true information about past beliefs led to less belief change than other information conditions
- Verifying false information about past beliefs did not affect belief change, however it was also unnoticed
- Ratings of the argumentative essays were collected from a separate pool of subjects, which will serve as a convergent measure for beliefs
 - Analyses ongoing

REFERENCES

Benjamin, A. S., Bjork, R. A., & Schwarz, B. L. (1998). The Mismeasure of Memory: When retrieval fluency is misleading as a metamnemonic index. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 127(1), 55–68. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0096-3445.127.1.55>

Schwarz, N. (2007). Attitude construction: Evaluation in context. *Social Cognition*, 25(5), 638–656. <https://doi.org/10.1521/soco.2007.25.5.638>