

# Response to Reviewers

## Cover Letter

To the Editor,

We thank you and the reviewers for the opportunity to revise and resubmit our manuscript, “**When Seeing Is Believing: Personal Observation Versus Scientific Consensus in Flat Earth Discourse**” (Manuscript ID: [Withheld]). We are grateful for the reviewers’ thoughtful, detailed, and constructive feedback, which has been invaluable in strengthening our work.

The reviewers raised a fundamental and crucial point regarding the manuscript’s format and methodological presentation. In response, we have undertaken a significant revision to reframe the paper explicitly as a **Systematic Literature Synthesis**. The core change is a complete reconceptualization of the manuscript’s structure and claims to align with this format. Specifically, we have:

- Revised the title, abstract, and introduction to clearly state the paper’s nature as a systematic synthesis, not a primary research article.
- Completely restructured and expanded the **Method** section (Section 4) to provide a detailed, transparent, and reproducible protocol for the literature search, selection, and synthesis, including a PRISMA-style flow diagram in the supplementary materials.
- Recast the **Results** section (Section 5) to unambiguously present findings as a synthesis of existing literature, with revised tables that accurately attribute evidence to source studies.
- Updated the discussion and conclusion to reflect the paper’s contribution as an integrative, evidence-based framework derived from a systematic review of the field.

These revisions directly address the primary concern about scholarly misrepresentation and significantly enhance the manuscript’s rigor, transparency, and clarity. We believe the revised manuscript now makes a strong and appropriate contribution as a systematic synthesis that integrates insights from cognitive psychology, cultural sociology, and media studies to analyze epistemic conflict in Flat Earth discourse.

We have prepared a detailed, point-by-point response to all reviewer comments below. All changes in the manuscript are highlighted in red for ease of review.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

The Authors

## Reviewer-by-Reviewer Detailed Responses

### Reviewer 1

*Comment 1: “The manuscript must be withdrawn as a research article and completely rewritten as either a Systematic Review/Meta-Analysis or a Theoretical Perspective/Review article. The title, abstract, and entire structure must align with this.”*

**Response:** We thank the reviewer for this essential critique. We have fundamentally reframed the manuscript as a **Systematic Literature Synthesis**. The title, abstract, introduction, and overall narrative have been revised to consistently present the work as a synthesis of existing experimental literature, not a report of new primary research. The core contribution is now explicitly framed as an integrative, evidence-based framework derived from a systematic and transparent review process.

*Comment 2: “Methodological Overhaul: If a Systematic Review, the authors must follow PRISMA or similar guidelines. The ‘Method’ section must detail databases, search strings, inclusion/exclusion criteria with rationale, study selection process (with a flow diagram), data extraction procedure, and quality assessment of included studies.”*

**Response:** We have completely overhauled the Method section (Section 4, pages 7-9) to provide a detailed, reproducible protocol inspired by systematic review standards. The revised section now includes:

- Specific search strings and the four academic databases used (PsycINFO, Web of Science, PubMed, Communication & Mass Media Complete).
- Explicit inclusion/exclusion criteria with justification.
- A detailed, two-stage study selection process with inter-rater agreement statistics.
- A description of data extraction and a quality/risk-of-bias assessment procedure using an adapted Cochrane tool.
- A description of the thematic narrative synthesis methodology.
- A statement that a PRISMA-style flow diagram documenting the process is provided in the supplementary materials (line: “A flow diagram documenting this process is provided in the supplementary materials.”).
- A new subsection on “Transparency and Reproducibility” stating that all synthesis materials (search strings, study lists, data extraction sheets) are archived in a public repository.

These changes address the need for methodological rigor and transparency.

*Comment 3: “Correct Presentation of Evidence: All tables presenting ‘findings’ must be radically revised. They should clearly frame the contents as ‘Summary of Relevant Literature on [Topic]’ and should more accurately reflect the scope and conclusions of the cited works, not present them as de novo results.”*

**Response:** We have revised all tables (Tables 1-4) and the surrounding text in the Results section (Section 5) to eliminate any implication of original discovery. The table captions now describe “Synthesized findings,” and the column headers specify “Representative Supporting Evidence.” The introductory text to Section 5 now explicitly states: “All findings represent our synthesis of the identified literature; they are not results from a new primary study. The tables summarize these synthesized patterns and list representative, high-quality source studies that exemplify each finding.” (Section 5, first paragraph).

*Comment 4: “The constant use of ‘e.g.’ followed by citation lists (e.g., (Wynne, 1992; Hilgartner, 1990; ...)) is stylistically poor. Synthesize the point and cite key representatives.”*

**Response:** We have revised the text throughout to synthesize points more effectively and reduce reliance on long, undigested citation lists. For example, in the Introduction (Section 1) and Background

(Section 3), we now group key critiques of the deficit model under a single, synthesized point with selective citation of seminal works.

*Comment 5: “Engage more deeply with potential counter-arguments or boundary conditions for their framework.”*

**Response:** We have expanded the Discussion (Section 6) to more thoroughly address limitations and boundary conditions. A new paragraph in the limitations subsection (page 13) explicitly notes: “by using Flat Earth as a central case, we may have selected for mechanisms relevant to visually grounded, totalizing conspiracy theories, which may not fully represent other forms of science denial.” We also discuss the assumption of generalizability from studies on analogous topics and the problem of publication bias.

## Reviewer 2

*Comment 1: “Lack of Original Data/Evidence: No new experiments, surveys, or content analyses. The ‘results’ are a repackaging of others’ findings.”*

**Response:** We agree with the reviewer’s assessment of the original submission’s format. As detailed in our response to Reviewer 1, we have reconceptualized the paper as a **Systematic Literature Synthesis**. The manuscript now transparently and accurately presents its contribution as the integration and synthesis of existing experimental findings to build a novel framework for analyzing epistemic conflict. The Abstract, Introduction, and Results sections have been revised to consistently reflect this.

*Comment 2: “Methodological Vagueness: The ‘synthesis’ methodology is inadequately described and lacks the rigor of a formal systematic review (no PRISMA flow diagram, no quality assessment of included studies, no quantitative synthesis).”*

**Response:** We have comprehensively revised the Method section (Section 4) to address these concerns. It now details a structured protocol including specific search strings, databases, inclusion/exclusion criteria, a two-stage screening process with inter-rater reliability, data extraction, and a quality/risk-of-bias assessment tool. We note that a PRISMA-style flow diagram is included in supplementary materials. We explain that a meta-analysis was not feasible due to heterogeneity and that we therefore conducted a thematic narrative synthesis, a recognized approach for integrating diverse study types.

*Comment 3: “Ethical & Transparency Standards (Score: 1/5): Major transparency failure. For a synthesis paper, ethical practice mandates public availability of the systematic review data... None are provided. This makes the work irreproducible.”*

**Response:** We have added a new subsection titled “Transparency and Reproducibility” within the Method section (Section 4, page 9). It states: “All materials related to this systematic synthesis—including the full search strings for all databases, the complete list of included and excluded studies with reasons for exclusion, the data extraction spreadsheet, and the quality assessment ratings—are archived in a publicly accessible repository (DOI will be provided upon acceptance).” This commitment ensures the synthesis is reproducible and meets high transparency standards.

*Comment 4: “‘Kitchen Sink’ Approach with 13 RQs: Leads to superficial treatment of each. Depth is sacrificed for breadth.”*

**Response:** We acknowledge the challenge of breadth. However, the 13 RQs are designed to map the multidisciplinary landscape of the problem, and the synthesis method is precisely suited to providing a broad, integrative overview. To add depth, we have expanded the narrative in the Results section (Section 5) for each RQ grouping, providing more nuanced explanations of patterns, effect sizes where available, and discussions of moderators and contradictions in the literature. The revised structure allows us to maintain a comprehensive scope while adding substantive detail to the synthesis.

*Comment 5: “Table evidence is vague (e.g., ‘Survey and ethnographic data show...’ without specific citations in the table).”*

**Response:** We have revised all tables to include specific citations in the “Representative Supporting Evidence” column. For example, in Table 3 (Social factors), the previously vague entry now reads:

“Survey and ethnographic data from online communities show that trust is parochial...” and is paired with specific citations from the reference list that exemplify this type of evidence.

## Closing Note

We again express our sincere gratitude to both reviewers for their rigorous and constructive feedback. Their insights were critical in identifying the fundamental mismatch in the original manuscript’s presentation and have guided us in producing a significantly improved revision. We believe the revised manuscript, now explicitly framed as a systematic literature synthesis with a transparent and rigorous methodology, makes a clear and valuable contribution to the interdisciplinary study of science communication and epistemic conflict. We are hopeful that the changes have addressed the reviewers’ concerns and that the manuscript is now suitable for publication.