The influence of conspiratorial public narratives on public health issues - a narrative review and bibliometric analysis

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Abstract

This paper investigates the impact of conspiratorial narratives on the perception and management of social problems stemming from contemporary health crises, with a focus on the COVID-19 pandemic. Through a narrative review of the recent scientific literature, the research explores how these narratives develop, propagate and influence individual and collective behaviours in relation to public health, particularly in the context of vaccination and health compliance. The psychosocial mechanisms that facilitate adherence to conspiratorial beliefs and the role of social networks and the digital environment in amplifying them are analysed. The paper highlights the social consequences of these discourses - including diminished trust in authorities, political polarization and diminished social cohesion - and underlines the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in formulating effective strategies to combat disinformation. By integrating thematic and bibliometric analyses, the study contributes to a complex understanding of this emerging phenomenon and suggests future research directions for strengthening social resilience in the face of misinformation. By demonstrating current approaches based on psychological orientation, it confirms the need to involve scientific approaches from other fields, including sociology and communication sciences, in the analysis of this phenomenon.

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Introduction

Over the last decades, the accelerated development of communication technologies and the expansion of digital social networks have contributed to a profound transformation in the way medical information is transmitted and received in the public space. In this context, conspiratorial narratives have gained unprecedented visibility, becoming not mere cognitive drifts or fringe beliefs, but active social actors with the potential to influence attitudes, behaviours and public policies.

The COVID-19 pandemic (Malizia et al., 2021) exacerbated this dynamic, providing a fertile framework for the proliferation of conspiracy theories targeting the virus, vaccines, public health measures and scientific institutions. These narratives went beyond the boundaries of a simple alternative discourse, generating concrete social problems: decreased trust in the authorities, polarization of public opinion, refusal to vaccinate, symbolic and physical violence, and a decline in social cohesion.

Analysing this phenomenon requires an interdisciplinary and reflexive approach. Thus, a narrative review of the literature allows not only to explore the conceptual complexity of conspiracy beliefs, but also to understand the psychosocial and cultural mechanisms that favour their emergence and spread in contexts of medical crisis. This research intends to make an important theoretical and practical contribution to an emerging field at the intersection of public health, crisis sociology, social psychology and media studies. In a global climate increasingly plagued by misinformation and polarization, a deep understanding of conspiratorial dynamics is not only useful but essential.

Methodology

This paper is based on a narrative review of the literature to investigate how conspiratorial public narratives influence the evolution and perception of social issues generated by contemporary health crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccination, and the impact of communication using online and social media. Narrative methodology was chosen as it allows for a flexible, integrative and critical analysis of scientific sources from multiple fields - in particular public health, sociology, social psychology and media studies - without the constraints imposed by a strict systematic protocol. This type of review is appropriate for exploring complex phenomena at the intersection of science, public discourse and social beliefs.

Literature selection criteria:

The sources were identified in relevant databases (Scopus and Google Scholar) through combinations of terms aimed at obtaining relevant data for a number of themes, as shown below.

- Defining public conspiracy narratives: „public conspiracy theories are formed", „characteristics of public conspiracy narratives".
- Sociological explanations of the emergence of public conspiracy narratives: „emergence of public conspiracy narratives", „social factors in conspiracy theories", „sociology of conspiracy theories".
- Sociological perspectives on conspiracy theories: „sociology public conspiracy", „narratives evolution last decade".
- Social problems derived from medical problems affected by public conspiracy narratives: „medical misinformation and its social consequences", „public attitudes towards medicine and conspiracy", „impact of conspiracy narratives on public health", „the role of conspiracy theories in public health crises", „conspiracy theories and vaccination behaviours a systematic review".
- Social issues in medicine influenced by conspiracy theories: „effects of public conspiracy on healthcare management", „management of social problems related to medical issues and conspiracy narratives", „understanding the impact of conspiracy theories on social issues in healthcare", „conspiracy theories and their effect on public health", „the role of conspiracy theories in shaping health behaviours".
- The direct influences of public conspiracy narratives on health problems: „conspiracy theories and public health problems", „social implications of conspiracy narratives in healthcare", „influence of conspiracy theories on health management", „conspiracy theories in the time of covid 19 impacts on vaccination behaviour", „exploring the impact of misinformation on health decisions", „public trust in health systems and conspiracy beliefs".
- Measures to combat conspiracy theories: „strategies to reduce impact of conspiracy theories", „communication strategies against conspiracy narratives".

Included were 97 papers published in English since 2014, with a focus on the period 2020-2024, relevant to the COVID-19 pandemic context. Priority given to theoretical studies, review articles, qualitative and quantitative research dealing with the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and health-related social behaviours (vaccination refusal, disease denial, community polarization, etc.).

The analysis process:

The selected texts were subjected to a thematic narrative analysis in order to identify characteristics and typologies of conspiratorial narratives and the mechanisms through which they influence risk perception, compliance with medical norms and trust in authority. It also looked at how these narratives are propagated (mass media, social media, influencers) and their impact on social cohesion, public policy and health inequalities.

For structuring the conceptual data, bibliometric analysis (through VOSviewer) was used to map the thematic links between the key concepts in the analysed literature.

This analysis also allows to identify the spectrum of sciences through which the topic is currently analysed.

This approach allows not only to systematize existing knowledge, but also to identify epistemological gaps and future research directions that are essential for effectively combating health misinformation.

Objectives

- Analysing the mechanisms of formation and propagation of conspiratorial narratives in medical crisis contexts.
- Assessing the impact of these narratives on public health-related social behaviours.
- Identify effective strategies to counter conspiracy influence in the digital space.
- Structuring the identified conceptual data and mapping the thematic links between key concepts through a bibliometric analysis (VOSviewer)

Defining conspiratorial public narratives

Public conspiracy narratives can be defined as intricate networks of stories in which events interpreted as the result of secret plots organized by powerful individuals or groups. They serve as cognitive schemes through which individuals attempt to make sense of complex social, political or public health phenomena, which are often shrouded in uncertainty and generate a perception of threat to the individual. Key features of these narratives include attributing hidden motivations to important social actors and framing events in terms of distrust of traditional controlling institutions such as governments and health care organizations.

At base, conspiratorial public narratives fulfil an individual's psychological need for coherence during crises, allowing them to manage emotions of uncertainty and fear. As a result, conspiracist beliefs are associated with a reluctance to engage in behaviours perceived to be supported or enforced by state authorities, such as vaccination against COVID-19. These types of public narratives succeed in modulating adherence to public health measures by diffusing distrust and conveying alternative explanations to the public about particular crises (Ripp&Röer, 2022). Conspiracist public narratives may evolve and amplify in times of social crisis; such public theorizing arises out of the need for an alternative form of reasoning about significant social and political events, especially in a period when distrust of official state narratives is high (Prooijen&Douglas, 2017).

One observation about how a conspiratorial narrative is constructed is that it uses a connection between stories that are smaller in dimension to ultimately create a larger framework that is perceived as a generalizing narrative (Shahsavari et al., 2020). This coherent stringing together often joins disparate elements from different domains (e.g., health, politics) into a unified explanation that emphasizes perceived threats from already institutionally established power structures. The narrative thus becomes a frame of observation through which individuals interpret events, reinforcing the perception that

elites are engaged in malign acts to the detriment of individuals' well-being. This mechanism represents the point at which conspiracy theories differ from mere scepticism, emphasizing the role of negative portrayals, for various public figures of authority, in promoting distrust at the societal level (Buturoiu et al., 2021).

The unfolding of conspiratorial narratives involves a complex social dynamic, whereby these stories gain visibility and reliable credence by tumbling into information bubbles in which group solidarity is promoted among those who subscribe to the echoing ideas. Online communities built around conspiratorial ideas are remarkably resilient, sometimes even stable, even when faced with exclusions from the information platform or attempts to erode trust in mainstream sources of information (Monti et al., 2023). This resilience stems from the attribution to individuals of a shared identity and the perceived social support of members who engage in conspiratorial discourse. The use of digital platforms changes the social dynamics through an amplification these narratives, producing viral propagation through online communication and increased visibility through unfolding on social networks (Shahrezaye et al., 2021).

The social implications of conspiracy narratives extend beyond individual beliefs and can destabilize trust in public health measures as well as traditional governance structures. The more people are exposed conspiracy narratives and increasingly adhere to the ideas contained therein, it may significantly reduce individuals' intention to seek health care or prophylaxis-related measures; the problem may tend to be expressed as a public health one (Natoli&Marques, 2020). Behaviours related to the maintenance and improvement of health status may reduce in frequency and intensity, especially by linking them to conspiracy narratives that focus on social injustices; the inherent dynamic becomes one of avoidance of conventional measures and interpretations and moves into the realm of seeking alternative answers that, although scientifically opposed, are maintained and validated, as observed in the case of conspiracy beliefs during health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Ripp&Röer, 2022).

The compartments of society in which these narratives are played out are multiple; these unfolding alternate realities become ubiquitous, including in educational settings that prove not to be immune to conspiracies. The unfolding narratives contain gaps of information based on certain, inherent or wilfully ignored data; if these gaps in conspiracy theories remain unsanctioned, the constitutive elements of the theories may consolidate and stratify into certainties or repetitive components of political discourses (Dyrendal&Jolley, 2020). Science- and evidence-based elements are not the only way to counter conspiracist narratives; merely conveying factual information becomes insufficient without considering the psychological appeal of narratives and how they access and utilize widespread social fears (Lazić&Žeželj, 2021). Interventions aimed at mitigating the influence of conspiracy narratives should construct and use their own narratives by incorporating persuasive communication techniques as an effective method in deconstructing deeply held beliefs reinforced by various theories (Biddlestone et al., 2022).

The conceptualization of conspiratorial narratives should not be minimized; they lie at the intersection with other sets of narratives, ideologies, political agendas, and socially pervasive myths. Starting from this perspective, conspiracy narratives can be seen as an expression of broader social myths, functioning as cultural responses and reactions to sensory and emotional overexposure to certain information or injustices in contemporary society (Chlup, 2023). In this way, a connection to collective identity is made that increases the appeal of conspiracy theories, especially in times when societal trust in political discourse or governmental structures is at an all-time low. The political dimension of conspiracy narratives is essential through their very use as political tools, in a populist and manipulative way, to promote support for ideas that emphasize potential enemies operating in an area presented as less visible (Godwin et al., 2023). The inclusion of these narratives in the political messaging of power structures can maintain or challenge the status quo as well as underlying social and economic disparities.

Public conspiracy narratives go beyond the level of mere beliefs of individuals; they embody a complex social and cultural phenomenon, driven by a multitude of psychological, political and social factors. They thrive in environments marked by distrust and uncertainty, while fostering communities that collectively reinforce their legitimacy through the very use of these narratives. All social systems can be affected, including the health care system, right down to its general springs such as public health. In order to manage and mitigate the impact of conspiracy theories, holistic approaches are those that recognize both the narrative structures themselves and the psychological needs they fulfil, as well as identify the mechanisms that may influence public resistance to their influences.

Results and discussions

Sociological explanations for the emergence of conspiratorial public narratives

The emergence of conspiratorial public narratives can be understood through the various lenses through which sociology operates; these consider how socio-cultural dynamics, media interactions and psychological factors interact, especially in times of crisis. Observing the public's susceptibility to adopting conspiracy-related ideas became a topic of debate during the COVID-19 pandemic; analyses of this susceptibility have indicated social crises as environments conducive to the growth and propagation of these narratives (Harambam, 2024) (Schatto-Eckrodt et al., 2024). modern information systems, rely on the new communication channels of the digital environment; their widespread use has promoted confusion and distrust that have fostered the propagation of conspiracy theories (Harambam, 2024)(Zeng et al., 2022).

The sociological perspective explains conspiracy theories by appealing to how various factors such as group identity, political narratives, and socially widespread cultural myths are interrelated. Psychological factors, such as a susceptibility to distrust of traditional figures invested with authority, contribute to the reinforcement of beliefs conveyed through conspiracy theories (Shahrezaye et al., 2021)(Natoli&Marques, 2020). The withdrawal or limitation of individual rights leads people to seek alternative answers

to emerging social problems; this process reaffirms scepticism and satisfies the need for cohesive and consistent narratives in a social landscape based on uncertainty (Tsamakis et al., 2022)(Yusuf et al., 2024). The unfolding of public narratives also follows the frames of entertainment programs; stories can be engaging and captivating, they can simplify the framework for dealing with complex social situations such as public health crises (Prooijen et al., 2021)(Bessi et al., 2015).

The socio-political environment is a prolific one for the emergence, influence and promotion of conspiracy narratives. Factors such as political polarization and sentiments against traditional governance structures create a background conducive to the acceptance of such beliefs. Observation of historical trends demonstrates that public presentations based on populism or rhetoric against elites can use conspiratorial narratives to reinforce their ideology, often constructing the image of opponents as malicious characters who act to the detriment of the general public (Poppe et al., 2023)(Hidalgo, 2022). The increased use of social media has accelerated the exposure of these narratives, allowing them to be disseminated quickly and widely compared to traditional media (Keulenaar et al., 2021). By creating information bubbles in which echoes of ideas reverberate, online platforms fuel conspiratorial beliefs among like-minded individuals; thus, narratives become embedded in public discourse (Nera et al., 2018)(Borza, 2023).

The role of media literacy becomes particularly important in this context. Lack of exposure to critical thinking frameworks makes individuals more susceptible to misinformation and conspiratorial narratives. It is evident that there are a number of pre-existing psychological traits, such as the desire to reach a firm conclusion quickly in the face of uncertainty and ambiguity; the tendency toward dichotomous thinking increases an individual's likelihood of adhering to and promoting conspiracies (Shahrezaye et al., 2021)(Ferreira et al., 2020)(Z. Zeng et al., 2022). These psychological mechanisms become all the more relevant as times of crisis are more dominated by fear and uncertainty and the need for control and situational understanding is heightened; conspiratorial thinking is emerging as a way of recognizing a person's ability to act independently, make decisions and influence their own life (Gemenis, 2021).

In addition to psychological and political factors, cultural narratives can guide how conspiracy theories emerge and evolve. Cultural contexts modulate narratives that are considered acceptable or credible within a social group; these contexts are closely linked to the construction of collective identity and memory (Moore, 2017)(Chen et al., 2020). Perceived historical injustices or the perpetuation of distrust in institutions constitute a fertile environment for conspiracy theorizing, as people search for new answers to old problems (Maček & Babič, 2022)(Manova, 2022). Conspiratorial narratives that have entered history are being re-discovered in online communication channels and are being resurrected leading to a diminution of objective reasoning and interpretive manifestations of reality, especially in vulnerable groups (Zienert-Eilts, 2023)(Sultănescu, 2022).

All of these mechanisms point towards analysing the relationship between conspiracy narratives and social movements; it is becoming increasingly evident that

conspiracy theories thrive in social spaces where collective identities are formed, especially in movements based on strong ideological commitments. The phenomenon has become evident in anti-vaccination campaigns, in which conspiratorial narratives mobilized by group dynamics lead to broad actions of rejection and denial of public actions by institutions perceived as authoritarian (Ripp & Röer, 2022)(Chlup, 2023). These narratives bring a new narrative coherence that builds on individuals' views of the world today, amplifies social solidarity among those who adhere to central ideas, and reinforces individual beliefs regardless of the presence of opposing evidence (Frenken & Imhoff, 2021)(Godwin et al., 2023).

Global events overlay the landscape of local narratives and provide a framework for understanding how conspiracy theories are gaining ground amid the chaos of global-scale crises. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to an increase in narratives linking elites to the territorial origins of the virus and amplifying fears ultimately leading to heightened social divisions (Langguth et al., 2023)(Z. Zeng et al., 2022). The intertwining of conspiracy messages with the effects of global crises complicates the dynamics at the societal level and naturally directs individuals to reaccess familiar myths and alleviate existential fears arising in the face of broad challenges (Prooijen et al., 2021).

Societal responses to conspiratorial narratives can mitigate or exacerbate their impact. Often, efforts to disprove conspiracy theories boomerang back and even reinforce these narratives in the group of adherents (Corbu et al., 2023)(Lazić & Žeželj, 2021). It is precisely the counterproductive effects of disproof measures that steers towards broader approaches that encompass a disclosure of the narratives and motivations underlying these beliefs, rather than merely attempting to contradict the central information (Buturoiu et al., 2021)(Hashmi et al., 2023)(Sharma et al., 2022). In fact it is a reiteration of the role of empathy and narrative awareness in public health communication during crises.

The emergence of conspiratorial public narratives through a sociological approach considers the interplay of psychological, socio-political and cultural factors. These narratives not only provide individuals with a means of responding to uncertainty and fear, but also reflect wider social tensions in terms of trust and authority. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing strategies to counter the impact of these narratives in public discourse, particularly in times of significant social and political upheaval such as global threats, including those to health.

The evolution of conspiracy theories in the last decade

The evolution of conspiracy narratives over the last decade shows notable transformations influenced primarily by technological advances in communication, increased political polarization and constantly evolving socio-cultural contexts. Since the early 2010s, conspiracy theories have proliferated, particularly amplified through the use of online platforms; these have been shown to have had a crucial influence in the spread

and social normalization of conspiracy narratives (Liaw et al., 2023)(Jiang et al., 2021). The rapid spread of information and misinformation on these platforms created informational echo chambers in which the echoes created reverberated, and users were predominantly exposed to stances that reinforced their beliefs (Liaw et al., 2023)(Buiko & Slipkaukaite, 2022).

The most transformative period for public narratives began with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic supported a significant increase in conspiracy theories about public health measures, the origins of the virus, and the efficacy of vaccines (Pummerer et al., 2020)(Klikauer & Link, 2024)(Erokhin et al., 2022). These theories accessed deeper social anxieties about social freedoms, the authority of traditional institutions, and the autonomy of individuals; all of which were amplified by a widespread sense of uncertainty and enormous fear provoked by the global health crisis (Pummerer et al., 2020)(Harambam, 2024). Studies could be identified that found how beliefs in conspiracy theories increased as they generated seemingly credible responses to complex and unpredictable events (Klikauer & Link, 2024). This trend indicates a significant shift in which health-related conspiracies have gained ground alongside those traditionally linked to political scandals or historical grievances, marking a major shift in the types of narratives that resonate in the public space.

One suggestive phenomenon is the increasing public presence of QAnon conspiracy theorizing; one can observe how conspiracy narratives have migrated from the status of fringe movements to ones that are intensely represented in mainstream or traditional communication channels, profoundly influencing the political landscape, particularly in the United States (Fernbach & Bogard, 2023). This phenomenon has been invested with significant effects in the outcome of the 2016 and 2020 electoral processes. Conspiracy thinking, in which narratives have not only permeated public debates but have also become slogans for specific political segments, reveals a trajectory where conspiracy beliefs are superimposed on political identity; narratives coalesce around ideologies to generate a form of support (Fernbach & Bogard, 2023). There has been a shift away from traditional forms of election campaigning and conspiracy theories have gained a central position in contemporary socio-political movements; a suggestive example is the way in which a series of seemingly isolated beliefs have metamorphosed into direct, collective-characterized direct actions, such as the Capitol riots of January 6, 2021 (Phadke et al., 2021). The attempt to stop the certification of election results has been set in motion by the online escalation of conspiracy beliefs or theories.

The social and cultural implications of these shifts in public narratives turn out to be profound; it should be noted that the narratives woven around conspiracies adapt to social changes and fluctuations in collective fears. Conspiracy theories seem to constitute forms of reaction to a list of emotions and feelings such as alienation, alienation, and the narrowing of individual rights; appeals to alternative cognitive processes can become a way of validation for people or a means of expressing overwhelming feelings (Pummerer et al., 2020)(Lantian et al., 2018). Classical social processes, such as stigmatization

associated with certain conspiracy beliefs, can function as a boundary differentiator within communities or as promoters of social division into different groups on ideological (Grusauskaite et al., 2022)(Lantian et al., 2018). Moreover, a correlation has been identified between such beliefs from the conspiracy spectrum and decreased trust in institutions. As a result, conspiracy theories do not merely reflect societal dissatisfaction, but actively promote the decrease of social cohesion and collective trust (Uscinski et al., 2022)(Pummerer et al., 2020).

This new social reality has transferred to a growing academic interest around conspiracy theories. The theoretical perspectives of the examinations have been diverse, ranging from psychological (Gkinopoulos et al., 2021)(Enders et al., 2024)(Hütt, 2016) to socio-cultural perspectives (Hopkins, 2024)(Tangherlini et al., 2020). Interdisciplinary approaches are crucial for understanding the mechanisms of conspiracy beliefs and their impact on public behaviour. All these interrogations through the social sciences have led to emerging concepts such as conspiracy mentality and epistemic justice; these come to explain why conspiracies are not just deviations from rational thought, but are veritable cultural artifacts that bring to light deeper social conflicts (Pummerer et al., 2020)(Trella, Sutton, & Douglas, 2024)(Tennent & Grattan, 2022). This scholarly shift indicates a growing recognition of the need to engage constructively in understanding conspiracy theories, given their complex interplay with individual beliefs and larger social structures.

With the continuing evolution of digital media, conspiracy narratives have experienced additional complexity in their presentation and audience. The emergence of multimedia platforms enhances engagement and communication between numerous people, enabling intricate and evolving narratives, also image-based, that appeal to an ever-widening audience, often avoiding critical scrutiny of the credibility of the material (Liaw et al., 2023)(Erokhin et al., 2022)(Jiang et al., 2021). Information overload, manifested in the digital sphere, brings great challenges to the evaluation of facts and their categorization within fact or fiction, increasing the risk that an individual will accept dubious claims (Pummerer et al., 2020) (Hopkins, 2024). Digital environments succeed in fostering an artificial or even erroneous consensus among people by overestimating the prevalence of conspiratorial beliefs in their social bubbles, which can lead to further reinforcement of these beliefs (Grusauskaite et al., 2022)(Buiko & Slipkaukaite, 2022).

Societal reactions to the negative effects of conspiracy narratives have followed a variety of approaches, ranging from reducing stigmatization and promoting constructive dialogue, to completely deconstructing such theories (Klikauer & Link, 2024)(Harambam et al., 2022). Interventions that rely on rebuilding narratives around dominant conspiracy theories, using strategies such as narrative engagement and community discussions, have shown promise in reducing their coalescence into a public consciousness (McKenzie-McHarg & Fredheim, 2017)(Lei & Huang, 2023). However, conspiracy theories have a degree of persistence in contemporary narratives and denote the need for approaches that adapt by investigating not only beliefs but also the various social dimensions that drive these behaviours (Pummerer et al., 2020)(Trella et al., 2024).

The evolution of conspiracy narratives over the past decade follows ongoing social transformations shaped by increasingly complex social dynamics, technological advances, and fundamental human desires for coherence and understanding in an unpredictable world. Understanding these changes requires a nuanced examination of the social mechanisms involved, inviting a thoughtful discourse on the implications of conspiracy theories for democracy and public trust.

Social problems stemming from medical problems affected by conspiratorial public narratives

The proliferation of conspiracy narratives around medical issues, particularly those amplified by social media, has led to numerous social problems with profound implications for public health and community trust. This interrelationship is rooted primarily in the distrust underpinned by conspiracy theories, which often arise in environments characterized by political discontent and misinformation.

A significant social problem exacerbated by conspiracy narratives is vaccine hesitancy, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Empirical data support the tendency for people who adhere to these kinds of beliefs to be less likely to engage in positive attitudes and behaviours related to various aspects of vaccination (Bertin et al., 2020). The spread of defamatory information about vaccine safety has led to low vaccination rates, contributing to the re-emergence or increased spread of infectious diseases that could be preventable by vaccination (Chou et al., 2018)(Skafle et al., 2022). As a reverberation effect, narratives across the spectrum of vaccination-related conspiracies distract the public from well-intentioned public health communication efforts and diminish trust in authoritative health institutions (Limaye et al., 2020).

Conspiracy theories create segregation within communities, often leading to stigmatization and hostile reactions towards health professionals. Misinformation related to pandemics can fuel animosity and reluctance to follow public health measures, as seen during the Ebola crisis, where social media rumours generated resentment towards health workers (Chou et al., 2018) . The COVID-19 pandemic has brought this dynamic back even further; scientific discourse has become even more politicized and we have even witnessed the emergence of a true "infodemic". Similar to the endemic spread of an infectious disease, huge amounts of conflicting information have been disseminated in the news media, complicating how the public understands and accepts official health-related guidance (Evanega et al., 2020)(Leng et al., 2021).

Disrupting conspiracy theories by providing relevant information depends less on the quality of the information and more on trust in the governmental and scientific institutions that communicate it. The available evidence leads to the finding that significant distrust in authorities correlates with high penetrability of COVID-19 conspiracy theories-19 (Mulukom et al., 2022)(Wang et al., 2021). The population-wide rollout of these beliefs may lead to low adherence to official public health guidelines, ultimately jeopardizing public health and safety (Evanega et al., 2020)(Ruhde, 2022).

Societal responses to such conspiracy-based narratives are orienting towards broader, multidisciplinary approaches to maintain a coherent and credible public discourse amid an unpredictable communication framework promoted in the online environment (Sule et al., 2023)(Choo et al., 2025).

We are witnessing a new phenomenon, "cyberchondria", a term derived from the words "cyber" (referring to the internet) and "hypochondriasis" (the tendency to interpret minor symptoms as signs of serious illness). "Cyberchondria" refers to compulsive online seeking of information about medical symptoms, which often increases rather than decreases health anxiety. These mechanisms lead to a form of health-related anxiety exacerbated by misinformation, which brings to light the undesirable social effects of conspiracy-like beliefs (Yeung et al., 2022). As individuals turn to the online environment to obtain health information, the spread of distorted content can lead to unnecessary panic and dysfunctional health-related behaviours, putting both individuals and the wider community in a danger zone.

The intersection between medical issues and conspiratorial narratives generates considerable social problems, including vaccine hesitancy, public distrust and the emergence of health anxieties. The interplay between misinformation and social media complicates efforts to maintain public health and safety, highlighting the urgent need for critical discourse and effective public health communication strategies.

The influence of conspiracy theories on the management of social problems derived from medical problems

The management of social issues arising from medical problems is significantly affected by the influence of conspiratorial public narratives. Such narratives are frequently linked to health-related behaviours and public adherence to official health guidelines. Understanding this relationship is essential for the development of effective public health strategies and interventions; the call must be made for more scientific guidance.

Conspiracy theories erode trust in public health authorities and the scientific evidence they present; during health crises it becomes relevant through the attitudes of individuals to comply with various official indications, both those related to vaccination and treatment, and some prophylactic, general ones, such as measures to reduce direct social contact (Tsamakis et al., 2022)(Prooijen & Böhm, 2023)(Constantinou et al., 2021). The dissemination of misinformation around state-promoted direct actions is intertwined with both the reduction of individual compliance but also with broad processes of public trust in health institutions; the end result is reflected in the difficulty of managing public health problems (Römer & Jamieson, 2020).

The psychological mechanisms involved in constructing and maintaining conspiracy beliefs provide insight into the management challenges faced by health authorities. When individuals feel disempowered in decision making or powerless they may anchor themselves in the rhetoric of conspiracy theories to rationalize their emotions and feelings, thereby reinforcing their distrust of authorities, medical or even state

(Jolley&Douglas, 2013)(Hong et al., 2021). Such dynamics suggest that interventions aimed at promoting public health must also address the underlying psychological factors that contribute to conspiratorial thinking. This also entails a practical element such as promoting a sense of empowerment over one's own decisions, individual autonomy for one's own life, and trust within communities to balance the narrative that portrays health institutions as untrustworthy (Goreis&Voracek, 2019)(Schlipphak et al., 2022).

The effect of conspiracy beliefs extends to social behaviour, goes beyond individual health choices, and ultimately influences collective actions related to public policy and community participation. Exposure to conspiracy theories may decrease motivations to engage in socially beneficial behaviours (from the sphere of utilitarianism), as individuals may feel out of control or distrustful about the efficacy of their actions (Jolley&Douglas, 2013)(Jolley & Douglas, 2013)(Hong et al., 2021). The effect is a much wider one of political disengagement of individuals, which brings serious challenges to public health campaigns, as the success of such initiatives often relies on community acceptance and collective action.

It is essential for public health strategies to include counter-narratives that directly address conspiracy theories; however, direct action to do so has proven insufficient. The effectiveness of communicating relevant scientific facts depends on how well the presentation resonates with the beliefs and perceptions of the audience; a good fit with the target audience allows for a dismantling of beliefs and the promotion of adherence to public health measures (Prooijen&Böhm, 2023)(Enders et al., 2021)(Baker, 2022). The use of current communication media can stimulate dialogue tailored to current communication media, reduce the intensity of misinformation, and reinvest communities with a role in the delivery of public health programs (Mahl et al., 2021)(Prooijen&Douglas, 2018).

The influence of conspiracy narratives on public health management reveals a complex interplay between individual psychology, public trust and social behaviour. A multidisciplinary approach that combines trust-building, education and active engagement with communities may be essential in managing the social implications of medical problems exacerbated by conspiracy beliefs.

Direct influences of conspiratorial public narratives on medical problems

The influence of public conspiracy narratives on health issues is significant, particularly in terms of health behaviors and health intervention outcomes. Various studies illustrate how such narratives can directly affect people's willingness to seek medical care, adhere to official public health guidelines and continue to adhere to public vaccination programs, thereby exacerbating existing medical problems.

The ways in which conspiratorial narratives disrupt health-seeking behaviours are not limited to distrust of government but extend to reducing the credibility of medical professionals, down to the level of the professional group as a whole, and of government health institutions. Exposure to conspiracy theories correlates with decreased intentions to seek needed assessments and treatments as a result of scepticism of institutionally

approved treatments and preventive measures endorsed by official policies (Natoli&Marques, 2020). These mechanisms in the distrust cycle may lead to poorer health outcomes by avoiding or delaying seeking care for preventable conditions; the final outcomes may be some exacerbated by exacerbating pre-existing health problems or by forgoing some already proven control measures.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous studies found how belief in conspiracy theories had a negative impact on public health compliance. Individuals supporting COVID-19-related conspiracy theories showed a propensity toward noncompliance with recommendations for social distancing and wearing protective masks (Tsamakis et al., 2022)(Hughes et al., 2022). This reduction in the practice of prevention behaviours is associated with a broader, population-based movement to reject treatment or even to frame vaccination in the zone of presumed harmful effects; reported effects have been marked reductions in vaccination rates, with an effect on herd immunity, and the thwarting of institutional public health efforts (Römer&Jamieson, 2020)(Prooijen, 2021).

Moreover, anxiety and psychological distress are often increased among people who subscribe to these conspiracy narratives. The interplay between conspiracy beliefs and mental health may create a feedback loop in which anxiety leads to greater belief in conspiracies, further negatively influencing health care behaviors (Coninck et al., 2021)(Constantinou et al., 2021). Such mental health concerns not only discourage individuals from engaging in preventive behaviours, but may also lead to increased health risks, as anxiety may provoke behaviours that reduce individual adaptations, such as excessive consumption of alternative health remedies lacking scientific evidence or neglect of professional medical advice (Marinthe et al., 2020)(Levinsson et al., 2021).

As conspiracy theories increasingly spread using the online framework, they may systemically influence the institutional functioning of the health sector. State agencies with a role in the field will find it difficult to communicate effectively with the population they serve, especially when public perception positions governments and public authorities on the spectrum of incompetence or corruption (Juanchich et al., 2021). A broad informational background is created, with differing narratives from the conspiracy zone, in which official information circulates poorly and reverberation loops are amplified that maintain people's distrust and promote non-compliance with official health measures (Hughes et al, 2022)(Franks et al., 2017).

Conspiracy-type public narratives have a profound impact on health issues by decreasing trust in health authorities and reducing compliance with public health measures, leading to poorer health outcomes. Addressing these narratives through effective communication and community engagement is vital to mitigate their negative influence on health behaviours.

Measures to counter conspiratorial public narratives

Countering the influence of conspiratorial public narratives, particularly those related to health issues, is a challenge that requires comprehensive strategies that include

communication, community engagement and psychological interventions. Recent studies have highlighted various effective measures to mitigate the spread and impact of conspiracy theories.

A key approach is to cultivate critical thinking and media literacy among the public. Educating individuals about assessing the credibility of information sources can empower them to discern facts from misinformation. Directing people to reliable sources of information improves their ability to evaluate conspiracy theories using their own thinking critically (Swami & Barron, 2021). Educational initiatives can take a variety of forms, some in a local, community-based setting, or in a broader one, such as social media campaigns or educational programs implemented in the traditional education system; the ultimate goal is to adapt citizens to the new conditions of information flow and equip them with the necessary skills to effectively counter conspiracy narratives (Swami&Barron, 2021).

Preventive measures also appear to be effective in the case of exposing people to conspiracy theories; to fit in this area, measures must expose people to counter-narratives before they come into contact with perpetuating conspiracy theories. As this cycle of information is put into practice there may be a decrease in the likelihood of people exhibiting the same consequences and negative behaviours as a result of public conspiracist narratives (Jolley et al., 2019). This highlights the importance of proactive communication strategies aimed at informing the public about common misconceptions about health, enhancing the public's response, as an immune mechanism, against misinformation when it occurs.

Transparent communication that starts with governments and health institutions is essential in building trust. Public trust promotes people's adherence to official public health recommendations (Banai et al., 2021). Thus, establishing clear, consistent and transparent communication can serve to increase public trust and mitigate the undesirable effects of conspiratorial beliefs on health-related behaviours (Constantinou et al., 2020).

Public figures and practitioners can play a role in combating conspiracy theories by openly challenging false claims and clarifying misconceptions. Identifying, naming, and even labelling conspiracy theories unfolding in public discourse can be effective measures to reduce the circulation of such narratives and increase public awareness of their questionable nature (Prims, 2024). This calls for health professionals and policy makers to openly engage in discussions about bias and misinformation, utilizing public platforms to address and debunk unfounded conspiracy theories.

Social media monitoring and intervention strategies are also critical. The rise of disinformation through social media has been alarming, as it often allows conspiratorial narratives to spread rapidly. It is also becoming increasingly necessary for the use of technology to come to the aid of deconstructing how conspiracy theories roll out in the public space; the use of automated detection systems can quickly alert the emergence of such narratives and, as a countermeasure, enable the use of relevant information provided by authorities (Shahsavari et al., 2020)(Park et al., 2020). The implementation of

algorithms that promote information based on testable facts over conspiracy-based content can also help to limit the online dissemination of harmful narratives.

Furthermore, interventions can address underlying psychological factors that predispose individuals to embrace conspiracy beliefs. For example, targeted psychological assessments can help tailor community-based interventions to rectify cognitive biases that facilitate conspiracy thinking among specific populations (Bam, 2022). Engaging these individuals on an emotional level, addressing their concerns, and providing positive narratives can help bridge the gap between misinformation and actual health discourse.

Combating public conspiracy narratives requires a coordinated response that integrates education, transparency, pre-emptive exposure to counter-narratives, and rapid and strategic interventions through media channels. Using these measures holistically can not only reduce the spread of conspiracy theories, but also strengthen public confidence in health initiatives, ultimately contributing to improved health outcomes.

Bibliometric analysis

The analysis achieves a mapping conspiracy belief through a bibliometric analysis of theoretical and empirical relationships. The bibliometric analysis performed by VOSviewer highlights a dual structure in research on conspiracy beliefs. On the one hand, a cluster dominated by terms specific to psychology and research methodology emerges, suggesting an empirical approach focused on personality traits, validation of measurement instruments and correlations between variables. The complementary cluster, on the other hand, includes terms associated with cognitive and ideological structures, indicating a theoretical framing of conspiracism as part of coherent belief systems or forms of symbolic organization. The central node ("conspiracy beliefs") links the two dimensions, emphasizing the interdisciplinary character of the phenomenon. This network suggests that research on conspiracy research evolves simultaneously along the individual-society and method-ideology axes, providing a complex framework for future investigations.
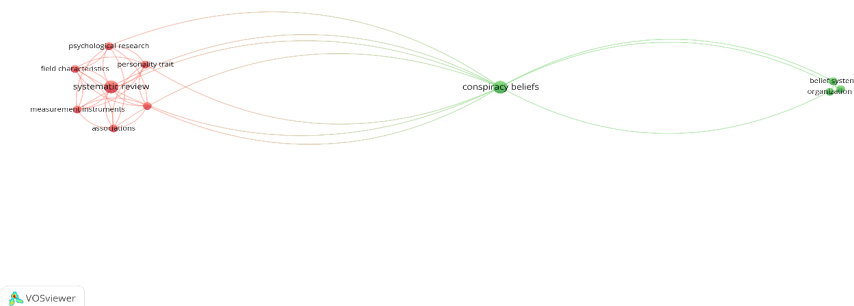
The bibliometric picture is reproduced below:

Figure 1: Bibliometric image of the analysed works

The overall image analysis represents a co-occurrence map of terms extracted from the titles, abstracts and keywords of the papers selected in the narrative review. Nodes (words) are connected to each other according to the frequency of their co-occurrence.

Clusters identified:

The red cluster represents the psychological and methodological dimension of the researched topic. Main nodes are: "systematic review", "psychological research", "personality trait", "field characteristics", "measurement instruments" and "associations". This cluster suggests that an important part of the literature on conspiracy beliefs is based on systematic reviews of personality traits and psychological methods of assessment. The focus falls on the validation of measurement instruments and correlations between variables.

The green cluster represents the cognitive and organizational dimensions in research on conspiracy beliefs. The main nodes are "conspiracy beliefs" (central), "belief system" and "organization". This area explores conspiracy beliefs as part of a coherent cognitive system or even ideological organization. It examines how these beliefs relate to broader mental or social structures. The central node ("conspiracy beliefs") is a pivot node connecting both clusters. Its role is as a thematic connector between psychological/empirical studies and theoretical interpretations related to belief systems.

The links between "systematic review", "personality trait" and "conspiracy beliefs" suggest that personality traits are a key variable in conspiracy research. In the green area of the image, the connection between "belief system" and "organization" indicates an ideological or structural approach to conspiracism. Conspiracist beliefs are investigated in a dual framework: empirical/psychological (red) and cognitive/philosophical/sociological (green). They are considered both a matter of individual personality or psychology and an organized social phenomenon. Methodological tools play an important role in the study of this phenomenon.

Conclusions

Conspiracist narratives function as psychological and cultural responses to uncertainty and crisis, providing individuals with a form of narrative coherence and social identification in the face of events perceived as threatening or unjust. Psychological factors play a key role; the need for certainty, dichotomous thinking, lack of media literacy and the desire for individual control contribute to the adoption of conspiracy theories. Distrust, anxiety and a sense of loss of control facilitate adherence to conspiracy theories, indicating the need for interventions that address both the emotional and cognitive dimensions of the individual.

The social impact of these narratives goes beyond the individual, significantly affecting key areas such as public health, education or trust in government institutions, especially in times of health crisis or political instability. The unstable social context favours conspiracies. Conspiracy narratives emerge and develop particularly in crisis

contexts, when society is marked by uncertainty, fear and distrust of authorities or institutions.

Conspiracy narratives have a profound effect on public health, contributing to a lack of trust in authorities, hesitancy to vaccinate and refusal of prophylactic measures, which in turn leads to a resurgence of preventable diseases. The impact of these narratives is not only medical, but also social, as they create divisions in communities, stigmatize health professionals and increase public polarization in times of crisis. For effective management of medical and social issues influenced by conspiracy mongering, a multidisciplinary approach combining strategic communication, media literacy, community engagement and rebuilding trust in institutions is needed.

Effectively combating the effects of conspiracy narratives requires more than simply correcting factual information or facts. It requires alternative, persuasive and empathetic narrative strategies that address the emotional and social needs of individuals exposed to these discourses. The educational and narrative approach is more effective than direct confrontation; countering conspiracies through direct confrontation can be counterproductive so effective solutions involve building alternative, empathetic, dialog-based narratives. Prevention through information works; early exposure to counter-narratives can reduce receptivity to conspiracy theories, acting as a 'cognitive vaccine' against disinformation.

Critical education is fundamental; promoting critical thinking and media literacy helps citizens to recognize and reject misinformation, giving them the tools to evaluate information independently.

Digital technology accelerates diffusion. The internet and social networks amplify the phenomenon by creating resilient 'information bubbles' in which individuals support each other's beliefs, reinforcing and perpetuating alternative narratives to the official ones. Social networks and online platforms have transformed conspiracies from marginal discourses into mainstream narratives, amplifying their visibility and mobilizing power. However, technology can be an ally; monitoring social networks and using artificial intelligence can help identify and limit the spread of harmful narratives.

Conspiracism takes on a dangerous political dimension when it is embedded in populist discourses, contributing to the erosion of social cohesion and increasing ideological polarization. Conspiracies reflect cultural and political tensions; these narratives offer a simplified framework for understanding the world, often reflecting historical grievances, ideological divisions or feelings of marginalization.

Social mobilization is influenced by conspiracies; recent social movements such as anti-vaccination and QAnon demonstrate how conspiracy theories can coalesce communities and generate large-scale collective action.

Systemic misinformation and "infodemics" aggravate institutional communication difficulties, leading to dysfunctions in the implementation of public health policies and reducing the effectiveness of official campaigns. Institutional transparency builds trust;

clear, consistent and honest communication from public authorities is essential for building trust with citizens. The involvement of opinion leaders is essential; professionals and public figures can actively combat conspiracy theories by publicly debunking falsehoods and promoting the facts.

An interdisciplinary understanding is needed; in order to effectively analyse and counter this complex phenomenon, combined sociological, psychological, cultural and political perspectives are required. The bibliometric analysis in this narrative review observes the interpretation of conspiracy narratives mainly using the perspective provided by psychology. It turns out that there is an important section of space for investigation by drawing on other humanities, including sociology.

Authors contributions

R.M.D. was involved in research design, the literature review, data collection, analysis and interpretation, and drafting conclusions. A.N.D. was involved in the literature review, data analysis and interpretation, and drafting of conclusions.

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