

Book reviews

The Misbelief Funnel: A Framework for the Factors that Influence the Belief in Conspiracy Theories

Dan Ariely, *Misbelief. What Makes Rational People Believe Irrational Things*
(Bonnier Books Ltd, 2023)

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The book *Misbelief* is a rational explanation for the irrational path people fall into. It is an insightful understanding of how and why people believe in conspiracy theories. Drawing from years of research and personal experiences, Ariely explores the psychological and social factors that contribute to the spread of misinformation and the entrenchment of irrational beliefs.

Dan Ariely is a professor of Psychology and Behavioral Economics at Duke University and engages in research on a variety of topics, including the psychological aspects of financial decision-making, the decision-making processes of healthcare professionals and patients, the causes and consequences of cheating, and the concepts of social justice. He has written many best-selling books such as *Predictably Irrational*, *The (Honest) Truth About Dishonesty*, and *Amazing Decisions*.

From the beginning, I emphasize that this book doesn't come with new theories and concepts which even the author himself admits. It is rather a reframing of the reasons why people believe conspiracy theories. The novelty of this book is the proposal of a roadmap with steps through which people pass through and become more and more engaged in irrational beliefs. The author conceptualizes this phenomenon as a funnel of misbelief, a process that encompasses emotional, cognitive, personality, and social factors. The book has six parts in which the author explains the concept of the funnel, each element of it, and in the end, adds reflections towards the future.

This book is a mix of research findings about the human mind and the personal experiences of the author. Dan Ariely was itself a victim of disinformation. The author recounts in the book's opening chapter the devastating impact of online disinformation that falsely accused him of collaborating with governments to orchestrate the COVID-19 pandemic, conspiring with Bill Gates, and deserving severe punishment. He describes how he felt and how he tried to have conversations with different people that were believing all these theories. The author concentrates on COVID-19

disinformation because it presents an exceptional circumstance that increases the vulnerability of individuals to misinformation.

An important baseline of the book is that misbelief is not merely a matter of ignorance or stupidity but rather a complex phenomenon driven by a combination of cognitive biases, social influences, and emotional motivations. The author depicts this process as a funnel-like progression, where individuals initially experience emotional triggers that sow seeds of suspicion, leading them to question established systems and beliefs. As they move further down the funnel, they become increasingly reliant on alternative media sources that reinforce their existing beliefs and reject any information that contradicts their worldview.

Emotional factors. Ariely states that „emotions tend to precede beliefs” (p. 35) and that's why it is important to start here. The author finds stress as the first trigger to irrational beliefs. Taking the COVID-19 crisis as a context, this feeling was experienced by most of the population. Lack of control, the feeling of stress, and the feeling that they aren't able to take action reduced people's rational thinking. The author invokes many types of research highlighting that people often misattribute their emotions. Adding to that, Ariely comes with an argument from a psychological perspective stating that a secure attachment style makes people handle stress more easily and thus less vulnerable to conspiracy theories.

Also, stressed people look for relief and it is easier to blame a villain for what is happening than to accept the fact the world is rather chaotic and not all carefully planned. This psychological mechanism offers relief in the short term, but in the long term, it is key for diving into the funnel of misbelief.

Cognitive factors. In this part of the book, the author brings to attention some characteristics of the human mind that influence the forming of our beliefs focusing on the fact that we all use shortcuts to understand this world's complexity. Ariely reiterates cognitive biases such as confirmation bias, the tendency to find patterns of causation, motivated reasoning, solution aversion, the Dunning-Kruger effect, and explanatory depth.

The main idea that Ariely points out is that „we tell ourselves untrue stories and we try to convince ourselves they are true” (p.134) We are not aware of how inaccurate our minds are leading us to unquestioningly accept our thoughts and perceptions as accurate representations of reality.

Personality factors. Our personalities are multifaceted, shaped by a unique combination of traits that define our character. These traits, whether enduring or temporary, represent only a portion of the complex interplay of factors influencing our beliefs and behaviors. However, Ariely states the idea that personality traits have an important influence on our irrational beliefs.

In an exploration of the link between personality traits and susceptibility to conspiracy theories, the author conducted a study, along with others, to identify common characteristics. These studies revealed a tendency among conspiracy theorists to exhibit traits such as misremembering, magical ideation, openness to absorbing unconventional ideas, and perceptual aberrations, suggesting an inclination to embrace unconventional forms of causation.

Additionally, conspiracy theorists tend to display a heightened patternicity, a propensity to see patterns in seemingly random events. Furthermore, they often place greater trust in intuition over rational analysis and have narcissistic tendencies.

Personality traits alone do not provide a complete explanation for conspiracy theory acceptance. Individuals with these traits may still possess the ability to make sound judgments. However, their susceptibility to certain cognitive biases and heuristics that the authors explain, can influence how they process information and interpret events.

Social factors. Social factors play a pervasive role in conspiracy theory belief, influencing individuals at every stage of the funnel of misbelief that the author proposes. Our deep-seated need for social belonging exerts a powerful influence, shaping our perceptions and behaviors. When individuals' beliefs are met with ridicule or disapproval from family and friends, they may seek out social groups that validate their suspicions, offering a sense of belonging and understanding.

The fear of ostracism, a potent and often painful experience, can drive individuals to adopt extreme beliefs, even if they conflict with their moral compass. The desire to maintain social cohesion and avoid isolation can lead to a change in social and personal moral standards.

As expected, Ariely brings into the discussion Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory. The discomfort that arises when contradictory beliefs or behaviors coexist plays a role in conspiracy theory acceptance. Individuals may resolve this dissonance by embracing even more extreme beliefs, reinforcing their sense of belonging to their chosen social group and enhancing their identity.

Social media platforms have amplified the impact of social factors on conspiracy theory beliefs. These platforms provide echo chambers where individuals can connect with others who share their beliefs, reinforcing their convictions and making them less susceptible to opposing viewpoints.

Ariely's exploration of misbelief is not merely a theoretical exercise; he also provides practical insights into how we can combat the spread of misinformation and promote more rational thinking. He presents a plethora of personal examples and discussions he had with people at different levels in the funnel of misbelief. The authors incorporated short practical exercises into the book to provide readers with hands-on experience in applying the concepts discussed. He suggests strategies such as promoting critical thinking skills, encouraging diverse perspectives, and building trust in institutions.

Dan Ariely ends the book with a reflection on the problem of trust and what the future can look like. Without trust, we risk falling into a funnel of misbelief, where suspicion and misinformation can spiral out of control. This erosion of trust has led to an escalating crisis of trust, where individuals and institutions struggle to maintain credibility and legitimacy.

Ariely continues his mission in this book and tries to teach people how to evaluate information critically, identify biases, and seek out multiple

perspectives, to foster a culture that values open dialogue and exchange of ideas, even when those ideas challenge our own beliefs, to focus on metacognition and analyze their minds and how to embrace intellectual humility.

Misbelief. What Makes Rational People Believe Irrational Things, is a very useful book that brings a bit of light into the explanations of the minds falling into misbelief. As I stated above, the author doesn't bring something new concerning the content of information but proposes a new framework that can offer a systematization, an order into the chaos of theories about the mind.

The Applicability of Neuroscience in the Advertising Field

Elke Schwarz, *Neuro-Advertising, Brain-Friendly Advertising for More Success in Your Market*
(Springer Wiesbaden, Gäufelden, 2022)

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In the advertising field, both the message to be transmitted to the target audience and the way in which the information will be communicated are equally important. In other words, it is not only what is said that matters, but also how it is said. Advertisements, advertising speeches must be strategically thought out, result from some research, be based on the deepening of the data discovered by looking at multiple variables: the brand identity, the way the brand communicates, the key attributes, the image and reputation of the brand, the characteristics, the needs, fears and aspirations of the individuals who make up the target audience, the industry and existing trends, the stage in the life of the product or service, the activity of competitors, etc.

Therefore, in essence, the consumer becomes a central point that shapes all the efforts of advertising specialists aimed at creating campaigns that ultimately persuade individuals and determine them to adopt a certain purchase decision. At the same time, technological progress has also facilitated the development of tools by which advertising researchers can study the buying behavior of those who are part of a particular target audience and use these findings to create attractive, engaging advertising messages that have stylistic force and affective impact.

Furthermore, advertisers have noticed that research in cognitive science and neuroscience can be of great help in trying to discover and understand consumer behavior or decision-making processes. As such, in recent years, advertising specialists use an interdisciplinary approach in the research they carry out with the aim of getting to know their current and potential buyers as well as possible and to specify, in advance, as precisely as possible, their actions and their purchase decisions.

Neuro-Advertising, Brain-Friendly Advertising for More Success in Your Market is a book that explores the idea that neuroscience research methods, techniques, and tools can provide a solid scientific basis even for evaluating the impact of advertising on the subconscious level of the human being. The book describes a new index (*Subconscious Decision Marketing Index - SDMI*) built

through an interdisciplinary approach and which combines theories, methods, principles, models and working tools from medicine, neurology, psychology, communication sciences and information theory for to investigate the workings of the human brain and, above all, the decision-making process - along with the meta-principles by which it works.

Structured in 8 main chapters, the work begins with the one dedicated to the *Subconscious Decision Marketing Index*, which explains the scientific process through which this index was created and validated, the way in which it can be applied in advertising practice to evaluate and calculate the impact that an advertisement could have on the subconscious level of the human mind and, implicitly, on the buying behavior of the consumer. Such a calculation of the index is carried out by specially trained experts who can manage a certain software suite that analyzes and evaluates the activity of the human brain when a consumer watches an advertisement.

In the second chapter, the central functions of the human brain and their significance for advertising practice are reviewed. The relationship between the two cerebral hemispheres is highlighted through the existence of common functions of a cognitive, motor and emotional nature and the roles that those functions fulfil at the time of viewing an advertisement, as well as in the process of making the purchase decision. The next 4 chapters are dedicated to 4 other important indicators in advertising practice: the emotional index, the benefit index, the hormonal index and the memory index.

What is an emotion? How can emotions influence purchase decisions? What are the emotions that drive the desire to buy in a certain target audience? These are some of the questions for which in-depth answers are sought in chapter 3 of the paper. It is emphasized that the paradigm of *sympathy* ("likeability") seems to be outdated today, that it is no longer enough for an advertisement to be liked by the target audience in order to influence purchase decisions, the perspective of emotional conditioning being brought into discussion.

What else matters? Authors argued in favor of *intuition* that could be influenced and controlled through the experiences an individual has because intuition comes from experiences. Therefore, when the perspective on a reality is influenced and changed, the experience of that reality is also changed, and finally, the intuition that underlies the individual's experiences. For advertising practice, this translates into the idea that through positive associations and emotions created/generated around a brand, the consumer's perception of the brand can be influenced in a positive sense, as well as the experience he has with the brand. Over time, the behavior of purchase ends up being guided unconsciously by affectivity, by intuition that is based on previous experiences and the (positive) emotions attached to them. At the same time, in the same chapter, a certain emotion index is described and how it can be calculated in the case of advertisements, giving details about the *Master Model of Emotions* and how this tool can be applied in advertising.

Advertising is successful when the reward system is activated and the consumer associates the product with a greater reward than the potential loss (for example, the financial one - the cost of the product). The goal of any advertising campaign is to generate an impulse purchase among consumers. In chapter 4 it is indicated how the benefits offered by a brand should be formulated in order to shape purchase decisions, and also how the effectiveness of those benefits received by the consumer can be measured.

Chapter 5 delves deeper into the reward system from a neurological perspective and highlights the role of neurotransmitters in purchasing decisions. Often guided by the motto "maximum reward, minimum penalty", individuals choose which products or services to pay for. Watching a simple advertisement leads to the secretion of certain substances (*dopamine, serotonin, oxytocin, adrenaline*) in the brain, and these changes can influence the way reality is perceived, respectively the promoted product, and thus can influence the consumer's purchase decision.

Chapter 6 of the book argues in favor of the idea that decisions are made at a subconscious level: "decisions are premeditated. Something is already happening in the brain before you consciously decide. Conscious decision is the result of an unconscious process. Our subconscious has already made a decision before we suspect that we will be decided and how we will be decided." (p. 109). The memory index brings attention to this and assesses when stimuli are stored and how they are remembered. Information is stored longer when associated with strong emotions, and therefore advertising specialists should take this conclusion into account when creating advertisements.

In the last two chapters of the book, the focus is on the applicability of the concepts, theories, models presented in the work, for the advertising field. Fruitful examples are provided, as well as recommendations to create effective advertising campaigns. What does effective advertising mean for companies? Profitability! And this can only be achieved through a deep understanding of how consumers think, the decision-making process and the levers through which their decisions can be influenced. Therefore, research into the impact that advertising can have on the unconscious level of human thought can be understood as a "useful supplement to measuring and evaluating the impact of advertising on the conscious level of human thought." (p. xii)

Neuro-Advertising, Brain-Friendly Advertising for More Success in Your Market is a book written in accessible language (even if it focuses on complex and very specific topics in the field of neuroscience), which approaches advertising practice from a neurological perspective and highlights the benefits that can be obtained in the advertising field by adopting and applying certain models and using certain instruments to investigate the way the human brain works, both on a conscious and unconscious level. It is a strongly practice-oriented work: what and how we can apply to achieve effective advertising campaigns that achieve their goals, to influence consumer purchasing decisions.

However, a question arises or persists: can there be ethical, moral considerations, all of which are aimed at understanding how the human brain works precisely in order to subsequently create advertising strategies that lead to certain perceptions, behaviors, attitudes, and decisions purchase among consumers? What are or should be the limits?