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SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

REVISED How conspiracy theories are defined: A systematic qualitative review of academic definitions

[version 3; peer review: 1 approved, 2 approved with reservations]

Türkay Salim Nefes[1,2], Javier Martínez Escobar[3], Borja González-Albo[3]

[1]Siyavuspasa Mah, Cigdem Sk, Mutlu Ap, TR-34182 Istanbul, Turkey
[2]The Institute of Public Goods and Policies (IPP), Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Cientificas, Madrid, Community of Madrid, 28037, Spain
[3]Information Management Unit, Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Cientificas, Madrid, Community of Madrid, 28037, Spain

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Abstract

Background

Although conspiracy theories are studied across multiple disciplines, their definition remains unsettled. Despite a substantial body of empirical research, definitions have not been systematically analysed, leaving it unclear how conceptual variation shapes research, methods, and findings.

Methods

Drawing on an original dataset of peer-reviewed publications, this study applies inductive qualitative content analysis to identify recurring dimensions along which academic definitions vary, including ontological assumptions, evaluative orientations, epistemic characterisations, constitutive features and scope. It further introduces a genealogical mapping of citation relationships to assess whether these dimensions structure more frequently reused definitions.

Results

The qualitative content analysis finds that most definitions describe conspiracy theories as explanations and adopt a neutral-descriptive stance, with intentionality, coalition, and secrecy forming a recurrent core constellation of constitutive features. The genealogical mapping

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1. **Nuh Akçakaya**, Selçuk Üniversitesi, Konya, Turkey
2. **Kenzo Nera**, Universite Libre de Bruxelles, Brussels, Belgium
3. **Dr. Anne Küppers**, University of Jena, Jena, Germany

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shows that frequently reused definitions share these features but differ in their evaluative and epistemic characterisation.

Conclusions

Definitional diversity in conspiracy theory research is maintained through citations. Making definitional choices explicit and treating definitions as analytical tools rather than background assumptions can improve conceptual clarity, comparability, and cumulative research.

Plain Language summary

Researchers do not all agree on what a “conspiracy theory” is. Studies use different definitions, but these differences are rarely examined systematically. Yet the way a concept is defined affects how research findings are interpreted and compared.

In this study, we reviewed peer-reviewed publications that explicitly define the term “conspiracy theory.” We examined each definition to identify recurring patterns. We looked at what conspiracy theories are described as, whether definitions include value judgments, how they treat knowledge and evidence, which features are considered essential, and how broadly the concept is applied.

We found that most definitions describe conspiracy theories as explanations involving secret coordination by multiple actors. However, they differ in important ways. Some definitions include negative judgments about truth or rationality, while others remain neutral. These differences also appear among the most frequently reused definitions and are repeated over time through citations.

Overall, there is no single shared academic definition of conspiracy theory. Instead, different approaches coexist. Making these differences explicit can improve clarity, transparency, and comparability in future research and in policy discussions that rely on academic concepts.

Keywords

Conspiracy theories; citation analysis; definitions; conceptual variation; qualitative analysis, systematic review.



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Corresponding author: Türkay Salim Nefes (turkay.nefes@csic.es)

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REVISED **Amendments from Version 2**

This revised version addresses comments raised in the latest peer review. Figure 1 and the corresponding search counts in Table 1 have been corrected following re-examination of the search records; these corrections do not affect the final analytical corpus of 107 studies. The Methods have been clarified to explain the multidimensional coding procedure, including that definitions were coded across all five analytical dimensions and that constitutive features were non-mutually exclusive. The description of the genealogical mapping has also been expanded to clarify the meaning of isolated nodes and to specify that all 107 definitions were included in the mapping. Minor clarifications have also been made in response to the reviewer's comments concerning the evaluative dimension and possible future analysis of temporal variation in definitions.

Any further responses from the reviewers can be found at the end of the article

Introduction

Recent scholarship notes that the academic literature lacks a standard definition of conspiracy theories despite increased empirical attention (Nera and Schöpfer 2023; Uscinski and Enders 2023a). This lack of consensus has consequences beyond academia. For example, the European Commission defines conspiracy theories as beliefs involving secret manipulation by powerful actors with negative intent, embedding an assumption of inherent malevolence. Such framings exclude contexts in which conspiratorial narratives are interpreted as protective: In Turkey, the 'deep state' has often been portrayed as a covert security mechanism aimed at preserving political order not solely as a malign force (Gürpınar 2019). The contrasting meanings attached to conspiracy theories show that the definitions shape which narratives are recognised as conspiratorial and how their social and political significance is interpreted. This motivates a closer examination of how they are defined.

Although definitional variations are acknowledged in research, they have not been examined systematically. Studies employ diverse definitions, ranging from neutral-descriptive formulations to normative ones, but this diversity tends to be treated as a background condition rather than as an object of analysis. It therefore remains unclear whether conceptual variation reflects substantive analytical differences or the uneven inheritance of earlier formulations. This study addresses this problem by analysing definitions in peer-reviewed articles through inductive qualitative content analysis and genealogical mapping of citation relationships. Combining these approaches allows us to assess whether conceptual diversity diminishes or persists at the core of the field. The review is guided by two research questions:

(1) How are conspiracy theories explicitly defined in peer-reviewed academic literature?

(2) Along which recurring conceptual dimensions does definitional variation occur, and how are these patterns reproduced through citation practices?

The article proceeds in four steps. First, it situates the study in the scholarship and highlights the lack of systematic analysis of definitions. Second, it describes the construction of the dataset and the inductive qualitative content analysis used to identify definitional dimensions, together with the genealogical mapping of citation relationships. Third, it presents the findings, detailing how definitions vary along ontological, evaluative, epistemic, constitutive-feature, and scope-related dimensions. Finally, it discusses the implications of these patterns for conceptual clarity and outlines potential directions for future studies.

Defining conspiracy theories: Academic research and conceptual gaps

Research on conspiracy theories has expanded rapidly over the past two decades (Rao and Greve 2024). Reviews document extensive work on the antecedents, correlates, and consequences of conspiracy beliefs, particularly in psychology, where scholars examined cognitive and affective processes such as uncertainty, threat perception, and distrust (Douglas et al., 2019; Douglas and Sutton 2023). Other contributions situate conspiracy theories in relation to social and political topics such as democratic governance, epistemic authority, political communication, and cultural meaning-making, drawing on philosophy, political science, sociology, and communication studies (Douglas et al., 2019). In these strands, conspiracy theories are treated as significant phenomena, linked to political mobilisation, institutional and interpersonal distrust, and misinformation dynamics. This literature generated substantial empirical findings and theoretical insights into why conspiracy theories emerge and how they operate in social life.

Despite this growth, definitions of conspiracy theories are often weakly specified or inconsistently applied. Mahl, Schäfer, and Zeng (2023) show that many studies rely on implicit or inherited understandings of conspiracy theories, leading to conceptual ambiguity. They show that definitions are frequently taken for granted, borrowed without reflection, or omitted altogether, even as the concept is operationalised in measurement and analysis. In parallel, Uscinski and Enders (2023b) argue that the absence of clear and consistently applied definitions allows conspiracy theory to

function as a flexible and often subjective label rather than a stable analytical category, enabling evaluative judgments to enter implicitly through definitional practice. Moreover, conceptual ambiguity also arises from the frequent conflation of conspiracy theories with adjacent constructs such as conspiracy mentality or suspicion. Recent empirical work distinguishes between these related but analytically distinct phenomena, showing that dispositional conspiracy mentality and belief in specific conspiracy theories do not necessarily overlap and may have different attitudinal and behavioural correlates (Nefes and Herreros 2026). Recognising such distinctions further underscores the importance of examining how conspiracy theory itself is defined in academic research.

When definitions are explicitly made, they vary considerably. Studies posit formulations, ranging from neutral explanatory accounts involving secret coordination to normative definitions that portray conspiracy theories as epistemically deficient or socially harmful (Douglas et al., 2019). Philosophical scholarship has engaged most directly with such definitional and epistemic questions, particularly through debates over whether conspiracy theories are intrinsically suspect or should instead be assessed on a case-by-case basis (Clarke 2002; Coady 2006; Dentith 2016; Keeley 1999). However, this work remains largely conceptual. Valuable contributions proposed, refined, or criticised definitions in relation to broader epistemic commitments. Consequently, definitional plurality is acknowledged but typically illustrated through a small number of canonical examples rather than systematically. Overall, the scholarship illustrates that definitional work is ubiquitous and weakly documented. What is missing is a systematic map of this definitional landscape—one that captures how conspiracy theories are conceptualised and how specific formulations are reproduced over time.

Disagreements over how conspiracy theories should be evaluated are closely tied to how they are defined, and these disagreements can be approached from a sociological perspective concerned with the construction of concepts. Particularist approaches argue that conspiracy theories should be assessed on a case-by-case basis and resist treating them as a unified category, typically favouring broad and neutral definitions centred on secret coordination (Coady 2006). Generalist approaches, by contrast, maintain that conspiracy theories can be evaluated as a class and therefore rely on more restrictive definitions that foreground shared epistemic or normative deficiencies (Harris 2022). From a sociological standpoint, these positions reflect competing ways of constructing the object of inquiry. Definitions do not simply describe conspiracy theories; they help constitute them as a category of knowledge. As Thomas and Thomas (1928) posited, when people define situations as real, those definitions have real consequences. Building on this insight, the present study shifts attention from how conspiracy theories ought to be evaluated to how they are actually defined. Treating definitions as socially situated practices provides a basis for examining their epistemic and practical consequences and understanding how conceptual choices shape the future trajectory of conspiracy theory research as well as policies.

Methods

Data were collected by the three authors using a systematic bibliographic search in three major databases: Web of Science (WoS), Scopus, and OpenAlex. Databases were last searched in February 2025. The search strategy targeted publications defining or conceptualising conspiracy theories using two term sets: (*conspira* + *theory* + (defin OR concept)); (*conspiracism* + (defin OR concept)). Searches were limited to peer-reviewed articles, review articles, and notes published in English. Using multiple databases reduces disciplinary and publication bias and increases the likelihood of capturing influential contributions. Because database search options differ, proximity operators were applied in WoS and Scopus, whereas OpenAlex required broader Boolean combinations. This resulted in a higher volume of initial records in OpenAlex, which necessitated additional manual screening to reduce informational noise. The database showing, search logic, and retrieval results are reported in Table 1 below, which underpins the subsequent screening process.

Retrieved records from the three databases were initially screened and consolidated. Snowball sampling was then applied by examining references cited in potentially eligible definitions to identify additional publications containing definitions. Records identified through snowball sampling were added to those retrieved from the databases, and the combined set was merged into a single database and deduplicated primarily using Digital Object Identifiers (DOIs). Where DOIs were unavailable, manual matching was conducted using title, author(s), journal, and year of publication, and the source database was retained using dummy variables. This process yielded 213 unique records for screening. Eligibility was determined through criterion sampling (Patton 2002). To be included in the analysis, a publication had to contain an explicit and author-endorsed definition of conspiracy theory. Publications referring to conspiracy theories only indirectly —through examples, descriptive discussions, or alternative labels such as *conspiracy narrative* or *conspiracy belief*— were excluded from the main corpus but reviewed separately to inform reflections on conceptual boundaries. The construction of the analytical corpus is summarised in Figure 1 below. Titles and abstracts were screened independently by two reviewers, and full-text articles were subsequently assessed for eligibility through discussion among the authors until consensus was reached. The final analytical corpus comprised 107 publications.

Table 1. Search procedure for obtaining articles with a CT definition.

	WoS	Scopus	OpenAlex
Procedure	The databases used: Science Citation Index, Social Science Citation Index, Arts & Humanities Citation Index, and Emerging Science Citation Index. In this case, considering the following sets – a) conspira*; b) theory; c) (defin* or concept*); d) conspiracism; e) (defin* or concept*)- the search strategy establishes that terms a) and b) can be found within a maximum of three words of each other in the bibliographic fields. This set can be separated by a maximum of three words from c). Similarly, and d) and e) must be within a maximum of three words of each other. The search fields are the title, abstract, and keywords.	The same search strategy is used and with the same restrictions as for WoS.	Because the system does not allow the use of proximity operators between terms neither truncations, the single terms were considered for the topic definition, combining them with boolean operators. This results in greater informational noise in the results obtained, so it was necessary to perform an initial screening of the documents obtained. Therefore, two search strategies were used against the title and abstract fields, although they were combined into a single one for the database search: 1. (Conspiracy OR Conspiracist OR Conspiratorial) AND (theory) AND (definition OR define OR concept OR conceptualise). 2. (Conspiracism) AND (Theory) AND (definition OR define OR concept OR conceptualise).
Results	174 documents	180 documents	1638 initial documents; 160 potentially relevant

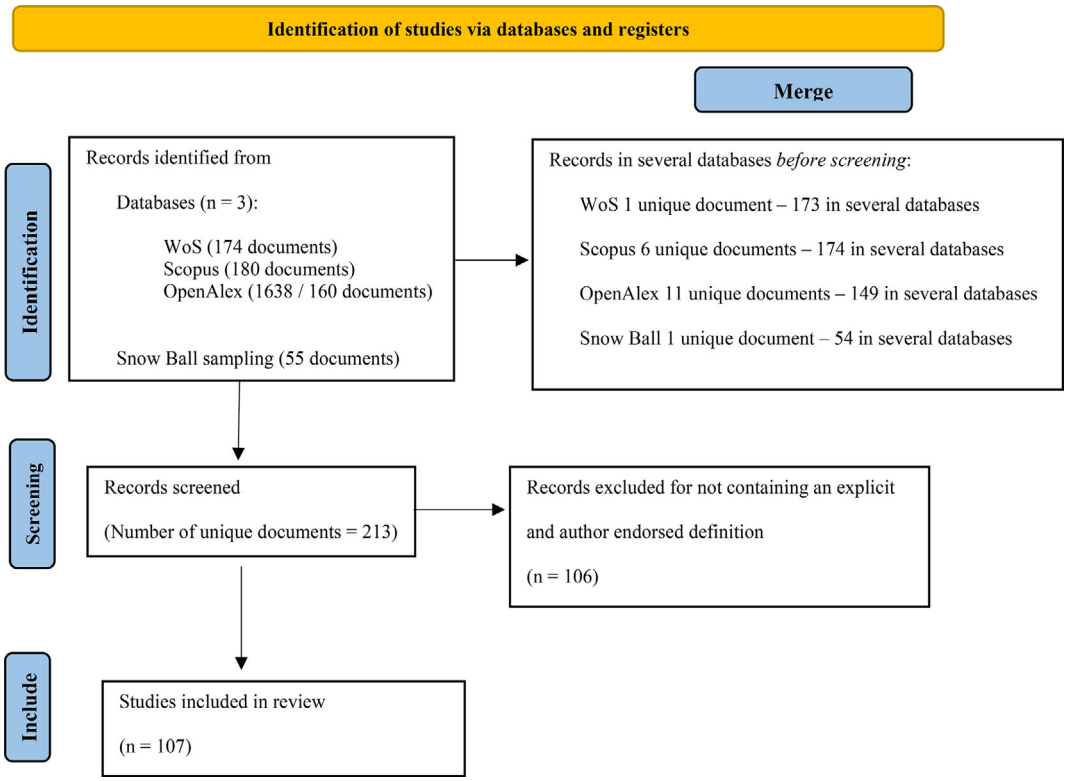

Figure 1. Flowchart of Identification, Screening, and Inclusion of Studies.

The final dataset (González-Albo, Martínez Escobar and Nefes 2025) was analysed using qualitative content analysis. Data extraction and coding were conducted by the authors, with categories iteratively refined through discussion until consensus was reached. For each publication, the passage in which *conspiracy theory* was explicitly defined was treated as the unit of analysis. Identical or closely related formulations were retained as separate observations, reflecting the study's interest in definitional use as an epistemic practice rather than in tracing conceptual originality. Coding proceeded inductively to identify recurring patterns. Following Patton's (2002) principles of internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity, the resulting categories were iteratively refined so that elements grouped within a category shared a coherent conceptual meaning, while categories themselves remained clearly distinct. In practice, each category was designed to capture a single, internally consistent dimension of definitional variation, and overlapping or ambiguous codes were revised until clear boundaries were established. Each definition was coded across all five analytical dimensions. Categories were mutually exclusive within the ontological, evaluative, epistemic, and scope dimensions, whereas constitutive features were non-mutually exclusive. Accordingly, a definition could, for example, combine a normative evaluative stance, an epistemically deficient characterisation, and constitutive features such as malevolence. The resulting matrix is publicly available in the accompanying dataset (González-Albo, Martínez Escobar and Nefes 2025).

Because this review synthesises conceptual definitions rather than empirical outcomes or effect estimates, we did not conduct risk-of-bias assessments, reporting-bias assessments, or certainty-of-evidence evaluations (e.g., GRADE), which are typically applied in systematic reviews of quantitative outcome studies. Genealogical mapping was introduced as a complementary strategy: while the qualitative content analysis focuses on the internal structure of definitions, the genealogical analysis traces patterns of definitional reuse at the level of cited formulations. The network was constructed from citation relationships between definitions. All 107 definitions were included in the mapping. An isolated node indicates that no citation relationship was identified between that definition and another definition in the corpus. This may occur when authors formulate their own definition without citing a prior definitional source, or when cited works do not themselves meet the inclusion criteria for the definitional corpus. Centrality was assessed using in-degree centrality, based on the number of definitions in the corpus citing each definition. The qualitative content analysis resulted in five analytical dimensions capturing distinct aspects of how conspiracy theories are conceptualised, as summarised in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Dimensions and categories of the qualitative analysis.

Dimension	Category	Analytical focus
Ontological	Explanatory/discursive object; Mental product/ belief; Social action/practice	What conspiracy theories are understood to be
Evaluative	Neutral-descriptive; Normative	Moral, social, or legitimacy judgments
Epistemic	Deficient; Neutral	Claims about knowledge quality or reasoning structure
Constitutive Features	Coalition; Contradicting; Intentionality; Malevolence; Power; Secrecy; No elements	Features treated as definitional components
Scope of the Explained Phenomenon	Broad; Narrow; Unspecified	Domain and range of application

Results

The definitions are organised along five dimensions: the ontological status attributed to conspiracy theories, the evaluative stance embedded in definitions, their epistemic characterisation, the constitutive features invoked and the scope of phenomena to which conspiracy theories are applied. These dimensions correspond to analytically distinct yet complementary questions that definitions consistently address: what conspiracy theories are, how they are judged, how their knowledge claims are framed, which features are treated as constitutive, how those features combine in definitional formulations, and how broadly conspiratorial explanations are assumed to apply. For example, the analysis treated evaluative stance and epistemic characterisation as separate dimensions. Evaluative stance refers to moral judgments embedded in definitional statements, such as portraying conspiracy theories as harmful, pathological, or socially undesirable. Epistemic characterisation, by contrast, captures claims about the quality of knowledge or reasoning attributed to conspiracy theories, including references to weak evidence, resistance to falsification, or flawed inferential processes. Definitions were coded as epistemically deficient only when such claims were explicitly articulated in the definitional formulation itself, rather than inferred from the author's broader argument or normative position.

Table 3 below reports the absolute frequencies and percentages of the categories identified across the dimensions. Within each dimension, each definition was assigned to the applicable category. Constitutive features were not mutually exclusive, as individual definitions could contain more than one feature.

Table 3. Prevalence of categories across definitional dimensions (N = 107).

Dimension	Category	N	%
Ontological	Explanatory/discursive object	85	79.4
	Mental product/belief	19	17.8
	Social action/practice	3	2.8
Evaluative	Neutral-descriptive	95	88.8
	Normative	12	11.2
Epistemic	Neutral	97	90.7
	Deficient	10	9.3
Constitutive features	Intentionality	90	84.1
	Coalition	80	74.8
	Secrecy	77	72
	Power	44	41.1
	Malevolence	39	36.4
	Contradicting	19	17.8
	No elements	12	11.2
Scope of explained phenomenon	Unspecified	74	69.2
	Broad	32	29.9
	Narrow	1	0.9

Ontological dimension

Definitions cluster around three ontological conceptualisations. Most define conspiracy theories as explanatory or discursive objects, such as explanations, theories, claims, narratives, allegations, or interpretations (79%). A smaller group defines them as beliefs or other mental constructs (18%), while only 3% formulate them primarily as social actions or communicative practices. The distinction concerns what the definition presents the conspiracy theory itself as, not the actions attributed to the alleged conspirators. Thus, a definition describing a conspiracy theory as an explanation of secret coordinated action is classified as an explanatory or discursive object. Kindynis (2025), for example, defines conspiracy theories as 'accounts or narratives that allege intrigue behind political or historical events'. Belief-based definitions instead identify the conspiracy theory itself as a construct. Ernst and Fasce (2018, 54), for instance, define it as 'a lay belief that attributes the ultimate cause of an event, or the concealment of an event from public knowledge, to a secret, unlawful, and malevolent plot by multiple actors working together'. Social-action formulations are rare. Gray (2008, 159), for example, defines conspiracy theory or conspiracism as 'the act of developing and sustaining a discourse', thereby locating the phenomenon in a communicative practice rather than in the explanatory content or belief alone.

Evaluative dimension

The majority of definitions refrain from embedding explicit negative evaluations, instead presenting conspiracy theories as analytical objects. A smaller number characterise conspiracy theories in pejorative or socially negative terms. Neutral-descriptive definitions emphasise analytical distance from pejorative meanings of conspiracy theories. Basham and Dentith (2016), for example, argue that conspiracy explanations should be assessed on a case-by-case evidentiary basis and reject the view that such explanations are inherently flawed. In contrast, normative definitions embed evaluative judgments, often portraying conspiracy theories as socially problematic or otherwise undesirable. Brotherton and French (2014, 238), for instance, use the following definition: 'an unverified and relatively implausible allegation of conspiracy, claiming that significant events are the result of a secret plot carried out by a preternaturally sinister and powerful group of people'.

Epistemic dimension

Only a minority of definitions address the epistemic status of conspiracy theories, and those that do tend to emphasise their deficiencies. Definitions addressing epistemic characteristics frequently describe conspiracy theories as resistant to

falsification, reliant on weak evidence, or structured by flawed reasoning. Common formulations characterise conspiracy theories as 'epistemically self-insulating against disconfirmation' (Brotherton 2013, 9) or as relying on 'weak, flawed, or fallacious logic' (Gray 2008, 159). They portray conspiracy theories as epistemically problematic forms of knowledge production, emphasising their internal reasoning processes rather than their empirical truth or falsity. By contrast, most definitions avoid epistemic judgments altogether, treating the validity of conspiracy theories as an empirical matter to be assessed individually rather than as a defining feature of the category itself. Beyond epistemic characterisation, definitions also vary in the specific attributes they identify as constitutive of conspiracy theories.

Constitutive features

Conspiracy theories are typically defined through multiple features. Six recurring themes were identified: intentionality, coalition, secrecy, power, malevolence, and contradiction of official explanations. Intentionality is the most prevalent, with definitions portraying conspiracies as the outcome of agency exercised by individuals, groups, or institutions. Coalition frequently accompanies intentionality, emphasising coordinated action among actors, while secrecy appears prominently, referring either to hidden plans or to the clandestine nature of the actors involved. References to power and malevolent intent vary in emphasis across definitions, suggesting that they often function as complementary. A smaller number of definitions characterise conspiracy theories primarily through their opposition to official explanations, framing them as counter-hegemonic accounts. In rare cases, authors adopt minimalist formulations, defining conspiracy theories as theories that posit conspiracies (e.g., Peels, Kindermann, and Ranalli 2023).

Most definitions combine several elements. In particular, intentionality, coalition, and secrecy form a recurrent core constellation around which other features are layered. However, some of these features may be prominent partly because they are already contained in the underlying concept of conspiracy rather than because authors introduce them as additional criteria for defining conspiracy theory. This is particularly clear for coalition and coordination: the Latin conspirare literally means 'to breathe together' and came to denote acting or agreeing together, while earlier English usage could similarly refer to harmonious combination. Sidney's Arcadia, for example, describes 'the conspiracy of her several graces, held best together to make one perfect figure of beauty' (Sidney [1590] 1907, 497). Definitions of conspiracy theory may then add further criteria that are not inherent in the concept of conspiracy itself. Contradiction of dominant or authoritative explanations is one such criterion. This may help explain why it sometimes appears without the other constitutive features: unlike coalition and coordination, it can independently serve to distinguish a conspiracy theory from other claims about conspiracies. For some authors, such opposition to authoritative accounts is sufficient for classification. Harris (2022, 8), for example, defines conspiracy theories as 'theories that allege conspiracies and conflict with the claims of relevant epistemic authorities, where epistemic authority is a matter of credentials and positions'. In summary, conspiracy theories are often defined through interacting causal, structural, and evaluative features.

Scope of the explained phenomenon

Definitions also vary in whether they specify the domain or scale of the phenomenon that a conspiracy theory seeks to explain. Most definitions leave this unspecified, employing general terms such as event, phenomenon, or situation without defining its scale or social significance. A smaller subset associates conspiracy theories with broad or consequential social and political events, while only a minority restricts them to particular domains or issue areas. The dimension therefore concerns the range of phenomena to which a definition applies rather than the conceptual breadth of conspiracy theory itself. For example, Guidry et al. (2015, 5053) define conspiracy theories specifically in relation to vaccine-related adverse events: 'Accusing a group or organization (e.g., the government, pharmaceutical companies, or doctors) of having caused or covered up vaccine adverse reactions or events'.

Genealogical structure and central definitions

Definitions are organised around a small number of recurrent reference points. Figure 2 below maps reference relationships among the definitional statements in the dataset and shows that a substantial proportion of studies reuse, adapt, or cite earlier definitions. The network is organised around a limited number of highly central nodes, most prominently the definitions proposed by Keeley (1999), Coady (2003), Bale (2007), Sunstein and Vermeule (2009), and Douglas et al. (2019). The genealogical analysis identifies definitions occupying central positions in this network, treating centrality as a measure of definitional relationships rather than broader citation impact. This structure provides a basis for examining whether the qualitative dimensions identified in the broader analysis also characterise definitional practices at the core of the field.

The central nodes correspond to a small set of widely used formulations. Keeley (1999) treats conspiracy theories as explanatory accounts that centre on covert coordination by a limited set of agents as the primary cause of events. Coady (2003) likewise conceptualises conspiracy theories as explanations of historical events in which conspiratorial agency plays a central causal role, adding that such explanations must posit a conspiracy aimed at bringing about the event and must conflict with an official account. Bale (2007) distinguishes between epistemically warranted conspiratorial



Figure 2. Citation relationships among CT definitions.

explanations and what he terms bogus conspiracy theories: ‘Elaborate fantasies that purport to show that various sinister, powerful groups with evil intentions, operating behind the scenes, are secretly controlling the course of world events’. Sunstein and Vermeule (2009, 205) define them as ‘an effort to explain some event or practice by reference to the machinations of powerful people, who attempt to conceal their role (at least until their aims are accomplished)’. Douglas et al. (2019, 4) define conspiracy theories as ‘attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors’.

Across these definitions, intentionality and secrecy recur: conspiracy theories are framed as accounts that attribute events or practices to deliberate, concealed coordination by multiple actors (Keeley 1999; Coady 2003; Sunstein and Vermeule 2009; Douglas et al., 2019). Coalition is implicit in all cases. By contrast, power and malevolence are unevenly treated. Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) and Douglas et al. (2019) explicitly foreground power, whereas Keeley (1999) and Coady (2003) do not treat power asymmetries as a necessary defining condition. Malevolent intent is not required by Keeley (1999), Coady (2003), or Douglas et al. (2019). Keeley (1999) also distinguishes conspiracy theories as a general category from ‘unwarranted conspiracy theories’. In other words, being epistemically unwarranted is not part of his definition of a conspiracy theory; it is a characteristic that may apply to particular conspiracy theories. Bale (2007) makes a comparable distinction by separating epistemically warranted conspiratorial explanations from what he terms bogus conspiracy theories, which are characterised by exaggerated scope, malevolence, and weak evidential support. Both approaches therefore distinguish what makes an account a conspiracy theory from the separate question of whether that account is epistemically warranted. These patterns indicate that a shared core—intentional, secret coordination by multiple actors—anchors the genealogical centre of the field, while other elements such as power or epistemic quality are variably attached. Divergence across definitions therefore reflects differences in analytical emphasis rather than disagreement over what minimally constitutes a conspiracy theory. As subsequent studies draw selectively on these formulations, they inherit particular combinations of constitutive and evaluative elements.

Ontologically, these central definitions consistently frame conspiracy theories as explanatory accounts rather than as beliefs or social practices. This ontological convergence contrasts with some variation in how the central definitions treat evaluative and epistemic judgments. Keeley (1999) and Coady (2003) adopt a neutral-descriptive stance and refrain from embedding judgments about the epistemic quality or consequences of conspiracy theories. Douglas et al. (2019) likewise offer a descriptive definition focused on explanatory form without building evaluative or epistemic deficiency into the definition. Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) also use a neutral-descriptive definition, despite adopting a critical position towards conspiracy theories in their broader argument. Their definition identifies conspiracy theories through their explanatory form and reference to the concealed actions of powerful actors, without treating falsity, irrationality, or epistemic deficiency as criteria. This illustrates how the evaluative content of an explicit definition may differ from the broader assumptions surrounding its use. Bale (2007), by contrast, foregrounds epistemic status by distinguishing warranted conspiratorial explanations from bogus conspiracy theories.

Among the central definitions, there is substantial convergence in how broadly the scope of conspiracy theories is specified. Influential formulations by Keeley (1999), Coady (2003), and Douglas et al. (2019) define conspiracy theories in general terms, referring to events, or circumstances without delimiting specific empirical domains or issue areas. Bale's (2007) intervention similarly operates at a general level by distinguishing between different kinds of conspiratorial explanations without restricting their application to particular fields. Sunstein and Vermeule's (2009) definition also adopts a broad scope, despite being motivated by policy concerns, framing conspiracy theories as explanations of events or practices involving secret plots rather than as domain-specific phenomena. This pattern mirrors the wider corpus, where scope is rarely specified explicitly and conspiratorial explanation is treated as potentially applicable across diverse contexts. The persistence of broad or open-ended scope among the most frequently reused definitions implies that conceptual generality—rather than domain-specific precision—is stabilised in the core of the field, reinforcing both the portability and the indeterminacy of the concept.

Discussion and conclusion

This study examined how conspiracy theories are defined in the academic literature and identified systematic conceptual diversity structured around recurring dimensions. Across 107 publications, definitions varied along ontological, evaluative, epistemic, constitutive-feature, and scope-related dimensions. Most conceptualise conspiracy theories as discursive entities, adopt neutral-descriptive evaluative stances, avoid explicit epistemic judgments, and combine multiple constitutive features. At the same time, genealogical analysis shows that the most frequently used definitions converge ontologically while diverging in evaluative, epistemic, and constitutive-feature terms. Because these diverse formulations function as shared reference points, their repeated adoption through citation shapes conceptual plurality as the genealogical mapping demonstrates. Understanding definitional diversity as structurally reproduced helps to clarify why conceptual disagreement remains a defining feature of conspiracy theory research. By treating definitions as the unit of analysis, this review extends systematic review methodology beyond synthesising empirical findings to examining the conceptual infrastructures that structure research fields.

One of the central findings concerns the predominance of discursive ontological definitions combined with neutral-descriptive evaluative stances. Most definitions treat conspiracy theories as narratives or explanations and refrain from embedding explicit evaluative judgments about their harm or legitimacy. The observed diversity is not reducible to disagreement over whether conspiracy theories are epistemically deficient, as some definitions that remain epistemically neutral nonetheless embed evaluative judgments, underscoring the relevance of separating epistemic characterisation from evaluative stance. This reflects a tendency to preserve analytical openness by separating scholarly concepts from everyday pejorative uses of 'conspiracy theory'. Indeed, studies demonstrate that conspiracy theories may be deployed instrumentally in mainstream political settings rather than exclusively as expressions of irrationality (Nefes 2014, 2015, 2017, 2026). By framing conspiracy theories as discursive objects, researchers could analyse their structure, circulation, and social functions without presupposing epistemic failure or moral deficiency.

Epistemic characterisation is a site of divergence. A minority of definitions describe conspiracy theories as epistemically deficient, while most avoid general claims about truth, rationality, or evidentiary standards. This reluctance seems to reflect an awareness of the risks of categorical judgment, including conceptual circularity and normative overreach. However, it also introduces analytical ambiguity, particularly for research designs that require clear conceptual boundaries between conspiracy theories and other explanatory forms. Together with the multidimensional structure and typically open-ended scope of most definitions, this ambiguity complicates comparison across studies and increases the risk of conceptual stretching. A related issue concerns the relationship between definitional breadth and case selection. Nera and Schöpfer (2023) observe that researchers may adopt definitions broad enough to encompass conspiracy claims generally while investigating a more restricted set of cases, particularly those regarded as unwarranted. As a result, conclusions derived from these cases may not extend to the full range of phenomena included by the definition. This discrepancy has implications for theoretical inference, since findings attributed to conspiracy theories generally may

apply more narrowly to particular types of conspiracy theory. The present review does not examine empirical case selection, but the definitional variation identified here suggests that future research should consider whether the cases studied correspond to the boundaries established by the definitions employed.

Definitional choices have consequences for how conspiracy theories are studied. Our findings show that most definitions are neutral-descriptive, while others add evaluative or epistemic criteria or adopt more minimalist formulations. Neutral-descriptive and minimalist definitions leave more room for assessing individual cases, but provide fewer criteria for operationalising the concept and distinguishing conspiracy theories from related concepts such as conspiracy mentality or rumour. More restrictive definitions provide clearer boundaries, but make classification partly dependent on evaluative or epistemic assumptions about the phenomena being studied. Broad definitions enhance portability and comparison across domains, whereas narrower definitions improve precision at the expense of generalisability. Definitions should therefore be made explicit and justified according to the aims of the study.

The different definitional configurations identified here represent distinct ways of constructing the category rather than marginal terminological differences. From a sociological perspective, definitional diversity appears as a structured outcome of how academic fields stabilise concepts. The generalist–particularist divide is therefore sustained not only by philosophical disagreement but also by definitional practices that allow different research agendas to coexist under a shared label while embedding distinct assumptions about rationality, harm, and legitimacy.

Definitional diversity is not merely a conceptual issue but has implications for empirical operationalisation and measurement. When definitions embed evaluative or epistemic assumptions, these assumptions may shape survey instruments and interpretive frameworks. This underlines the importance of positing definitions explicitly rather than treating them as background assumptions. Furthermore, definitional dynamics become particularly consequential when concepts travel beyond academia. Institutional definitions—such as those used by the European Commission—often embed assumptions of inherent malevolence and epistemic deficiency, while the academic literature documents neutral and context-dependent definitions, including cases where conspiratorial narratives are framed as protective or order-preserving. When policy frameworks implicitly adopt narrow or normatively loaded definitions, they risk conflating analytical categorisation with moral judgment. Such selective uptake draws on particular academic lineages while obscuring the broader conceptual diversity of the field. Without awareness of this diversity, policy interventions may unintentionally reinforce conceptual ambiguity or politicise the category of conspiracy theory itself.

The findings should be interpreted in light of two main limitations. First, the analysis is restricted to English-language, peer-reviewed publications and focuses exclusively on explicit definitions. This may underrepresent influential implicit conceptualisations and non-English traditions. We first conducted broad searches across three major bibliographic databases. Snowball sampling was then used as a complementary method to identify additional definitions not captured by the database searches. Because this procedure follows existing citation relationships, it may underrepresent relevant definitions that are less frequently cited or weakly connected to established citation networks. Second, many reviewed studies leave key dimensions—such as epistemic criteria or scope—underspecified. This reflects field-level constraints and was addressed by applying an inductive analytical framework that disentangles ontological, evaluative, epistemic, constitutive-feature, and scope dimensions. All in all, these limitations delimit the scope of inference without undermining the findings.

Nevertheless, the study makes contributions and points to directions for future research. By systematically reviewing an interdisciplinary corpus of definitions and mapping both their content and genealogical structure, the study shows that definitional diversity is reproduced through both analytical choices and referencing practices. Focusing on definitions themselves clarifies the conceptual foundations upon which empirical research, measurement strategies, and policy debates are built. Future research would benefit from greater reflexivity in definitional choices, explicit justification of analytical priorities, and clearer distinctions between ontological, evaluative, and epistemic considerations. Treating definitions as analytical tools whose suitability depends on research aims can enhance conceptual clarity, empirical rigour, and cumulative knowledge in the study of conspiracy theories.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required for this study. The research is based on the analysis of published academic literature and does not involve human participants, personal data, or identifiable information.

Data and software availability

The dataset generated and analysed in this study is publicly available in the DIGITAL.CSIC repository and can be accessed without restrictions. The repository supports versioning of datasets, with updated versions assigned new DOIs.

Repository: DIGITAL.CSIC DOI: https://doi.org/10.20350/digitalCSIC/17922

Dataset citation: González-Albo, B., Martínez Escobar, J., & Nefes, T. S. (2025). Bibliographic data from publications with definitions of conspiracy theory and characterisation of the definitions. DIGITAL.CSIC. https://doi.org/10.20350/digitalCSIC/17922

The dataset contains definitions of "conspiracy theory" extracted from peer-reviewed academic publications written in English, together with bibliographic metadata and coded analytical dimensions used in this study, including:

- ontological assumptions
- evaluative orientations
- epistemic characterisations
- constitutive features
- conceptual scope

The dataset is available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) license. No proprietary software was used in the analysis. Qualitative coding and analysis were conducted using standard text-processing and spreadsheet tools.

PRISMA 2020 CHECKLIST is available in ZENODO repository with the following name: Prisma 2020 checklist with guidelines for submitting review reports for the article: "How conspiracy theories are defined". DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18956816.

Checklist citation: Martínez Escobar, J., Nefes, T. S., & González-Albo, B. (2026). Prisma 2020 checklist with guidelines for submitting review reports for the article: "How conspiracy theories are defined". Zenodo. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18956816

Reporting guidelines

This systematic review followed the PRISMA 2020 reporting guidelines. The completed PRISMA checklist is provided in a public repository and cited in the Data Availability statement. The review was not preregistered and no protocol was prepared.

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Open Peer Review

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Dr. Anne Küppers
[1] University of Jena, Jena, Germany
[2] University of Jena, Jena, Germany

The article performs a systematic review of conspiracy theories in peer-reviewed academic work (following PRISMA guidelines). It tracks commonalities and differences in conceptualization along 5 core dimensions. Further, a genealogical mapping traces citation relationships.

I believe that the article will be extremely valuable to conspiracy research across disciplines. I particularly liked the attempt to move beyond simply listing existing definitions and to instead identify common dimensions along which definitions align or differ. Also, the dataset is another major contribution of the paper. Having a systematic collection of definitions used in peer-reviwed academic work, together with the information on the conceptual characteristics of each definition could be extremely useful to understand how conceptual and evaluative assumptions about CTs feed into their operationalization (e.g. as survey items/batteries) and measurement in empirical research.

Thus, overall, I think this is a already very strong and valuable piece of work. And I only have some minor points that should be addressed:

 # FIGURE 1 / IDENTIFICATION OF STUDIES
I find the figure to be incomplete.
In the first pane, the total number of records found is: 105 + 154 + 159 + 35 = 453 (across the three databases + via snowball sampling).
On the right-hand side, it is then depicted that 6 (or 12?) records were removed as duplicates.
First, it is unclear what the relevant number is. For example, the first entry under “duplicate records removed” reads (n=6 (3 removed)). I find this ambiguous. Does n = 6 refer to the number of duplicate records, or to the number actually removed? Because if 6 duplicates were identified and 3 duplicates were actually removed, that would mean that 3 duplicates were retained?
Second, the math does not work out, because that would be 453-6 = 447 records left for screening (or 453-12 = 441 – depending on which number is used). However, the next box states that 213

records were screened, and not 400+.
This means that 234 records suddenly disappeard, and the flow diagram does not explain what happened to these records.
I assume that these were removed based on some additional screening/filtering procedure, potentially the DOI matching (as described on p. 5), but this is not clear from the figure.
Please clarify what happened to these records and adapt the figure accordingly. In particular, add how many duplicates were actually removed.

 # RESULTS
EVALUATIVE DIMENSION EXAMPLE
I wonder about the example the authors cite for the normative category, i.e. the category that captures definitions that view CTs as (socially) harmful / portray them in a negative light / view them as undesirable.
The cited example is: “Brotherton and French (2014, 238), for instance, use the following definition: ‘an unverified and relatively implausible allegation of conspiracy, claiming that significant events are the result of a secret plot carried out by a preternaturally sinister and powerful group of people’” (p. 8).
However, in my understanding of the category scheme used by the authors, “unverified and relatively implausible allegation of a conspiracy” would fall under the epistemic dimension, which is described as including definitions where CTs are attributed to have “weak evidence” (p. 8).
Similarly, “preternaturally sinister … group of people” seems to describe the actors involved in the conspiracy as malevolent, which should, if I understand the category scheme correctly, fall under the “constitutive features” dimension (and should’ve been coded as “malevolence”).
If I am mistaken at some point, please clarify the coding scheme, in particular what is included under which dimension/category. At the moment, I find it somewhat difficult to understand why this particular definition is used as an example of the evaluative dimension.
Related to that: if a codebook with coding rules exists, it would be great to share this alongside the dataset as part of the replication material.

CONSTITUTIVE FEATURES
I see some potential to explore variation in more depth. For example whether there us variation over time? Could it be that definitions become more complex over the years, or that certain attributes are considered only in newer definitions?

A thought that may be potentially interesting for future research - not necessarily in this manuscript, though:
In the genealogical mapping, the authors write that a substantial proportion of articles draws their definition from a limited number of studies (the central nodes). Could you trace whether all elements of the original definition are retained, or whether subsequent articles drop or add certain elements?
For example, the authors write: "These patterns indicate that a shared core—intentional, secret coordination by multiple actors—anchors the genealogical centre of the field, while other elements such as power or epistemic quality are variably attached." (p. 10)
However, these 3 elements seem to be at the heart of the definitions by Keeley (1999), Coady (2003), Bale (2007), Sunstein and Vermeule (2009), and Douglas et al. (2019). As other studies use more elements in their definitions, it looks to me as if these later definitions may have expanded these definitions.

 # GENEALOGICAL MAPPING
I also wonder about the points in the network graph that have no connection.
It would be helpful to clarify what an unconnected node represents in the network graph. Does it mean that the article did not draw on other literature for its definition? Or does it rather means that the article's definition has no identifiable relationship to another definition in the **sample**? Or does it depend?
I assume that most of these studies give a definition that also comes from some other study. Could you explain why these studies did not make it into yours sample via the final stage of datacollection through snowball sampling? Did they not meet your inclusion criteria? Or did the just not make it in the mapping effort? Perhaps you could give the n of the maiing effort to show whether all 107 studies were mapped (or not).

ADDITIONAL PLOTS IN SUPPLEMENT
The authors write in their abstract that "genealogical mapping shows that frequently reused definitions share these features but differ in their evaluative and epistemic characterisation." However, this is not visible in the network graph in Figure 2.
Perhaps the authors did this analysis but did not provide the relevant plots in the article. It would be helpful to color-group the records in the genealogical mapping not by article type (article, review, note), which does not seem to tell us very much, but by category (and dimension), such as neutral vs. normative, etc. Maybe you could provide such additional plots. / analyses as a supplementary material.

Are the rationale for, and objectives of, the Systematic Review clearly stated?
Yes

Are sufficient details of the methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Partly

Is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results presented in the review?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: research on CT belief and democracy / survey research

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response 06 Oct 2026

Turkay Nefes

Dear Dr Küppers, Thank you very much for your careful and constructive review. We greatly

appreciate your assessment of the article and the dataset, as well as your thoughtful suggestions for improving the clarity of the analysis and its presentation. Please find our responses below.

Comment 1: Figure 1 / Identification of studies Response: Thank you. You were correct that Figure 1 contained an inconsistency. On rechecking the data, we found that the figures in the first panel had been taken from an earlier version of the database. This did not affect the final corpus of 107 studies. We have corrected Figure 1 and Table 1 using the data. The four sources contained 569 source-level records, corresponding to 213 unique documents after deduplication; 106 were excluded, leaving 107 studies in the review. Thank you for drawing our attention to this.

Comment 2: Evaluative dimension example Response: Thank you. You are correct that "unverified and relatively implausible" reflects the epistemic dimension and that "sinister" and "powerful" also relate to constitutive features. The five dimensions are analytically distinct but complementary, so the same definition can be characterised across dimensions. In the Brotherton and French definition, the formulation, particularly "sinister", also contributes to its normative evaluative character. We have clarified this multidimensional coding logic in the Methods. The publicly available dataset reports the coded analytical dimensions for each definition. No separate codebook was used; the coding matrix contained in the dataset records the dimension-level coding for each definition. We have clarified the coding procedure in the article and refer explicitly to the dataset: González-Albo, B., Martínez Escobar, J., & Nefes, T. S. (2025). Bibliographic data from publications with definitions of conspiracy theory and characterisation of the definitions. DIGITAL.CSIC. https://doi.org/10.20350/digitalCSIC/17922.

Comment 3: Constitutive features Response: Thank you for this helpful suggestion. The article focuses on how conspiracy theories are defined rather than on temporal change. We did not observe a clear temporal pattern in the corpus, although we did not conduct a systematic longitudinal analysis. Your point about the shared core is also well taken. Intentionality, secrecy, and coordination recur in the central definitions, and later studies build on these formulations while sometimes adding further elements. Tracing how such elements are retained, dropped, or added across subsequent studies would be a valuable direction for future research.

Comment 4: Genealogical mapping Response: Thank you for this helpful point. An unconnected node represents a definition for which no citation relationship with another definition in the analytical corpus was identified. This does not mean that the article did not cite other literature. In some cases, authors formulate their own definition without citing a prior definitional source; in others, cited works do not themselves meet the inclusion criteria for the definitional corpus. All 107 definitions in the analytical corpus were included in the mapping. We have clarified this in the Methods.

Comment 5: Additional plots in supplementary material Response: Thank you for this suggestion. Because individual definitions combine characteristics across several dimensions, a single colour-coded network would not adequately represent that multidimensional variation. Separate networks for each dimension would also add several

figures without necessarily improving interpretation. We have therefore retained the existing presentation of Figure 2, while the evaluative, epistemic, and constitutive differences are addressed in the accompanying text.

Thank you again for your very helpful comments and for your generous assessment of our work.

Best regards, Türkay Salim Nefes *on behalf of the authors*

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Version 1

Reviewer Report 17 June 2026

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Kenzo Nera
[1] Universite Libre de Bruxelles, Brussels, Belgium
[2] Universite Libre de Bruxelles, Brussels, Belgium
[3] Universite Libre de Bruxelles, Brussels, Belgium

It is difficult to emphasize enough how much research sorely needs this contribution, and it is most welcome as conspiracy theory research becomes more self-critical and strives for theoretical integration. I commend the authors for their work and hope it will have an important impact on the field. I have some moderate to minor points that need to be addressed; some of them might require work, but all of them should be highly manageable and do not call into question the core contribution of the article.

For each dimension of the conspiracy definition (see Table 1), it would be useful to know the relative prevalence of each “subgroup” in absolute values and as a percentage of the definition corpus. Knowing if some approaches are endorsed by the vast majority and others by tiny minorities would be extremely valuable information. For instance, regarding the ontological dimension, I was puzzled to read that some authors define conspiracy theories as “social action” – and I am wondering about the prevalence of such bizarre definitions. Since the word “theory” suggests an intellectual construction, how could a conspiracy *theory* be the plot/conspiracy itself? Note that Wood et al. (2012) define conspiracy theories as a “proposed plot by powerful groups and organizations,” which is ambiguous: the word “proposed” suggests that the plot is embedded in some kind of narrative or belief. The authors may consider discussing this a bit further.

On page 8, the authors mention examples of how conspiracy theories are epistemically characterized: “Common formulations include references to ‘discounting contradictory evidence’, ‘self-insulating against disconfirmation’, and ‘fallacious logic’.” Providing references for each citation would be highly valuable.

In the “constitutive features” section, the authors argue that sometimes, the only definitional criterion is opposition to authoritative accounts. As an example, they cite Harris (2022), who defines conspiracy theories as “theories that allege conspiracies and conflict with the claims of relevant epistemic authorities, where epistemic authority is a matter of credentials and positions.” In my view, the concept of “conspiracy” encompasses many of the constitutive features (coalition, secrecy, etc.). Perhaps the authors might consider discussing the notion that some of the features are directly derived from the concept of conspiracy. This would explain why these features are at the core of most definitions. Thus, definitions of conspiracy theories define them by (1) paraphrasing what a conspiracy is, with (2) an optional selection of features (e.g., opposition to authoritative accounts) sprinkled on top.

The “scope” dimension is ambiguous. At first, I thought it would designate the extent to which definitions make a distinction between conspiracy theories and conspiracy claims in general – the latter being much broader in scope. Yet, the dimension refers to the scale, or topic, of the alleged conspiracies, with some definitions focusing on significant societal events (i.e., in this approach, a conspiracy in the workplace would not count as a conspiracy theory). This distinction makes sense because my initial understanding is redundant with the constitutive features section. The authors may want to tweak the wording of the section to disambiguate it (perhaps using “topic specificity” instead of “scope” – or something along those lines).

The resolution of the article network (Figure 2) is too low to be readable. I do not know if it is a feature of the platform or an issue with the uploaded figure; if it is the latter, the authors may consider uploading a high-resolution figure.

On page 9, you mention that “Malevolent intent is not required by Keeley (1999), Coady (2003), or Douglas et al. (2019). Bale’s (2007) contribution differs in kind: rather than offering a definition, he distinguishes between epistemically warranted conspiratorial explanations and what he terms bogus conspiracy theories…” This is correct, but the authors might mention that Keeley’s piece actually proposes to distinguish between conspiracy theories and unwarranted conspiracy theories – an effort similar to Bale’s.

On page 10, the authors write: “Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) embed negative evaluative and epistemic judgments, portraying conspiracy theories as systematically unreliable and socially harmful.” While these authors are extremely critical of conspiracy theories, their definition itself does not encompass a negative evaluation. That may be a problem because it potentially creates a mismatch between the definition and implicit assumptions (regarding this mismatch, see Nera & Schöpfer, 2023, Theory & Psychology).

The authors conclude that most studies use a neutral, non-normative definition, which contrasts with the fact that “Institutional definitions—such as those used by the European Commission—often embed assumptions of inherent malevolence and epistemic deficiency.” However, I believe that researchers – and perhaps psychologists in particular – are partly responsible for this contamination of definitions by normative judgments: we mobilize neutral

definitions, yet we study almost exclusively conspiracy theories that are problematic (e.g., poorly substantiated, socially dangerous, etc). This creates a mismatch between what we claim to be studying and what we are actually studying. I apologize for the shameless self-promotion, but I believe this review further stresses the need to reflect on the potential mismatch between the definitions we mobilize and the conspiracies we are studying – a point we already discussed in Nera and Schöpfer (2023; see the section "The necessity of a refined approach to defining conspiracy theories in psychology"). I believe this should be mentioned in the closing comments.

I again applaud the authors for their work.

Kenzo Nera (signed review)

Are the rationale for, and objectives of, the Systematic Review clearly stated?
Yes

Are sufficient details of the methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Yes

Is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results presented in the review?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Social psychology of conspiracy theories

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response 11 Aug 2026

Turkay Nefes

Dear Dr. Nera, Thank you very much for your constructive and helpful comments. We greatly appreciated the care with which you engaged with the paper and found your suggestions very useful for clarifying both the analysis and its presentation. Please find our responses to each of your comments below.

Comment 1: Frequencies, percentages and the "social action" category
For each dimension of the conspiracy definition (see Table 1), it would be useful to know the relative prevalence of each "subgroup" in absolute values and as a percentage of the definition corpus. Knowing if some approaches are endorsed by the vast majority and others by tiny minorities would be extremely valuable information. For instance, regarding the ontological dimension, I was puzzled to read that some authors define conspiracy

theories as “social action” – and I am wondering about the prevalence of such bizarre definitions. Since the word “theory” suggests an intellectual construction, how could a conspiracy theory be the plot/conspiracy itself? Note that Wood et al. (2012) define conspiracy theories as a “proposed plot by powerful groups and organizations,” which is ambiguous: the word “proposed” suggests that the plot is embedded in some kind of narrative or belief. The authors may consider discussing this a bit further.

Response: Thank you. We have added frequencies and percentages for the categories (see Table 3). We also re-examined the ontological classifications, focusing on what each definitional formulation identifies a conspiracy theory itself as, rather than on the actions attributed to the alleged conspirators. We agree that Wood et al.’s (2012) formulation, “a proposed plot”, is ambiguous. On reconsideration, we interpret “proposed” as indicating a plot that is posited. We have therefore reclassified this definition as an explanatory/discursive formulation. We also revised the Results (pp. 11-12).

Comment 2: References for quoted epistemic characterisations
On page 8, the authors mention examples of how conspiracy theories are epistemically characterized: “Common formulations include references to ‘discounting contradictory evidence’, ‘self-insulating against disconfirmation’, and ‘fallacious logic’.” Providing references for each citation would be highly valuable.

Response: Thank you. We revised this passage (p. 12).

Comment 3: Features inherited from the concept of conspiracy
In the “constitutive features” section, the authors argue that sometimes, the only definitional criterion is opposition to authoritative accounts. As an example, they cite Harris (2022), who defines conspiracy theories as “theories that allege conspiracies and conflict with the claims of relevant epistemic authorities, where epistemic authority is a matter of credentials and positions.” In my view, the concept of “conspiracy” encompasses many of the constitutive features (coalition, secrecy, etc.). Perhaps the authors might consider discussing the notion that some of the features are directly derived from the concept of conspiracy. This would explain why these features are at the core of most definitions. Thus, definitions of conspiracy theories define them by (1) paraphrasing what a conspiracy is, with (2) an optional selection of features (e.g., opposition to authoritative accounts) sprinkled on top.

Response: Thank you. We revised this section to clarify that some constitutive features partly reflect their inheritance from the concept of conspiracy (pp. 13-14). In particular, we note that the historical meaning of conspirare foregrounds acting together, which helps explain the prominence of coalition in definitions of conspiracy theory. We also clarify that contradiction of dominant explanations is not implicit in the concept, which may help explain why it sometimes appears independently.

Comment 4: Ambiguity of the “scope” dimension
The “scope” dimension is ambiguous. At first, I thought it would designate the extent to which definitions make a distinction between conspiracy theories and conspiracy claims in general – the latter being much broader in scope. Yet, the dimension refers to the scale, or

topic, of the alleged conspiracies, with some definitions focusing on significant societal events (i.e., in this approach, a conspiracy in the workplace would not count as a conspiracy theory). This distinction makes sense because my initial understanding is redundant with the constitutive features section. The authors may want to tweak the wording of the section to disambiguate it (perhaps using "topic specificity" instead of "scope" – or something along those lines).

Response: Thank you. We renamed the dimension "Scope of the Explained Phenomenon" and revised the section (pp. 14-15). We have also revised the corresponding description in Table 2.

Comment 5: Resolution of Figure 2
The resolution of the article network (Figure 2) is too low to be readable. I do not know if it is a feature of the platform or an issue with the uploaded figure; if it is the latter, the authors may consider uploading a high-resolution figure.

Response: Thank you. We replaced Figure 2 with a higher-quality PNG version to improve the readability.

Comment 6: Keeley and unwarranted conspiracy theories
On page 9, you mention that "Malevolent intent is not required by Keeley (1999), Coady (2003), or Douglas et al. (2019). Bale's (2007) contribution differs in kind: rather than offering a definition, he distinguishes between epistemically warranted conspiratorial explanations and what he terms bogus conspiracy theories…" This is correct, but the authors might mention that Keeley's piece actually proposes to distinguish between conspiracy theories and unwarranted conspiracy theories – an effort similar to Bale's.

Response: Thank you. We revised this passage to clarify the similarity between Keeley (1999) and Bale (2007) (p. 16).

Comment 7: Sunstein and Vermeule's explicit definition
On page 10, the authors write: "Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) embed negative evaluative and epistemic judgments, portraying conspiracy theories as systematically unreliable and socially harmful." While these authors are extremely critical of conspiracy theories, their definition itself does not encompass a negative evaluation. That may be a problem because it potentially creates a mismatch between the definition and implicit assumptions (regarding this mismatch, see Nera & Schöpfer, 2023, Theory & Psychology).

Response: Thank you. We revised this passage accordingly (p. 17).

Comment 8: Mismatch between neutral definitions and selected cases
The authors conclude that most studies use a neutral, non-normative definition, which contrasts with the fact that "Institutional definitions—such as those used by the European Commission…" However, I believe that researchers are partly responsible for this contamination of definitions by normative judgments: we mobilize neutral definitions, yet we study almost exclusively conspiracy theories that are problematic (e.g., poorly substantiated, socially dangerous, etc). This creates a mismatch between what we claim to

be studying and what we are actually studying. I apologize for the shameless self-promotion, but I believe this review further stresses the need to reflect on the potential mismatch between the definitions we mobilize and the conspiracies we are studying – a point we already discussed in Nera and Schöpfer (2023)...

Response: Thank you. We added this to the Discussion (pp. 19-20). Drawing on Nera and Schöpfer (2023), we now note that broad definitions may be applied to a narrower set of empirical cases.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Report 01 June 2026

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Nuh Akçakaya
[1] Selçuk Üniversitesi, Konya, Turkey
[2] Selçuk Üniversitesi, Konya, Turkey
[3] Selçuk Üniversitesi, Konya, Turkey

Peer Review Report

How conspiracy theories are defined: A systematic qualitative review of academic definitions Nefes, Martínez Escobar, and González-Albo (2026)

Approval Status: Approved

Questionnaire Responses

Are the rationale for, and objectives of, the Systematic Review clearly stated? Yes.
The rationale is clearly articulated in the introduction. The authors identify a real gap — the lack of systematic analysis of how conspiracy theories are defined — and connect it to both academic and policy implications. The two research questions are explicitly stated and consistently addressed throughout the paper.

Are sufficient details of the methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others? Partly. The search strategy, screening procedure, and coding approach are well documented and the dataset is publicly available. That said, two points need attention. The snowball sampling procedure is not accompanied by any discussion of its limitations, and the methodological basis for the genealogical mapping is underspecified — in particular, how centrality was operationalised is never explained. Both points are discussed further below.

Is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate? Not applicable.
This study uses qualitative content analysis and genealogical mapping. No statistical analysis is involved, and none would be expected here.

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results presented in the review? Yes.
The five analytical dimensions are applied consistently and the main conclusion — that definitional diversity is reproduced through citation practices — follows naturally from the findings. One suggestion: the paper's central recommendation would carry more weight if the authors discussed the practical trade-offs of different definitional types more explicitly. This is elaborated below.

Summary
This paper looks at how conspiracy theories are defined in peer-reviewed academic literature and maps the conceptual variation across 107 publications. The authors apply qualitative content analysis to identify five recurring dimensions along which definitions differ, and complement this with a genealogical mapping of citation relationships to examine how particular formulations become dominant over time. The paper is clearly written and the findings are well presented. I am happy to recommend it for approval.

Assessment:

Literature and Framing
The paper engages seriously with the relevant literature. More importantly, it addresses a problem that goes beyond what standard bibliometric work typically handles. The conspiracy theory field has built up a large and somewhat messy body of definitional work, with competing formulations moving across disciplines without much critical scrutiny. Treating this situation as the object of analysis rather than a background condition is a sensible and overdue move. The framing is honest about what the paper does and does not claim to do.

Study Design
The combination of qualitative content analysis and genealogical mapping works well for the research questions. Using three databases is a reasonable way to reduce disciplinary bias, and the screening procedure is documented clearly enough to follow. Criterion sampling and the focus on explicit, author-endorsed definitions are appropriate choices given the study's aims.

Results and Conclusions
The five dimensions are applied consistently and the results section is well organised. The genealogical analysis adds something that the content analysis alone could not — it shows that conceptual diversity is not just a feature of the field at large but persists even among the most frequently cited formulations. The policy discussion at the end is reasonable, though it could be pushed a little further.

Specific Comments:
Abstract Structure
The Results section of the abstract runs together findings from two different methods without

signalling which finding comes from which. Qualitative content analysis and genealogical mapping are doing different things, and a reader encountering the abstract for the first time cannot easily tell them apart. Two sentences — one for each method — would sort this out without much effort.

Methods/Snowball Sampling
The paper does not discuss the limitations of snowball sampling. Since this method follows existing citation trails, definitionally relevant but less-cited works may not have been picked up. A sentence acknowledging this would fit naturally in the limitations section, which is otherwise quite candid about what the study cannot claim.

Genealogical Mapping
Figure 2 is interesting and the genealogical approach is a genuine addition to the analysis. The problem is that the basis for identifying central nodes is never explained. The authors point to Keeley (1999), Coady (2003), Bale (2007), Sunstein and Vermeule (2009), and Douglas et al. (2019) as occupying strategic positions, but it is not clear how this was determined. Degree centrality? Betweenness centrality? Something else? A short note on how the network was built and how centrality was measured would make this part of the paper considerably easier to evaluate.

Evaluative Discussion of Individual Definitions
The paper is good at classifying definitions but does not say much about what different definitional choices cost or buy. The recommendation to treat definitions as analytical tools is sensible, but it would be more useful if the authors said something about which tools are suited to which jobs. Neutral-descriptive definitions keep things open but create problems for operationalisation; normative ones draw cleaner lines but risk circular reasoning; minimalist formulations like that of Peels et al. (2023) are arguably circular on their face; broad-scope definitions travel well but lose precision. A short paragraph in the discussion on these trade-offs would give readers something concrete to work with.

Concluding Remarks
The points above are minor and do not affect the paper's main contribution. The study is well designed, clearly presented, and addresses something the field genuinely needs. I hope the comments are useful.

Are the rationale for, and objectives of, the Systematic Review clearly stated?
Yes

Are sufficient details of the methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Yes

Is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results presented in the review?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: My area of expertise is conspiracy theories and conspiracy beliefs. I feel that I am able to assess the entire article, including its theoretical framework, qualitative content analysis, genealogical mapping, and conclusions.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Author Response 11 Aug 2026

Turkay Nefes

Dear Dr. Akçakaya, Thank you very much for your constructive and helpful comments. We greatly appreciated your suggestions, which helped us improve the clarity and presentation of the article. Please find our responses to each of your comments below.

Comment 1: Abstract structure
The Results section of the abstract runs together findings from two different methods without signalling which finding comes from which. Qualitative content analysis and genealogical mapping are doing different things, and a reader encountering the abstract for the first time cannot easily tell them apart. Two sentences — one for each method — would sort this out without much effort.
Response: Thank you. We revised the Results section of the abstract to distinguish more explicitly between the findings of the qualitative content analysis and genealogical mapping.

Comment 2: Limitations of snowball sampling
The paper does not discuss the limitations of snowball sampling. Since this method follows existing citation trails, definitionally relevant but less-cited works may not have been picked up. A sentence acknowledging this would fit in the limitations section, which is otherwise quite candid about what the study cannot claim.

Response: Thank you. We added a limitation concerning the snowball-sampling procedure. We now clarify that broad searches across three major bibliographic databases constituted the primary search strategy, while snowball sampling was used as a complementary method to identify additional definitions. We also acknowledge that this procedure may underrepresent definitions that are less frequently cited or weakly connected to established citation networks.

Comment 3: Genealogical mapping and centrality
Figure 2 is interesting and the genealogical approach is a genuine addition to the analysis. The problem is that the basis for identifying central nodes is never explained. The authors point to Keeley (1999), Coady (2003), Bale (2007), Sunstein and Vermeule (2009), and Douglas et al. (2019) as occupying strategic positions, but it is not clear how this was determined. Degree centrality? Betweenness centrality? Something else? A short note on how the network was built and how centrality was measured would make this part of the paper considerably easier to evaluate.

Response: Thank you. Centrality was measured using in-degree centrality, based on the number of definitions citing each definition (p. 10).

Comment 4: Trade-offs between definitional approaches
The paper is good at classifying definitions but does not say much about what different definitional choices cost or buy. The recommendation to treat definitions as analytical tools is sensible, but it would be more useful if the authors said something about which tools are suited to which jobs. Neutral-descriptive definitions keep things open but create problems for operationalisation; normative ones draw cleaner lines but risk circular reasoning; minimalist formulations like that of Peels et al. (2023) are arguably circular on their face; broad-scope definitions travel well but lose precision. A short paragraph in the discussion on these trade-offs would give readers something concrete to work with.

Response: Thank you. We added a paragraph to the Discussion outlining the analytical trade-offs among neutral-descriptive, minimalist, restrictive, broad and narrow definitions (p. 20).

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.