



# Understanding conspiratorial thinking (CT) within public relations research: Dynamics of organization-public relationship quality, CT, and negative megaphoning

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## ABSTRACT

Research on conspiracy theories in the fields of social and political psychology has identified dispositional and situational factors that lead to belief in conspiracy theories. However, there is still a lack of research on how and why individuals engage in conspiratorial thinking (CT) within the area of public relations. This study views CT as individuals' propensity to consider malicious events and circumstances as secret plots initiated by a powerful organization for its self-serving purposes and applies CT to a government-public relationship context. Using a survey dataset collected from a nationally representative sample of Australia citizens ( $n = 542$ ), this study examines CT about the Australian government using five survey items that measure CT. CT was found to be significant in fully mediating the relationship between organization-public relationship quality and negative megaphoning.

## 1. Introduction

During the early wave of COVID-19 restrictions in 2020, a series of public protests took place in Australia; they were seemingly against COVID-19 lockdown measures but also brought forward different conspiracy theories. One such theory suggested a link believed to exist between COVID-19 and 5 G technology (Meese et al., 2020). While conspiracy theories about wireless technology have been around for many years, anti-5 G groups took the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to spread new ones, one of which alleged that Bill Gates “not only caused the outbreak but also somehow, used 5 G to do it” (Heilweil, 2000, para. 19). The efforts made by social media platforms to block accounts from sharing conspiracy theories (Andrews, 2020) raised further suspicion among certain groups of people that those conspiracy theories could be true.

A study in Australia found that almost all Australians (95.1%) had heard of one or more conspiracy theories from a list of 15 (Marques et al., 2022). Conspiracy theories are defined as “attempts to explain the ultimate cause of an event (usually one that is political or social) as a secret plot by a covert alliance of powerful individuals or organizations, rather than an overt activity or natural occurrence” (Douglas & Sutton, 2008, p. 211). They are “presently unverified, highly implausible, based

on weak to no evidence, and often rely on arguments that are not falsifiable” (Mckernan et al., 2023, p. 1103).

To date, extensive research in psychology has identified different dispositional factors (e.g., partisanship) and situational factors (e.g., election results) that explain individuals' beliefs in conspiracy theories (e.g., Edelson et al., 2017; Oliver & Wood, 2014; Uscinski, 2018). Yet, there remains a lack of research that explains how and why individuals subscribe to conspiracy theories about particular organizations. Thus, this study examines conspiratorial thinking (CT) as individuals' propensity to consider malicious events and circumstances as secret plots initiated by a powerful organization for its self-serving purposes. Through the lens of public relations, it also explores organization-public relationship quality (OPRQ) as an antecedent to and negative megaphoning (NM) as an outcome of CT.

This study suggests that it is important to study CT as well as its antecedent(s) and consequence(s) in the context of public relations for the following reasons. First, individuals subscribe to conspiracy theories as they attribute agency and intentionality when encountering malicious events (e.g., Douglas et al., 2016). Issues and crises, which cause problematic consequences for an organization or its publics, often emerge as malicious events. As public relations practice is responsible for managing issues and crises, it is crucial to understand how and why

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individuals consider, evaluate, adopt, or communicate conspiracy theories. For example, at times when crisis responsibility is unclear (e.g., Y. I. Lee et al., 2021), publics may turn to unofficial accounts to fulfill their information needs (Nekmat & Kong, 2019). Therefore, conspiracy theories emerge from information created, consumed, and shared by individuals when organizations are involved in malicious events. Yet, current research has yet to explain how and why some individuals become inclined to believe in conspiracy theories when encountering such events.

Second, according to Uscinski (2018), conspiracy theories are speculative explanations which attribute the causes of a malicious event to a plot initiated by powerful forces in society. At the level of organizations, especially when organizations are seen to have power over their publics (e.g., Berger, 2005; Roper, 2005), it is important for organizations to strive to foster positive organization-public relationships (OPRs) to achieve mutual understanding and mutually beneficial outcomes (Brown & White, 2010; Cheng, 2018; Huang, 2001a, 2001b). Pre-existing positive OPRs help to buffer publics' negative interpretation of and reaction to organizational crises. In contrast, pre-existing negative OPRs reinforce the negative views of organizations during crises (Coombs & Holladay, 2001). Hence, organization-public relationship quality (OPRQ) could be a significant factor in determining individuals' inclination to accept or reject official accounts from the organizations involved in malicious events.

Lastly, individuals engage in CT about a certain organization when they find its actions to be problematic (Chon et al., 2022). To cope with these problematic actions, they engage in damaging behaviors such as negative megaphoning to also raise others' problem perceptions about the organization (Kim & Grunig, 2011; Kim & Ni, 2013). Douglas et al. (2017) suggested that more research on the consequences of conspiracy beliefs<sup>1</sup> is needed. Exploring negative megaphoning as an outcome of CT will help to explicate the extent to which CT results in a behavior or behavioral intention against an organization.

This study undertakes two steps. First, based on literature on public relations and conspiracy theory, this study defines conspiratorial thinking (CT) as individuals' propensity to consider malicious events and circumstances as secret plots initiated by a powerful organization for its self-serving purposes and applies CT to the context of public relations (i.e., government-public relationships). Second, it examines organization-public relationship quality as an antecedent to and negative megaphoning as an outcome of CT. Research associating conspiracy theories with organizations has only been done in the context of employee-organization relationships in organizational psychology (e.g., Douglas & Leite, 2017; van Prooijen & de Vries, 2016). However, most conspiracy theories are related to political and social events (Douglas & Sutton, 2008) where political entities such as the government are believed as the powerful actors involved, signaling that more research on CT should be conducted in the context of government-public relationships. Hence, this study examines the Australian government as an organization related to political and social events to understand the way in which CT emerge. To achieve this, it uses a survey dataset collected from a nationally representative sample of Australian citizens (n = 542).

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Conspiracy theories, misinformation, rumours, and gossip

While conspiratorial thinking is the focal construct of this study, related terms, including conspiracy theories, misinformation, rumors and gossip, should be explained for the purpose of conceptual clarity.

<sup>1</sup> Beliefs in conspiracy theories refer to individuals' acceptance of conspiratorial accounts. Meanwhile, conspiratorial thinking (CT) examined in this study refer to individuals' propensity or predisposition to "explain events as conspiracies" (Imhoff et al., 2022, p. 392).

Conspiracy theories have been published in various sources from different disciplines since the 1970 s, ranging from law (e.g., Marcus, 1977) to psychology (e.g., McCauley & Jacques, 1979). Research on psychology has identified factors that explain the belief in secret plots between organizations and powerful people to achieve self-interest goals (Douglas et al., 2017; Douglas, Sutton, et al., 2019; Wood & Douglas, 2015); these factors include the tendency to attribute agency and intentionality when experiencing malicious events (Douglas et al., 2016). Douglas et al. (2017) explained that the belief in secret plots can be driven by three types of motives: epistemic (i.e., the need to understand the environment), existential (i.e., the need to feel safe and in control of the environment) and social (i.e., the need to maintain a positive image of oneself and his/her social group).

Unlike other related concepts such as misinformation, rumors, and gossip, conspiracy theories refer to accounts that explain how a group of actors work together in secret to reach malevolent or sinister goals (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018; Wood et al., 2012), with emphasis on the fact that the event has happened and that its cause has been attributed to a group of actors acting secretly. Misinformation is defined as the publication of wrong information without meaning to be wrong or having a purpose to deceive while disinformation is false information designed to deliberately mislead (De Coninck et al., 2021). The concept of rumors is understood as unverified and ambiguous information that circulates to help people make sense and manage risk (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007). Gossip is informal communication about intimate and personal information through an informal network (Mills, 2010).

In the field of communication, conspiracy theories are understood as "alternative explanations of historical or ongoing events claiming that people or groups with sinister intentions are engaged in conspiratorial plotting" (Mahl et al., 2022, p. 2) and "a speculative explanation for an event that involves elite individuals secretly colluding for their interests, rather than the public interest" (Konkes & Lester, 2017, p. 827). Kim and Cao (2016) claimed that conspiracy theories emerge from the belief that historical and social events "are the result of concerted and conscious actions of powerful, highly organized, and secretive groups that withhold the truth from the public" (p. 3809). The topic of conspiracy theories has recently gained attention in the public relations discipline. Gil de Zúñiga and Kim (2022) associated conspiracy theories with "pseudo-information" which they defined as "an umbrella term to encompass all kinds of incorrect information, regardless of its ultimate intent to harm" (p. 3).

However, as some scholars have noted, "some conspiracy theories may turn out to be true later" (Toepfl et al., 2023, p. 1128). Yet, there is a lack of public relations research that focuses on individuals' conspiratorial thinking (CT), which will be explained in the following section.

### 2.2. Understanding conspiratorial thinking (CT) within public relations

People who believe in conspiracy theories tend to seek cognitive closure at a time where events lack clear official explanations (Marchlewska et al., 2018), to consider the official evidence or explanations to be incoherent (Jamil & Rousseau, 2011) or to simply be reluctant to receive or accept official explanations (Wood, 2017). Conspiratorial thinking (CT) (also known as "conspiratorial predispositions") is defined as an underlying worldview that some events are the product of conspiracy (Edelson et al., 2017) and a cognitive effort to explain some events as being caused by powerful groups and people who conceal their roles and work in secret (Miller et al., 2016). Federico et al. (2018) defined conspiratorial thinking as "a general propensity to think in terms of conspiracies about social events" (p. 930), a concept which deviates from general conspiracy-theory endorsement. Endorsement of general conspiracy theories is also known and measured as "conspiracy suspicions" (Wood, 2017), and deviates from CT. CT is referred to as "conspiracy mindset" and "conspiracy mentality", reflecting some individuals' predisposition to "explain events as conspiracies" (Imhoff et al., 2022, p. 392).

Conspiratorial thinking (CT) is related to the process of motivated reasoning (e.g., Miller et al., 2016; Pennycook & Rand, 2019; Saunders, 2017), also known as directional reasoning. Motivated reasoning develops when people have a conclusion before finding evidence necessary to support it (Saunders, 2017). Some individuals are inclined to subscribe to certain conspiracy theories due to their need for cognitive closure; to reduce cognitive dissonance between existing beliefs and new evidence; others will tend to accept confirming evidence and be critical towards or reject disconfirming evidence (Leman & Cinnirella, 2013). Even the same evidence can be interpreted differently by those who endorse a conspiracy theory and those who do not endorse it to avoid cognitive dissonance (Leman & Cinnirella, 2013). Beliefs in conspiracy theories serve both ideological and psychological needs (Miller et al., 2016). Certain factors will lead to conspiratorial thinking aligning with personal political ideology.

Research on conspiracy theories, specifically on individual and social/structural factors that lead to endorsing them, show a lack of studies focusing on organization-public relationship. According to Kramer (1999) the antecedents and consequences of both individual and collective human behaviors within organizational settings should be studied because they affect the dynamics of organizations as complex social systems. Additionally, Schreven (2018) noted that while most conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists arise in the context of social problems, individuals also experience hierarchical and hegemonic structures within their workplaces. This explains why some organizations are accused of acting in secrecy to engage in malicious events and why some people decide to endorse or speak up about conspiracy theories related to those organizations. Although many organizations relate to stakeholders as equal partners (Taylor & Kent, 2014), it is inevitable that some stakeholders perceive themselves as powerless, and see powerful people or groups within the organization as the perpetrators of malicious events. Therefore, it is important to examine individuals' propensity to believe in conspiracy theories related to particular organizations (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). This might also help to address how and why particular organizations and entities are more susceptible to the harmful effects of conspiracy theories and cascades.

Based on current research on conspiracy theories and the impact of conspiracy theories on organizations, this study examines conspiratorial thinking in the context of organization-public relationships. As such, it examines conspiratorial thinking (CT) as *individuals' propensity to consider and explain malicious events and circumstances as secret plots initiated by a powerful organization for its self-serving purposes* using five measurement items (see details in Methods). From a public relations perspective, Chon et al. (2022) described CT as "skeptical, highly self-motivated, and overly simplified mindset that considers other individuals or groups as plotting to jeopardize desirable objectives" (p. 6) and used two survey items to measure individuals' CT related to food safety issues. However, the two items used by Chon et al. (2022) referred to conspiratorial thinking about food companies in general and their involvement in hiding information about GM foods and additives risks to consumers. As Chon et al. (2022) noted in the section of limitations and future research, the use of only two items in the study "may cause reliability and validity issues of the items to accurately gauge conspiratorial thinking on the food issue" (p. 16). Thus, they recommended further development of the CT variable with multiple items to offer deeper insights into the variable and this study is responding to their call.

### 2.3. Organization-public relationship quality (OPRQ)

Current research on conspiracy theories highlights the effects of trust and distrust as they precede conspiratorial thinking (CT) (e.g., Hawley, 2019; Kramer, 1999; van Prooijen et al., 2022). Kramer (1999) argued that the pervasiveness of distrust in institutions is reflected in the number of people who believe in conspiracy theories about those institutions. In the same vein, Hawley (2019) argued that conspiracy

theorists tend to show "a distinctive pattern of distrust in standard sources of information which other people rely upon, such as mainstream news media" and "a heightened degree of trust in one's own capacities to see through the façade and understand what's going on" (p. 974). van Prooijen et al. (2022) argued that people who distrust powerful institutions and endorse conspiracy theories about them also have lower trust in their interpersonal relationships, which in time leads to a range of negative societal outcomes. In an organizational setting, conspiracy theories such as allegations that managers conspire to benefit themselves at the expense of employees could also affect behaviors such as cooperation (van Prooijen et al., 2022). Consequently, distrust is in part caused by a discrepancy between walk and talk. When powerful actors and institutions such as governments and politicians claim to have people's best interests at heart but do not act in line with those interests, they foster the development of conspiracy theories related to them (Hawley, 2019).

Although the relationship between trust and distrust in institutions and conspiratorial thinking (CT) has been established (e.g., Hawley, 2019; Kramer, 1999; van Prooijen et al., 2022), trust and distrust alone do not explain the relational nature of the interactions between an organization and its stakeholders. Moreover, empirical research on trust and belief in conspiracy theories has a limitation: trust has been measured as a reflective indicator with single-item measures for different institutions such as the government, law enforcement, the media, and people in general (Miller et al., 2016) rather than as a formative indicator with multiple items to explain trust as a latent variable (e.g., Diamantopoulos & Sigauw, 2006). Therefore, the effects of trust and other associated factors in individuals' determining conspiratorial thinking (CT) about a specific organization could be further developed. Indeed, in the context of organization-public relationships, trust and distrust only reflect one aspect but not all aspects of one's relationship with an organization. Beyond the concepts of trust and distrust, the concept of relationship emphasizes the importance of general mutual understanding and benefits to meet the expectations of both an organization and its stakeholders (Ledingham, 2003).

Huang (2001) argued that a large volume of research had conceptually and empirically established that "a relationship is composed of more than one relational dimension" and that the relational dimensions should measure relationship as "a subjective experience rather than objective quality" (p. 65). Hence, Huang (2001) developed four factors (also known as relational dimensions) to conceptualize and measure organization-public relationship (OPR) quality: control mutuality, trust, relational satisfaction and relational commitment.

First, the notion of control mutuality describes the distribution of power in an OPR and is defined as "the degree to which parties agree on who has the rightful power to influence one another" (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p. 13). This concept reminds practitioners to use two-way communication to produce control mutuality for mutually beneficial relationships. Second, trust is defined as "one party's level of confidence in and willingness to open oneself to the other party" (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p. 14). A lack of trust in organizations could cause stakeholders to engage in negative behaviors (such as the reluctance to engage with an organization). Third, relational satisfaction is described as "the extent to which one party feels favorably toward the other because positive expectations about the relationship are reinforced" (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p. 14). It refers to perceptions of equitable rewards that outweigh costs in a relationship. Lastly, relational commitment is defined as "the extent to which one party believes and feels that the relationship is worth spending energy to maintain and promote" (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p. 14).

Extensive research has been published on OPR as antecedents or outcomes (Cheng, 2018). The publications that focus on OPR as an antecedent look at the way in which stakeholders assess organization-public relationship quality (OPRQ) and how it influences their attitudes and outcomes toward organizations (Cheng, 2018; Ki & Hon, 2007). For instance, in crisis situations, OPRQ affects attribution of responsibility (Brown & White, 2010) and communicative action in

favor of or in opposition to an organization (Chon & Park, 2021). In the same line, pre-existing positive OPRQ serve as a buffer publics' negative interpretation of and reaction to the organizational crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2001, p. 324). In contrast, pre-existing negative OPRQ reinforce the publics' negative view of the organization (Coombs & Holladay, 2001).

This study proposes that one's relationship with an organization, which is determined by "subjective experience rather than objective quality" (Huang, 2001, p. 65) and comprises mutual understanding and benefits, could reduce conspiratorial thinking. When an individual perceives an organization to fail in pursuing mutual understanding and benefit (as shown in OPR quality), it is possible that they will presume that the organization, particularly at times of malicious events such as crises, will exert its power to act in secrecy and in a self-serving way. Given that individuals would endorse conspiracy theories that confirm pre-existing beliefs (Leman & Cinnirella, 2013), they could also have a tendency to attribute the causes of malicious events to an organization. This tendency could stem from negative OPRQ that results from hearsays or experiences about an organization (Grunig & Hung-Baesecke, 2015). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H1:** Organization-public relationship quality (OPRQ) is negatively associated with conspiratorial thinking (CT).

#### 2.4. Negative megaphoning (NM)

Research attributes the emergence and diffusion of conspiracy theories (also known as "conspiracy cascades") to the wider availability and use of social media platforms and digital technologies (e.g., Papakyriakopoulos et al., 2020; Shahsavari et al., 2020; Theocharis et al., 2021). This is because most conspiracy theories originate from alternative sources such as personal blogs and social media posts (Papakyriakopoulos et al., 2020). However, mainstream sources also share information about conspiracy theories; subsequently, more users publish social media posts about conspiracy theories with links to news reports from mainstream sources (Shahsavari et al., 2020). The network-building capacity of social media platforms lead to the creation of communities or groups where individuals find and develop emotional ties with other like-minded individuals who share, consume and engage with content related to conspiracy theories (Shahsavari et al., 2020; Theocharis et al., 2021). Shahsavari et al. (2020) suggest that acceptable stories related to conspiracy theories could be easily generated in those communities or groups because of three common features: a shared world view, a reservoir of existing stories, and a shared understanding of story structure. Although 77% of Americans believe that social media and the Internet were responsible for the increase in belief in conspiracy theories, when studying individuals' belief in different conspiracy theories over a period of time, Uscinski et al. (2022) find that different social forces have led to the fluctuations in the number of people believing in different conspiracy theories. For example, when a country's leader from a particular political party is in power, conspiracy theories related to partisan actors and issues could be more prevalent (Uscinski et al., 2022). But Fletcher et al. (2021) find that partisan online echo chambers, which refer to people's engagement in partisan selective exposure to certain information, are actually more prevalent among conservatives than liberals. This points to the need of exploring one question: if individuals' evaluation of an organization (or an entity) triggers CT, does it also affect their communicative behaviors such as information sharing?

According to the situational theory of problem solving (STOPS), when individuals encounter problematic situations, they engage in communicative behaviors such as information transmission as a mechanism to cope with the problems (J.-N. Kim & Grunig, 2011). As conspiratorial publics already subscribe to conspiracy theories as preferred explanations of the malicious events they have experienced, they become motivated individual problem solvers in proactively

forwarding and actively sharing their forefended information across different communicative networks (J.-N. Kim & Grunig, 2021). Their transmission of forefended information "could be contagious and develop into a social misbelief or collective illusion" as this information could be widely circulated among other like-minded conspiratorial publics, building up their confidence about their pre-existing beliefs and rejecting alternative beliefs (Kim & Grunig, 2021, p. 239). Hence, individuals who have a tendency to attribute malicious events and circumstances to a particular organization could be motivated to engage in negative megaphoning about the organization.

In addition to this, Kim and Rhee (2011) found that perceived quality of relationships was positively associated with positive megaphoning and was negatively associated with negative megaphoning in the context of employee-organization relationships. They defined megaphoning as "employees' positive or negative external communication behaviors about their organization" and operationalized the variable as "the likelihood of employees' voluntary information forwarding or information sharing about organizational strengths (accomplishments) or weaknesses (problems)" (J.-N. Kim & Rhee, 2011, p. 246). Similar findings were made in other contexts. In the context of university-student relationship, Krishna and Kim (2016) found that relationship quality was positively associated with positive megaphoning and was negatively associated with negative megaphoning. Likewise, in a crisis context, relationship quality was also directly and indirectly associated with positive and negative megaphoning respectively (Y. Lee, 2019).

Based on the literature on communicative behaviors motivated by individuals' relationship with an entity and conspiratorial thinking related to the entity, the following hypotheses are proposed:

**H2:** Organization-public relationship quality (OPRQ) is negatively associated with negative megaphoning (NM).

**H3:** Conspiratorial thinking (CT) has a positive association with negative megaphoning (NM).

Fig. 1 below shows a conceptual model testing H1, H2 and H3.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Development of measures

A questionnaire was first adapted to operationalize each variable. Because the questions had to relate to an organization with which all respondents had a relationship, the Australian government was used as the organization assessed for all variables. Then, the measurement items were either developed based on or adapted from existing literature. Respondents were asked to evaluate the statements on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Table 1 shows the factor loadings, mean, standard deviation and standard error of the mean for each survey item.

##### 3.1.1. Conspiratorial thinking (CT)

A total of eight items were first developed based on the conceptualization in the literature review. Although some studies on conspiracy theories have measured belief in conspiracy theories as a reflective variable, resulting in an index that consists of several unrelated conspiracy theories such as the roles of the U.S. government in the September 11 attack (e.g., Miller et al., 2016; Oliver & Wood, 2014), this study conceptualized conspiratorial thinking as a formative variable that measures individuals' propensity to think of malicious events and circumstances as secret plots initiated by the Australian government for self-serving purposes. Although Federico et al. (2018) used 17 items to measure individuals' "conspiracy thinking" as "a general propensity to think in terms of conspiracies about social events" (p. 930), they were not used in this study because they measured general conspiracies (e.g., "There are people with power who will do anything to hide the truth

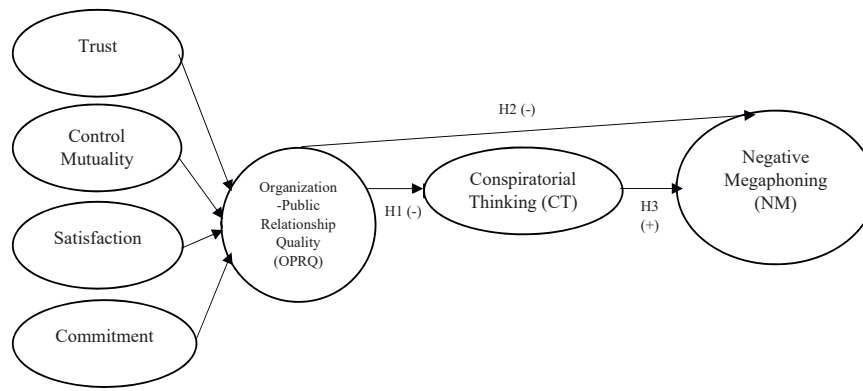


Fig. 1. Conceptualization of H1, H2 and H3.

from public scrutiny” and “The media is the puppet of those in power.”) rather than about conspiratorial thinking (CT) about a specific organization, which is this study’s focus. Based on this conceptualization, measurement items were adapted from existing studies on conspiratorial predispositions (e.g., Edelson et al., 2017; Uscinski et al., 2016, 2022), highlighting the involvement of the Australian government in those theories. A total of eight items were initially developed. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted on the survey items used using Maximum Likelihood with Promax Rotation (Carpenter, 2018). Three items were then removed. The five items retained had a reliability of  $\alpha = .916$  and a KMO (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin) of .88 and explained 74.86% of the variance (see Table 1).

### 3.1.2. Organization-public relationship quality (OPRQ)

The measurement items for OPRQ were adopted from existing literature on OPRQ (e.g., Hon & Grunig, 1999; Huang, 2001) and were applied to the present study context of government-public relationship (see Table 1). For trust, five items were used, resulting in a reliability of  $\alpha = .915$  and a KMO of .88% and 74.86% of variance explained. For control mutuality, four items were used, resulting in a reliability of  $\alpha = .819$  and a KMO of .819% and 73.60% of variance explained. For commitment, four items were used, resulting in a reliability of  $\alpha = .926$  and a KMO of .814% and 81.88% of variance explained. Lastly, for satisfaction, five items were used, resulting in a reliability of  $\alpha = .929$  and a KMO of .892% and 78.16% of variance explained.

### 3.1.3. Negative megaphoning (NM)

The measurement items for NM were adopted from the original study and subsequent studies on negative megaphoning (e.g., J.-N. Kim & Rhee, 2011; Shim et al., 2017) and were applied to the present study context (see Table 1). Five items were used, resulting in a reliability of  $\alpha = .907$  and a KMO of .887% and 72.88% of variance explained.

## 3.2. Data collection

To test the hypotheses, upon approval from the University’s ethics committee, a dataset was collected from a nationally representative sample of Australian citizens in December 2019. The participants were recruited through the online panels of Qualtrics and were given a remuneration based on their agreements made with Qualtrics. A total of 542 responses were collected. The demographics of the sample can be found in Table 2.

## 3.3. Data analysis

First, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted on AMOS (version 28) for the construct of conspiratorial thinking using the five items derived from the EFA. Model fit for the measurement model was satisfactory ( $\chi^2 = 8.493$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 2.213$ ,  $p = .075$ , CFI = .998,

RMSEA = .046, SRMR = .0103) based on Hu and Bentler’s (1999) cut-off criteria for fit indices ( $\chi^2/df < 3$ , CFI  $> .95$ , RMSEA  $< .06$ , SRMR  $< .08$ ). Prior to performing Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to test H1-H3 and the fit of the data to the hypothesized model (see Fig. 1), the composite reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity (as reflected in average variance extracted (AVE)) for each construct were tested (see Table 3).

## 4. Findings

To test H1-H3, the hypothesized model showed a satisfactory model fit ( $\chi^2 = 1046.387$ ,  $df = 368$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 2.843$ ,  $p < .001$ , CFI = .953, RMSEA = .058, SRMR = .0486) based on Hu and Bentler’s (1999) cut-off criteria for fit indices ( $\chi^2/df < 3$ , CFI  $> .95$ , RMSEA  $< .06$ , SRMR  $< .08$ ). Specifically, H1 was supported, showing a significant negative association between OPRQ and CT ( $\beta = -.509$ ,  $p < .001$ ). However, H2 was rejected as there was no direct relationship between OPRQ and NM. A significant positive association was found between CT and NM ( $\beta = .777$ ,  $p < .001$ ), supporting H3. Gender was found to be a significant control variable affecting CT ( $\beta = -.109$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and NM ( $\beta = -.127$ ,  $p < .001$ ), noting that male respondents were more likely to engage in CT and NM. For CT, the mean for males ( $n = 264$ ) was 3.27 (SD=.9995) and the mean for females ( $n = 278$ ) was 3.216 (SD=1.112). For NM, the mean for males ( $n = 264$ ) was 3.15 (SD=1.025) and the mean for females ( $n = 278$ ) was 2.871 (SD=1.095). The model explains 25.3% of the CT variable and 67.2% of the NM variable. Fig. 2 shows the results from the model tested. The absence of a direct relationship between OPRQ and NM shows that CT was significant in fully mediating the relationship between the two variables. Following the steps of mediation analysis to also test the direct relationship between an exogenous and an endogenous variables without a mediating variable (Ager & De Boeck, 2017), a model without CT as a mediating variable was also run. The model shows a significant relationship between OPRQ and NM ( $\beta = -.418$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but it only explains 17.5% of the NM variable.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Theoretical implications

This study has examined conspiratorial thinking (CT) as individuals’ propensity to consider and explain malicious events and circumstances as secret plots initiated by a powerful organization for its self-serving purposes. CT related to a specific organization was studied. The respondents of the study were asked to evaluate to what extent they perceive the Australian government to be secretly plotting malicious events and circumstances (such as creating panic and hoaxes) for self-interested purposes (such as increasing public support). The results showed that CT can be mitigated by OPRQ and that it contributes to NM.

**Table 1**

Factor loadings, mean, standard deviation and standard error of the mean for each survey item ( $\alpha$  = Cronbach's alpha, KMO = Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin, M = mean, SD = standard deviation, SE = standard error).

Variable	Survey items	Loading	M	SD	SE
Relationship quality – trust $\alpha$ = .915 KMO = .88 Variance explained = 74.86%	1. The Australian government treats people like me fairly and justly.	.731	3.07	1.125	.052
	2. The Australian government can be relied on to keep its promises.	.898	2.59	1.246	.053
	3. I believe that the Australian government takes the opinions of people like me into account when making decisions.	.869	2.71	1.235	.053
	4. I feel very confident about the Australian government's skills.	.896	2.74	1.3	.056
	5. The Australian government has the ability to accomplish what it says it will do.	.74	3.05	1.255	.054
Relationship quality – control mutuality $\alpha$ = .88 KMO = .819 Variance explained = 73.6%	1. The Australian government and people like me are attentive to what each other say.	.656	2.91	1.126	.048
	2. The Australian government believes the opinions of people like me are legitimate.	.839	2.93	1.17	.05
	3. The Australian government really listens to what people like me have to say.	.897	2.68	1.22	.052
	4. The Australian government gives people like me enough say in the decision-making process.	.825	2.62	1.231	.053
Relationship quality – commitment $\alpha$ = .926 KMO = .814 Variance explained = 81.88%	1. I feel that the Australian government is trying to maintain a long-term commitment to people like me.	.844	2.8	1.228	.053
	2. I can see that the Australian government wants to maintain a relationship with people like me.	.89	2.81	1.258	.054
	3. There is a long-lasting bond between the Australian government and people like me.	.912	2.73	1.235	.053
	4. Compared to other organisations, I value my relationship with the Australian government more.	.838	2.74	1.262	.054
Relationship quality – satisfaction $\alpha$ = .929 KMO = .892 Variance	1. I am happy with the Australian government.	.831	2.73	1.313	.056
	2. Both the Australian government and people like me	.838	3.01	1.237	.053

**Table 1 (continued)**

Variable	Survey items	Loading	M	SD	SE
explained = 78.16%	benefit from the relationship.				
	3. Most people like me are happy in their interactions with the Australian government.	.912	2.78	1.207	.052
	4. Generally speaking, I am pleased with the relationship the Australian government has established with people like me.	.923	2.85	1.207	.053
	5. Most people enjoy dealing with the Australian government.	.76	2.57	1.266	.054
	Conspiratorial thinking (CT) $\alpha$ = .916 KMO = .88 Variance explained = 74.86%	1. The Australian government creates panic about certain issues because it is their best interests to do so.	.757	2.75	1.227
2. The Australian government purposely publicise fake data to increase public support.		.896	3.01	1.237	.053
3. Some issues are hoaxes perpetrated by the Australian government to increase its legitimacy.		.847	3.24	1.286	.055
4. The Australian government makes up some issues for political reasons.		.789	2.88	1.183	.051
5. The Australian government fails to regulate certain businesses because it is their best interests not to.		.776	3.06	1.203	.052
Negative megaphoning (NM) $\alpha$ = .907 KMO = .887 Variance explained = 72.88%	1. I would distribute negative articles or reports about the Australian government to my friends or people that I know.	.757	2.75	1.227	.053
	2. I would blame the Australian government about its hypocrisy whenever I have a chance to talk about it.	.896	3.01	1.237	.053
	3. I would criticize without any hesitation how the Australian government puts its self-interests first, rather than its citizens'.	.847	3.24	1.286	.055
	4. If there is someone who says a good word about the Australian government, I cannot help but give them the opposite aspect/perspectives of it.	.789	2.88	1.183	.051
	5. I would support negative comments	.776	3.06	1.203	.052

(continued on next page)

Table 1 (continued)

Variable	Survey items	Loading	M	SD	SE
	about the Australian government from other people.				

Table 2  
Demographics of the sample.

Individual-level variables	N	Percent	Mean	Standard Deviation
Age	542		45.42	17.88
18–20	43	7.9%		
21–30	106	19.6%		
31–40	91	16.8%		
41–50	82	15.1%		
51–60	85	15.7%		
60 and above	135	24.9%		
Gender				
Male	264	48.7%		
Female	278	51.3%		
Education				
Less than high school	48	8.9%		
High school graduate	180	33.2%		
Some university	78	14.4%		
Bachelor's	120	22.1%		
Master's	66	12.2%		
Doctorate	18	3.3%		
Other	32	5.9%		
Annual pre-tax income				
Less than AUD\$30,000	142	26.2%		
AUD\$30,001-\$60,000	134	24.7%		
AUD\$60,001-\$90,000	101	18.6%		
AUD\$90,001-\$120,000	66	12.2%		
More than AUD\$120,000	56	10.3%		
Prefer not to disclose	43	7.9%		
Political affiliation				
Labor	201	37.1%		
Liberal	170	31.4%		
Greens	51	9.4%		
Other	56	10.3%		
Prefer not to answer	64	11.8%		

Table 3  
Composite validity, convergent validity, and average variance extracted (AVE) as indicators of discriminant validity.

Construct	Composite Reliability	Convergent Validity	AVE values (in bold) and correlations		
			OPRQ	GCT	NM
Organization-Public Relationship quality (OPRQ)	.997	.951	<b>.975</b>		
Conspiratorial thinking (CT)	.979	.691	-.492	<b>.831</b>	
Negative megaphoning (NM)	.976	.663	-.421	.809	<b>.814</b>

Shifting from the existing research on conspiracy theories that focuses on the psychological perspective (e.g., examining individual psychological factors) or the philosophical perspective (e.g., examining social factors) that explain endorsement in conspiracy theories, this study takes a public relations perspective that seeks to explain why and how individuals develop conspiratorial thinking about a specific organization's involvement in malicious events and circumstances.

There are several theoretical implications. First, by adopting OPRQ as an antecedent variable, this study considers the relational nature of a relationship between an organization and its publics in affecting CT. While existing literature has already established a direct relationship between OPRQ and NM (J.-N. Kim & Rhee, 2011; Krishna & Kim, 2016;

Y. Lee, 2019), this study did not find a direct relationship between the two in the model. On the other hand, CT was found to be a significant mediating variable between the two variables. When OPRQ is low, individuals tend to also develop a view that the organization is involved in some secret plot to cause malicious circumstances for its own gains. As a result, CT could result in negative megaphoning. This could especially be problematic when there is a lack of evidence to support such a view or when individuals reject official explanations as evidence.

Second, it is important to further examine the conditions under which CT about specific organizations flourish and how those organizations can reduce CT. Consistent with the literature of conspiracy theories in its claims that individuals' communicative behaviors (e.g., information acquisition and selection) are driven by the need to reduce cognitive dissonance and increase cognitive consonance (e.g., Leman & Cinnirella, 2013), J.-N. Kim and Grunig (2021) argued that individuals' close-mindedness is driven by individuals' engagement in cognitive retrogression (i.e., drawing a conclusion before finding evidence to support it). While existing research has looked at motivated reasoning or close-mindedness related to particular issues such as climate change or global warming (e.g., Saunders, 2017), findings from this study also point to the need of examining motivated reasoning or close-mindedness about specific organizations that influence individuals' information acquisition and selection.

Third, while this study has examined individuals' predispositions to subscribe to conspiracy theories about a specific organization, it has also identified OPRQ as a cause of and a cure for the rise of conspiratorial publics who have a strong tendency to attribute the causes of malicious events and circumstances to a specific organization. Existing research on conspiracy theories has mostly focused on individuals' psychological, political and social factors (Douglas, Uscinski, et al., 2019) and has overlooked the significance of organizational factors in the context of organization-public relationships. Interestingly, although females were found to be more likely to endorse conspiracy theories in existing studies (e.g., Hart & Graether, 2018), this study found that males are more likely to have high CT and NM. It may reflect that when CT is examined in a government context, males were more likely to engage in CT because males generally had a greater opposition against the government and its policies (Howse et al., 2020).

Lastly, although existing research has consistently found a significant direct relationship between OPRQ and NM (J.-N. Kim & Rhee, 2011; Krishna & Kim, 2016; Y. Lee, 2019), this findings from this study show that this relationship disappears when CT is examined as a mediating variable. Moreover, when CT is included as a mediating variable, the model also explains more of the NM variable. This finding explains why OPRQ contributes to NM in the first place. Individuals who have positive OPRQ with an organization are less likely to consider malicious events and circumstances as secret plots by the organization and thus, are less likely to engage in negative megaphoning about the organization. On the other hand, individuals with negative OPRQ with an organization are more likely to engage in negative megaphoning about the organization because they tend to attribute the causes of malicious events and circumstances to the organization. This reflects that OPRQ does not directly result in NM as a behavior; individuals engage in NM about an organization because OPRQ first triggers their tendency to perceive negative events as secret plots initiated by the organization. This also reflects the significance of OPRQ in triggering perceptions about the organization even though those perceptions may not be accurate accounts of what the organization has done.

5.2. Practical implications

In recent years, public relations practice has extensively discussed the role of public relations in dispelling misinformation, disinformation and fake news (e.g., Gray, 2021; Rodrigues, 2021). Its role in combatting conspiracy theories related to specific organizations has been understudied. Conspiracy theories are often created and flourish when there

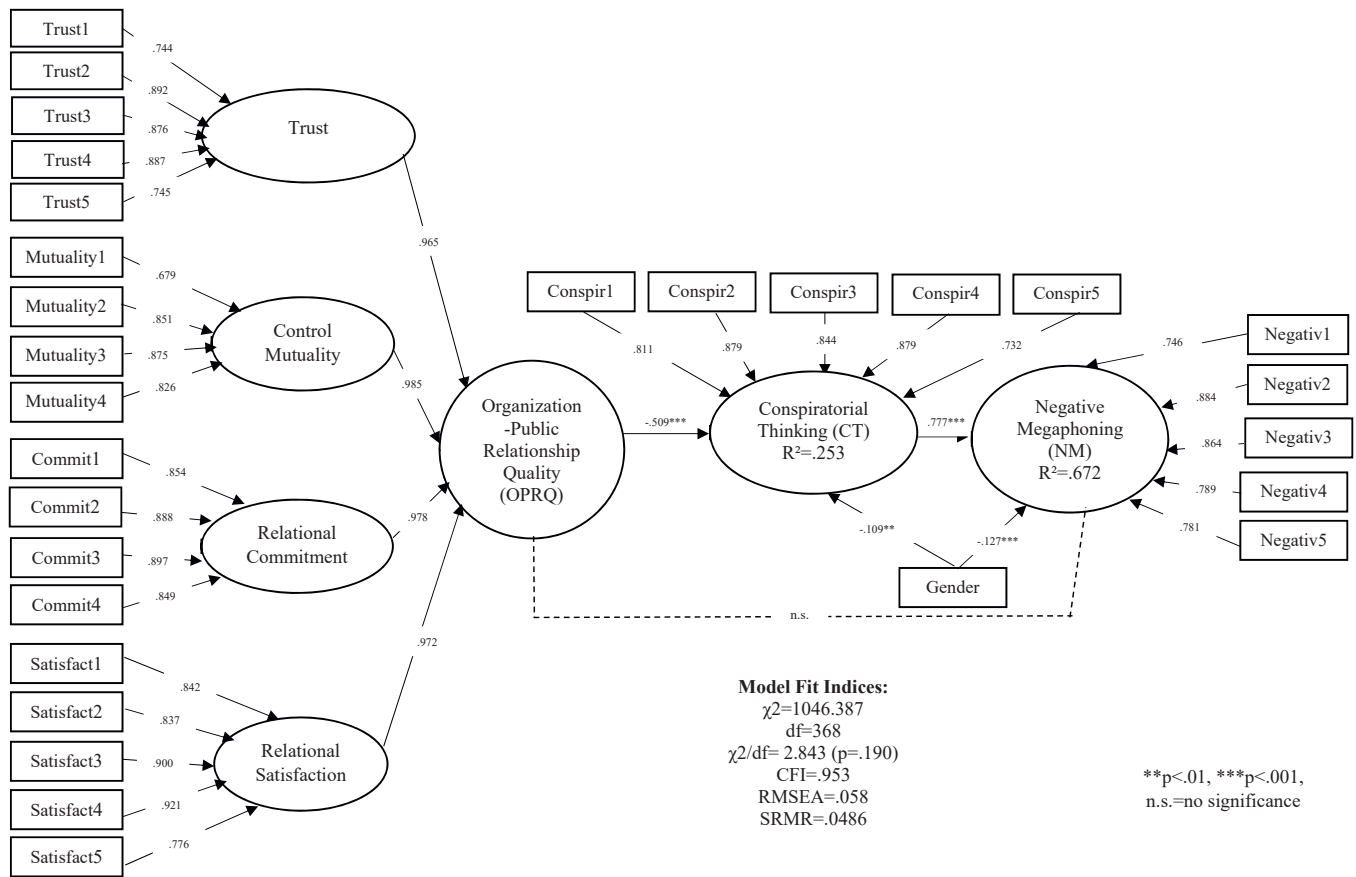


Fig. 2. Results from the model tested.

are malicious events and circumstances. The present study examined conspiratorial thinking about the Australian government. According to Mortensen and Gibson (2022), Australia has suffered from a variety of crises in recent years including fires and floods. While these events were not caused by the Australian government, they triggered fear and undermined trust. This corresponds to Y. I. Lee et al.'s (2021) finding that crisis uncertainty triggered crisis emotions. Hence, even if a crisis itself does not necessarily trigger conspiratorial thinking, the ways in which an organization manages and navigates the crisis can have profound effects on the prevalence of conspiracy theories related to the crisis event and the organization(s) involved (Mortensen & Gibson, 2022). Therefore, Mortensen and Gibson (2022) suggested that when the Australian government managed and navigated the different crises facing the Australian population, the different government departments “should develop strategies to ensure that their crisis management and messaging take into account the risk factors for conspiracy thinking” (para. 12).

During crises, uncertainty about crisis responsibility is common because of the lack of information, especially during the early stage of a crisis, as a result of which publics are often exposed to conflicting information (Lee et al., 2021). Although individuals’ consumption of media (Foley & Wagner, 2020) and usage of social media (Enders et al., 2021) have a positive association with belief in conspiracy theories, individual-level predispositions are necessary conditions for this association to take hold (Enders et al., 2021). Ultimately, individuals’ tendency to develop conspiratorial thinking about specific organizations could depend on their motivations to accept, seek and select certain information about malicious events (Enders et al., 2021). And these motivations could be influenced by their perceptions about the organizations. In the context of employee-organization relationship, leadership styles were found to play a critical factor in influencing organizational

conspiracy beliefs (van Prooijen & de Vries, 2016). The findings from this study propose that in the context of organization-public relationship, there are also conditions that lead to individuals’ tendency to develop conspiratorial thinking that can be within the control of organizations such as OPRQ as an antecedent. When managing and cultivating relationships with publics, organizations should also consider approaches to reduce the possibility of triggering conspiratorial thinking.

The conceptualizations of CT highlight individuals’ perceived power differences between an organization and its publics. As perceptions of power differences could be mitigated through OPRs, organizations should use relational or communication strategies to build and maintain positive relationships such as through the use of dialogic principles (Taylor & Kent, 2014) and relationship cultivation strategies (Ki & Hon, 2008). At the same time, it is also important for organizations to identify and adopt strategies to repair their relationships with individuals with whom they have already had damaged relationships in order to reduce their CT and NM. Their negative megaphoning could reinforce the collective beliefs among conspiratorial publics (J.-N. Kim & Grunig, 2021) and could also turn non-active publics into active publics against organizations (e.g., public-initiated public relations problems) (J.-N. Kim & Ni, 2013). To counter CT, current research has suggested correcting misinformation (Jin et al., 2020; Mehta et al., 2021) and using rational arguments (Orosz et al., 2016). However, these strategies may only be useful for preventing conspiratorial publics from further propagating conspiracy theories and may not be useful for converting conspiratorial publics into non-conspiratorial publics. In addition, not all conspiracy theories necessarily contain incorrect information. After all, individuals, who believe in conspiracy theories about an organization, would have a negative relationship with the organization to begin with. Hence, they are unlikely to accept official accounts from the organization (Kim & Gil



de Zúñiga, 2021). To dig to the roots of the causes of and cures for CT, future research in public relations should start from finding the causes of and cures for poor OPRs.

## 6. Conclusion

In response to the lack of research on how and why individuals believe in conspiracy theories about specific organizations, this study examines conspiratorial thinking (CT) as individuals' propensity to consider malicious events and circumstances as secret plots initiated by a powerful organization for its self-serving purposes. Testing the construct using the Australian government as a sample entity, this study found that Australian citizens' perceived relationship quality with the government was an antecedent and negative megaphoning was an outcome of CT about the Australian government. The findings from this study point to the need of examining the conditions under which CT about a specific organization is triggered and the cures for mitigating CT.

## Limitations and future directions

The limitations of this study are as follows. First, while the conceptualization of CT was developed based on extensive literature on conspiracy theories and conspiratorial predispositions and should be applicable to different contexts, the operationalization of the construct was dependent on the context in which it was tested (i.e., government). The survey items might only be applicable to the government context but not to other contexts. Future studies that test the construct in other contexts should create items based on the specific contexts chosen and should conduct EFA and CFA to ensure the adequacy of the operationalization. Second, the measurement items for CT measured individuals' evaluations of general malicious events related to the Australian government rather than specific issues. It is possible that some individuals only subscribe to certain conspiracy theories about the Australian government. Future studies should measure CT related to specific issues and explore whether individuals have a dispositional tendency to believe in all conspiracy theories related to a specific organization or only some conspiracy theories. Third, since this is the first study related to conspiracy theories that adopted a public relations perspective, future empirical studies should delineate the concept from other related concepts that have been studied in public relations such as misinformation (e.g., Jin et al., 2020; Mehta et al., 2021) and rumors (Nekmat & Kong, 2019). Forth, in addition to the variables examined in this study, there should be other antecedent variables that explain the conditions under which CT flourishes and other outcome variables resulting from it. Based on the conceptualization of the construct developed in this study, future studies should investigate these variables. Moreover, practice-focused research could be conducted to investigate if certain public relations strategies can be put in place to mitigate CT. Lastly, because existing research has examined psychological factors (such as need for cognitive closure) and social factors (such as changes in policies) in influencing CT, future studies should examine the possible intersection between these factors and public relations-related factors (such as the variables examined in this study) in influencing CT.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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