



“We don’t need no thought control”: dealing with faculty members spreading conspiracy theories

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Abstract

Recent studies reveal that a significant proportion of the population in various countries endorses at least some form of conspiracy theory (CT). Notably, there have been instances of faculty members spreading CTs, despite their pedagogical obligations to foster academic and scientific thinking. While the existing literature has predominantly focused on student populations, an examination of less-studied cohorts such as faculty members seems necessary. This theoretical article delves into the prevalence, underlying factors, and ramifications of CTs within the context of higher education. The present analytic article distinguishes CTs from scientific theories, elucidates the detrimental consequences for individuals and the broader society engendered by the uncritical propagation of CTs, and scrutinizes the responsibilities of students and faculty in mitigating the dissemination of misinformation. Moreover, the article posits potential solutions from both student and faculty standpoints to counteract the proliferation of CTs in higher education.

Keywords Conspiracy theories · Higher education · Faculty members · Critical thinking · Conceptual article · Heuristic model

Introduction: conspiracy theories in the classroom

Conspiracy theories (CTs) have pervaded contemporary discourses, and although they have been present throughout history, digital communication platforms allow CTs to spread more rapidly and reach a global audience, amplifying their impact (Butter, 2020; Uscinsky et al., 2022). CTs can be considered a dangerous type of epistemically unwarranted

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beliefs: They are explanatory frameworks attributing events or practices to clandestine machinations of malevolent and influential individuals or groups that lack scientific evidence and often are self-sealing against criticism (Uscinski et al., 2022). A notable example of a COVID-19 related CT is the claim that 5G technology is linked to the spread of the virus. This is one of many instances where misinformation, fake news, and pseudoscientific assertions have proliferated during the pandemic, especially on social media platforms, as highlighted in studies by Cinelli et al. (2022), Douglas et al. (2019), Shahsavari et al. (2020), and Theocharis et al. (2021).

CTs are often widespread. Recent representative studies indicate that, for instance, approximately 60% of Americans still hold the belief that President John F. Kennedy was assassinated by the CIA (Douglas, 2021; Jochen, 2020). Empirical findings suggest that individuals with lower levels of education and analytical aptitude are particularly susceptible to CTs (e.g., Swami et al., 2011; van Prooijen, 2017). Consequently, formal (higher) education holds an important role in detecting and mitigating the dissemination of CTs. Existing literature and resources address how educators can manage students espousing CTs (e.g., Dyrendal & Jolley, 2020; Hayward & Gronland, 2021; RAN Centre of Excellence, 2017). However, such information is only partially helpful if faculty members in higher education fall for CTs themselves, spread them, or do not see the relevance of addressing them critically in class (see exemplary cases listed in the “Prevalence, causes, and linkages of conspiracy theories outside and within higher education” section).

In fact, as we will outline in this conceptual article, we continue to lack theoretical reflection and empirical evidence on (1) the extent to which educators introduce students to CTs, (2) the potential consequences, and (3) appropriate student, faculty, and administration responses. Faculty members are primarily responsible for acquainting students with competences in critical thinking and scientific research, different types of theories, and supporting evidence. Nonetheless, some educators at schools (e.g., Schwarz, 2020; Unterberg, 2020) and universities (Carini, 2021; Klug & Steinwehr, 2021) attract disreputable media coverage by (at times supposedly) promulgating CTs in classrooms or on social media platforms. The goal of this conceptual article is to develop a multi-level heuristic model (Fig. 1; “Discussion and concluding remarks” section) that synthesizes insights

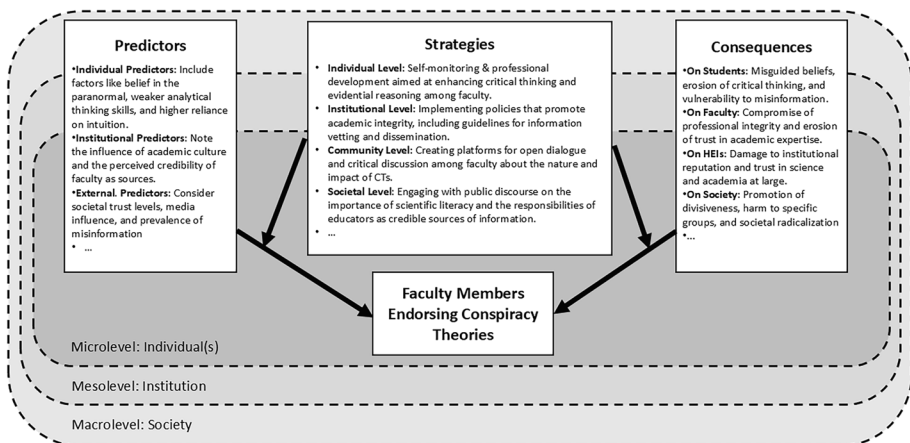


Fig. 1 Heuristic model of faculty members endorsing conspiracy theories: predictors, consequences, strategies, and implications (based on the design considerations for conceptual articles by Jaakola (2020), Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (1992), etc.)

regarding causes and linkages, consequences, and strategies related to faculty members spreading conspiracy theories (from the “Prevalence, causes, and linkages of conspiracy theories outside and within higher education” section until “[Tentative individual and structural strategies for preventing conspiracy theories in the classroom](#)” section). To this end, it is necessary to first examine the nature of CTs and conspiratorial thinking, and to clarify how these differ from scientific theories and scientific thinking.

Conspiracy theories and conspiratorial thinking vs. scientific theories and scientific thinking

Although CTs are abound (e.g., Butter, 2020; Uscinski et al., 2022), they have been defined differently, leading Dyrendal and Jolley to describe CTs as a “slippery concept” (Dyrendal & Jolley, 2020, p. 2; see also Butter, 2020). A CT pertains to an (abstract) understanding of a conspiracy, such as a clandestine agreement between two or more individuals (Butter & Knight, 2020). CTs generally lack the attributes of scientific theories—systematized hypotheses aiming to describe or explain phenomena derived from scientific research (Butter, 2020; Siegel & Daumiller, 2021). Table 1 delineates the fundamental (not completely dichotomous) distinctions between scientific theories and conspiracy theories, highlighting the systematic, evidence-informed approach of the former versus the inconsistent, often unfalsifiable nature of the latter. We are aware that not every non-scientific theory (e.g., subjective theories) equals a conspiracy theory. We deem the distinction between scientific and conspiracy theories, respectively, scientific and conspiratorial thinking, helpful, as it allows us to point out fundamental differences in these different types of knowledge.

The distinction between scientific theories and CTs underscores the reality that while actual conspiracies have occurred and are historically verifiable, not all speculative narratives about covert operations qualify as CTs in the pejorative sense (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Butter, 2020; Butter, 2021). CTs have varying degrees of severity and impact. For instance, believing that the Illuminati govern pop music is less detrimental than denying anthropogenic climate change, which can result in insensitivity to carbon dioxide emissions and a failure to promote sustainability in (higher) education. Recognizing the potential harm and societal impact of such narratives, some scholars propose alternative terms like conspiracy myths, narratives, or ideologies to describe these phenomena (Douglas et al., 2019; Schwaiger et al., 2022). Despite these critiques, the term CT remains the most widely employed descriptor for its concise encapsulation of the pattern of thought that often diverges from sound evidence (e.g., theorizing, empirical data) and rational discourse.

In detailing the characteristics of CTs, it is crucial to clarify that not every individual who endorses a CT aligns with the archetypal conspiracy theorist. Rather, their engagement with specific CTs can be viewed through the prism of the attributes outlined by van der Linden (2023) with the *CONSPIRE* acronym: contradictory, overriding suspicion, nefarious intent, something must be wrong, persecuted victim, immunity to evidence, and reinterpreting randomness. Such patterns of thought often lead to dichotomous views of society, categorizing individuals or entities into simplistic binaries of good vs. evil or oppressors vs. the oppressed, frequently ignoring inconsistencies and dismissing credible evidence (Butter, 2020; Douglas & Sutton, 2023; Dyrendal & Jolley, 2020). This framework highlights what typifies conspiratorial thinking, distinguishing it from (healthy) skepticism or critical inquiry:

Table 1 Contrasting scientific theories and conspiracy theories

Aspect	Scientific theories	Conspiracy theories
Definition	Systematized hypotheses aiming to describe or explain phenomena derived from scientific research	Pertains to an (abstract) understanding of a conspiracy, such as a clandestine agreement between two or more individuals
Attributes	Meet numerous formal and abstract criteria depending on one's epistemic stance and understanding of science: Precision in terminology, logical internal consistency, explicitness, empirical testability, potential falsifiability, parsimony, systemic character, explanatory content, prognostic relevance, and stimulus content (e.g., Popper, 1934; White & McBurney, 2012)	Typically fail to meet the formal and abstract criteria of scientific theories that lack the attributes of scientific theories (Butter, 2020; Lewandowsky et al., 2020); CONSPIRE traits: contradictory, overriding suspicion, nefarious intent, something must be wrong, persecuted victim, immunity to evidence, and re-interpreting randomness (van der Linden, 2023)
Knowledge generation	Considered superior in academic contexts due to its systematic generation (Vogel, 2019)	Often stem from subjective interpretations of selective perceptions
Approach to evidence	Open to scrutiny, falsification, and revision. Driven by a motivation to challenge one's assumption	Often exhibits immunity to evidence, relying on circular reasoning and disregarding scientific evidence. Driven by a motivation to confirm one's assumptions and find confirming evidence (van der Linden, 2023)
View on events and evidence	Events and evidence are interpreted based on theorizing, logical reasoning and/or empirical data	Events and evidence are often seen as interconnected in a nefarious manner; nothing occurs by chance; nothing is as it appears (van der Linden, 2023)

[A]t the heart of science is an essential balance between two seemingly contradictory attitudes—an openness to new ideas, no matter how bizarre or counterintuitive, and the most ruthlessly sceptical scrutiny of all ideas, old and new. (Sagan, 1997, 287)

This quote by Sagan (1997) points to the fact that unconventional or unorthodox theories are crucial for the advancement of knowledge as they push the boundaries of current understanding. While they challenge mainstream or accepted knowledge, they (should), however, remain firmly grounded in rigorous academic research and methodology (e.g., being open to scrutiny; Sagan, 1997). The delineation between genuine conspiracies and CTs reflects, therefore, the broader epistemological and philosophical challenge of differentiating science from non-science, akin to the demarcation problem (Bunge, 1982; Fasse, 2017).

The relevance of understanding different types of theories, i.e., the various forms of scientific and non-scientific knowledge and their characteristics, and addressing CTs extends into various domains, including higher education (e.g., Dyrendal & Jolley, 2020), where the spread of unfounded theories can undermine critical thinking, scholarly discourse, and the pursuit of scientific knowledge. The consequences of CTs on both societal cohesion and individual well-being (see “[Potential consequences of faculty members disseminating conspiracy theories](#)” section) underscore the importance of engaging with this topic critically, emphasizing the need for educational interventions that promote evidence-based reasoning and the critical evaluation of sources (e.g., Butter, 2020; Douglas & Sutton, 2023).

Prevalence, causes and linkages of conspiracy theories outside and within higher education

Representative studies indicate that CTs are widely believed across different countries: Over 50% of Americans and about 30% of Germans believe in at least one CT (Oliver & Wood, 2014; Jochen, 2020).

While the presence of CTs in the public is well-documented, it does not automatically imply their prevalence within specific populations, such as faculty members and research. Resources, such as handbooks and guidelines, regarding faculty members who believe and spread CTs remain scarce (e.g., Ballová Mikušková, 2018; Gkinopoulos et al., 2021; Uscinski, 2019). Despite well-documented cases of faculty spreading CTs, to the best of our knowledge, no systematic and representative research about the prevalence of faculty members spreading CTs exists. Unsystematic searches in handbooks of CTs (e.g., Butter, 2020), search engines (e.g., Google (Scholar)), and media outlets (e.g., BBC) published within the last 15 years revealed numerous instances suggesting the supposedly prevalent dissemination of CTs, leading to the conclusion that this likely represents a significant issue in higher education as well:

Daniele Ganser, a senior history researcher, has disseminated CTs concerning the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Butter, 2020).

Tjeerd Andringa, a cognitive science lecturer at University College Groningen accused of promoting diverse CTs (e.g., concerning vaccination or 9/11) in his courses and discouraging dissenting views, as confirmed by an investigative committee (Fabrizi, 2023). Tim Hayward, a University of Edinburgh professor accused of propagating CTs about the Syrian conflict and sharing distressing misinformation on social media (Hadjimatheou et al., 2022).

Tom DeDonno, a Saddleback College professor, implied to be including controversial content in his teachings, though the details are incomplete in the provided text (Lucas, 2022).

Michael Meyen, a communication science professor at Ludwig-Maximilians University in Munich scrutinized for his ties to a newspaper known for promoting CTs and extremism (Demmelhuber, 2023).

Sucharit Bhakdi, a retired medical professor who, despite controversial statements on vaccination and remarks on Israel and Jews, was acquitted of incitement charges by a German court, with his statements deemed to fall under freedom of expression (Staib, 2023; see Supplement 1 for a contextualization of these exemplary cases).

The phenomenon of faculty members potentially endorsing and spreading CTs, whether consciously or unconsciously, represents a significant research gap. The scarcity of studies on the prevalence of CTs among faculty members may be due to the attributed to the subject's complexity (see "[Conspiracy theories and conspiratorial thinking vs. scientific theories and scientific thinking](#)" section), sensitivity, social desirability, and stigma, coupled with methodological challenges and concerns over academic freedom. The stated examples underscore the need for further research and thorough analyses on the prevalence of faculty members potentially spreading CTs.

People turn to CTs as they offer simple explanations for complex societal issues, addressing feelings of alienation and lack of control, despite being misleading (Douglas & Sutton, 2023; Goreis & Voracek, 2019). The persistence of CTs is reinforced by cognitive biases such as confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998), which leads people to favor information that aligns with their beliefs, and the deep emotional and psychological needs that CTs satisfy, making individuals resistant to opposing evidence.

Research highlights a complex relationship between personal characteristics and the susceptibility to CTs, suggesting that factors such as belief in the paranormal, need for cognitive closure, low analytical thinking skills, and reliance on intuition tend to be associated with increased CT endorsement, while a study showed that eliciting analytical thinking reduces conspiracist ideation (e.g., dos Reis et al., 2024; Swami et al., 2014; Wood & Douglas, 2018). Two studies reported an association between individuals who embrace CT beliefs and traits such as lower general intelligence, self-esteem, and reduced social agreeableness (Swami et al., 2011). Previous research further indicates that individuals who believe in one CT are more prone to accept other CTs as well (Imhoff et al., 2022; Swami et al., 2011).

Faculty members, who have typically undergone rigorous academic socialization, need to exhibit advanced levels of formal education, analytical thinking skills, and scientific literacy. Therefore, their potential susceptibility to and involvement in the promotion of CTs is paradoxical and particularly alarming, considering their pivotal role in fostering an environment where students learn to differentiate between different types of knowledge and different forms of reasoning (Douglas et al., 2016; Oleksiyenko & Jackson, 2020). Such beliefs can influence attitudes toward individuals, institutions, and policies, with potentially far-reaching effects on behavior and democratic values (Douglas & Sutton, 2018; Sutton & Douglas, 2020; Yendell & Herbert, 2022). This concern is heightened by the fact that CTs can be socially divisive and harmful, as their proponents are more likely to hold racist, extremist, and anti-democratic views.

However, it is crucial to understand that CT susceptibility is not confined to individuals with specific traits; virtually anyone can be drawn to CTs under certain conditions such as feeling alienated and socially isolated (Goreis & Voracek, 2019). Empirical findings suggest that educational interventions and evidence-orientation can reduce CT susceptibility. This is

particularly pertinent in academic settings; if CTs find resonance among faculty members, who are typically seen as highly educated and analytical, it signals a broader societal vulnerability to such beliefs. Furthermore, the perceived credibility of information sources plays a pivotal role in the acceptance of CTs. When CTs are propagated by faculty members, who are often viewed as authoritative and trustworthy sources, students may be especially prone to accept these theories. This dynamic emphasizes the importance of addressing CTs within educational institutions and highlights the need for faculty to model critical engagement with information, underscoring the significance of source evaluation in combating the spread of CTs (Dyrendal & Jolley, 2020).

Potential consequences of faculty members disseminating conspiracy theories

Faculty members can incorporate CTs into their teaching to deconstruct them, elucidate the attributes of scientific theories, and identify and debunk misconceptions and myths (Peters & Johannesen, 2020). However, the uncritical dissemination of CTs by faculty members can yield adverse consequences, particularly when content is presented unreflectively or instrumentally, exploiting their authoritative position to impose their worldview on students (COMPACT Education Group, 2020).

We have systematically organized the potential harms of faculty members propagating (CTs) around the primary stakeholders affected. This organization reflects the impacts most frequently discussed in the available literature, while also recognizing the current research gaps regarding faculty members in this area (Table 2).

Impact on students: loss of time and attention for engaging with scientific theories/ in scientific thinking

Teaching CTs can hinder students' education by displacing time dedicated for scholarly sound content. When instructors disseminate CTs, they redirect time and attention from the actual subject matter to false information or misinterpretations of facts (e.g., about climate change). This is particularly concerning in large higher education institutions, where instructors may inadvertently act as super-spreaders of disinformation to vast numbers of students. As epistemic authorities, faculty members bear a responsibility to provide accurate and reliable information (Slavin, 2002); promoting CTs contributes to the spreading of misinformation. This is particularly problematic given faculty members' authority, as students may uncritically accept information from their instructors, leading to the amplification of misinformation. Additionally, even if not explicitly stated, instructors' values and beliefs may implicitly permeate their teaching (Fives & Buehl, 2012), further skewing the information and inducing students to draw inaccurate conclusions and accordingly weakening their mental immunity — that is, their cognitive resistance to misinformation and questionable beliefs (Norman et al., 2024).

Impact on students: hindrance to development of critical thinking and mental immunity

Moreover, the objective of higher education—teaching students critical thinking skills (e.g., Fisher, 2011; Robinson, 2011), scientific literacy, and evidence-informed

Table 2 Overview of potential consequences of faculty members spreading CTs in higher education based on selected articles in the literature (e.g., Douglas & Sutton, 2023)

Most affected stakeholders	Potential impact of faculty members spreading CTs
Students	Loss of time and attention for learning about different types of knowledge and thinking (e.g., scientific theories/scientific thinking) and corresponding characteristics and quality criteria (e.g., logical internal consistency) (Slavin, 2002) due to engagement with conspiracy theories instead of scientific theories or thinking Hindrance to the development of critical thinking, scientific literacy, and evidence-informed reasoning development (Butter, 2020) and weakening mental immunity (Norman et al., 2024)
Professional and academic community	Violation of professional standards of teaching (e.g., treating controversial subjects as controversial, prohibition indoctrinating students; Norris, 2023; Slavin, 2002) Undermining credibility of researchers and scientific research (Siegel & Daumiller, 2020)
Higher education institutions (HEIs)	Damage to Higher Education Institution (HEI) reputation (Dyrendal & Jolley, 2020; Lobato et al., 2014)
Society at large	Promotion of divisiveness, harm to specific groups, and societal radicalization (dos Reis et al., 2024; Douglas & Sutton, 2023; Imhoff & Lamberty, 2017; Rees & Lamberty, 2019) Harmful societal behavior due to belief in CTs (Douglas & Sutton, 2023)

reasoning—is obstructed by lecturers propagating CTs. These skills, however, are essential for rational discourse and evidence-based decision-making. Uncritically exposing students to CTs can weaken their mental immunity and, accordingly, their cognitive defenses that safeguard against misinformation (Norman et al., 2024), hinder their ability to engage in academic work, recognize the value of scientific theories over for instance everyday theories, CTs, (targeted) disinformation, and fake news (Brown et al., 2010; Golowko, 2021). For instance, a lecturer might frame climate change denial as a valid scientific debate, despite overwhelming evidence supporting the consensus on human-driven climate change. Students may struggle to distinguish between credible and non-credible knowledge sources, particularly when the information comes from trusted educators (e.g., Marttunen et al., 2021). The tension between preservation and emancipatory pedagogies lies in fostering intellectual independence—not dictating what students think, but how they think, within a critical and open discussion culture (Shephard, 2020). Universities face the challenge of nurturing an inclusive academic environment that balances open dialogue, academic integrity, and critical thinking, especially in an era marked by polarization and accusations of cancel culture (Norris, 2023).

Impact on the professional academic community: violation of professional standards

The unreflective propagation of CTs by faculty members within their courses may be considered a form of misconduct, comparable with plagiarism or falsification of research data

(Siegel & Daumiller, 2020). Adherence to professional standards for faculty members necessitates meeting criteria such as the requirement of controversy, discursive positioning, and evidence-based teaching (Slavin, 2002). Uncritical presentation of CTs fails to meet these criteria. Although these standards do not preclude instructors from expressing political opinions, they should strive to represent a plurality of perspectives (Carr, 1991).

Impact on the professional academic community: erosion of credibility

Faculty members embody a dual responsibility: they disseminate knowledge and are instrumental in nurturing scientific and critical thinking among students. By virtue of their roles, faculty members are not just educators but also representatives of the scientific community, particularly aligned with the Humboldtian ideal of integrating teaching and research. When CTs are presented in classrooms without critical analysis or reflective discussion, it compromises not only scholarly integrity but also the public's trust in science. This situation is exacerbated when students, encountering CTs presented without skepticism, begin to doubt the validity of scientific knowledge itself. Such an erosion of confidence in science is especially concerning given the faculty's role as standard-bearers of scientific inquiry and rational thought. Their uncritical dissemination of CTs can, therefore, have profound implications, intensifying skepticism towards scientific principles and methodologies (Siegel & Daumiller, 2020).

Impact on higher education institutions (HEIs): reputational damage

The propagation of questionable beliefs and CTs within higher education institutions can indeed be detrimental to their reputation: these institutions are designed to be centers of learning and knowledge, focused on promoting critical thinking (Golding, 2011), evidence-informed research, and intellectual rigor. The core principles of universities emphasize scholarly research, academic integrity, and the pursuit of truth.

However, CTs often rely on subjective claims, inconsistent theories, and a lack of empirical evidence, which directly conflict with the mission and values of higher education institutions (Butter, 2020). Faculty members play a critical role in shaping the academic environment and influencing student learning. If faculty members propagate CTs or questionable beliefs, they may undermine the educational goals of the institution and erode trust in the academic process. This can lead to negative media attention, which may further damage the reputation of the HEI in question (Ballová Mikušková, 2018; Dyrendal & Jolley, 2020; Lobato et al., 2014).

Impact on society: promotion of radicalization and societal division

CTs can be divisive and detrimental to specific groups of people, as individuals who promote CTs are more likely to harbor racist, right-wing extremist, and anti-democratic views (Farinelli, 2021). Additionally, CTs can shape people's attitudes towards individuals, social groups, institutions, and policies, influencing individual behavior (Douglas & Sutton, 2018; Sutton & Douglas, 2020; Yendell & Herbert, 2022). For example, Holocaust denial can harm Jews inside and outside the classroom, while white supremacist CTs can create unsafe and hostile learning environments for students that may hamper learning. CTs pose a danger due

to their potential to catalyze the radicalization of individuals (Kruglanski et al., 2022). Consequently, faculty members who disseminate CTs may inadvertently contribute to increased polarization and division within society, manifesting in a rejection of democratic values, distrust of scientists, scholarly knowledge, and academic institutions. This can result in negative social consequences, such as reduced political engagement (Douglas & Sutton, 2018). By teaching CTs, faculty members may insidiously and casually surpass legitimate criticism, simultaneously casting doubt on state institutions and undermining social cohesion.

Impact on society: encouraging harmful societal behaviour

Faculty members who influence students to adopt CTs may inadvertently inspire detrimental societal behaviors, including disregarding infection control measures or engaging in violence at demonstrations (COMPACT Education Group, 2020). For instance, in the context of COVID-19, students or instructors influenced by CTs may resist vaccination, mask-wearing, or verifying their vaccination, recovery, or negative test results. These decisions, rooted in the belief that the COVID-19 virus is either nonexistent or innocuous to humans, can jeopardize both individual and public health while perpetuating falsehoods.

It is vital to balance dramatization and de-dramatization, as not all CTs and their dissemination are equally problematic (Butter, 2020). Although faculty members possess a role model function and may encourage radicalization, leading to societal fragmentation, their influence on students may be restricted. This limitation can be attributed to the limited time faculty have and the fact that students, as subjects with free will, can resist or reject educational efforts (so-called technology deficit of education; Luhmann & Schorr, 1979). As such, the impact of faculty members on students should not be overestimated. The investigation of CTs in higher education, from various disciplinary perspectives, necessitates rigorous and well-conducted research to provide meaningful insights into the complex dynamics between educational content, faculty influence, and student reception. However, a purely research-oriented approach falls short; practical application in teaching, emphasizing for instance prebunking (proactively dispelling misinformation; van der Linden, 2023) and debunking (reactively dispelling misinformation; Grodzicka & Harambam, 2021) strategies, is essential for mitigating CTs' impact. In sum, in certain cases, epistemically unwarranted beliefs may serve as educational tools to develop students' critical thinking skills, media literacy, and understanding of misinformation dissemination (Dyer & Hall, 2019). In these contexts, instructors should present CTs as examples of false or unproven claims, supporting the scientific consensus with evidence. Nonetheless, faculty members must remain vigilant about the potential harm caused by CTs, such as promoting distrust of legitimate institutions, and avoid legitimizing or promoting them in their courses.

Tentative individual and structural strategies for preventing conspiracy theories in the classroom

How can individual and structural (effective) strategies be implemented to address the spread of CTs in the classroom by faculty members? As stated in the “[Introduction: conspiracy theories in the classroom](#)” section, the existing literature predominantly focuses on how instructors can address students who endorse CTs (e.g., Dyrendal & Jolley, 2020; Hayward & Gronland, 2021; RAN Centre of Excellence, 2017, UNESCO, 2022). Based on a review of these sources, we propose exemplary preventive measures and interventions at a micro, meso, and macro level, necessitating the cooperation of various stakeholders such

as students, faculty members, higher education institutions, and professional and academic communities (e.g., COMPACT Education Group, 2020; Lewandowsky & Cook, 2020; O'Mahony et al., 2023).

Possible student interventions

Students play a vital role in critically evaluating the information presented to them by their faculty members, including claims or theories. In instances where faculty members appear to spread CTs, students should strive to comprehend and critically assess the assertions (Smallpage, 2018). Concerns regarding the information presented can be respectfully communicated to peers or the instructor, requesting clarification or additional evidence (e.g., COMPACT Education Group, 2020).

If concerns remain unaddressed, students may consult other faculty members, academic advisors, or higher-level administrators such as department chairs or deans. In cases where instructor's actions disrupt the learning environment or create a hostile atmosphere or (psychologically) unsafe and/or unbrave spaces (Winks, 2018) that do not allow for academic freedom, students should report the incident to relevant authorities or advocate for change.

Possible preventive actions by faculty members

Individual faculty members can play a critical role in preventing the dissemination of CTs. Faculty should engage in regular self-monitoring, reflecting on their teaching practices, beliefs, and content by using a baloney detection kit, i.e., a set of cognitive tools to identify dubious claims (Sagan, 1997). Participation in professional development programs focusing on critical thinking, media literacy, and misinformation awareness can further equip faculty members with tools to identify and address CTs effectively (Lewandowsky & Cook, 2020; Swami et al., 2014; Tekoniemi et al., 2022).

Acquiring knowledge on cognitive biases (e.g., confirmation bias, backfire effect, framing; e.g., Kahneman, 2011) and fallacies (e.g., begging the question, circular reasoning, ad hominem; e.g., Hansen & Fioret, 2016) is crucial for faculty members and their students to strengthen their mental immune system (Norman et al., 2024). Even if those who disseminate CTs are unlikely to take up the offer, academic development and further education programs should provide faculty with optional trainings in critical thinking (e.g., Fisher, 2011; Swami et al., 2014), media literacy, and the tools necessary to identify and mitigate the dissemination of CTs and fact-checking (e.g., Tekoniemi et al., 2022).

Faculty members can also take proactive steps to constructively engage with colleagues who may propagate CTs. This is an opportunity to build mental immunity (Norman et al., 2024) and herd resistance among faculty and to sensitize them for the forms and risks of disinformation and provide them with tools to help themselves and students differentiate between theoretically and empirically supported theories and those lacking evidence (Butter, 2020; Lewandowsky & Cook, 2020).

Possible preventive actions by higher education institutions

Higher education institutions can implement several strategies to curb the spread of CTs by faculty. First, they can develop and enforce policies to review course content,

ensuring it is factual and evidence-informed. Second, they can foster an open and inclusive intellectual environment that promotes diverse viewpoints and encourages dialogue, supporting freedom of speech (Smallpage, 2018). Third, institutions can provide continuous professional development for instructors, keeping them updated in their fields and teaching them strategies to handle CTs, such as prebunking via inoculation (a preventive strategy that builds resistance to misinformation by exposing people to weakened versions of false claims and refuting techniques used to mislead; van der Linden, 2023) and debunking (a corrective approach that replaces misinformation with factual content and explains why the false claim is incorrect; Lewandowsky et al., 2020). HEIs could also implement mechanisms during hiring processes to evaluate candidates' adherence to evidence-based teaching. However, recognizing that candidates may present themselves favorably in socially desirable situations, ongoing evaluations post-hiring should also be established.

In instances of CT dissemination by (already active) faculty, higher education institutions should respect the right to freedom of expression while simultaneously distancing themselves from any propagated CTs, in accordance with the principle of (relative) academic freedom (Marginson, 1997; Smallpage, 2018; Tierney & Lechuga, 2010). In this article, we conceptualize academic freedom as a distinct form of freedom of expression within higher education. Unlike general freedom of expression, academic freedom is accompanied by specific responsibilities towards scholarly rigor and the pursuit of truth—based on evidence. Academic freedom is not just about the right to express one's opinion (freedom of speech) but involves adhering to standards of scholarly inquiry, e.g., burden of proof (Hahn & Oaksford, 2007) or adhering to the Sagan standard, i.e., that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence (Sagan, 1997). Academic freedom allows faculty to teach, learn, and communicate ideas or facts without being targeted for repression, job loss, or imprisonment (Oleksiyenko & Jackson, 2020; Tierney & Lechuga, 2010) and is therefore highly socially significant. However, academic freedom must not be misunderstood as absolute freedom, but rather a relative freedom (Marginson, 1997). As Darian-Smith (2024) argues, this seems to be especially crucial in times of rising antidemocracy and diminishing academic freedom (Bloom, 1987). Higher education institutions should seriously, however carefully, address cases of CTs by examining their codes of conduct and internal procedures, and institutional leaders should consider structures that empower students and provide them with options for action.

In cases involving CTs, HEIs should review and refine their codes of conduct and internal procedures. Institutional leaders should establish support structures, such as complaint offices, counseling centers, and ombudspersons, and widely communicate these resources to students and faculty representatives. This ensures accessibility and empowers individuals to report and address issues effectively.

Discussion and concluding remarks

This article, which can be considered a “conceptual article” (Jaakkola, 2020), aimed to illuminate the potential prevalence, causes and linkages, and consequences of faculty members propagating CTs in higher education. Additionally, it examined the roles of students, faculty, and institutions in mitigating their dissemination.

Heuristic model of faculty members endorsing conspiracy theories

To synthesize our work, we developed a heuristic model (Fig. 1) to provide a multi-level framework for understanding this phenomenon and guiding future research and practice.

The heuristic model connects predictors, consequences, and strategies across three levels—micro (individual faculty and students), meso (institutional practices), and macro (societal influences)—to provide a holistic view of CT dissemination in higher education. By framing these interconnected elements, the model illustrates how individual attitudes, institutional policies, and societal dynamics collectively shape the emergence and impacts of CTs, while offering actionable strategies at each level.

Implications and future research directions

As shown in the “[Potential Consequences of Faculty Members Disseminating Conspiracy Theories](#)” section, faculty members disseminating CTs can have various consequences, such as the loss of classroom time for evidence-informed content, inhibited development of critical thinking skills and scientific literacy (Brown et al., 2010; Golowko, 2021), and potentially contributing in the long term to the radicalization of society (Douglas & Sutton, 2018; Douglas & Sutton, 2023; Imhoff & Lamberty 2017; Rees & Lamberty, 2019). Furthermore, faculty members endorsing CTs conflict with the core principles of higher education institutions, which emphasize evidence and research (Siegel & Daumiller, 2020), and can harm an HEI’s reputation (Butter, 2020) (see “[Potential Consequences of Faculty Members Disseminating Conspiracy Theories](#)” section). This paper proposed solutions from student, faculty, and institution perspectives to counteract the spread of CTs in higher education on micro, meso, and macro levels (see “[Tentative Individual and Structural Strategies for Preventing Conspiracy Theories in the Classroom](#)” section).

Consequently, this article contributes to the scholarly discourse on CT proliferation in higher education and advocates for more research to effectively address this issue. Building on our heuristic model and its delineation of micro-, meso-, and macro-level mechanisms, we propose the following research directions:

First, we call for representative prevalence studies to assess CT endorsement among faculty across disciplines and institutions. While anecdotal and case-based evidence exists, systematic research is rare. This gap is likely due to the sensitivity of the topic, concerns over academic reputation, and the potential threat to institutional integrity. Therefore, we emphasize the need for anonymous survey formats and indirect questioning techniques, such as the Randomized Response Technique (RRT), to mitigate social desirability bias and encourage honest disclosure.

Second, we advocate for experimental research that examines the effects of faculty-spread CTs on students’ critical thinking, scientific literacy, epistemic beliefs, and trust in academic authority. Given the ethical sensitivity of such designs—particularly when involving vulnerable student participants—these studies must be developed with rigorous safeguards. Rather than experimentally instilling CT content, designs should prioritize ethically aligned manipulations that focus on mitigation strategies such as prebunking, debunking, and resilience-building. Carefully crafted debriefings and ethical oversight will be essential to avoid epistemic harm. Moreover, such studies could compare the effectiveness of these interventions under different contextual conditions, guided by moderation or mixture modeling approaches that capture differential effects across student populations.

Third, also qualitative case studies are necessary, particularly to investigate institutional responses to faculty who publicly propagate CTs. Such studies can explore how higher education institutions balance academic freedom with epistemic responsibility, using document analyses, stakeholder interviews, and process tracing of institutional reactions. Particular attention should be paid to codes of conduct, professional norms, and disciplinary cultures. For example, it may be that academic fields characterized by relativistic or post-modern epistemologies show different susceptibility patterns to CT endorsement, warranting comparative analyses across departments and institutions.

Besides these methodological avenues, the proposed model also emphasizes relevant variables to include or at least consider. Particularly at the meso-level, research should scrutinize how university policies and governance structures either enable or constrain the dissemination of CTs. This includes studying the design and enforcement of professional development programs, institutionalized forms of academic freedom, and internal complaint mechanisms. Comparative case studies across national and institutional contexts could reveal which structural conditions foster epistemic resilience or vulnerability. At the macro-level, large-scale analyses of faculty members' public communications—including lecture materials, social media posts, and media statements—could serve especially well to detect ideological patterns and shifts in epistemic norms over time. Such analyses should be situated within broader societal dynamics, including political polarization, declining trust in expertise, and changing norms around freedom of expression and scholarly authority.

As noted, the methodological and ethical complexities in studying faculty-endorsed CTs must not be underestimated. These include challenges of operationalization, recruitment, reputational sensitivity, and data interpretation. Especially regarding this topic, future research must adhere to high ethical standards, protect respondent anonymity, and triangulate data sources wherever possible. In sum, tackling the issue of CT dissemination in higher education requires a multi-level, interdisciplinary approach that combines theoretical advancements with robust empirical methodologies. Beyond generating knowledge, such efforts will also be crucial for informing evidence-based policies, institutional strategies, and pedagogical practices that safeguard the integrity of academic inquiry while maintaining the delicate balance between academic freedom and epistemic responsibility.

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Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate Not applicable.

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