Can brands grow like conspiracy theories spread? Studying attitudes toward advertising and conspiracy beliefs

Podemos desenvolver as marcas da mesma forma que as Teorias da Conspiração? Estudando a relação entre atitude perante a publicidade e crenças conspirativas

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ABSTRACT
In a world where brands find increasing difficulties to communicate their message, in part due to the splitting consumer’s attention and in part due to the difficulty in having consumers believe their messages, we also notice everyday growth of conspiracy theories in many fields (politics, health, social relations, …) who seem to thrive and find it easier than ever to enter people’s lives and gather believers. Can marketing learn something from the success of major conspiracy theories and their facility in reaching people’s attention and earning their trust? Should it? Should marketing fear the success of conspiracy theories as they seem to result from decentralized and uncontrolled forms of communication and tribe creation? This paper sets out to acquire lessons from the success of Conspiracy Theories (CTs) that can be applied by SMEs and startups. For that purpose, a survey was used to collect primary data, using constructs that measure people’s conspiracy tendencies (generic conspiracy beliefs scale), their attitude toward advertising and their personality profile (Big Five Inventory – BFI). The data gathered was used to look for correlations. Are people with the more positive view of advertising more prone to believe in CTs? Is there some relation between BFI’s personality profiles and CT belief or negativistic views of advertising? Is there some relation between the information sources people prefer and their tendency to adopt conspiracy beliefs and/or more positive attitudes towards advertising? The results show a clear positive correlation between peoples’ conspiracy belief tendencies and their attitude towards ads. Conspiracy beliefs were modelled as a result of attitude towards ads, age, social class and belief in popular myths. These results provided hints for startups/SMEs marketing strategies, by suggesting that larger advertising budgets can be fought with strategies based on different communication channels (surely social networks) and messages centered on the most common script for conspiracy theories, “big corporations / big brother doesn’t want you to know this”.

Keywords: conspiracy theories, marketing, advertising, social networks

RESUMO
Num mundo em que as marcas encontram dificuldades crescentes em comunicar a sua mensagem, em parte devido à divisão da atenção do consumidor e, em parte, à dificuldade em fazer com que os consumidores acreditem nas suas mensagens, também notamos o crescimento constante das teorias da conspiração em muitos domínios (política, saúde, relações sociais, …), que parecem prosperar, reunir crentes e entrar na vida das pessoas de forma achar mais fácil que nunca. O marketing pode aprender algo com o sucesso das teorias da conspiração e a sua facilidade em alcançar a atenção das pessoas e ganhar a sua confiança? Deve?
O marketing deve temer o sucesso das teorias da conspiração, uma vez que parecem resultar de formas descentralizadas e descontroladas de comunicação e criação de tribos?
Este trabalho pretende adquirir lições do sucesso das Teorias da Conspiração (TCs) que possam ser aplicadas pelas PME e startups. Para o efeito, foi utilizado um inquérito para recolher dados primários, utilizando construções que medem as tendências de conspiração das pessoas (escala genérica de crenças de conspiração), a sua atitude em relação à publicidade e o seu perfil de personalidade (Big Five Inventory – BFI).
Os dados recolhidos foram usados para procurar correlações. As pessoas com uma visão mais positiva da publicidade são mais propensas a acreditar em CTs? Existe alguma relação entre os perfis de personalidade da BFI e a crença em CTs ou visões negativistas da publicidade? Existe alguma relação entre as fontes de informação que as pessoas preferem e a sua tendência para adotar crenças de conspiração e/ou atitudes mais positivas em relação à publicidade?
Os resultados mostram uma clara correlação positiva entre as tendências de conspiração dos povos e a sua atitude em relação aos anúncios. As crenças da conspiração foram modeladas como resultado da atitude em relação aos anúncios, idade, classe social e crença nos mitos populares.
Estes resultados forneceram dicas para as estratégias de marketing das startups/PMEs, sugerindo que orçamentos publicitários maiores podem ser combatidos com estratégias baseadas em canais de comunicação diversificados (certamente redes sociais) e mensagens centradas no roteiro mais comumente usado pelas teorias da conspiração, "as grandes empresas/o irmão mais velho não querem que você saiba disso".

**Palavras-chave:** teorias da conspiração, marketing, publicidade, redes sociais

1 INTRODUCTION

The rise of Conspiracy Theories’ profile in media has brought attention to a phenomenon that exists for centuries but seems to have found in nowadays world of social networks platforms and multiple parallel media the more fertile grounds ever.

Belief in CTs has been explained in the literature by primary psychopathy (March and Springer, 2019), social factors (Phadke, Samory and Mitra, 2020), Jumping to Conclusion (JCT) Bias (Pytlik, Soll and Mehl, 2020) and by social class belonging (Mao, Yang and Guo, 2020), among many other factors.

On the other hand, attitudes toward advertising have been proved to be getting more negative with time.

So, in this world where people believe the most extraordinary claims (presented by Conspiracy Theories), people also mistrust and don’t believe in advertising (including institutional advertising).

Are these the same people?

Perhaps we should look at these factors individually, in the first place.

2 CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Even though this subject became a star in recent years, conspiracy theories are not new. There is even a famous anecdote (apparently based on a true story) saying the United States of America is the result of such a unfunded story being spread among the former British colonies.

Among the many definitions of conspiracy theories, the one closer to the subject of this study, and
therefore the one adopted is “beliefs that significant events are the result of malevolent actions from powerful groups who “pull the strings” behind the scenes” (Douglas, Sutton, & Cichocka, 2017 (Adam-Troian et al., 2020)). The term “conspiracy theory” itself seems to have been introduced by Karl Popper (Allington, Buarque and Barker Flores, 2021) and it is often presented as an attempt to offer easy explanations to account for complex social phenomena, comprising multiple conspirators, who act in unison, in secret and in pursuit of some hidden plan (Baden and Sharon, 2021). Nevertheless, literature still has not presented convincing methodologies to identify conspiracy theorists, conspiratorial thinking or paranormal beliefs (Enders and Smallpage, 2019).

Conspiracy theories (CTs) are not a natural result of human activity, they have been shown to be the result of “a loose movement of alleged truth-seekers who publicly advance scientific claims at a crossroads between partial evidence, pseudo-science, and conspiracy theories. It comprises scientists, businesspeople and celebrities united by their distrust of governments and mainstream science” (Casarões and Magalhães, 2021). Literature also claims that contrary to “old time” conspiracists, purveyors of the new conspiracism make no attempt to substantiate their theories (Morone, 2020).

CTs have been important to totalitarian regimes and to would-be totalitarian political forces (Šteˇtka, Mazák and Vochocová, 2020; Allington, Buarque and Barker Flores, 2021) with many historic documented examples, from the French revolution to the totalitarian regimes in first half XX century Europe to nowadays politics in all continents. In particular, CT belief was shown to be related to populism and with populist political forces, particularly in discourses that present the masses as victims of elites’ conspiracies (Castanho Silva, Vegetti and Littvay, 2017). In fact, literature suggests right wing activism (in particular the so called alt-right) has embraced conspiracy theories and strategic disinformation more than the left, but more research is needed to reveal the magnitude of that inclination (Freelon, Marwick and Kreiss, 2020; Walter and Drochon, 2020).

CTs also influence people’s attitudes toward public health, particularly vaccination acceptance with CT believers proving to be 3.9 times less willing to take the COVID19 vaccine (Earnshaw et al., 2020; Germani and Biller-Andorno, 2020; Roozenbeek et al., 2020) or to comply with confinement measures (Maftei and Holman, 2020; Romer and Jamieson, 2020).

Very important about these CTs is the difficulty to disprove them. “Every attempt to deny a conspiracy theory can be turned into evidence for its pervasiveness, which only inflates the perception of the conspirators’ genius and power… the mind of the conspiracy theorist can hardly be changed, and surely not on mere logical grounds” (Castanho Silva, Vegetti and Littvay, 2017, p. 4).

**Attitudes towards advertising**

The way advertising is accepted and incorporated in people’s day to day life is something that can be seen as very dependent on culture with both place and time differences.
Different cultures seem to have incorporated the aggressive audiovisual advertising the TV, the cinema and the social network platforms brought to our lives in different ways. These incorporation has proven to be a path that takes its time to become accepted in the society.

Overall the consumer’s attitude towards advertising presents challenges to brand’s communication efforts and must therefore be known by managers.

**Big 5 model**

The pursuit of a model to describe and explain human personality took long time and many efforts and resulted in the Big Five Model, a cross-cultural framework that describes and explains human personality through five main traits: Extraversion, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, Agreeableness and Openness (OCEAN). This is arguably the most popular, the most used, the most widely replicated model in this field. It has been widely used in cross-cultural studies (Sulwen, 2018).

**Precursors to conspiracy theories**

It is interesting to note that belief in one conspiracy fantasy proves the person likely to believe in others and that conspiracy beliefs may influence individual action, like the decision to vote or to volunteer to political activities (Allington, Buarque and Barker Flores, 2021).

It thus becomes very relevant to know what drives people to “buy into” conspiracy theories. The literature offers several explanations to this phenomenon.

Cultural values (Hofstede’s model) showed a positive link between collectivism, and masculinity and CT beliefs (Adam-Troian *et al.*, 2020). Trust in science was negatively associated with CT beliefs on COVID19 (Agley and Xiao, 2021). The European antisemitic tradition was offered as another precursor to CT beliefs (Allington, Buarque and Barker Flores, 2021). Genre seems to have some relevant role in the phenomenon, as women were found significantly less likely than men to endorse COVID-19 conspiracy theories (Cassese, Farhart and Miller, 2020). Age, education level and vocational status also proved related to CT beliefs (Duplaga, 2020). A wide range of factors seems to predict CT belief, overall grouped in political, psychological, and structural factors (Kim and Kim, 2021) but the psychological factors are particularly intriguing.

For starters, the literature proposes that people with a more intuitive (and less analytic) thinking style a people more prone to faster decision making and jumping to conclusion bias are more prone to buy into CTs (Pytlik, Soll and Mehl, 2020; Stoica and Umbreș, 2021). It is even suggested that belief in CTs can provide several kinds of psychological benefits and everyone to some degree and in certain areas and at certain points in time actually takes up some degree of CT belief, something that is clearly different from CT creation and diffusion (Troubé, 2020).

But the literature also claims that schizotypal personality dimensions Odd Beliefs and Paranoid
Ideation, as well as social dominance orientation (SDO), right wing authoritarianism (RWA), paranormal beliefs (PB) and conspiracy mentality (CM) were also shown to have a positive influence on CT beliefs (Dyrendal, Kennair and Bendixen, 2021), while in another study psychopathological factors (schizotypy and delusion-proneness) emerged as the strongest predictors of CT beliefs (Georgiou, Delfabbro and Balzan, 2019) and Machiavellianism and primary psychopathy positively predicted general and Covid specific CT beliefs, whereas collective narcissism positively predicted Covid specific CT beliefs only (Hughes and Machan, 2021; Stoica and Umbreș, 2021). In the same line Authoritarianism also proved to be a precursor of CT beliefs (Prichard and Christman, 2020). So the literature presents us with wide support to the idea that those with aversive personalities (Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, and sadism) are more prone to entertain odd beliefs/magic thinking, be fatalistic, and distrust others and, in that way, believe in CTs (March and Springer, 2019; Walter and Drochon, 2020; Kay, 2021).

Younger males, with Unjust World beliefs and politically right-wing views, proved more likely to endorse CTs (Furnham, 2021), while COVID19 specific CTs found more believers among people with greater concerns about their own safety, and lower concerns about the safety of close others (Hornsey et al., 2021).

Social class has also been proven to significantly negatively predict individuals’ belief in conspiracy theories (Mao, Yang and Guo, 2020).

One more factor literature claims to underly conspiracist ideation was called epistemic mistrust, something that leads the “voices of authority” to be negated. Once that happens, the resulting epistemic vacuum can send individuals “down the rabbit hole” looking for answers where they are vulnerable to the biased processing of information and misinformation within an increasingly “post-truth” world (Pierre, 2020).

**Determinants of attitude towards advertising**

Literature has shown the consumers’ attitudes toward advertising results from on advertising features like credibility, informative, hedonic/pleasure and “good for economy” (Ling, Piew and Chai, 2010).

The main objective of this paper is to study the relationship (if any) between conspiracy beliefs and attitude toward advertising.

A simple hypothesis will be tested: \( h_0 \) – there is a significant and positive relationship between conspiracy beliefs and attitudes toward advertising, meaning people with a larger tendency to buy into conspiracy beliefs are also more prone to be influenced by advertising and thus show a more positive attitude.
3 METHODS

An instrument was developed to measure belief in CT, attitude towards advertising, the BIG 5 personality and demographic characteristics of repliers.

The questionnaire included GCBS to measure CTs belief. This scale was created by (Brotherton, French and Pickering, 2013), analyzed and validated by (Castanho Silva, Vegetti and Littvay, 2017; Drinkwater et al., 2020; Majima and Nakamura, 2020) and used by many studies (Maftei and Holman, 2020; Hughes and Machan, 2021) (Enders and Smallpage, 2019).

It also included a scale to measure attitudes towards advertising, which we’ll call ATT (Ling, Piew and Chai, 2010) and the Portuguese version of Big-five 44, arguably the most used scale to measure personality traits (Almeida, Brito-costa and Bem-haja, 2015; Brito Costa et al., 2016; Simões, 2016; Sulwen, 2018).

Finally, the questionnaire included a battery of demographic questions, including a scale to measure social class (Adler et al., 2000), a scale to measure the credibility people give to formal and informal sources of information (CRED), a scale to measure how people feel about popular urban myths (OTCS) and questions to measure peoples’ tolerance toward extremist political parties (2 extreme right and two extreme left): TOLERANCE.

This questionnaire was spread online with short promotional videos from May to October 2021. The posts had a call to action offering to give eBooks to all answerers.

4 RESULTS

The relatively large survey was distributed in late 2021 and 237 observations were collected, of which 52.97% respondents were female with some prevalence on younger generations (76% under 40), living in large or middle-sized towns (51.9%) similar to the general Portuguese population.

This sample viewed themselves as middle class members, but their incomes put them in the lower/middle bracket, as can be seen in the two following figures. On the left the way each respondent positioned herself on a 10-step social ladder and on the right the income brackets (Adler et al., 2000).
The qualifications level was like the general population, a little over half with some level of higher education degree. This sample exhibited a higher level of political engagement than the general population: 63.1% declared to had voted in all previous elections (80.9% in most elections), while only 6.8% voted in none.

Reliability tests revealed good and strong constructs, with Cronbach’s alpha indicators above 0.7 (ATT 0.833, GCBS 0.922, Big-five 0.713, CRED 0.744, OTCS 0.760). The exception was TOLERANCE (alpha = 0.339) and this variable was thereafter not used.

Validity tests revealed equally positive results. Convergent validity could be asserted because factor loadings for all items within a construct were more than 0.50 (except for the TOLERANCE scraped construct). Discriminant validity was also asserted because all items were allocated according to the different constructs. Therefore, the items were not overlapping, and they supported the respective constructs. Overall, the principal components analysis with VARIMAX orthogonal rotation showed acceptable results, since the KMO and Bartlett statistics produced positive outcomes (KMO 0.664 > 0.5, Bartlett > 0 with significance = 0) and the Eigenvalues for all the constructs were greater than 1.0.

These tests led to restraining the analysis to the following variables:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitude</th>
<th>Attitude towards advertising (Ling, Piew and Chai, 2010)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GCBS</td>
<td>Generic Conspiracy Belief Scale (Brotherton, French and Pickering, 2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRED</td>
<td>Credibility attributed to formal sources of information (ads, salespeople, news in mass media, commentators in mass media)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OTCs</td>
<td>Belief in popular urban myths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>BIG-five dimension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>BIG-five dimension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>BIG-five dimension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuroticism</td>
<td>BIG-five dimension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>BIG-five dimension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genre</td>
<td>Male / Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>In years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>Income bracket of the household in a scale of 5 brackets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Class</td>
<td>Self-assessment of social class in a 10 step ladder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urbanidade</td>
<td>Size of town people live in, divided in 5 types, from isolated place to Big city</td>
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<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>Professional occupation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualifications</td>
<td>Schooling level, in 5 levels from basic school to PhD</td>
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<tr>
<td>HV</td>
<td>Voting habits in all elections, from never voted to “all elections”</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Results shown higher GCBS values for the male part of this sample (2.587 vs 2.579) and higher for the younger and the older parts of the sample.
ATITUDE values showed the female part of the sample had a more accepting attitude towards advertising, while age showed no clear trend.

This was followed by an analysis of correlations between the variables, trying to identify which variables had a significant correlation with either GCBS or ATITUDE. In this analysis were considered both Pearson’s alpha statistic and the significance level. Significant correlations were considered when the level of significance (2-tailed) was higher than 0 and lower than 0.05 (Chetty, 2015). This analysis revealed positive correlations between GCBS and CRED, GCBS and Agreeableness (one of Big-five), GCBS and ATITUDE, GCBS and OTCs, and ATITUDE and CRED.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>var</th>
<th>var</th>
<th>Pearson alpha</th>
<th>sig (2-tailed)</th>
<th>Significant at</th>
<th>level of</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GCBS</td>
<td>CRED</td>
<td>0.221</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>-0.202</td>
<td>0.008</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ATITUDE</td>
<td>0.151</td>
<td>0.020</td>
<td>0.05</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OTCs</td>
<td>0.768</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ATITUDE</td>
<td>CRED</td>
<td>0.439</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A regression analysis was performed to further study the relationships between these constructs. GCBS was used as the dependent variable, in a model where it was tested whether its variance could be explained by ATITUDE, CRED, OTCs and the various demographic variables.

The model revealed an interesting capacity to explain variance in GCBS, with an adjusted R² of 0.605, indicating a strong correlation between dependent and independent variables. The ANOVA test results makes believe the null hypothesis (none of the independent variables is related to the dependent one) should be rejected as the F-test is well above the recommended value of 3.95 (17.487), with a 99% confidence interval (SIG=0.000) (Narang, D. and Chetty, 2015).

<table>
<thead>
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<th>ANOVA</th>
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This model revealed no constant but 4 variables had significant relationship with GCBS: ATITUDE, OTCs, social class and age, the only ones showing SIG values under 0.05 and so significant in a confidence interval of 95% (Narang, D. and Chetty, 2015).
From this analysis performed on this sample one can propose a model where GCBS is a result of this function:

\[
GCBS = 0.178 \times ATITUDE + 0.749 \times OTCs - 0.126 \times Social\ Class + 0.12 \times Age
\]

These results will now be discussed in the next section.

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The sole hypothesis being tested here was confirmed. There is a significant relationship between conspiracy beliefs and attitudes towards advertising. The more positive people are towards advertising, the more likely they are to have stronger conspiracy beliefs.

This can be concluded both from correlation and regression analysis. A positive correlation between the two variables was evident on both analyses, leading us to believe that people with higher tendency to adopt conspiracy beliefs also have a more positive attitude towards advertising. This is information can help the marketing efforts of startups and SMEs, companies facing larger competitors. For instance, this result would make us believe that such a company in disadvantageous situation could face larger advertising budgets with tactics similar to the ones conspiracy theories (facing the “deep state” or the illuminati) use: use different channels to reach their audience with messages based of “the truth big corporation (big pharma, big industry, big money) don’t want you to know”. This is just exploring the grasp of the options open for startups and SMEs in this situation.

The parallel between CTs spread and acceptance among people prone to “odd beliefs/magic thinking” and other kinds of fantasy acceptance, on the hand, and the way advertising has been populating peoples’ imagination with fanciful claims, often as ungrounded as any CT, on the other hand, seemed too obvious to be ignored and is now supported by this data.

The fact that both conspiracy beliefs and attitudes toward advertising correlate positively with the credibility people give to “formal” information sources (mostly media based) is also an important input for marketing strategies, proving the importance mass media still carries on the building of people’s beliefs. In a way it shows the size of the obstacle companies with low media presence face in their marketing efforts.

At the core of every conspiracy theory is the idea that a powerful person, or group of people, is secretly hatching a dastardly scheme. This data shows that startups/SMEs can take up this basic framework
and replace the “powerful person” part with “powerful incumbent company” and build equally powerful marketing strategies. Strategies that will not gain the main market but can build “tribes” with the outskirts of the market.

All in all, this first approach shows a promise of new marketing insights to be gained for startups/SMEs from the study of conspiracy theories marketing strategies.

This study was limited to one country and the sample was skewed toward the younger part of the population. This should be balanced in future studies, if more robust conclusions are to be drawn for startups/SMEs’ marketing strategies.
REFERENCES


