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## **Consumer-Brand Relationships in Conspiratorial Narratives**

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This paper takes a poststructuralist view to analyze conspiratorial consumer-brand relationships. Drawing on literature in the social sciences and a discourse analysis of 30 conspiracy narratives retrieved online, we show how consumers and brands can play the role of victim or culprit.

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# Consumer-Brand Relationships in Conspiratorial Narratives

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

To summarize this research, I show that conspiracy theories infuse marketplaces, leading to specific conspiratorial relationships between consumers and brands. Discourse analysis of 30 consumption-related conspiracy narratives available on the Internet --in English and in French, underlines that consumers and brands can play the integrative roles of the culprit and the victim.

In the realm of consumer research, a conspiracy theory can be defined as an alternative, explanatory, non-refutable, and logical narrative about a brand-related event which is rooted in consumer's belief that nothing happens by accident, and that there must be a secret and powerful group of people pulling the strings behind the scene. It therefore differs from rumors, (urban) legends, hoaxes, and gossip. Marketers are particularly interested in understanding and anticipating conspiracy theories in that these conspiratorial narratives happen outside of marketing channels of communication and therefore out of marketers' control. Moreover it is difficult to persuade conspiracists that their theory is unfounded once they start to believe in it (Nyhan, Reifler, and Ubel 2013; Sunstein and Vermeule 2009). Reasons for such hardly debunkable narratives might be, among others, that some theories revealed to be true (Keeley 1999). To Aupers (2012) and Jane and Fleming (2014), conspiracy thinking carries a cultural logic of modernity that is taken to its extreme through the accumulation of proofs in a methodological and rational way, finally leading to a manifestation of distrust and "fashionable conspiracism" (Aaronovitch 2010, 3). Recent increase of conspiracy thinking might be understood as a consequence of new technologies of information, and more particularly the advent of the Internet (Barkun 2003). The abundant flows of online information would decentralize all forms of discourses and favor echo chambers in which ideas and theories are no longer challenged, but only strengthen (Pariser 2011; Sunstein 2009).

Several convincing reasons might lead consumers to develop conspiracy thinking. For example, some business traditions such as special-interest lobbying that are characteristic of the late 20th and early 21st centuries can only feed conspiracy thinking since on many occasions particular industries -- especially the tobacco industry -- have been accused and found guilty of conspiring against the law (Brandt 2009). Another plausible reason for the belief in conspiracy is to be found in the Goliath effect (Fine 1985). Like the too big to fail theory in economics, there might be a too big to be honest consumer theory developed regarding the size of major companies such as Nestlé, Google, Amazon, Procter & Gamble, Monsanto, Walmart, ExxonMobil, or Toyota. When one of these giants is involved in a scandal, such as the recent Volkswagen emissions scandal, consumers might give more credit to conspiracy theorists and to the possibility of hegemonic entities that try to deceive and control them.

In order to better understand conspiratorial relationships between consumers and brands, 30 consumption-related conspiracy narratives, available online, were analyzed through a poststructuralist perspective (Moisander, Valtonen, and Hirsto 2009; Thompson and Hirschman 1995). Analysis was also structured around the idea that characters and storylines structure texts and semiotic relationships (Hirschman 2000). We have therefore used Greimas' (1966) concepts of acteur and actant. Results underline the different roles that consumers and brands can play, and more particularly two integrative roles that gather all the other roles: the victim and the culprit. Most conspiracy narratives in the field of consumption involve a cul-

prit/victim relationship between consumers and brands/companies. From the analysis, we find that a majority of conspiracy theories make consumers the victims, while brands, companies, or industries are considered the guilty party (e.g., McDonald's ice cream machine conspiracy). We also find narratives in which the company is a victim of consumers' conspiracy. These narratives often appear as official counter-narratives to answer conspiracy theories that directly attack the company (e.g., Phil Schiller from Apple about the removal of the audio jack). Two other kinds of consumer/brand relationships are the culprit/culprit and victim/victim situations. In these cases, events are interpreted either as the consequence of collaboration between consumers and brands/companies/industries (e.g., black market of Hollywood movies in Iran organized by consumers themselves and the USA to pervert Islam, local culture, and Americanize the whole world) or as the unfortunate cause of both consumer and brand misfortune (e.g., Malaysia Airlines flights 370 and 17 in 2014, allegedly shot down for secret political reasons). Finally, the brand can sometimes benefit from conspiracy theories and even feed them. For example, the Newton community considers Microsoft to be a conspirator (Muniz and Schau 2005). Drawing on this narrative in which Microsoft is the villain, Apple takes the roles of both the victim and the hero fighting the suppressor of superior technology. These conspiracy narratives are even more plausible to the audience when the media announces that Microsoft shares consumers' information with the NSA whereas Apple refuses to collaborate with the FBI in order to protect its consumers' privacy.

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