

# Business Conspiracy Theories

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## Abstract

This study explored one of the less studied types of conspiracy theories, namely those concerned with business, organisations and industry. In all, 400 participants completed a 60-item questionnaire which covered a number of areas such as dishonest advertising, bribery and corruption. Given the opportunity to respond “don’t know”, a large number (>25%) responded that way to very specific questions. Overall, it seemed that consumers believed drug, oil and tobacco companies were dishonest and devious in their marketing. Also, they believed many manufacturers and advertisers attempted to manipulate and trick customers. Four factors resulted from a number of analyses though correlations and regressions suggested that demographic (age, sex, class) and ideological factors (religious and political beliefs) were not strongly related to business conspiracy theories suggesting consensus. Implications for understanding how conspiracy beliefs relate to product purchase and consumer boycotts are discussed.

## Keywords

Business Conspiracy, Corruption, Dishonesty

## 1. Introduction

There has been a massive growth in the interest in conspiracy theories (CTs) since the millennium (Douglas et al., 2016; Furnham & Grover, 2021; Imhoff & Lamberty, 2017; Sutton & Douglas, 2020; Swami et al., 2011; Walter & Drochon, 2020). Just as the theories have themselves multiplied so has research into their causes and consequences (Goreis & Voracek, 2019). Whilst there has been a considerable interest into conspiracy theories about particular issues like climate change (Douglas & Sutton, 2015), and Covid (Haakonsen & Furnham, 2022) it has been possible to classify or categorise theories into particular areas/topics

like aviation, deaths and disappearances, espionage, governments, medicine, science and technology. Most researchers in this area tend to concentrate on CTs about specific topics many in medicine.

Many groups have become very concerned about the spread of CTs as they relate to many issues such as obedience to the law, political activities of one sort or the other, as well as pro- and anti-social behaviour. CTs are now seen as “spreading like wild-fire” because of social media. This study looks at a relatively neglected area, namely *commercial or business conspiracy theories*: ideas about the manufacturing and marketing of products and services, as well as general business relationships. Business CTs often involve the idea that all sorts of businesses are dishonest about their practices.

The essence of a conspiracy theory is that they are a set of beliefs where the cause of many events is considered to be due to a “secret plot” by multiple, usually evil, people working with an over-arching, selfish and ideological, goal in mind (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). CTs usually form part of a *monological* belief system: that is, people adopt a *conspiracist worldview* tending to accept or reject *all types* of conspiracy theories. Belief in conspiracies usually serves a psychological function for people who feel powerless, excluded or disadvantaged, to explain events that are difficult to comprehend (Douglas et al., 2019a, 2019b).

One area that has been relatively neglected concerns business, organisations and industry conspiracy theories. This is perhaps surprising given the amount of publicity about corruption and illegal practices in many businesses around the world (Arli, 2022). Douglas and Leite (2017) defined organizational conspiracy theories as beliefs that powerful people within the workplace act in secret to achieve some kind of malevolent objective, like hiring or firing preferred candidates. It is not difficult to imagine business conspiracy theories involving bad (criminal, immoral, greedy) individuals and organisations telling lies about themselves, their products and processes and exploiting the media to advance their cause. These ideas might include such things as lying in advertising, bribing officials, exploiting labour etc. We have called these business and commercial conspiracy theories (BCCC).

There are some relevant studies in the area of business organisations. For instance, there has been an interest in the way organizations do surveillance of their staff (Furnham & Swami, 2019; Kalmus et al., 2022). Furnham and Horne (2022) noted that nearly all researchers attempt to identify particular CTs and then explain who, why and when people believe in them. They tend to take the perspective of the skeptic or cynic rejecting CTs as misguided myths and few, if any, take the perspective of the CT advocates and theorists who claim to be insightful into the many government and “other-inspired and supported” *cover-ups* which are occurring.

A decade ago, Furnham (2013) demonstrated that many people were cynical and sceptical with regard to advertising tricks, as well as the tactics of organisations like banks and alcohol, drug and tobacco companies. The conspiracy be-

liefs factored into four identifiable clusters, labelled sneakiness, manipulative, change-the-rules and suppression/prevention. He found that people who were less religious, more left-wing, more pessimistic, less (self-defined as) wealthy, less Neurotic and less Open-to-Experience believed there was more commercial conspiracy in general. This study attempts to update that one.

In an important study [Lunardo et al. \(2023\)](#) began by summarizing the limited studies on what they called *brand conspiracy theories*, related to the concept of brand anthropomorphism. They found only 12 papers published between 1980 and 2022 which related to their idea that essentially brands are “moral agents”. Their supposition was that consumers attribute negative human traits (i.e., dark personality traits) to brands when they believe those brands are involved in conspiracy theories and essentially act against their interests. In three imaginative studies they showed that when consumers believe a brand is involved in some sorts of conspiracy, they perceived them as having a Machiavellian personality, which decreases their trust and purchase intentions. Further, these beliefs were modified by external locus of control beliefs,

## 2. This Study

This study has two research aims. The first is to develop a comprehensive and up-to-date questionnaire that covered business and commercial conspiracy theories. The questionnaire was based on [Furnham \(2013\)](#) but we removed and added a number of items based on the current literature. We were particularly interested in its factor structure and internal reliability: that is what themes there were in BCCCs. We believe it is important to develop an up-to-date and comprehensive questionnaire for research in this field. The second was to examine the correlates of these beliefs looking at demographic factors (sex, age, education), ideological factors (religious and political beliefs), and self-ratings. This helps to understand the development and maintenance of these particular beliefs. We recognized also that we should assess the extent to which respondents could indicate the extent to which they did not know, rather than omit the item or indicate a mid-point scale. Our interest was in which of these personal factors was most closely associated with BCCC.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Participants

A total of 400 participants completed the questionnaire: 207 were men and 193 were women. They ranged in age from 18 to 76 yrs, with the mean age being 40.76 years ( $SD = 14.06$  years). All had secondary school education and around half were graduates. In total, 45% were single and 40% married. In all 72% classified themselves as ethnically white, and 12% black. Participants rated their beliefs on two scales: Religiousness (1 = Not at all to 9 = Very,  $M = 3.69$ ,  $SD = 2.90$ ), Politics (1 = Conservative to 9 = Liberal,  $M = 6.14$ ,  $SD = 2.23$ ). Optimist 1 = Not at all to 9 = Very,  $M = 6.12$ ,  $SD = 2.05$ . They were all fluent in English.

### 3.2. Measures

*Consumer attitudes* This questionnaire had the following instructions:

*Some people are deeply cynical and sceptical about how many companies operate. Others are quite happy to accept the fact that most companies operate within the law and are both honest and “above board” in their advertising and manufacturing. This questionnaire asks you to read a number of statements used before in research projects and to indicate the extent you agree with them. You also have the option of saying you Don’t Know. Please indicate the extent to which you agree-disagree with the following.*

### 3.3. Procedure

Data were collected on Prolific, to obtain a reasonable sample. Participants are paid volunteers who have to fulfill various criteria. The questionnaire took an average of 15 minutes to complete. Participants were paid the standard rate (\$3.50) for this task. Data was collected in the first week of 2023. Data was inspected and cleaned before analysis.

## 4. Results

**Table 1** provides a breakdown of the answers for every question presented. There was a notable group of participants who chose the “don’t know” option in their responses. Specifically, questions numbered 11, 12, 15, and 38 saw more than 100 respondents selecting “don’t know”. This represents a quarter of all participants. As a result, we removed these items from analysis due to variance considerations.

Next, there were those items which attracted the highest (most disagreement) score: In all five scores over 7.25 namely 50, 10, 13, 37 and 23. There was no apparent theme in these items. *Third*, there are similarly a number of items which attracted low (most agreement) scores under 3.90 namely 58, 54, 5, 27, 15.

We then computed a number of factor analyses (orthogonal and oblique rotation; using/not using mean substitutes for don’t knows) to determine the underlying structure of the items. After inspection we decided on a varimax rotated analysis and chose items that loaded  $> .50$  on the factors with an Eigenvalue  $> 2.00$ . This revealed four factors. The first showed the highest loading items as 42, 40, 26, 45, 43, 8, 22, 32, 44 and 15. This was labelled *Dishonest Practices* and had an Alpha of .90. The second factor had six items loading  $> .50$  which were 35, 23, 41, 36, 34, 31. This was labelled *Bribery and Corruption* and had an Alpha of .85. The third factor had five item loading  $< .50$  which were 50, 57, 52, 10, 29. It was labelled *Marketing Tricks* and had an Alpha of .82. The final factor had four items loading  $> .50$  which were 3, 17, 6, 14. This was labelled *Profit Motive* which had an Alpha of .85.

We correlated these factors with participant demography (sex, age, education), ideology (religious and political beliefs). Effect sizes were small. Using the factors scores as the independent/criterion variable we then computed four regressions with dependent variables being demography and ideology. Three were significant but accounted for less than 7% of the variance.

**Table 1.** Means and SDs for each item and number of Don't Knows.

	Mean	SD	Don't know
1) I trust nearly all labels on food products.	4.20	2.301	9
2) Most companies do not mind breaking the law; they just see fines and lawsuits as a cost of doing business.	6.58	2.206	22
3) Most businesses are more interested in making profits than in serving consumers.	7.36	1.798	4
4) Many companies see consumers as puppets to manipulate.	6.94	2.056	10
5) Nearly all businesses are strictly law abiding.	3.68	2.266	12
6) Manufacturers do not care about consumers once they have bought the product.	6.37	2.242	12
7) Sales people are nearly always completely insincere.	5.31	2.450	17
8) Advertisers still place the word "sex" very subtly in advertisements to attract your attention.	5.15	2.657	76
9) Drug companies bribe doctors with presents and conferences to prescribe their drugs.	6.78	2.294	47
10) Junk mailers use "sneaky tactics" to get people to open the envelope.	7.52	1.980	17
11) <b><u>Tobacco companies actually approve of cigarette smuggling</u></b>	<b>4.40</b>	<b>2.717</b>	<b>183</b>
12) <b><u>EEC regulations tried and succeeded in protecting consumers.</u></b>	<b>4.70</b>	<b>2.160</b>	<b>151</b>
13) Many food and fashion brands illegally exploit third world labour	7.48	1.870	21
14) Most companies will sacrifice their integrity to make a profit.	6.80	2.048	9
15) <b><u>Many vegan and vegetarian foodstuffs actually contain animal products</u></b>	<b>3.86</b>	<b>2.494</b>	<b>116</b>
16) There are plenty of laws to protect all consumers.	4.26	2.305	23
17) Most businesses will cut any corner they can to improve profit margins.	7.07	1.892	5
18) Most companies walk a fine line between legal and illegal practices.	6.50	2.196	18
19) Businesses are willing to throw away long-term customer relationships for short-term profit.	6.06	2.186	22
20) It is hard for an honest company to succeed in today's competitive world.	6.30	2.373	19
21) Most food, health, financial product advertising (TV, Radio, Print) tells many lies.	6.59	2.069	21
22) Even with strict legislation many food companies do not say what is actually in their products.	6.00	2.326	37
23) Many big international companies bribe politicians to get what they want	7.38	1.893	25
24) Most brands say they care about Global warming but do not care at all	6.73	2.089	25
25) Nearly all big multi-nationals avoid paying fair taxes	7.18	2.166	32
26) Advertisers often illegally flash subliminal (below consciousness) images in television advertisements.	4.89	2.664	68
27) Supermarkets use undetectable gasses (smells) in shops to change a person's mood to encourage sales.	3.83	2.682	88
28) Mobile devices and other technologies listen to private conversations in order to facilitate advertisement targeting on the web.	6.46	2.497	29
29) Shops often trick you with pricing cons: i.e., putting up prices for a few minutes, then down claiming big discounts.	7.00	2.096	20
30) Advertisers disguising their ads in envelopes appearing to be official government documents.	6.20	2.520	61
31) Tobacco and alcohol companies cooperate in their marketing practices to reinforce consumption of both at the same time	6.23	2.303	95
32) Drug companies falsify their data on the effectiveness of their drugs	5.53	2.461	57

**Continued**

33) Companies sell medically prescribed drugs which they know are addictive	7.27	1.938	23
34) Tobacco companies trying to get around the advertising laws in every country	6.95	2.178	62
35) Various companies (mining, tobacco, drug) bribe politicians in any country they can to get laws passed to protect them	7.27	1.997	37
36) Oil Companies deliberately suppress better car technology that uses less fuel	6.37	2.349	69
37) <b><u>Oil companies encourage politicians to invade countries to take their oil</u></b>	<b><u>5.58</u></b>	<b><u>2.646</u></b>	<b><u>91</u></b>
38) <b><u>Governments ban certain third world product not because they are unsafe but because they complete too well.</u></b>	<b><u>5.39</u></b>	<b><u>2.469</u></b>	<b><u>101</u></b>
39) Most green claims in advertising are intended to mislead rather than to inform customers.	5.82	2.264	49
40) Government guidelines set poor diet guidelines so that the medical industry generates drug and treatment revenue in unhealthy patients.	5.09	2.671	46
41) Oil companies intentionally ignore oil reserves to create the illusion of scarcity that keeps prices high.	6.48	2.438	65
42) Manufacturers add illegal additives to foods (i.e., some brand of crisps) to make them addictive.	5.05	2.700	72
43) Effective alternative medicines are rejected by medical councils to maximize revenue.	5.88	2.624	51
44) Drug companies get normal behaviour to be called a “disorder” so they can invent drugs to cure it.	5.12	2.631	51
45) Food companies are still dishonest about genetically modified food.	6.01	2.345	51
46) Banks manipulate inflation and other figures to make more profit.	6.14	2.353	55
47) Lawyers knowingly lie all the time on behalf of their clients.	6.28	2.367	31
48) Shops faking “sell-by” dates to make more profit.	5.04	2.494	62
49) Jews working in high-power jobs in the media spreading propaganda to gain support for Israel	2.94	2.510	90
50) Supermarkets design their stores to encourage to buy more than is on your shopping list.	8.05	1.528	7
51) Malls and shopping centres are deliberately designed to disorientate you.	5.54	2.431	64
52) All stores use well-known “pricing tricks” to fool you into buying.	7.28	1.833	17
53) Arms manufactures are happy to sell arms to potential enemies of this country.	6.87	2.221	53
54) We have enough laws in this country to protect all consumers.	3.61	2.434	28
55) Tech companies deliberately produce products such as cell phones that do not last you more than two years to get you to buy another one.	7.18	2.100	16
56) Products overstate or exaggerate how its “green” they are.	6.92	1.859	26
57) Store cards are used to target you to buy more.	7.47	1.881	24
58) Cameras in stores are there to help them understand how people choose, not to catch shop-lifters	3.27	2.238	54
59) Most products that claim to be recyclable are not.	5.23	2.513	61
60) Because green claims are so exaggerated, consumers would be better off if such claims in advertising were eliminated	4.84	2.538	72

## 5. Discussion

As noted by Lunardo et al., (2023), ten years after Furnham (2013) made the

point, commercial or brand conspiracy theories have been seriously under-investigated compared to the many other types particularly medical and political conspiracies. There is no obvious reason for this state of affairs and this paper attempts to correct that issue.

Most people recognize that commercial organisations have to be very competitive and imaginative to survive and thrive in the modern world. This inevitably means exploiting advertising and marketing techniques which while they might increase sales, may be considered to be unethical but not necessarily illegal, though that can be a thin line. Furthermore, they also recognize through regular media exposure that some individuals and organisations actually break the law in attempts to make money. People may be cynical, sceptical, disinterested or enthusiastic about business practices in the pursuit of profitability.

This study suggests that many people are highly sceptical about many business practices. Some items that participants most agreed with were benign: *Supermarkets design their stores to encourage to buy more than is on your shopping list*, and *Junk mailers use “sneaky tactics” to get people to open the envelope*. However, others were much more cynical about business practices such as their strong agreement with items such as: *Many big international companies bribe politicians to get what they want*; *Nearly all big multi-nationals avoid paying fair taxes*; *Companies sell medically prescribed drugs which they know are addictive*; and *Many food and fashion brands illegally exploit third world labour*.

It is also apparent that people understand the purpose of advertising and general business practices in a free market. They understand and appear to accept the fact that advertisers, marketing people and shops use techniques that encourage sales. Hence they agreed that: *Store cards are used to target you to buy more*; *All stores use well know “pricing tricks” to fool you into buying*; *Shops often trick you with pricing cons. i.e., putting up prices for a few minutes, then down claiming big discounts*; and *Tech companies deliberately produce products such as cell phones that do not last you more than two years to get you to buy another one*. This could be seen as healthy scepticism and weariness about the dubious world of advertising and marketing.

Despite many different analyses, the factor analytic results did not suggest any very clear and distinctive factors such as issues very specifically concerned with bribery, tax evasion, false advertising. It may have been better to devise a number of these categories and then devise items for each. On the other hand, this may simply indicate that people are either overall deeply cynical, or perhaps skeptical about numerous business practices. Of course, there is the question of whether these ideas could be called conspiracies, except when organisations flout the law and make false claims. It is not certain whether people believe there are hidden cartels with secret plots. Rather it seems people are simply deeply sceptical about what they are told by certain companies in particular sectors.

We believe the inclusion of a *Don't Know* option is important in this, as in all studies. The respondent faced with an item he or she does not understand or have sufficient knowledge about can respond in various ways like omit the item, use the mid-point scale or randomly respond. We believe this captures important data, about an individual's knowledge and beliefs though it leads to various statistical problems in the analysis.

## 6. Limitations

Some of the items may be best re-phrased, some dropped and others included, particularly those with high "Don't Know" scores or those which are particularly skewed to either end of the scale. Although we dropped items which had more than 100 Don't Know responses, stricter exclusion criteria could have been applied. However, both the spread of scores (mean and SDs) suggested a reasonable distribution of response. Next, it would have been very interesting to have more information about the participants like their gender-role identification as well as more about their political beliefs and behaviours. Our measure of political beliefs was a single measure, while those interested in measuring political beliefs often assess various issues like voting preferences and history, party membership, general interest in politics, taking part in demonstrations and discussions, protest participation, rally attendance, internet activity and financial contributions. Whilst many of these different measures are highly intercorrelated there are different correlates of each. Ideally in this study, we would have assessed many more aspects of the participants' political beliefs. Finally, our sample though a reasonable size was limited in a number of ways in terms of culture, education and social class. Finally, it would have been interesting to examine the personality and social attitudes of participants such as their authoritarianism or conservative to see how they related to BCCC.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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