

# Identification and Ranking of Factors Influencing the Prevention of Conspiracy Delusion with a Focus on Political Behavior in Iranian Government Organizations

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## ABSTRACT

Conspiracy delusion in Iranian government organizations—recognized as one of the most destructive psycho-social phenomena—is associated with intensified political behaviors, reduced social capital, weakened cooperation, and the deterioration of employees' psychological well-being. It constitutes a serious obstacle to organizational development and performance improvement. This study was conducted with the aim of identifying and ranking the factors influencing the prevention of conspiracy delusion, with a specific focus on political behavior in Iranian government organizations. Using a mixed-methods approach, thematic analysis was applied in the qualitative phase, and the fuzzy DEMATEL method was employed in the quantitative phase. The statistical population consisted of 15 experts (senior and middle managers, human resource specialists, researchers in psychology and organizational behavior, and policymakers in the Civil Service sector) who were studied through in-depth semi-structured interviews and a fuzzy DEMATEL questionnaire. Data analysis was carried out using MAXQDA 2020 and MATLAB software. A total of 157 semantic statements were categorized into 17 sub-themes, which were subsequently grouped into six main dimensions: individual psychological factors, socio-cultural factors, political-institutional factors, informational-media factors, economic factors, and organizational-managerial factors. The findings indicated that socio-cultural factors ( $D+R = 3.524$ ), organizational-managerial factors ( $D+R = 3.489$ ), and political-institutional factors ( $D+R = 3.455$ ) possess the highest overall importance and interaction levels, while economic factors ( $D+R = 1.878$ ), with the highest  $D-R$  value (1.234), play the strongest causal and foundational role. For the first time, this study proposes a fully localized and multidimensional model for preventing conspiracy delusion that simultaneously integrates foundational economic factors and highly interactive upper-level dimensions within a unified causal network. By combining thematic analysis and fuzzy DEMATEL, the model enables precise and scientific prioritization of factors. This model can significantly contribute to reducing destructive political behaviors, enhancing organizational trust, improving cooperation, and promoting employees' psychological well-being and performance in Iran's public sector.

**Keywords:** Conspiracy delusion, organizational political behavior, socio-cultural factors, economic factors, organizational trust

## Introduction

Conspiracy beliefs have increasingly become a matter of scholarly attention due to their profound social, psychological, and organizational consequences. In recent years, researchers have emphasized that conspiratorial thinking is not merely an individual cognitive bias but a complex socio-psychological process shaped by contextual



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stressors, political dynamics, organizational climates, and cultural narratives (1). Within organizational settings—especially public sector institutions—conspiracy beliefs frequently manifest in the form of distrust, misinterpretation of managerial decisions, attribution of hidden agendas, and amplification of interpersonal conflicts, ultimately harming collaboration, performance, and well-being (2). The expansion of conspiratorial mindsets in organizations is deeply embedded in broader societal transformations, shifting power structures, and cultural discourses, making its management an essential focus of contemporary organizational research (3).

Conspiracy mentality has been shown to operate as a stable psychological orientation, influencing how individuals interpret ambiguous or threatening events (4). This mentality increases susceptibility to believing that influential actors or hidden groups intentionally manipulate organizational or societal outcomes. Multiple studies highlight that such beliefs often emerge in uncertain work environments, where lack of transparency, rapid political changes, or perceived injustice create fertile ground for conspiratorial explanations (5). These conditions can be exacerbated by weak communication systems, fragmented power structures, and poorly defined role expectations, which collectively intensify employees' feelings of vulnerability and suspicion (6). As a result, organizational leaders face mounting challenges when attempting to address tensions, distrust, or conflict driven by conspiracy-laden interpretations of workplace events (7).

Parallel to these concerns, scholars have increasingly sought to understand the organizational and socio-cultural drivers of political behavior in public institutions. Political behavior—defined as actions aimed at influencing decision-making processes for personal or group gain—has significant interactions with conspiratorial thinking (8). In contexts where political maneuvers become pervasive, employees often resort to conspiracy explanations to make sense of opaque, competitive, or unfair decision environments (9). Such behaviors undermine meritocracy, weaken organizational citizenship behavior, and contribute to a cycle in which distrust and defensive behaviors escalate across organizational levels (10). The intergroup dynamics present in public sector organizations, particularly in hierarchical or bureaucratic systems, may therefore amplify the interpersonal consequences of conspiracy beliefs (11).

The psychological foundations of conspiracy beliefs, as well as their organizational implications, have been examined in various interdisciplinary studies. For example, growing evidence shows that cognitive biases—such as confirmation bias, proportionality bias, and agency detection—play a key role in shaping conspiratorial beliefs (12). Employees experiencing existential threats, anxiety, or high uncertainty may rely on conspiratorial thinking to restore a sense of coherence and meaning (13). These dynamics become even more complex when organizational cultures tolerate information ambiguity or when rumors serve as informal channels through which employees interpret complex managerial decisions (14). The influence of cultural narratives and group identities also shapes how conspiracy theories are developed, maintained, and socially shared (15).

The prevalence of political behavior within organizations further intersects with conspiratorial thinking. Competitive and uncertain political climates tend to generate environments in which employees interpret managerial actions through a lens of suspicion and hidden intention (16). As a result, conspiracy beliefs become a mechanism for individuals to navigate organizational politics, often by constructing causal explanations that reinforce perceived threats or inequalities (17). Research examining political behavior in public sector organizations indicates that political strategies, shadow management, and informal influence networks can heighten conspiratorial interpretations of decision-making processes (18). These interpretations are reinforced when organizational

structures fail to ensure fairness, transparency, and accountability, thereby increasing employees' motivation to interpret managerial behavior as manipulative or hidden (19).

Academic analyses further demonstrate that cultural, organizational, and political contexts serve as critical determinants in shaping conspiracy ideation. In societies facing political tension, economic instability, or polarized media environments, conspiracy theories flourish via cultural mechanisms that validate and sustain them (20). This connection between socio-cultural identity and conspiracy beliefs is also highlighted in intergroup research, which shows that individuals tend to adopt conspiracy narratives as part of broader group-based social identity processes (21). For example, organizational members may adopt conspiratorial explanations as a defensive response to perceived out-group threats or internal rivalries, reinforcing intergroup prejudice and mistrust (22). These tendencies contribute to chronic cycles of suspicion, where employees interpret routine managerial actions through narratives of deceit or hidden agendas.

The organizational literature also highlights the role of contextual stressors in facilitating conspiracy beliefs. Political uncertainty, conflicts of interest, and bureaucratic inefficiencies can intensify helplessness and erode trust in leadership (23). Public institutions facing high levels of external scrutiny or political turnover often experience heightened internal tensions, contributing to rumors, speculation, and conspiratorial framing of administrative decisions (24). The relationship between political behavior and workplace outcomes, such as job satisfaction, has also been empirically demonstrated; employees exposed to political manipulation or opaque decision-making processes often report reduced satisfaction and increased suspicion toward organizational authority (25). Collectively, these findings highlight the necessity of addressing not only individual psychological tendencies but also broader environmental and organizational structures that give rise to conspiracy beliefs.

The evolution of digital communication channels has added further complexity to the spread of conspiracy beliefs within organizations. The rapid dissemination of information, coupled with limited media literacy among employees, facilitates the formation and reinforcement of misinterpretations, misinformation, and conspiratorial narratives (1). When individuals lack critical thinking skills or rely on repeated exposure to unverified content, the illusory truth effect strengthens their belief in misleading explanations of organizational events (11). This dynamic is particularly harmful in governmental organizations where information gaps, media restrictions, and rumor-driven environments reinforce distrust in leadership and intensify political behaviors grounded in flawed assumptions (3).

In addition to these cognitive and media-driven factors, organizational culture plays a central role in influencing conspiracy ideation. Research has demonstrated that cultures lacking transparency, fairness, and participatory decision-making are more prone to conspiracy tendencies (5). Organizational climates that promote collaboration, effective communication, and shared decision-making, on the other hand, significantly reduce employees' reliance on conspiratorial interpretations (8). Empirical investigations into the cooperative structures of Iranian public organizations illustrate that participatory and trust-enhancing environments minimize suspicion, reduce rumors, and foster constructive engagement across hierarchical levels (6). Moreover, leadership style has been repeatedly recognized as a determinant of employees' tendency to adopt conspiratorial narratives. Authoritarian or opaque leadership practices increase feelings of powerlessness and uncertainty, whereas participatory leadership facilitates shared meaning-making and reduces the likelihood of conspiratorial thinking (7).

The role of socio-cultural norms in shaping conspiracy beliefs is also emphasized in cross-cultural studies. For example, collective cultural orientations have been found to influence how groups perceive external threats, with high-collectivism societies displaying greater sensitivity to narratives involving intergroup manipulation or hidden

agendas (18). In Iran, socio-cultural narratives are often intertwined with historical memory, political change, and collective imaginaries, making conspiracy ideation more deeply embedded in public discourse (2). These cultural layers shape workplace interactions, perceptions of fairness, and the interpretation of political behaviors among employees of governmental organizations.

Several scholars have attempted to model political behavior and its consequences, providing valuable insights into how political maneuvering, influence strategies, and organizational power dynamics interact with employees' psychological orientations. These models highlight the importance of understanding political behavior not merely as an undesirable outcome but as an interconnected element of broader systemic and cultural factors (23). Meta-analytic reviews of political behavior in organizations further reveal that political climates significantly shape employees' cognitive interpretations, including their propensity to adopt conspiratorial thinking (20). Research in public management also demonstrates that political behaviors, when intensified by bureaucratic tensions or economic pressures, reduce trust and heighten defensive attributions among employees—providing fertile ground for conspiracy beliefs (13). This interplay between politics, organizational culture, and perceived injustice underscores the complex mechanisms by which conspiratorial interpretations develop and spread within government organizations.

Moreover, economic insecurity has been identified as a powerful driver of conspiracy ideation. When employees experience resource scarcity, threat to livelihood, or perceived inequality, they are more likely to attribute hidden motives to organizational actors or political groups (17). Studies examining the role of economic stressors in shaping employee behavior show that financial instability and unclear reward systems amplify perceived vulnerability, leading individuals to construct causal narratives that reflect deeper anxieties and mistrust (19). These tendencies are particularly prevalent in the public sector, where bureaucratic structures, fluctuating resources, and political pressures intersect to heighten uncertainty and increase the salience of conspiracy ideation (16).

Finally, the cumulative evidence points to the necessity of a holistic and multidimensional approach to understanding conspiracy beliefs in the workplace. Scholars argue that conspiracy thinking is not merely the result of individual deficits but emerges from systemic interactions among psychological tendencies, media dynamics, organizational structures, cultural norms, and political behaviors (21). A comprehensive analysis must therefore examine how these factors converge to shape employees' interpretations, interactions, and behavioral responses (22). Despite the growth of literature on conspiracy theories in psychology and political science, there remains a significant gap in understanding how these dynamics unfold within governmental organizations, particularly in contexts where political behaviors and organizational insecurity are pervasive (4). Addressing this gap is crucial for developing preventive strategies that strengthen trust, reduce political conflict, and enhance organizational effectiveness.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to identify and rank the factors influencing the prevention of conspiracy delusion with a specific focus on political behavior in Iranian governmental organizations.

## Methods and Materials

The present research was designed using a mixed-methods (qualitative–quantitative) approach to identify and rank the factors influencing the prevention of conspiracy delusion, with a focus on political behavior in Iranian government organizations. This study is an applied research project that employed thematic analysis in the first phase to identify preventive factors and the fuzzy DEMATEL method in the second phase to rank and determine

the causal relationships among these factors. The methodology was structured to accurately reflect the perspectives of experts and practitioners and to ensure the validity, comprehensiveness, and practical applicability of the findings in preventing conspiracy delusion.

The statistical population of this research consisted of experts and specialists in public administration, human resource management, social sciences, and industrial and organizational psychology who possessed expertise in conspiracy delusion, conspiratorial beliefs, organizational political behavior, or related subjects within Iranian government organizations. Additionally, senior and middle managers of government organizations with at least 5 years of managerial experience and familiarity with the challenges of political behavior and its influence on the formation of conspiracy delusion in the workplace, human resource specialists with expertise in organizational culture development and the management of political behavior, academic researchers in public administration, organizational behavior, or organizational psychology with at least 5 years of relevant research experience, and policymakers involved in labor law and civil service legislation who were familiar with political–organizational dynamics constituted other segments of the target population.

Sampling was carried out using a combination of purposive (judgmental) and snowball techniques in two stages. In the qualitative phase, five key experts were initially selected using purposive sampling based on the research team's knowledge of their expertise and scientific and practical backgrounds in the management of government organizations, organizational political behavior, and familiarity with issues related to conspiracy delusion and its impact on organizational performance. Subsequently, using the snowball technique, ten additional experts were introduced by the initial interviewees. A total of 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted, and thematic saturation was achieved, meaning that additional interviews did not yield new insights beyond those already identified. In the quantitative phase, the opinions of 12 of the same experts—those with sufficient knowledge to evaluate relationships among preventive factors and a deep understanding of the interplay between political behavior and conspiracy delusion—were collected to conduct the fuzzy DEMATEL analysis.

Inclusion criteria for the study consisted of having at least 5 years of executive or research experience in public administration, human resource management, organizational behavior, or industrial and organizational psychology; deep familiarity with the challenges of political behavior and its influence on the formation of conspiratorial beliefs in government workplaces; the ability to provide analytical insights regarding preventive factors and effective managerial strategies; practical or research experience related to bureaucratic challenges in Iran's public sector; and providing informed consent for participation and audio recording. To ensure diversity of perspectives and data, experts were selected to vary in work experience, academic specialization, organizational affiliation (ministries, state-owned enterprises, research institutions, universities, and government agencies), and geographic regions across Iran. Individuals lacking direct experience in the public sector or lacking specialized knowledge of organizational political behavior and conspiracy delusion were excluded.

Qualitative data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews. Interview questions were open-ended and designed to deeply explore participants' experiences, perspectives, and analyses regarding the factors influencing the prevention of conspiracy delusion, with an emphasis on political behavior in Iranian government organizations. Initial questions were formulated based on the review of theoretical literature related to conspiracy delusion, organizational political behavior, human resource management, and organizational behavior studies. At the end of each interview, an open question such as "Is there any topic or point regarding preventive factors for conspiracy delusion that we may have overlooked?" or "Do you have any additional suggestions or strategies for

preventing conspiracy delusion in government organizations?" was posed to allow for the emergence of new and more comprehensive insights. Each interview lasted between 40 and 100 minutes, with an average duration of approximately 60 minutes. In addition to note-taking, audio recording was used to ensure accurate data capture. Ethical protocols were observed by obtaining verbal or written consent from each participant prior to recording. Interviews were conducted in quiet, private environments such as office spaces or academic settings. To prepare participants, an introductory letter containing research details, main objectives, and key questions was sent via email in advance.

In the quantitative phase, a fuzzy DEMATEL-based questionnaire was developed, consisting of a pairwise relationship matrix among the preventive factors identified in the qualitative phase. Experts evaluated the degree of influence and interdependence of each factor using a five-point linguistic fuzzy scale (very low, low, moderate, high, very high). After content validity confirmation by three subject-matter specialists, the questionnaire was distributed to the experts.

Qualitative data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis following the six-step framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). In the first step (familiarization), the full transcribed interviews were thoroughly read and reviewed multiple times to gain a deep and comprehensive understanding of the content. In the second step (initial coding), key semantic expressions and significant statements related to the research topic were extracted from each interview, resulting in the identification of 157 initial codes. In the third step (theme search), initial codes were grouped based on conceptual similarity, relevance, and semantic overlap. In the fourth step (theme review), preliminary themes were examined and refined to ensure internal coherence and meaningful distinction among themes. In the fifth step (defining and naming themes), each theme was clearly defined and labeled, and its relationship to the research objectives was established. Finally, in the sixth step (reporting), the findings were presented as a comprehensive conceptual model for the drivers and inhibitors of conspiracy delusion in Iranian government organizations. MAXQDA 2020 software was used for data organization and analysis.

In the quantitative phase, the fuzzy DEMATEL method was employed to rank preventive factors and determine their reciprocal causal relationships. This method included the following steps: constructing the direct-relation matrix using experts' fuzzy evaluations, in which each expert assessed the influence of one factor on another using fuzzy numbers; normalizing the direct-relation matrix to produce the normalized matrix; calculating the total-relation matrix to determine direct and indirect effects among factors; computing D (row sums) and R (column sums) values for each factor; ranking factors based on D+R (overall importance) and D–R (causal or effect role); and plotting the causal diagram to visually illustrate relationships and prioritize factors. Fuzzy DEMATEL calculations were performed using MATLAB.

To ensure credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability of the qualitative findings, multiple verification strategies were employed. Credibility was strengthened through member checking, in which the transcribed interviews and extracted codes were sent to 8 participants for review, refinement, and confirmation. Long-term engagement with the research topic and an in-depth review of the theoretical literature further enhanced credibility. Transferability was supported by providing detailed documentation for other researchers, including comprehensive demographic profiles, participant experiences, and descriptions of the research context to facilitate applicability to similar settings or other government organizations. Confirmability was ensured by systematically documenting all research steps—from question design to coding processes, theme development, and final analysis—to allow for external audit and verification.



Dependability was assessed using inter-coder reliability. For this purpose, 20% of the interviews (4 interviews) were coded by a second independent coder familiar with the research topic, and the agreement rate between coders was calculated. The average coding reliability was reported as 82.3%, indicating a high level of reliability and analytic rigor. In the quantitative phase, the reliability of the fuzzy DEMATEL questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded a value of 0.75, indicating satisfactory internal consistency.

Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout all stages of the research. Participant identities were kept completely confidential, and data were analyzed and reported anonymously. Informed consent—written or verbal—was obtained from all participants for audio recording and the use of their data in the research. The objectives of the study, data usage procedures, interview duration, and participants' right to withdraw at any time were clearly explained to ensure full understanding of the research process. Recorded data were stored securely and were accessible only to the research team. This mixed-methods methodology, combining thematic analysis for factor identification and fuzzy DEMATEL for factor ranking, provides a rigorous, comprehensive, and operational framework for examining the factors influencing the prevention of conspiracy delusion, with an emphasis on political behavior in Iranian government organizations.

## Findings and Results

Table 1 presents the demographic information of the interview participants.

**Table 1. Demographic Information of Research Participants**

Interviewee Code	Number of Codes	Work Experience (Years)	Specialization	Type of Organization	Gender	Age (Years)
M1	13	More than 10	Public Administration	Government Agency	Male	45
M2	13	More than 10	Organizational Psychology	University	Female	38
M3	10	5–10	Human Resources	Research Center	Male	34
M4	12	More than 10	Sociology	Government Agency	Female	42
M5	9	5–10	Management	University	Male	36
M6	11	More than 10	Psychology	Research Center	Female	40
M7	10	5–10	Human Resources	Government Agency	Male	37
M8	12	More than 10	Public Administration	University	Male	48
M9	9	5–10	Sociology	Research Center	Female	33
M10	10	More than 10	Organizational Psychology	Government Agency	Male	44
M11	10	5–10	Management	University	Female	39
M12	9	5–10	Human Resources	Research Center	Male	35
M13	11	More than 10	Psychology	Government Agency	Male	46
M14	9	5–10	Sociology	University	Female	37
M15	9	5–10	Public Administration	Research Center	Male	41
Total	157	—	—	—	—	—

To identify the factors influencing the prevention of conspiracy delusion with a focus on political behavior in Iranian government organizations, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with experts. The thematic analysis of these interviews resulted in the extraction of 157 semantic statements and open codes. Subsequently, through deeper analysis, these codes were reduced to 17 axial codes (sub-themes). Finally, these 17 axial codes were categorized into six selective codes (main themes). The results of the interviews in the form of sub-themes and main themes are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2. Codes Extracted from the Interviews**

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Open Codes	Interviewee Codes
Individual Psychological Factors	Personality Traits	Need for Control Tolerance of Ambiguity	M3, M7, M12, M15 M2, M9, M14
	Cognitive Capacities	Anxiety Level Political Self-Efficacy Confirmation Bias	M1, M5, M10, M13 M4, M6, M8, M11 M3, M7, M15
Socio-Cultural Factors	Trust and Social Support	Emotional Intelligence Social Trust	M2, M9, M12, M14 M1, M5, M10, M13
		Social Support	M4, M6, M8
	Cultural Patterns	Cultural Norms Group Belonging	M11, M3, M7, M15 M2, M9, M12, M14
		Social Polarization	M1, M5, M10
Political–Institutional Factors	Organizational Cultural Environment	Closed Organizational Culture	M4, M6, M8, M13
		Open Organizational Culture	M11, M3, M7, M15
	Transparency and Participation	Organizational Transparency Participation in Decision-Making	M2, M9, M12, M14 M1, M5, M10
	Organizational Justice	Distributive Justice Accountability	M4, M6, M8, M13 M11, M3, M7
Informational–Media Factors	Power Structure	Centralization of Power Political Changes	M15, M2, M9, M12 M1, M5, M14
		Perceived Corruption	M4, M6, M8, M10
	Information Quality	Information Accuracy Diversity of Information Sources	M13, M11, M3, M7 M15, M2, M9, M12
	Information Literacy	Media Literacy Critical Thinking	M1, M5, M14 M4, M6, M8, M10
Economic Factors	Information Control	Organizational Rumors Information Restriction	M13, M11, M3, M7 M15, M2, M9, M12
		Misuse of Social Media	M1, M5, M14, M4
	Individual Economic Security	Job Security Financial Satisfaction	M6, M8, M10, M13 M11, M3, M7, M15
		Promotion Opportunities	M2, M9, M12, M14
Organizational–Managerial Factors	Economic Competition	Resource Scarcity Economic Instability	M1, M5, M4, M6 M8, M10, M13, M11
		Economic Inequality	M3, M7, M15, M2
	Management Style	Authoritarian Leadership	M9, M12, M14, M1
		Participatory Leadership	M5, M4, M6, M8
	Organizational Communication	Effective Communication Fair Evaluation System	M10, M13, M11, M3 M7, M15, M2, M9
		Job Pressures	M12, M14, M1, M5
	Human Resource Development	Workload Pressure	M4, M6, M8, M10
		Training and Development Career Opportunities	M13, M11, M3, M7 M15, M2, M9, M12, M14

Based on the axial coding results and shared concepts across categories (Table 2), six categories were identified as the key factors influencing the prevention of conspiracy delusion with a focus on political behavior in Iranian government organizations.

For applying the fuzzy DEMATEL method in this study, the opinions of 12 experts who had participated in the interviews were used. These experts contributed their experience and knowledge in the qualitative phase and subsequently analyzed the relationships among the identified factors. Their evaluations played a crucial role in determining the degree of influence and dependency among the various factors. This collaboration ensured that the fuzzy DEMATEL model was developed with greater accuracy and grounded in practical realities.



## Steps of the Fuzzy DEMATEL Method

### Step 1: Constructing the Fuzzy Direct-Relation Matrix

To identify the relational pattern among  $n$  criteria, an  $n \times n$  matrix is first constructed. The influence of the element in each row on the elements in each column is represented by a fuzzy number. When using the opinions of multiple experts, each expert completes the matrix independently. The arithmetic mean of their evaluations is then calculated to form the final fuzzy direct-relation matrix  $Z$ :

$$Z = \begin{bmatrix} 0 & \cdots & \tilde{z}_{n1} \\ \vdots & \ddots & \vdots \\ \tilde{z}_{1n} & \cdots & 0 \end{bmatrix}$$

The table below presents the fuzzy direct-relation matrix (experts' pairwise comparisons). Since multiple experts were consulted, the matrix represents the arithmetic mean of all expert evaluations.

**Table 3. Abbreviations of Dimensions**

Dimension	Abbreviation
Individual Psychological Factors	I&P
Socio-Cultural Factors	S&C
Political–Institutional Factors	P&I
Informational–Media Factors	I&M
Economic Factors	E&F
Organizational–Managerial Factors	O&M

**Table 4. Fuzzy Direct-Relation Matrix of Factors**

	F&E	L&M	S&T	L&R	E&R	M&E
I&P	(0.000,0.000,0.00 0)	(0.625,0.875,1.00 0)	(0.333,0.583,0.83 3)	(0.000,0.167,0.41 7)	(0.083,0.333,0.58 3)	(0.354,0.604,0.85 4)
S&C	(0.688,0.938,1.00 0)	(0.000,0.000,0.00 0)	(0.583,0.833,1.00 0)	(0.354,0.604,0.85 4)	(0.167,0.417,0.66 7)	(0.625,0.875,1.00 0)
P&I	(0.104,0.354,0.60 4)	(0.333,0.583,0.83 3)	(0.000,0.000,0.00 0)	(0.583,0.833,1.00 0)	(0.000,0.125,0.37 5)	(0.375,0.625,0.87 5)
I&M	(0.167,0.417,0.66 7)	(0.125,0.375,0.62 5)	(0.375,0.625,0.87 5)	(0.000,0.000,0.00 0)	(0.000,0.125,0.37 5)	(0.125,0.375,0.62 5)
E&F	(0.000,0.125,0.37 5)	(0.104,0.354,0.60 4)	(0.000,0.125,0.37 5)	(0.000,0.000,0.25 0)	(0.000,0.000,0.00 0)	(0.000,0.125,0.37 5)
O&M	(0.375,0.625,0.87 5)	(0.625,0.875,1.00 0)	(0.333,0.583,0.83 3)	(0.125,0.375,0.62 5)	(0.000,0.125,0.37 5)	(0.000,0.000,0.00 0)

The fuzzy linguistic scale used in the model is shown in Table 5.

**Table 5. Fuzzy Scale of Factors**

Code	Linguistic Term	L	M	U
1	No Influence	0	0	0.25
2	Very Low Influence	0	0.25	0.5
3	Low Influence	0.25	0.5	0.75
4	High Influence	0.5	0.75	1
5	Very High Influence	0.75	1	1

### Step 2: Normalizing the Fuzzy Direct-Relation Matrix

To normalize the fuzzy direct-relation matrix, the following formula is applied:

$$\tilde{x}_{ij} = \tilde{z}_{ij}/r = (l_{ij}/r, m_{ij}/r, u_{ij}/r)$$

where:

$$r = \max_{i,j} \{ \max_i \sum_{j=1}^n u_{ij}, \max_j \sum_{i=1}^n u_{ij} \}$$

**Table 6. Normalized Fuzzy Direct-Relation Matrix of Factors**

	I&P	S&C	P&I	I&M	E&F	O&M
I&P	(0.000,0.000,0.00 0)	(0.101,0.144,0.17 3)	(0.086,0.130,0.17 3)	(0.108,0.151,0.17 3)	(0.058,0.101,0.14 4)	(0.079,0.122,0.16 5)
S&C	(0.119,0.162,0.17 3)	(0.000,0.000,0.00 0)	(0.108,0.151,0.17 3)	(0.086,0.130,0.17 3)	(0.065,0.108,0.15 1)	(0.101,0.144,0.17 3)
P&I	(0.065,0.108,0.15 1)	(0.101,0.144,0.17 3)	(0.000,0.000,0.00 0)	(0.079,0.122,0.16 5)	(0.086,0.130,0.17 3)	(0.108,0.151,0.17 3)
I&M	(0.130,0.173,0.17 3)	(0.108,0.151,0.17 3)	(0.101,0.144,0.17 3)	(0.000,0.000,0.00 0)	(0.043,0.086,0.13 0)	(0.086,0.130,0.17 3)
E&F	(0.043,0.086,0.13 0)	(0.065,0.108,0.15 1)	(0.079,0.122,0.16 5)	(0.029,0.072,0.11 5)	(0.000,0.000,0.00 0)	(0.058,0.101,0.14 4)
O&M	(0.101,0.144,0.17 3)	(0.119,0.162,0.17 3)	(0.130,0.173,0.17 3)	(0.079,0.122,0.16 5)	(0.065,0.108,0.15 1)	(0.000,0.000,0.00 0)

If you would like, I can also translate and format Steps 3–5, the total-relation matrix, defuzzification, causal diagrams, or the D+R / D–R ranking tables.

### Step 3: Calculating the Fuzzy Total-Relation Matrix

In this step, the fuzzy total-relation matrix is formed using the following expression:

$$\tilde{T} = \lim_{k \rightarrow +\infty} (\tilde{X}^1 \oplus \tilde{X}^2 \oplus \dots \oplus \tilde{X}^k)$$

If each element of the fuzzy total-relation matrix is denoted as  $\tilde{t}_{ij} = (l''_{ij}, m''_{ij}, u''_{ij})$ , then it is calculated as follows:

$$[l''_{ij}] = X_l \times (I - X_l)^{-1}$$

$$[m''_{ij}] = X_m \times (I - X_m)^{-1}$$

$$[u''_{ij}] = X_u \times (I - X_u)^{-1}$$

In other words, the inverse of the normalized matrix is first computed, then subtracted from the identity matrix, and finally the normalized matrix is multiplied by the resulting matrix. Table 7 presents the fuzzy total-relation matrix.

**Table 7. Fuzzy Total-Relation Matrix of Factors**

	I&P	S&C	P&I	I&M	E&F	O&M
I&P	(0.072,0.198,0.51 2)	(0.152,0.308,0.65 8)	(0.138,0.286,0.64 5)	(0.156,0.305,0.64 2)	(0.096,0.230,0.55 8)	(0.135,0.280,0.62 7)
S&C	(0.178,0.332,0.68 5)	(0.085,0.215,0.54 8)	(0.165,0.318,0.67 2)	(0.145,0.293,0.64 0)	(0.108,0.247,0.58 3)	(0.162,0.311,0.65 8)
P&I	(0.125,0.268,0.61 5)	(0.162,0.312,0.66 3)	(0.075,0.192,0.52 8)	(0.138,0.282,0.62 8)	(0.125,0.263,0.60 5)	(0.168,0.317,0.66 5)
I&M	(0.195,0.348,0.69 8)	(0.175,0.325,0.67 5)	(0.168,0.315,0.66 8)	(0.068,0.178,0.49 5)	(0.088,0.218,0.54 8)	(0.152,0.298,0.64 5)
E&F	(0.082,0.208,0.53 8)	(0.105,0.238,0.57 8)	(0.115,0.248,0.58 8)	(0.065,0.185,0.50 8)	(0.028,0.095,0.35 8)	(0.098,0.225,0.56 2)
O&M	(0.168,0.318,0.67 2)	(0.185,0.338,0.68 8)	(0.192,0.342,0.69 5)	(0.145,0.288,0.63 8)	(0.105,0.238,0.57 8)	(0.078,0.195,0.53 2)

### Step 4: Defuzzifying the Values of the Total-Relation Matrix

For defuzzification, the CFCS (Converting Fuzzy data into Crisp Scores) method proposed by Opricovic and Tzeng was used. The steps of the defuzzification procedure are as follows:

$$l_{ij}^n = \frac{l_{ij}^t - \min(l_{ij}^t)}{\Delta_{\min}}$$

$$m_{ij}^n = \frac{m_{ij}^t - \min(l_{ij}^t)}{\Delta_{\min}}$$

$$u_{ij}^n = \frac{u_{ij}^t - \min(l_{ij}^t)}{\Delta_{\min}}$$

where:

$$\Delta_{\min} = \max(u_{ij}^t) - \min(l_{ij}^t)$$

Calculation of the upper and lower bounds of the normalized values:

$$l_{ij}^s = \frac{m_{ij}^n}{1 + m_{ij}^n - l_{ij}^n}$$

$$u_{ij}^s = \frac{u_{ij}^n}{1 + u_{ij}^n - l_{ij}^n}$$

The output of the CFCS algorithm is a matrix with crisp values.

Calculation of the final normalized crisp values:

$$x_{ij} = \frac{l_{ij}^s(1 - l_{ij}^s) + u_{ij}^s \times u_{ij}^s}{1 - l_{ij}^s + u_{ij}^s}$$

Table 8 presents the defuzzified total-relation matrix.

**Table 8. Crisp Total-Relation Matrix of Factors**

	I&P	S&C	P&I	I&M	E&F	O&M
I&P	0.248	0.352	0.338	0.345	0.278	0.335
S&C	0.385	0.272	0.368	0.348	0.298	0.362
P&I	0.325	0.365	0.258	0.338	0.322	0.368
I&M	0.402	0.382	0.375	0.238	0.278	0.358
E&F	0.268	0.298	0.308	0.245	0.152	0.285
O&M	0.368	0.392	0.398	0.348	0.298	0.262

### Step 5: Threshold Computations

All values in the crisp total-relation matrix that are less than the average of the matrix are identified and set to zero using the following expression; in other words, those causal relationships are not considered:

$$TS = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n \sum_{j=1}^m V_{ij}}{m \times n}$$

$$U_{ij} = \begin{cases} V_{ij} & V_{ij} \geq TS \\ 0 & \text{Others} \end{cases}$$

The table below shows the crisp total-relation matrix after removing values below the threshold. Based on Table 9, the causal relationships among elements are drawn. The threshold value (TS) in this study is 0.312.

**Table 9. Crisp Total-Relation Matrix of Factors After Removing Values Below the Threshold**

	I&P	S&C	P&I	I&M	E&F	O&M
I&P	0	0.352	0.338	0.345	0	0.335
S&C	0.385	0	0.368	0.348	0	0.362
P&I	0.325	0.365	0	0.338	0.322	0.368
I&M	0.402	0.382	0.375	0	0	0.358
E&F	0	0	0	0	0	0
O&M	0.368	0.392	0.398	0.348	0	0

**Step 6: Final Output and Construction of the Causal Diagram**

The next step is to obtain the sums of the rows and columns of matrix  $T$ . The sum of the rows ( $D$ ) and the sum of the columns ( $R$ ) are calculated using the following formulas:

$$D = \sum_{j=1}^n T_{ij}$$

$$R = \sum_{i=1}^n T_{ij}$$

Then, using  $D$  and  $R$ , the values of  $D+R$  and  $D-R$  are computed, which respectively represent the level of interaction and the degree of causal influence of the factors. The final output is presented in Table 10.

**Table 10. Final Output**

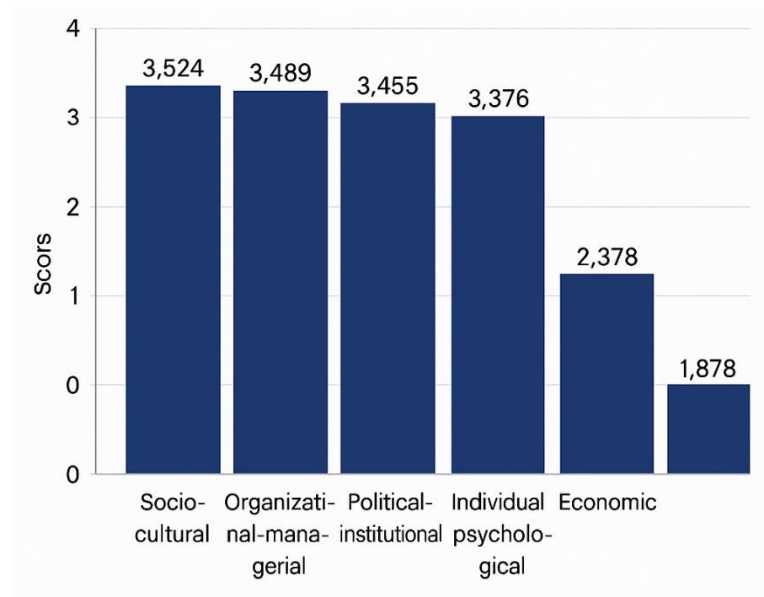
Factor	R	D	D+R	D-R
Individual Psychological Factors	1.480	1.896	3.376	0.416
Socio-Cultural Factors	1.491	2.033	3.524	0.542
Political-Institutional Factors	1.479	1.976	3.455	0.497
Informational-Media Factors	1.331	2.033	3.364	0.702
Economic Factors	0.322	1.556	1.878	1.234
Organizational-Managerial Factors	1.423	2.066	3.489	0.643

**Step 7: Interpretation of the Results**

In the fuzzy DEMATEL analysis of the factors influencing the prevention of conspiracy delusion in Iranian government organizations, the results of the table and diagram indicate that the socio-cultural, organizational-managerial, and political-institutional dimensions—due to their high  $D$  and  $R$  values—are both influenced by other factors and exert considerable influence on the relational network. In particular, socio-cultural factors, which hold the highest  $D+R$  value, are identified as the most important dimension of the system. In contrast, economic factors, with the lowest  $R$  value, have the least level of susceptibility to influence and demonstrate the strongest causal role in the system; their high  $D-R$  score makes them the most powerful driving factor. Other dimensions, including informational-media, individual psychological, and socio-cultural factors, also have positive  $D-R$  values and are thus categorized as influential factors. Overall, the pattern displayed in the diagram shows that all factors play active and causal roles, but the causal weight is more pronounced in economic factors, whereas the overall importance is more salient in socio-cultural and organizational-managerial factors. These three dimensions play the most strategic role in intervention and policymaking for preventing conspiracy delusion.

To rank the criteria, the " $D+R$ " column must be used. The  $D+R$  column represents the overall level of influence and susceptibility of each factor within the system and serves as an appropriate criterion for ranking the general

importance of the factors. The higher the D+R value, the more important the factor and the broader its interactions across the network.



**Figure 1. Ranking of Dimensions Influencing the Prevention of Conspiracy Delusion**

Based on the D+R index, which is the primary criterion for assessing the overall importance of each factor in the relational network, the ranking shows that socio-cultural factors rank first with a score of 3.524, demonstrating the highest level of interaction with other dimensions. Next, organizational–managerial factors rank second with a value of 3.489, followed by political–institutional factors in third place with a value of 3.455, indicating their decisive role in the formation and control of conspiracy delusion. Subsequently, individual psychological factors with a value of 3.376 and informational–media factors with a value of 3.364 rank fourth and fifth, respectively, reflecting their moderate yet stable importance in the system. Finally, economic factors hold the lowest rank with a value of 1.878, indicating the lowest level of interaction and the weakest relational role among the six dimensions, although they still maintain a notable causal influence within the network.

**Table 11. Final Output of Fuzzy DEMATEL for the Components**

Rank	Component	R	D	D+R	D–R	Related Dimension
1	Management Style	3.856	4.125	7.981	0.269	Organizational–Managerial
2	Organizational Communication	3.742	4.058	7.800	0.316	Organizational–Managerial
3	Trust and Social Support	3.925	3.834	7.759	–0.091	Socio-Cultural
4	Cultural Patterns	3.688	3.956	7.644	0.268	Socio-Cultural
5	Information Quality	3.512	4.028	7.540	0.516	Informational–Media
6	Transparency and Participation	3.634	3.875	7.509	0.241	Political–Institutional
7	Information Control	3.458	3.996	7.454	0.538	Informational–Media
8	Organizational Justice	3.586	3.825	7.411	0.239	Political–Institutional
9	Cognitive Capacities	3.725	3.658	7.383	–0.067	Individual Psychological
10	Power Structure	3.512	3.842	7.354	0.330	Political–Institutional
11	Job Pressures	3.456	3.786	7.242	0.330	Organizational–Managerial
12	Organizational Cultural Environment	3.598	3.625	7.223	0.027	Socio-Cultural
13	Personality Traits	3.682	3.512	7.194	–0.170	Individual Psychological
14	Information Literacy	3.325	3.758	7.083	0.433	Informational–Media
15	Human Resource Development	3.486	3.562	7.048	0.076	Organizational–Managerial
16	Economic Competition	2.958	3.856	6.814	0.898	Economic
17	Individual Economic Security	2.842	3.725	6.567	0.883	Economic

The component ranking results indicate that management style, with a D+R value of 7.981, ranks first and is identified as the most influential factor in preventing conspiracy delusion—particularly because participatory leadership approaches, compared to authoritarian leadership, play a more foundational role in reducing misperceptions and creating an atmosphere of trust. Following this, organizational communication, with a value of 7.800, ranks second, illustrating how informational transparency, fair communication flows, and equitable evaluation systems can significantly prevent the emergence of conspiratorial thinking.

In third place, trust and social support, with a value of 7.759, emerges as a key component that—even though it is more influenced than influential (due to its negative D–R value)—remains central to shaping a psychologically healthy organizational climate. Cultural patterns, with a value of 7.644, rank fourth, reflecting the decisive role of cultural norms, group cohesion, and processes of social polarization in increasing or reducing conspiracy-minded attitudes.

The fifth component, information quality, with a value of 7.540, has significant influence due to informational accuracy, diversity of sources, and transparency; its positive D–R value (0.516) strengthens its role among causal factors. In contrast, the economic components—economic competition and individual economic security—despite ranking lower (positions 16 and 17), display very high D–R values (0.898 and 0.883, respectively). This indicates that although these components establish fewer relational links with other factors, their causal and driving roles are highly significant. Economic instability, resource scarcity, and inequalities can function as fundamental roots in the emergence and spread of conspiracy delusion within organizations.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to identify and rank the factors influencing the prevention of conspiracy delusion in Iranian governmental organizations, with particular attention to the mechanisms through which political behavior shapes employees' interpretations, trust levels, and cognitive pathways. The findings demonstrated that socio-cultural, organizational–managerial, and political–institutional factors possess the highest levels of overall interaction (D+R), whereas economic factors, though less interconnected, exhibit the strongest causal roles due to their elevated D–R scores. These results reinforce the growing scholarly consensus that conspiratorial thinking in organizational contexts is best understood as an emergent property of interconnected social, cultural, psychological, and structural influences {Tam, 2024 #328453}. The high importance of socio-cultural and organizational–managerial dimensions observed here is consistent with research showing that conspiracy beliefs thrive most readily in environments characterized by weakened social cohesion, cultural fragmentation, and opaque managerial practices (2). In contexts where employees rely on informal networks, shared narratives, and group-based perceptions to interpret workplace events, socio-cultural cues play a determining role in shaping conspiratorial interpretations (3).

The strong influence of socio-cultural factors aligns with empirical evidence indicating that conspiracy beliefs are deeply embedded in shared cultural patterns and collective psychological orientations. Studies have emphasized that cultural norms, intergroup identities, and social narratives act as interpretive frameworks through which individuals assess ambiguous or threatening organizational decisions (4). In the Iranian governmental context—where social polarization, institutional distrust, and historical narratives surrounding political secrecy persist—such cultural frameworks create fertile ground for conspiratorial thinking. Consistent with this, the current study found that trust and social support were among the highest-ranking components of socio-cultural factors, reinforcing prior



findings that trust deficits are among the most robust predictors of conspiracy belief endorsement (5). The prominence of cultural patterns as a determinant further echoes scholarship suggesting that in collectivist and group-identity-oriented societies, conspiracy beliefs function as protective cognitive tools used to maintain in-group cohesion and guard against perceived external threats (6). The findings therefore extend existing literature by confirming that socio-cultural variables exert multidimensional influence on both the spread and mitigation of conspiratorial mindsets in organizational settings.

Organizational–managerial factors emerged as the second most influential dimension, with management style and organizational communication ranking as the most impactful components across all categories. This reflects a substantial body of evidence indicating that leadership transparency, participatory decision-making, and fair communication systems are central inhibitors of conspiracy ideation (7). Organizations that fail to provide clear rationales for decisions or that rely heavily on hierarchical, unilateral communication styles inadvertently create interpretive voids that employees may fill with suspicion and conspiratorial explanations (8). In contrast, participatory leadership—characterized by open communication, distributed decision rights, and respect for employee voice—has been shown to reduce political maneuvering, enhance mutual trust, and weaken the appeal of conspiratorial narratives (9). The centrality of management style found in this study is consistent with research demonstrating that leadership behaviors significantly shape the cognitive climate of organizations by influencing employees' perceptions of fairness, credibility, and psychological safety (10). Effective communication structures serve as an antidote to misinformation, including rumors and politically motivated distortions that often form the foundation of conspiracy beliefs (11). Therefore, the current findings corroborate theories emphasizing the protective role of transparent managerial practices against the proliferation of conspiratorial thinking.

The ranking results also revealed that political–institutional factors, such as transparency, participation, accountability, and power structure, play determinant roles in shaping employees' susceptibility to conspiracy theories. These results mirror extensive scholarship demonstrating that political behaviors, informal influence networks, and opaque institutional mechanisms increase employees' tendencies to attribute hidden intentions to organizational actors (12). When political behavior becomes normalized inside institutions, conspiratorial interpretations tend to intensify as employees attempt to make sense of inconsistency, favoritism, or non-meritocratic outcomes (13). Research has shown that political climates characterized by unfairness, instability, or covert decision-making significantly elevate distrust and promote defensive attitudes rooted in conspiracy ideology (14). The present findings support these conclusions by showing that components such as transparency and accountability mitigate the emergence of political suspicion, whereas centralized power structures intensify conspiratorial interpretations.

Informational–media factors also exhibited strong influence, particularly information quality and information control, which ranked among the top components. This finding aligns directly with research demonstrating that incomplete, inconsistent, or manipulated organizational information increases the likelihood that employees construct conspiracy-based explanations to fill informational gaps (15). The illusory truth effect—which describes how repeated exposure to misleading information increases perceived accuracy—has been widely identified as a key mechanism supporting conspiracy belief formation in organizational settings (16). Additionally, when organizations fail to cultivate adequate media literacy or critical thinking among employees, unverified narratives spread more rapidly, reinforcing conspiracy ideation (17). These mechanisms are further exacerbated in public organizations operating under political pressures, bureaucratic opacity, or limited communication infrastructures.

The findings of the current study support these explanations, highlighting information transparency and controlled rumor dynamics as crucial levers for preventing conspiracy delusion.

Individual psychological factors ranked fourth in overall influence, underscoring the role of cognitive capacities, personality traits, emotional processing, and uncertainty tolerance in shaping employees' susceptibility to conspiratorial interpretations. This finding resonates strongly with psychological literature demonstrating that individuals with high anxiety, low tolerance for ambiguity, or elevated uncertainty aversion are more likely to adopt conspiracy explanations when confronted with unclear organizational circumstances (18). Cognitive biases such as confirmation bias, attribution error, and proportionality bias further predispose employees to favor conspiratorial narratives that match their expectations or reduce emotional discomfort (19). These tendencies align with studies showing that conspiracy belief is often motivated by the desire to regain control, preserve self-esteem, or reduce uncertainty in complex environments (20). Likewise, emotional factors such as anxiety, fear, and perceived vulnerability have been shown to reinforce conspiratorial thinking as a coping mechanism in organizational life (21). Thus, while individual psychological factors are not the most influential dimension in this study, their persistent role as a cognitive and affective substrate for conspiracy belief formation is evident.

One of the most distinctive findings of the current study is the significant causal role of economic factors, despite their low overall importance in relational networks. Economic competition and individual economic security exhibited the highest D–R values, identifying them as key driving forces behind conspiracy belief formation. This supports previous research indicating that economic instability, job insecurity, and distributive inequity significantly increase employees' vulnerability to conspiracy thinking (22). When organizational members experience scarcity, financial stress, or unequal access to resources, they are more inclined to interpret managerial practices or political behaviors as conspiratorial threats (23). Economic pressure amplifies perceptions of vulnerability, increasing reliance on externalizing attributions and hidden-agenda explanations (24). This finding is consistent with studies showing that economic insecurity heightens defensive behavior, increases distrust, and intensifies political interpretations of organizational decisions (25). Therefore, while economic factors do not interact broadly with other dimensions, their fundamental role as catalysts of conspiracy delusion is both theoretically significant and practically critical.

Taken together, the findings of this study reinforce and expand upon existing theoretical and empirical knowledge regarding conspiracy belief formation in organizational settings. The convergence of socio-cultural, organizational–managerial, political, informational, psychological, and economic factors suggests that conspiracy delusion is a multidimensional phenomenon requiring coordinated interventions across structural, behavioral, and cultural domains. The results underscore the necessity of strengthening organizational transparency, enhancing participatory leadership, promoting media literacy, addressing economic vulnerabilities, and cultivating supportive socio-cultural environments to mitigate conspiracy ideation. These insights contribute to the literature by offering a comprehensive systems-level understanding of how conspiracy delusion emerges, persists, and can be prevented in governmental organizations.

This study, while comprehensive, is limited by its reliance on expert sampling, which may not fully capture the diversity of employee experiences across all governmental institutions. The qualitative phase, though rich in depth, is constrained by subjective interpretations of participants and researchers. The fuzzy DEMATEL method, although robust for causal modeling, simplifies complex social and psychological interactions into numerical representations that cannot fully account for contextual subtleties. Additionally, the study focuses on Iranian governmental organizations, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other cultural or institutional contexts.

Future studies should incorporate larger and more diverse samples of employees to validate and refine the identified factors. Longitudinal research would be valuable for understanding how conspiracy beliefs evolve over time and respond to organizational interventions. Additionally, integrating quantitative measures of psychological traits and organizational climate could provide more nuanced insights into the complex relationships highlighted in this study. Examining cross-cultural comparisons may also help determine the universality or cultural specificity of the identified causal mechanisms.

Organizations should prioritize enhancing transparency, strengthening participatory leadership practices, and improving communication infrastructures. Developing training programs focused on media literacy, critical thinking, and emotional resilience can reduce susceptibility to conspiratorial interpretations. Efforts to stabilize economic conditions, ensure equitable resource distribution, and build trust-based socio-cultural environments will also play a critical role in preventing conspiracy delusion and fostering healthier organizational climates.

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### Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

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The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

### Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

### Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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