

# Conspiracy Theory Belief during the Pandemic

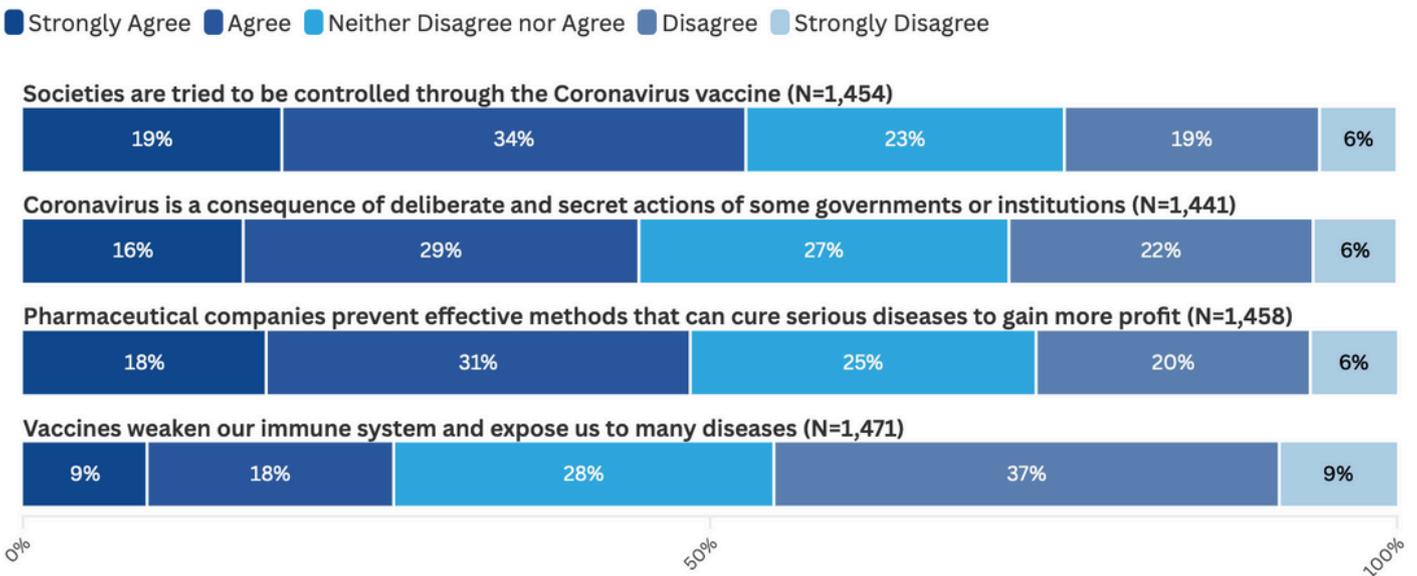
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This report investigates conspiracy theory beliefs in Turkey during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on health-related issues such as COVID-19 vaccines, the pharmaceutical industry, and their variation across age groups. The data for this study were drawn from the 2022 Turkish COVID-19 Values Survey (TCVS), conducted face-to-face with 1,500 participants.

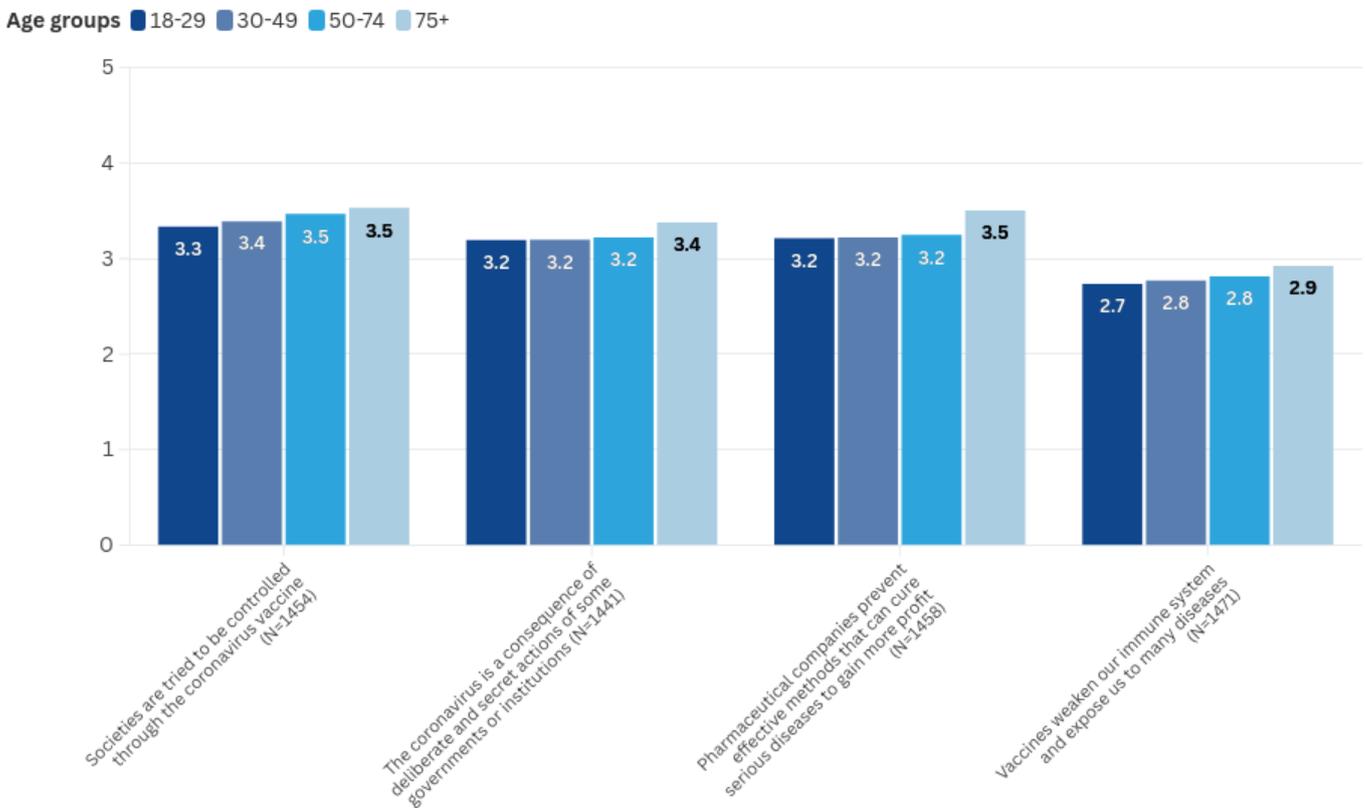
A conspiracy theory can be defined as a proposed explanation of social reality or important events through the intended actions of certain actors. These theories tend to become more popular during crises times such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The conspiracy theories in the TCVS focus on some of the most debated issues during the pandemic, around the vaccines, COVID-19 vaccines, pharmaceutical companies and the origin of the coronavirus (See Figure 1). The survey measures the belief in four conspiratorial statements using a 5-point Likert scale (1-Strongly Disagree to 5-Strongly Agree).

**Figure 1. Belief in Conspiracy Theories**



The results reveal that 53% of respondents either strongly agree or agree with the statement, *"Societies are tried to be controlled through the coronavirus vaccine,"* with a mean response of 3.4 (SD = 1.56). Belief in other conspiracy theories is slightly lower: 49% of respondents agree with the statement, *"Pharmaceutical companies prevent effective methods that can cure serious diseases to gain more profit,"* which has a mean response of 3.43 (SD = 1.16). Similarly, 45% of respondents agree that *"The coronavirus is a consequence of deliberate and secret actions of some governments or institutions,"* with a mean response of 3.27 (SD = 1.54). The lowest level of agreement is observed for the statement, *"Vaccines weaken our immune system and expose us to many diseases,"* with only 27% of respondents agreeing and a mean response of 2.82 (SD = 1.10).

**Figure 2. Average belief in conspiracy theories by age groups**



Respondents' ages are categorized into four groups: 18–29, 30–49, 50–74, and 75+. For the first three conspiracy theories, the levels of agreement differ significantly across these age groups. However, the pattern of belief varies for each conspiracy theory (Figure 2).

For the first statement, the highest mean agreement is reported among respondents aged 75+ (mean = 3.53), followed closely by the 30–49 age group (mean = 3.39). The lowest mean agreement is seen in the 18–29 age group (mean = 3.34), indicating a slight increase in agreement as age increases. Regarding the second statement, the 30–49 age group exhibits the highest level of agreement (mean = 3.20), with the 75+ group showing the lowest (mean = 3.38). Although the 75+ group has a slightly lower mean, the overall agreement is still relatively similar across age groups.

For the third conspiracy theory, agreement is somewhat more evenly distributed across age groups. The 75+ group again shows the highest level of agreement (mean = 3.50),

with the 18–29 group exhibiting the lowest (mean = 3.22), though the differences are minimal. Finally, for the last statement, the lowest levels of agreement are observed across all age groups, with the 75+ group still showing the highest agreement (mean = 2.92), while the 18–29 group reports the lowest mean (mean = 2.74). However, the differences in agreement between age groups is not statistically significant in this case.

Studies have shown that belief in conspiracy theories can lead to vaccine skepticism, decreased adherence to public health guidelines, and reluctance to seek medical treatment. Addressing these conspiratorial beliefs is crucial to ensure effective management during health crises. The survey results reveal significant variation in conspiracy beliefs across different age groups, highlighting the need for targeted communication strategies. Specifically, older adults (75+) and middle-aged individuals (30–49) show higher levels of agreement with various conspiracy theories, suggesting that these groups may require tailored approaches to counteract misinformation, particularly regarding vaccines.

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