Conspiracy Narratives and Religious Legitimation in Digital Politics: A Cross-Case Analysis of State-Linked Discourses

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Abstract: This study aims to analyze the relationship between conspiracy belief, religion, and the stability of authoritarian regimes by examining the structural similarities between religious modes of thinking and conspiracy belief in contemporary political contexts. The study departs from the growing use of conspiracy narratives by authoritarian state actors and the involvement of national religious actors and groups in supporting such narratives. The research adopts a qualitative approach and applies narrative analysis to ten conspiracy narratives disseminated by the governments of the United States, Russia, Israel, Turkey, and India through the internet and digital media. The findings show that conspiracy belief and religious belief share structural equivalence in their psychosocial functions, particularly in providing self-certainty, group affiliation, meaning orientation, and identity stabilization amid social complexity. However, conspiracy belief consistently operates as a defensive mechanism against threats to a narcissistic self-concept and perceived loss of control through the distortion of reality, whereas religious belief displays a broader and more context-dependent range of functions. The study also demonstrates that digital media and platform algorithms function as cognitive and emotional accelerators that intensify the reproduction of conspiracy narratives and the legitimation of authoritarian power. The implications of this research underscore the importance of critical approaches in the study of religion and politics, particularly for understanding how religion and conspiracy narratives operate as sources of power legitimation and regime stabilization in the digital public sphere. The originality of this study lies in its integration of political narrative analysis with perspectives from cognitive psychology and neuro- and biopsychological explanations within the study of religion and culture.

Keywords: Authoritarianism; cognitive psychology; conspiracy belief; digital narratives; religion and politics.

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis hubungan antara keyakinan konspirasi, agama, dan stabilitas rezim otoriter dengan mengeksplorasi kesamaan struktural antara pola pikir agama dan keyakinan konspirasi dalam konteks politik kontemporer. Penelitian ini berangkat dari penggunaan narasi konspirasi yang semakin meningkat oleh aktor negara otoriter dan keterlibatan aktor dan kelompok agama nasional dalam mendukung narasi tersebut. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dan menerapkan analisis naratif terhadap sepuluh narasi konspirasi yang disebarkan oleh pemerintah Amerika Serikat, Rusia, Israel, Turki, dan India melalui internet dan media digital. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa keyakinan konspirasi dan keyakinan agama memiliki kesetaraan struktural dalam fungsi psikososialnya, terutama dalam memberikan kepastian diri, afiliasi kelompok, orientasi makna, dan stabilisasi identitas di tengah kompleksitas sosial. Namun, keyakinan konspirasi secara konsisten beroperasi sebagai mekanisme pertahanan terhadap ancaman terhadap konsep diri narsistik dan kehilangan kontrol yang dirasakan melalui distorsi realitas, sedangkan keyakinan agama menampilkan rentang fungsi yang lebih luas dan bergantung pada konteks. Studi ini juga menunjukkan bahwa media digital dan algoritma platform berfungsi sebagai akselerator kognitif dan emosional yang memperkuat reproduksi narasi konspirasi dan legitimasi kekuasaan otoriter. Implikasi penelitian ini menyoroti pentingnya pendekatan kritis dalam studi agama dan politik, terutama untuk memahami bagaimana agama dan narasi konspirasi berfungsi sebagai sumber legitimasi kekuasaan dan stabilisasi rezim di ruang publik digital. Keaslian penelitian

ini terletak pada integrasinya antara analisis narasi politik dengan perspektif dari psikologi kognitif dan penjelasan neuro- dan biopsikologis dalam studi agama dan budaya.

Kata kunci: Otoritarianisme; psikologi kognitif; kepercayaan konspirasi; narasi digital; agama dan politik.

1. Introduction

The disinhibiting impact of the internet's structural characteristics has long been recognized in studies of digital communication and politics. Anonymity, weak institutional control, and reinforcing algorithms have created fertile ground for hate speech and misinformation well before the COVID-19 pandemic, while simultaneously turning digital platforms into key instruments of political extremism (Baldauf, Ebner, & Guhl, 2018). As societies increasingly depend on digital media, the public sphere has become shaped by algorithmic logics that prioritize emotion, affect, and polarization over rational verification. This transformation marks a fundamental shift in the production and circulation of social knowledge.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated and intensified these dynamics. Belief in conspiracy theories rose sharply and contributed to growing social fragmentation. The Director-General of the World Health Organization, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, explicitly described this phenomenon as an *infodemic*, referring to the flood of false information accompanying the global health crisis (Hurtz, 2020). Surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center documented widespread public belief in pandemic-related misinformation (Mitchell & Oliphant, 2020), while empirical studies revealed a significant escalation in the production and consumption of conspiracy narratives in digital spaces (Nocun & Lamberty, 2020). Meta-analyses of social media research during the pandemic identified serious disruptions to cognitive structures and social relations, alongside a strong drive to seek alternative meaning-making frameworks online (Dow, Johnson, Wang, Whitson, & Menon, 2021). A feedback loop emerged in which online communities reinforced conspiracy theories, translated them into offline actions, reposted these actions on social media, and thereby further consolidated collective belief.

In this context, video platforms such as YouTube recorded a marked increase in the consumption of conspiratorial content (Banse & Müller, 2020; Kalisch & Stotz, 2020), accompanied by a surge in antisemitic conspiracy theories (Israel Netz, 2020). More importantly, conspiracy theories no longer remain confined to subcultural milieus but have been systematically adopted by authoritarian regimes and political actors in both Eastern and Western contexts. Figures such as Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump have repeatedly employed conspiracy narratives as instruments of political mobilization (Audureau, 2025; Cillizza, 2020; Kranz, Haltiwanger, & Zeballos-Roig, 2019; Shesgreen, 2019; Ware & Flood, 2024). In many cases, these narratives gain additional legitimacy through the support of religious groups that share similar belief structures. As twentieth-century history has already demonstrated, conspiracy theories function as effective tools in totalitarian movements and have re-emerged as a serious threat to contemporary democracies (Chambers, 2025; Herold, 2024).

Scholarly research on conspiracy theories has developed along several major trajectories. First, approaches in religious and cultural studies interpret conspiracy narratives as forms of modern myth. Research within this tradition understands conspiracy theories as revivals of cosmic narratives centered on the struggle between good and evil (Blumenberg, 1979; Groh, 1987; Heep, 2022; Knight, 2003). Numerous studies trace their historical roots to apocalyptic traditions and demonology, including the Book of Revelation, which has shaped the symbolic structure of modern conspiracies (Barkun, 2013; Butter, 2018; Hagemeister, 2020; Hofstadter, 1990; Strozier, 2020; Wippermann, 2007). Karl Popper (2012) already pointed to structural analogies between religious belief and conspiracy belief, while more recent research discusses conspiracy thinking as a form of new religion, alternative spirituality, or esoteric worldview (Dyrendal, Robertson, & Asprem, 2018; Nocun & Lamberty, 2020; Pöhlmann, 2021; Ward & Voas, 2011).

Second, psychopathological approaches emphasize reality distortion in conspiracy belief, often framing it as akin to paranoia (Butter, 2018; Hofstadter, 1990; Strozier, 2011). Studies within this framework identify pathological narcissism as a key psychological predisposition for attraction to conspiracy theories (Douglas, Sutton, & Cichocka, 2017; Douglas et al., 2019), which they interpret as a mechanism of psychodynamic projection (Hepfer, 2015). Although this perspective offers important insights, scholars frequently criticize it for pathologizing believers and neglecting the social and cultural dimensions of conspiracy belief.

Third, socio-psychological approaches highlight distrust in political institutions, interpersonal relations, and fear of losing control as central factors (Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). Socioeconomic instability encourages the search for spurious or superstitious causal patterns to explain complex crises (Anton, 2011; Anton, Schetsche, & Walter, 2014; Goertzel, 1994; Groh, 1992). Research further shows that libertarian environments characterized by high levels of mistrust toward the state and the "mainstream" display particular susceptibility to conspiracy belief (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2017). Within such contexts, a conspiracy milieu emerges that functions as an accelerator of radicalization (Bartlett & Miller, 2010; Harambam, 2020; Wood, Douglas, & Sutton, 2012).

Despite the valuable insights provided by these three strands, much of the literature remains analytically compartmentalized: symbolic and cultural accounts often stop at interpretation of mythic structure, psychopathological explanations emphasize individual predispositions, and socio-psychological models focus on context factors such as distrust and control loss. What remains insufficiently developed—particularly within the study of religion and politics—is an integrated account that connects (1) narrative mechanisms through which conspiratorial discourse constructs crisis, enemies, and collective identity, to (2) the cognitive style that makes such constructions compelling (e.g., monocausality, moral dichotomization, high associativity, and resistance to falsification), and to (3) a neuro- and biopsychological framing that explains why this style persists under affective stress and group-coordination demands in algorithmically structured digital publics.

The present study contributes to Religious Studies by treating conspiracy narratives as forms of politically mobilized meaning-making that can be analyzed with conceptual tools long used for the study of religion—such as sacralization, moral cosmologies, and legitimation through authoritative actors—without reducing either religion or conspiracism to clinical pathology. By bringing political narrative analysis into conversation with cognitive psychology and neuro- and biopsychological perspectives, it also clarifies how "religion-like" cognitive styles can become resources for power legitimation and regime stabilization in the digital public sphere.

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to re-examine the psychological conditions and cognitive styles underlying conspiracy belief and to explicate their largely neglected neuro- and biopsychological foundations. By building a bridge between religious studies and cognitive science, this research seeks to explain why religious belief and conspiracy belief exhibit structural equivalence without reducing either to pathology or deviance.

This study argues that the cognitive style of religious and conspiracy belief—distinct from rational-scientific reasoning and present in every form of myth (Blumenberg, 1979)—is rooted in primary modes of thinking at both ontogenetic and phylogenetic levels. This mode of thinking operates in an egocentric and non-reflexive manner and primarily serves to regulate emotions in order to enable affective group coordination and the harmonization of individual and collective interests. By contrast, language-based logical reasoning constitutes a more recent evolutionary achievement and functions by suspending emotion in favor of reproducing causal relations in nature. Within the framework of evolutionary epistemology, the human cognitive apparatus represents an adaptation to the dominant human environment, namely the social group, with the aim of ensuring efficient survival (Vollmer, 2023). Human cognition therefore represents reality only insofar as it is relevant to survival within the *mesocosmos*, without any guarantee of full correspondence with "truth." These two modes of thinking—emotional-mythological and rational-scientific—coexist within human cognition, and neither can inherently claim access to objective truth. This perspective carries far-reaching implications for understanding religion, society, and politics in the contemporary digital era.

2.   Method

The unit of analysis in this study consists of political conspiracy narratives disseminated by the governments of the United States, Russia, Israel, Turkey, and India. The study analyzes these narratives as digital discursive artifacts that operate within contexts of political legitimation and receive support from national religious actors or groups. The research focuses on narrative structures, argumentative patterns, and symbolic meanings embedded in these conspiracy narratives, particularly in how they represent crisis, enemies, and the collective identities of their supporters.

This study adopts a qualitative research design using narrative and discourse analysis. The approach suits the research objectives because the study does not aim to measure the frequency or distribution of conspiracy beliefs but rather to understand how such narratives are constructed, interpreted, and function psychologically and cognitively. Qualitative analysis enables the researcher to trace the relationships among discursive structures, modes of reasoning, and the psychological conditions underlying conspiracy belief, while also explaining their connections to religious modes of thinking.

The research data derive from online materials available on the internet and social media, which currently function as the most effective instruments of political propaganda. Primary sources include official political and governmental platforms, such as the Trump/Vance platform, real-time Australian media portals reporting primary statements, the English-language version of the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, as well as statements by publicists and political analysts. For non-European and cross-linguistic contexts, the study draws on platforms of regional research institutions, including the Center for Eastern Studies, the Central Asia–Caucasus Institute, and the *Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung*.

Data collection proceeded through targeted keyword searches using online search engines. This process aimed to identify conspiracy narratives that state actors explicitly disseminated or reproduced and that gained religious legitimation. The search process was complemented by a review of relevant literature by leading political analysts in order to ensure contextual accuracy, source validity, and the relevance of the narratives under examination. The researcher then selected the collected data based on their direct relevance to the research objectives.

Data analysis involved examining the narrative structure of each conspiratorial discourse. The analysis identified basic patterns in order to trace the origins of the narratives, while interpretive analysis of specific content served to uncover the collective self-images of the supporters and the deep crises they perceived. From these findings, the study drew inferences regarding the psychological conditions of conspiracy believers. In addition, the analysis examined how the narratives construct their arguments in order to reveal the underlying cognitive styles, which the study then explains through perspectives from cognitive psychology as well as neuro- and biopsychological mechanisms.

3.   Results

Narrative Analysis of Selected Conspiracy Stories

Contemporary conspiracy narratives employed by authoritarian regimes display a consistent pattern in constructing crisis, enemies, and collective identity. In the United States, President Donald Trump openly declared a war against what he labeled the "Deep State," which he portrayed as being led by George Soros—a Hungarian billionaire and Holocaust survivor accused of infiltrating the judicial system in order to destroy the American Way of Life (Donald J. Trump, 2023). The Deep State appears as an evil force that weakens the United States through liberalism, civil rights, multilateralism, and the "fake press." This narrative gained religious legitimation through the support of a majority of Evangelicals who viewed Trump as an instrument chosen by God (Wehner, 2025), in line with neo-conservative beliefs that frame America as a new "chosen people" destined to lead the world (Marsden, 1991; Milich, 2006).

A comparable narrative emerged in the Russian context. The Russian government claimed the existence of a "fifth column" that sought to destroy the state from within through Western values such

as democracy, human rights, and "gender ideology" (Radnitz, 2023). Authorities legitimized the invasion of Ukraine as a holy war against fictitious Nazis and a Western puppet government, even framing it as a cosmic battle against global evil (Applebaum, 2024). Allegations concerning U.S.-funded Ukrainian biological weapons laboratories—including stories about virus-carrying migratory birds—reinforced the construction of a conspiratorial enemy (Borger, Rankin, & Farrer, 2022; Salazar, 2022). The Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church explicitly framed the war as a sacred struggle against the Antichrist and Western liberalism (Chawryło, 2024; Kirill, 2024). The ideology of *Russki mir* and the concept of *Holy Rus* asserted the superiority of a divinely chosen Russian civilization embodied in the figure of Putin (Jilge, 2016; Soldatow & Gazeta, 2024), particularly as a response to the loss of superpower status after the collapse of the Soviet Union and Western rejection of Russian security proposals (Merkel & Baumann, 2024; Seligmann, 2024).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, conspiracy narratives also spread widely among Western libertarian milieus. These actors interpreted the COVID-19 virus as a biological weapon produced by a Zionist conspiracy or by George Soros and symbolically linked it to the number of the Antichrist (HispanTV, 2020; IDZ, 2021). Certain Christian figures, including representatives within the Catholic Church, reinforced these narratives by promoting the idea of a *new world order* controlled by evil forces (Kagermeier, 2020). In contrast to these claims, the pandemic infected hundreds of millions of people worldwide and caused approximately seven million deaths globally (Gesundheitszustand, 2024).

In Israel, political discourse since the electoral victory of Menachem Begin has been dominated by an existential narrative portraying Israel as living in a hostile world that constantly threatens destruction and the repetition of the Holocaust (Goldhagen, 2009). Political actors labeled the Hamas attack that killed 1,170 Israeli citizens as a "new Holocaust" (Goldenberg, 2023). Within a moral alliance with the United States, political discourse positioned Israel as a defender of global civilization and freedom (Evans 2009; Gilder 2009). Internal criticism of Revisionist Zionism often appeared as criminality or treason (Zimmermann, 2024; Zuckermann, 2010). Ultra-Orthodox and national-religious parties played an active role in Netanyahu's government and articulated eschatological expectations that encouraged settlement expansion. The ideology of Jabotinsky's Revisionist Zionism, explicitly reaffirmed by Netanyahu (2022), framed the conflict as a holy struggle that normalized violence against Palestinians.

In Turkey, Erdoğan constructed a narrative in which Islam—with Turkey as its vanguard—engaged in an existential struggle against Christianity and the West (Lüküslü, 2016). Political discourse framed the "New Turkey" project as a revival of Ottoman greatness, with Erdoğan as the charismatic leader of post-Kemalist political Islam (Cornell, 2015). The concept of *Turkishness*, which combines ethnicity, language, and religion, became the core of national identity and supported claims of leadership within the Islamic world (Cevik, 2025). This narrative evolved amid stagnating European integration, ongoing Kurdish conflict, international recognition of the Armenian genocide, and recurrent economic crises.

In India, the Bharatiya Janata Party promoted the ideology of Hindutva, which framed history as a cosmic struggle between good and evil. Political actors explained past defeats as consequences of losing Vedic purity, Aryan culture, and "blood purity," while proponents portrayed the homogenization of the Hindu national body as a path toward final victory with the assistance of the god Rama (Savarkar, 2011). The boundary between political ideology and religion became increasingly blurred, as scholars debated whether Hindutva constituted a component of Hinduism or its dominant interpretive framework. This ideology showed affinities with European racial nationalism and caste-based systems that legitimize ritual hierarchy and social exclusion (Zachariah, 2014), particularly amid widespread fears among the Hindu majority of losing privileges in India's highly plural society.

All of these conspiracy narratives follow the same pattern: a "holy people" or chosen nation confronts a satanic enemy that seeks to destroy its identity, freedom, and way of life through liberalism, pluralism, or modern values. The narratives frame the conflict as a holy war or an existential struggle, while the underlying crisis centers on fears of losing status, power, or privilege. These narratives

consistently receive support from national-conservative religious groups. To clarify this synthesis of findings, Table 1 summarizes the recurring structural elements observed across all cases.

Table 1. Conspiracy Narrative Patterns and Their Structural Elements (Cross-Case Synthesis)

Self-image	Satanic enemy	Enemy's ultimate goal	Means/strategy	Type of conflict	Actual "crisis"	Religious supporters
Trump as the embodiment of the American Way of Life, chosen by God	Deep State/Soros	To destroy the American Way of Life	Liberalism and multilateralism	Holy war	Trump convicted; the United States losing supremacy	American Evangelicals
Putin as the embodiment of *Holy Rus* (chosen by God for world domination)	Fifth column	To destroy Russia	Western values and biological weapons	Holy war	Putin's plans ignored; Russia losing superpower status	Leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church
Libertarians as maximizers of individual freedom and minimizers of the state	Jews/Soros	To destroy the freedom of the Western world	COVID-19 as a biological weapon	Civil disobedience, violence	Temporary civil restrictions; approximately seven million deaths	Representatives of Christian churches
The "chosen people" (mentally and morally superior, entitled to rule)	A hostile world of enemies	To wipe out the Jewish people	Anything that harms or restricts Israel	Holy war	Threatened by hostile neighbors and terrorism	Ultra-Orthodox and national-religious Judaism
Leader of Islam, *Turkishness*	Christianity/ the West	To wipe out Islam	Western values and Christian faith	Struggle for existence	EU accession stagnation; Kurdish conflict;	Fundamentalist Islamic movements

					recognition of the Armenian genocide; weakened economy	
The "pure" Vedic people, rightful rulers of "Holy India"	Islam	To destroy Hindu faith, culture, and "blood purity"	Anything that threatens Hindu privileges	"Hinduization," struggle with the help of Rama	Ethnic conflicts; fear of losing privileges	National-religious Hinduism

The pattern summarized in Table 1 reveals a clear structural similarity across cases. Each narrative frames the community as a sacred or exceptional entity, personifies the enemy as an embodiment of evil, totalizes the threat as existential, and elevates political conflict into a moral-cosmological war. Consequently, crises that appear political or security-related often originate in anxieties about losing status and privilege, which national-conservative religious groups then naturalize through religious legitimation.

This pattern can be traced back to the most influential conspiracy narrative of the twentieth century, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. The Russian secret police produced this text in 1903 to provoke conflict among anti-Tsarist forces. It describes an alleged plan by a "Jewish Antichrist" to achieve world domination by plunging states into chaos so that they would voluntarily demand a Jewish world ruler. In this narrative, democracy, liberalism, freedom of the press, terror, war, epidemics, and the establishment of puppet governments serve as instruments for destroying states. After state collapse, the Jewish Antichrist allegedly assumes leadership and establishes a totalitarian *Volksgemeinschaft* that worships him in a religious manner (Sammons, 2011). Textually, the narrative is plagiaristic, yet its storyline clearly draws on the apocalyptic tradition of the Book of Revelation. Sergei Nilus appended the *Protocols* to the end of his book on Revelation in order to "prove" the imminent arrival of the Antichrist (Benz & Frey, 2007).

The absence of concrete, verifiable information rendered the *Protocols* highly elastic and adaptable to a wide range of events. Political actors used the text to rationalize defeat in the Russian Revolution of 1905 (anti-Tsarist forces), the Russian October Revolution of 1917 (pro-Tsarist forces), and the German November Revolution of 1918 (anti-liberal and autocratic forces).

The Nazis made the *Protocols* the core of their antisemitic propaganda. They constructed Hitler as the "Christ" of the German people who led a holy war against the global Jewish conspiracy—the biblical Antichrist—allegedly intent on destroying the German nation, especially through Bolshevism. The so-called "German Christians" supported this narrative without reservation. Other national-conservative Christian groups, both Protestant and Catholic, largely endorsed it because it aligned with the long-standing tradition of *Germanness* (*Deutschtum*), which elevated the German people as a new chosen nation destined to rule the world. In this worldview, the holy *Reich* represented the Kingdom of God invoked in the Lord's Prayer, and German culture was proclaimed "superior." As a result, the "old" chosen people—the Jews, stigmatized as the cursed "God-killers"—became identified with the Antichrist. Anti-Judaism had constituted an integral component of Christianity for centuries and had already contained elements of conspiratorial thinking (Heep, 2020). When the Nazis propagated the racially pure and healthy German *Volkskörper* as the fulfillment of Christianity, a large part of the German population accepted this claim (Steigmann-Gall, 2003).

This religiously inflated self-image stood in sharp contrast to historical reality. Accounts of Hitler's mediocrity, his fears, and the experiences of rejection that shaped his personality would fill an entire

volume (Fest, 1995). The "Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation" had already been destroyed by Napoleon long before. After the First World War, Germany did not dominate Europe as promised; instead, it fell under the constraints of the Treaty of Versailles, which imposed total disarmament, triggered hyperinflation, and produced mass unemployment.

Psychological Conditions

The narrators and adherents of conspiracy narratives display a set of recurring psychological conditions, most notably a narcissistic and egocentric self-concept. This pattern appears not only in autocratic figures who occupy the center of these narratives (as "chosen leaders" or personifications of the nation), but also in the orientations of libertarian communities and in imaginaries of a "chosen people" destined to rule over others. Yet this narcissism correlates with fragile self-confidence (minor self-confidence), so that crises that structural factors can explain—such as economic weakening, declining diplomatic influence, or security vulnerabilities—are displaced onto external "evil forces" (Cichocka, Marchlewska, & de Zavala, 2016). In other words, "crisis" functions primarily as the moment when an inflated self-image confronts reality; the greater the discrepancy between the two, the more intense the experienced sense of crisis becomes.

In such situations, crisis produces a characteristic affective experience: feelings of powerlessness and loss of control. This condition recurs across studies on conspiracy belief, especially when individuals or groups confront a world they perceive as complex, anonymous, interdependent, and unpredictable (Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). Comparable psychological resonance appears in various forms of religious apocalypticism, in which uncertainty and threat are read as signs of world decline and the collapse of moral order (Drewermann, 1992). Within this framework, negative experiences register more intensely, while social, medical, political, or value changes that remain only partially understood—such as divergent opinions, beliefs, and values, or the dynamics of public policy and scientific processes—become personalized as direct attacks on group identity. As a result, nostalgia emerges for a past imagined as more stable and "better," accompanied by the perception that the world is moving toward collapse.

At this point, conspiracy narratives operate as a psychological mechanism of "salvation." They redeem fear and powerlessness by rescuing the narcissistic self-concept, but they do so at the cost of distorting—or even denying—reality. Conspiracy narratives provide a devil figure embodied in a specific individual or group that attacks "innocent victims" (Wippermann, 2007). At the same time, they offer a savior figure who promises final victory. Adherents then position themselves as the "good side," the "holy remnant," surrounded by a sinful and evil world that seeks to harm or destroy the innocent. A defining feature is the complete externalization of morality: sin and error always belong to others. This pattern parallels the psychological configuration of followers of religious fundamentalism and apocalypticism across traditions—as well as the fanatical nationalisms that follow them—because it offers a self-esteem-enhancing explanation (Anton, 2011). The narrative not only explains crisis but simultaneously reaffirms the threatened superiority of the self.

The emotional dynamics follow a distinctive trajectory. At an initial stage, conspiracy narratives tend to intensify fear, but they quickly transform it into anger and hatred—emotions that lend themselves more easily to political expression because they provide concrete targets. Hatred receives a clear object, while the promise of imminent power and victory compensates for present frustration. When violence occurs, perpetrators even experience a "foretaste" of the promised power (Sutterlüty, 2002). In a logic reminiscent of the Book of Revelation, the primary aim does not involve abolishing injustice in general, but rather seizing the power attributed to the supposed oppressors. At the level of psychodynamics, this pattern constitutes depth psychological projection, particularly *disowning projection*—the displacement of disavowed aspects of the self onto external others (Hepfer, 2015). In Freudian terms, the misuse of this mechanism represents a core feature of paranoia (Freud, 1950).

Although pathological narcissists follow this trajectory more frequently (Kernberg, 2016), the underlying psychological logic does not remain exclusive to them. Under the "right" socio-emotional conditions—identity crisis, perceived loss of control, and escalating uncertainty—conspiracy narratives

become accessible to virtually anyone. Their central power lies in their capacity to elevate one's own ideology or worldview into a pillar of the divine order, thereby legitimizing any action, including the most cruel. With this legitimation, perpetrators preserve a "good conscience" and psychological balance, because they no longer perceive victims as human beings but as agents of "evil" (Kizilhan & Steger, 2021). Accordingly, the psychological conditions of conspiracy believers explain not only why such narratives persuade, but also why they function so effectively as instruments of political mobilization and the normalization of violence—a direct bridge to the discussion of cognitive style in the following sub-finding.

Cognitive Style

The conspiracy narratives analyzed in this study rest not only on specific psychological conditions but also on a distinctive cognitive style that appears across mythological and religious systems in different cultures. At the macro level, this style of thinking reduces the complexity of the world to a single, simple, and personalized cause; at the micro level, it becomes absorbed in excessive, speculative details that remain impossible to verify. Social, political, or health crises are explained through an absolute dichotomy between good and evil, with causation consistently personified in particular individuals or groups rather than understood as the outcome of complex social, political, or biological mechanisms. Assigning blame to a single actor appears emotionally easier and more convincing, even though explanations of how that actor allegedly produced the crisis become increasingly convoluted and implausible. At this point, the enemy figure acquires almost omnipotent qualities and transforms into a figure of the "devil." In this sense, conspiracy belief operates in a religious mode: it presupposes a transcendent power, offers a comprehensive explanation of the world as a "higher order," directs behavior, and fulfills a function of psychological "redemption" (Berner, 1982).

Like myths and religious revelations, conspiracy narratives begin by establishing fundamental reference points—a "basic truth" that requires no proof and, indeed, cannot be proven. The existence of a Deep State, a Western or Jewish conspiracy, the destructive will attributed to Islam, a virus framed as a biological weapon, or conversely as a completely fictitious threat, relies on only a few indications that render it "conceivable," however unlikely it may be. Because this foundational truth does not arise from demonstration but is instead "revealed," it becomes immune to refutation. The same structure applies to religious concepts of divine power, transcendent life forces such as *mana* or *tonalli*, karma, or cycles of rebirth.

Another defining cognitive feature involves high associativity. Instead of causal-logical argumentation, conspiracy narratives treat similarities, analogies, and symbolic coincidences as evidence of connection. They construct causal relations through selective contextualization that fits preexisting patterns. For example, no evidence shows that George Soros appoints judges or develops biological weapons. Yet he is a wealthy Jew who supports the values of an open society—values that *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* has long demonized. From this association, the narrative draws its "conclusion": Soros orchestrates a global Jewish conspiracy. Symbolic "proof" then follows, such as the claim that a laboratory he once funded allegedly carried the address number 666, the number of the Antichrist in the Book of Revelation. By linking this symbol to *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and the Revelation of John, the entire construction appears "plausible." This mechanism underlies the formation of mythological systems. Oldenberg describes Vedic religion as a network of fantastically arbitrary relations that interpenetrate and merge, so that once two ideas enter symbolic proximity, they become almost impossible to separate (Oldenberg, 1915). As he emphasizes, this pattern applies to all mythological worldviews.

This cognitive style also operates ahistorically. The same narrative pattern recurs repeatedly with changing objects. The viruses of the Spanish flu (1918), HIV (1980s), Zika (2015), Ebola, and COVID-19 all faced accusations of functioning as biological weapons. As Malinowski argues, myths primarily serve to conceal contradictions that arise from historical events rather than to report those events accurately (Malinowski, 1948). In myth, time appears cyclical: present events repeat primordial acts of

creation. In apocalyptic thinking, the end of time returns to the beginning and culminates in a new creation.

Within conspiracy narratives, images and emotions dominate over arguments. These stories systematically arouse curiosity through sensationalism and the unexpected, while simultaneously mobilizing fear, disgust, anger, hatred, and desires for revenge. Unlike religious myths, which may also evoke wonder or surprise, conspiracy narratives almost exclusively activate negative emotions. Religious traditions such as Christianity do not primarily teach through rational propositions; instead, they convey meaning through emotionally charged stories about human lives. Religious concepts often promise compensatory justice—karma or the Last Judgment—that satisfies psychological desires to see wrongdoing punished.

A final characteristic involves blindness and indifference to contradiction. Every conspiracy narrative contains internal inconsistencies, but the most fundamental contradiction concerns the very nature of conspiracy itself. Conspiracies depend on secrecy; once exposed, they cease to function. Yet conspiracy narratives publicize alleged conspiracies on a massive scale and explain them in detail. This contradiction persists only by assuming an omnipotent evil power—a Satanic force that continues to operate despite exposure. Sacred texts display similar contradictions, which religious institutions historically resolved by monopolizing interpretation and permitting only readings aligned with official doctrine. The procedure mirrors that of conspiracy narratives: selective construction of connections ensures continual alignment with established patterns.

Taken together, the cognitive style of conspiracy narratives represents a form of mythological-religious rationality that remains internally coherent while detached from empirical causal logic. This pattern paves the way for a deeper explanation of the neuro- and biopsychological mechanisms that sustain the persistence and appeal of such narratives, as the following sub-finding will demonstrate.

Neuro- and Biopsychological Mechanisms Underlying Conspiracy Belief

Ego consciousness constitutes a fundamental feature of human existence. Individuals experience themselves as relatively autonomous entities, separated from their environment and from others, and as subjects who feel that they "control" their own actions. Neuropsychological research, however, shows that more than 90 percent of human thoughts and actions occur automatically and are interpreted as conscious intentions only after they have already taken place (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999). At the same time, humans always experience themselves as members of groups that share identities—traditions, values, rituals, and worldviews—that provide constant feedback about who they are. From this process emerges the self-concept, a psychological construct that remains continuously present in the background of consciousness, is highly emotionally charged, and automatically directs attention toward self-relevant information.

Because it functions as a primary filter, the self-concept tends to exaggerate the role of the self and—precisely for that reason—remains persistently threatened by reality. Such threats trigger anxiety, which individuals often regulate by reinterpreting reality in ways that protect self-esteem (Boski, 1983). To a limited extent, such distortions appear universal, as everyone displays mild narcissistic tendencies. When exaggerated self-evaluation becomes maladaptive and lacks sufficient self-confidence to tolerate correction, narcissistic personality disorder can emerge, marked by diminished empathy and an overriding priority to protect self-image (Caligor, Levy, & Yeomans, 2015). Under these conditions, individuals may behave manipulatively, cruelly, and even *pychopathically*. Alfred Adler interpreted this developmental failure as a tendency to confront the world in a permanent readiness for combat, perceiving social relations as struggles for superiority (Adler, 1994), often accompanied by paranoid patterns of feeling persecuted or obstructed (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2017). Psychodynamic research frequently traces these patterns back to childhood experiences characterized by unstable caregiving relationships that violate basic needs for integrity, self-efficacy, recognition, and love. Scholars have identified similar dynamics in Adolf Hitler as an extreme conspiracy believer (Heep, 2020), which allows contemporary autocrats to be interpreted as typological replications of this pattern on different scales.

At this point, narcissistic self-concept can be understood as a psychological counterpart to the biological survival instinct—the drive to prioritize one's own interests in competition over limited resources—which conscious justification reframes as a "right" to obtain more than others. Individuals easily project this drive onto the collective level: they transfer claims of superiority to groups defined by salient characteristics, which allows individuals to accept subordinate positions as long as their group, as an extension of the self, appears exalted. Conspiracy-believing communities function as such groups and distinguish themselves through claims of possessing "secret knowledge." In archaic ethnocentrism, groups declare themselves the only "true people" entitled to the resources of others, while cultural mechanisms of separation consolidate moral distance between "us" and "them." When maladaptive self-aggrandizement combines with fragile self-confidence, narcissism reappears at the group level, producing exclusive nationalism and xenophobia. Fear of losing privileges perceived as "legitimate" turns outsiders into enemies worthy of hatred. Phylogenetically, hatred once strengthened group cohesion to confront threats and repel adversaries (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1987). In modern contexts, however, humans can freely select enemies without real threats, which makes stereotyping and marginalization especially prominent among conspiracy believers.

This narcissistic vulnerability also explains why experiences of powerlessness and loss of control provide fertile psychological ground for conspiratorial thinking. Human information-processing capacity remains extremely limited—approximately 90 bits per second—while millions of bits of sensory information reach the brain each second. Filtering therefore becomes indispensable, and the self-concept and emotional system function as the two primary filters. The emotional system operates as a subconscious evaluation mechanism that prepares the body for action (Schneider & Scherer, 1988). In situations of danger, it activates fight-or-flight responses; when threats appear insurmountable, it triggers freezing, a temporary paralysis that historically protected against predators (Azevedo et al., 2005). In modern social life, critical events can overwhelm the emotional system, producing anxiety, despair, and aggression as emergency modes to restore psychological equilibrium. Conspiracy believers show lower thresholds for such emotional flooding because narcissism has already weakened their psychological stability. In Adler's individual psychology, childhood feelings of inferiority typically motivate learning and social adaptation (Adler, 1994). Healthy development allows individuals to adjust self-image to reality; by contrast, anxiety-paralyzed individuals reject social demands and attempt to force reality to conform to their self-concept. At this point, conspiracy narratives emerge as an effective form of "therapy": they restore subjective control at the cost of distorting reality. When conflict between reality and self-image becomes extreme, this path may lead to psychosis (Jaspers, 1965). Both outcomes represent forms of "false healing," as individuals restore mental balance through denial or distortion of facts.

At the cognitive level, these mechanisms operate through complexity reduction, monocausality, and moral dichotomization. Constructing mental models of the world requires complexity reduction as an initial step in long-term information storage. The simplest method organizes reality into oppositional pairs, a pattern Lévi-Strauss identified across all mythologies. The ego functions as the primary reference point, evaluating whether phenomena benefit or threaten the self, which constitutes a basic orientational function (Spitzer, 2015). The good–bad dichotomy serves as an automatic cognitive heuristic that enables rapid prediction. Humans also exhibit heightened sensitivity to negative stimuli because of their survival relevance, while nostalgia restores self-integrity when the present appears overly threatening (Sedikides, Wildschut, Routledge, & Arndt, 2015). Under conditions of relational mistrust, individuals reduce the world to an absolute moral struggle. Archaic ethnocentrism exploits this mechanism by defining one's own group as the sole bearer of "truth" and others as incarnations of evil (Fiske, 2000). This pattern even appears in arbitrarily formed groups (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). Monocausality, in turn, arises from limitations of working memory, as individuals compress complex causal networks into single cause–effect relations. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, resulted from interactions among viral mutations, sanitation conditions, institutional failures, global mobility, and individual immunological factors, yet the "biological weapon" narrative offers a far simpler and emotionally satisfying explanation.

This simplification intensifies through humans' preference for personal causes. As hypersocial beings, humans prioritize personal over physical causation (Rochat, Morgan, & Carpenter, 1997). Innate mechanisms detect faces, movement, and intention. When intentions remain ambiguous, individuals prefer to assume them rather than tolerate uncertainty; people more readily attribute personal misfortune to others' malevolence than to chance (Boyer, 2017). This strategy evolved adaptively: assuming an unseen hunter proved safer than ignoring a real threat (Barrett, 2000). As a result, myths and conspiracy narratives almost always present human or quasi-human agents as causes; they personify crises as the work of Satan incarnated in specific individuals or groups.

At the same time, this process is guided by mechanisms of reference-point setting that function like anchoring and abduction. Environmental information often appears ambiguous. To conserve energy, the brain proposes the most plausible hypothesis given the context (Uran et al., 2022). The anchoring heuristic selects an initial hypothesis as a reference point; when no hypothesis appears "obvious," randomly available information can serve as an anchor so that reasoning can proceed at all (Mussweiler & Strack, 2000). This dynamic opens space for erroneous connections that rarely face scrutiny as long as they appear plausible within a given context (Nocun & Lamberty, 2020). The process operates abductively: from a surprising fact, the mind searches for a hypothetical mechanism that renders it understandable. Religious revelation and conspiratorial "truth" follow this logic—just as certain scientific hypotheses do, such as "dark matter," although the latter remain subject to further empirical testing.

These anchoring mechanisms then gain durability through an associative, pattern-based memory architecture. Association formation constitutes the foundation of learning, as stimuli connect through temporal proximity or reinforcement (Wagner & Morris, 1987). Language further expands associations through polysemy. Individuals retain information not solely because it is true, but because it proves individually or socially useful; repetition synchronizes neuronal patterns and increases memory resilience (Solms & Turnbull, 2004). The more associative pathways a memory has, the easier it becomes to retrieve; and the denser the associative network, the more robust the memory remains when some pathways fail. The brain even actively constructs coherent worlds from fragmented sensory input. From this process emerges a worldview: culturally and experientially mediated associative patterns acquire implicit validity and subsequently organize perception—we see and hear what we expect. When beliefs shape action and identity, individuals invest heavily in them, and reinforcement by like-minded communities encourages persistence even when beliefs prove objectively false, because they "feel right" (Kaplan, Gimbel, & Harris, 2016).

This framework gains additional stability because it relies on autobiographical memory dominated by images and emotions. Reflective consciousness requires autobiographical memory, yet its structure and function differ from semantic memory: it stores life episodes primarily as images, emotions, and feelings. Emotions thus become a second mode of acquiring information alongside cognition and often provide more reliable guidance for rapid decisions in opaque situations (Frijda, Manstead, & Bem, 2000). Episodes accompanied by strong emotions remain more vividly remembered, while autobiographical memory continuously "patches," embellishes, and adjusts the past to fit present experience, to the point that individuals deny having said, done, or believed something once their positions change (Wolfe & Williams, 2018). In this way, every person constructs an egocentric, ahistorical "life myth" dominated by image and emotion and relatively immune to contradiction, which closely parallels the logic of myth and sacred narratives that claim to speak about the essence of humanity.

Ultimately, these mechanisms point to the coexistence of two modes of thinking: the primary process and the secondary process. The cognitive style that underpins myth and conspiracy aligns with what Freud described as the primary process—an ontogenetically and phylogenetically early mode of thinking that remains egocentric and non-reflective, operating according to basic rules of seeking pleasure and avoiding displeasure (Freud, 1927). In early development, the emotional system executes these rules; later, mental models of the world constructed by the cognitive apparatus intervene. These models do not mirror reality but adapt to physical and psychological needs, displaying autonomy in

phenomena such as hallucinations, delusions, dreams, and fantasies (Santhouse, 2000). Under such conditions, frontal lobe activity—the center of conscious cognitive control—becomes inhibited, allowing emotions, images, and associations to operate without reality checks (Akhtar, 2022). The inner world can then feel as "real" as the external world, becoming an "other world" that compensates when real-world need fulfillment is delayed; in children, this manifests as "magical consciousness," where what ought to be true becomes true.

Humans, however, cannot survive if they remain entirely within their inner worlds. Development toward the secondary process—closely linked to reflective consciousness—therefore becomes a prerequisite for social life. In this mode, individuals postpone need fulfillment in order to test different possibilities within reality; they must abandon narcissistic perspectives by adopting others' viewpoints and negotiating shared frames of reference. This mechanism enables individuals to reassess spontaneous emotional reactions and exercise more deliberate emotional control, which frees thinking from its original task of calming internal emotional states. Thinking then opens itself to logic as the mental counterpart of natural causality. Its outcomes become verifiable, plausible, and consistent with established knowledge; its goal becomes knowledge rather than mere restoration of affective balance.

Both modes of thinking coexist and intermingle within adult humans. Their relationship depends on states of consciousness, degrees of self-reflection, and capacities for emotional regulation; high emotional stress dramatically reduces logical-analytical thinking. In religious and conspiratorial belief, elements of the primary process remain dominant—sometimes labeled holistic thinking—while analytical reasoning primarily serves to weave coherence into the larger picture: details that do not fit are ignored, and missing elements can be "created" (Nocun & Lamberty, 2020). By contrast, analytical thinking demands habit and substantial energy; it proceeds through proposing and rejecting hypotheses as long as contradictions with observation persist, much like perceptual systems operate through predictions that must "work" under principles of causality. Hypotheses that survive become theories, yet theories remain provisional and yield to better explanations when they emerge. Logical thinking therefore rarely governs everyday life: it is energetically costly, vulnerable to logical error, and easily blocked by strong emotions.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study show that contemporary conspiracy narratives—whether circulating within autocratic political projects or within national-religious milieus—display a consistent structure that researchers can explain at multiple levels. At the narrative level, these stories repeatedly deploy the same schema: they frame a community as a "holy/chosen people" under threat from a satanic enemy, and they project "crisis" as a holy war or existential struggle to defend identity and freedom. At the psychological level, these narratives gain traction because they resonate with a narcissistic yet fragile self-concept that feels easily threatened and seeks to restore self-esteem through reality distortion (Cichocka et al., 2016; Douglas et al., 2017). At the level of cognitive style, conspiracy thinking reduces complexity into monocausality, moral good–evil dichotomies, anchoring in a "basic truth" that resists falsification, and high associativity that builds networks of analogies and symbols that make "impossible" details feel plausible. At the neuro- and biopsychological level, these layers express evolutionary mechanisms: primary thinking prioritizes emotion regulation, identity coherence, and group cohesion, and it operates alongside—often above—formal-logical reasoning, which evolution developed later and which requires deliberate training (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999).

Why do these findings take this form? The explanation lies in the functional relationship among human existential needs, cognitive architecture, and the politics of identity. First, needs for safety, control, meaning, and certainty do not operate primarily as logical needs; they function as affective needs that remain emotionally "hot." People therefore tend to address them through modes of thought that calm emotions and provide rapid orientation rather than through modes that test claims through verifiable procedures. When social reality appears complex, anonymous, interdependent, and hard to predict—during rapid social change, value pluralization, health crises, or geopolitical uncertainty—individuals with a vulnerable self-concept experience the "gap" between their self-image (or group

image) and reality as an identity threat. This gap generates helplessness and loss of control, which empirical research links to stronger tendencies to search for hidden causal patterns (Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). Conspiracy narratives then function as a "rescue device": they convert anxiety into anger that actors can articulate more easily; they provide concrete targets for hatred; and they promise revenge and restored dominance in the future. Because this mechanism restores self-esteem, people tend to maintain it even when evidence contradicts it—not because the arguments persuade, but because the affective function works (Anton, 2011).

Second, conspiracy narratives exploit how the brain processes information under capacity constraints. Limited working memory makes complexity reduction a basic strategy: people simplify the world into binary oppositions (good–evil; us–them) and into emotionally binding monocausal explanations that feel concise and coherent. Humans also prefer personal causation because we are hypersocial and constantly infer intentions; this preference drives people to personify crises as evil individuals or groups, and those figures then acquire near-omnipotent qualities as "devils" in mythic language. Third, conspiracy narratives succeed not only at the individual level but also through their collective function: they create cohesion, moral boundaries, and coordinated mobilization. In this logic, "success" does not mean correspondence with reality; it means a narrative's capacity to produce belief, compliance, and solidarity. This point links directly to the narrative findings: the "holy people versus satanic enemy" pattern operates as the most efficient meaning-technology for consolidating identity and normalizing hard measures in the name of self-defense.

Comparative analysis shows that these findings confirm—and also reorient—three major streams of conspiracy scholarship. First, in line with approaches in religious and cultural studies, this study affirms that conspiracy theory operates as a "modern myth" that revives the cosmic structure of a struggle between good and evil and displays structural equivalence with religious narratives (Blumenberg, 1979; Groh, 1987; Heep, 2022; Knight, 2003). Tracing its historical roots to apocalyptic traditions and demonology—including the imprint of Revelation and the transmission pathway through the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*—strengthens the claim that conspiracism does not merely reflect "information error," but rather constitutes a symbolic cultural form that repeats older patterns through new media (Barkun, 2013; Butter, 2018; Hagemeister, 2020; Hofstadter, 1990; Wippermann, 2007). Second, unlike psychopathological tendencies that interpret conspiracy belief as a variant of paranoia and treat pathological narcissism as a prerequisite, this study refines that position: pathological narcissism can increase probability, but it does not function as a necessary condition. The "ordinary narcissism" that almost everyone carries—when combined with identity threat—already enables reality distortion as an effective emotion-regulation strategy; for that reason, overly pathologizing readings risk flattening a broader social phenomenon (Butter, 2018; Douglas et al., 2017, 2019; Hepfer, 2015; Strozier, 2011). Third, these findings resonate with socio-psychological approaches that emphasize mistrust, fear of losing control, and socioeconomic instability as triggers, but they add a new emphasis: structural factors (such as socioeconomic instability) function more accurately as sparks that activate preexisting psychological predispositions and cognitive styles rather than as deterministic primary causes (Anton et al., 2014; Goertzel, 1994; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). The study's main novelty lies in locking together three levels—narrative, psychological, and cognitive—through a neuro- and biopsychological layer and evolutionary epistemology, so that it explains in an integrated way why these narratives work, rather than offering partial accounts.

A historical interpretation of these findings shows that modern conspiracism does not emerge from a vacuum; it travels along pathways of symbolic transmission. Apocalyptic traditions provide moral vocabulary (Antichrist, end-time war), while the *Protocols* provide an elastic narrative architecture—generic enough to attach to diverse events, but sharp enough to produce enemies and legitimate violence (Benz & Frey, 2007; Hagemeister, 2020; Hofstadter, 1990). Socially, conspiracy narratives operate as devices for producing cohesion and moral boundaries: they bind individuals into communities of belief, provide a sense of belonging, and create an "affective order" that facilitates mobilization. Yet this mechanism imposes substantial social costs: when people treat "truth" as an identity need rather than as factual correspondence, consensus about reality weakens. At that point,

public communication becomes a competition among myths, and broader social cohesion fractures. Ideologically, conspiracy narratives function as engines of legitimation: they transform political conflict into a cosmic mandate. By moving social problems that remain troubling but solvable (value change, identity tensions, resource competition) into an arena of absolute struggle, conspiracism closes space for democratic negotiation and accelerates polarization. Here, scholarship must criticize the claim that all modes of knowledge are epistemically equivalent: primary thinking evolved to regulate emotion and cohesion, while formal-logical reasoning gains epistemic validity through predictive success and the functioning of technoculture. Erasing this distinction enables an "epistemic relativism" that benefits the production of political falsehood.

Reflection on function and dysfunction underscores the ambivalence of these findings. Conspiracy narratives function at the individual level by offering psychological safety, orientation, and restored self-esteem when the world feels uncontrollable; at the group level, they strengthen cohesion, moral discipline, and collective mobilization. However, their central dysfunction carries greater weight: reality distortion or denial amplifies hatred, normalizes dehumanization, and encourages the justification of violence against personified "enemies." Another dysfunction, no less serious, involves the collapse of shared reality. When people no longer treat facts as common reference points, democratic deliberation loses its minimal preconditions; trust in institutions declines; and the public sphere becomes easy to manipulate by political actors who offer identity "redemption" through imaginary enemies. In other words, mechanisms that calm individual emotions can undermine a society's social-cognitive infrastructure.

For that reason, an action agenda must target these dysfunctions by restoring society's capacity to distinguish identity claims from factual claims and by strengthening cognitive and institutional resilience without stigmatizing communities. First, literacy interventions must move beyond "fact-checking" and instead cultivate epistemic literacy: training in causal, multi-factor reasoning; understanding cognitive biases (monocausality, anchoring, spurious association); and practicing the ability to delay emotional certainty in order to test claims against reality. In practical terms, institutions should embed probabilistic reasoning and evidence evaluation in school curricula and in public training programs. Second, because the findings highlight emotions and perceived control, public policy must reduce the "affective terrain" on which conspiracism thrives by improving institutional transparency, strengthening accountability in crisis communication, and building participatory mechanisms that give citizens real experiences of agency and control. Third, because conspiracism operates as a cohesion technology, deradicalization strategies must provide substitutes for cohesion: community spaces that offer belonging and meaning without satanic enemies, including interfaith work that rejects political apocalypticism while remaining sensitive to spiritual needs. Fourth, at the level of platforms and communication systems, policy must reduce incentives for distributing dehumanizing narratives—not by criminalizing belief, but by constraining content that moves toward violence and by introducing friction into the circulation of spectacular claims (for example, contextual warnings, source labeling, and reduced visibility for repeated content that manufactures imaginary enemies). Through this package of measures, the core goal does not involve eliminating the human need for meaning, but rather preventing society from repeatedly "paying" for that need with the collapse of shared reality and the escalation of symbolic and physical violence.

5. Conclusion

This study affirms a central lesson: contemporary conspiracy theories persist not primarily because of the "strength of their arguments," but because of their effectiveness as instruments for identity restoration and emotion regulation when the self-concept—at both individual and collective levels—experiences threat. An analysis of ten state-driven conspiracy narratives, reinforced by national-religious actors, reveals a consistent pattern: a "holy people/chosen nation" is positioned in an existential crisis and then mobilized against an enemy personified as a satanic force. This pattern works because it reduces complexity into monocausality and a good–evil dichotomy, while simultaneously transforming helplessness into actionable anger. As a result, a "crisis" that appears to be an objective

threat often reflects a crisis of status and privilege that actors reinterpret as a cosmic struggle, with conspiracy narratives functioning as meaning-technologies that normalize dehumanization and—under certain conditions—violence.

The scientific contribution of this study lies in strengthening a cross-level explanation that connects narrative structures, psychological conditions, cognitive styles, and neuro- and biopsychological mechanisms within a single coherent interpretive framework. First, the study affirms the structural equivalence among conspiracy, myth, and apocalyptic traditions, while showing more precisely how this equivalence operates through the setting of reference points, high associativity, and falsification resistance that resembles the logic of "revelation." Second, the study mediates the "paranoia versus non-paranoia" debate by demonstrating that reality distortion constitutes the most socially and politically relevant aspect—without pathologizing all adherents as clinical cases; pathological narcissism increases probability, but "ordinary" narcissism activated by identity threat already suffices to trigger these mechanisms. Third, by incorporating memory architecture, cognitive heuristics, and the evolutionary functions of primary thinking, the study offers a more differentiated tool for evaluating arguments: it explains why conspiracy narratives feel "convincing" as an alignment with how the brain conserves energy, manages uncertainty, and builds group cohesion, rather than as reflections of factual truth.

The study's limitations primarily concern data scope and design. The research draws on internet-based narratives selected through keywords and verified secondary sources; therefore, the findings do not aim to provide a comprehensive map of the global conspiracy ecosystem, but rather an in-depth analysis of structures and mechanisms observable in representative cases. In addition, the study does not conduct direct empirical measurements of psychological variables—such as surveys, experiments, or interviews with adherents—so its conclusions about psychological conditions and neurobiological mechanisms remain inferential and theory-driven, grounded in the literature. Future research can strengthen these claims through mixed-method designs: (1) network and algorithmic analyses to map diffusion and platform amplification, (2) experimental and survey studies to test the relationships among identity threat, loss of control, and conspiracy acceptance, and (3) digital ethnography to examine meaning-making processes and community cohesion. These steps would expand external validity while deepening the explanatory power of the mechanisms proposed in this study.

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