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# The Role of Identity Subversion in Structuring the Effects of Intergroup Threats and Negative Emotions on Belief in Anti-West Conspiracy Theories in Indonesia

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## Abstract

Indonesian Muslims believe in conspiracies, suggesting that the West is behind terrorist attacks in Indonesia. This belief persists despite overwhelming evidence that Islamist radicals were the true perpetrators. The current research examines the role intergroup threats and negative emotions have in moulding this type of conspiratorial belief, and how this role is dependent upon the level of Muslims' perceived identity subversion, that is, a sense that the Western ways of life have fundamentally changed

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Islamic identity. Data from 246 Indonesian Muslim students revealed that negative emotions of dejection-agitation towards Western ways of life significantly mediated the effects of both symbolic and realistic threats on belief in anti-West conspiracy theories. The effects of intergroup threats and dejection-agitation on belief in conspiracy theories, as predicted, were contingent on Muslim participants' perceived identity subversion. Higher symbolic threat, realistic threat and dejection-agitation, indeed, positively predicted the belief, but only when the degree of identity subversion was high. Identity subversion moderated the roles of dejection-agitation in mediating the effect of symbolic and realistic threats in predicting belief in conspiracy theories. More specifically, the empirical evidence of these mediating roles of dejection-agitation was only among Muslim participants with high identity subversion. Finally, theoretical implications and study limitations of the current findings were discussed.

### Keywords

Identity subversion, symbolic threat, realistic threat, negative emotions, belief in conspiracy theories, terrorism in Indonesia

## Introduction

The phenomenon of the belief in conspiracy theories is widespread across the globe, spreading not only in developing countries but also in developed countries (Byford, 2011). Despite a large corpus of literature that has confirmed the conclusive role of personal factors in explaining the belief (see Swami, 2012 for a review), existing research that investigates how intergroup factors shape belief in conspiracy theories is still sorely lacking. The investigation of intergroup variables is important for getting a better understanding of practical strategies to decrease belief in conspiracy theories. This is especially the case given that at a group level, prior studies have cited the conspiracy theories belief as a catalyst of a host of negative intergroup behaviours against those suspected as the conspirators, including group ostracism (Räikkä, 2009), discrimination (Bilewicz & Krzemiński, 2010) and victim blaming (Putra, Mashuri & Zaduqisti, 2015). With reference to integrated threat theory (ITT; Stephan & Renfro, 2002), we show that Muslims believe in anti-West conspiracy theories because they perceive the West as posing a symbolic and realistic threat to Muslims' group entity. These intergroup threats, in turn, lead

4 to negative emotions among Muslims who feel threatened toward the West perceived as producing the threat. Ultimately, this leads to the belief in anti-West conspiracy theories to harm Muslims. Moreover, we show that intergroup threats promote negative emotions and conspiracy thinking more prominently when Muslims see that the Western ways of life not only threaten but also subvert or fundamentally change Muslims' identity. We test these ideas in the Republic of Indonesia, where people tend to believe in theories that the West has masterminded terrorism in this world's largest Muslim population (Sijabat, 2015).

Generally, a belief in conspiracies refers to individuals' tendency to place external attribution on certain events, wherein they blame surreptitiously designed malignant plots by powerful forces instead of overt activities or incidents to account for the events (McCauley & Jacques, 1979). Through the lens of intergroup perspective, a belief in conspiracy theories occurs when people categorise actors of a conspiracy as an out-group with malevolent intentions to harm these people's own group (Bilewicz, Winiewski, Kofta, & Wójcik, 2013). The content of the belief in conspiracies commonly has to do with very salient events, thereby attracting the public's attention and curiosity, such as the origin of HIV/AIDS (Ross, Essien & Torres, 2006), the death of Princess Diana (Douglas & Sutton, 2011), the tragedy of the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Swami, Chamorro Premuzic, & Furnham, 2010), and the scandalous assassination of US President John F. Kennedy (McHoskey, 1995). People tend to 4 perceive these historical events as internal or external threats, wherein the belief in conspiracy theories serves as people's defensive response to ease the threats (Swami, 2012).

Stephan and Renfro (2002) classified two types of intergroup threats: symbolic and realistic. A symbolic threat occurs when the goal attainment or well-being of a certain group is challenged or impaired by another group's actions, beliefs or characteristics. In a similar way, Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears and Doosje (1999) posited that people experience symbolic or identity threat when they perceive that that another group devalues their own group's values and norms. Previous work suggests that a part of perceived symbolic or identity threat is the experiences of discrimination, which signals to those discriminated that another group has devalued their own group norms and values (Maliepaard, Phalet & Gijsberts, 2014). Indeed, Muslims, especially those who are living in Western countries as a minority group, have subjectively viewed themselves as a target of continuing discrimination, more pronouncedly after the tragedy of the 9/11 (Awad, 2010). Some studies (Kunst, Tajamal, Sam, & Ulleberg, 2012; Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2007)

have revealed that among Muslim minorities in Europe perceived discrimination contributes to stronger Islamic identification and weaker national identification. Combined together, stronger Islamic identification and weaker national identification hinder dual identity with which Muslims become emotionally attached to both their Islamic identity and national identity, which subsequently leads to Muslims' negative attitudes against the West (Ten Teije, Coenders, & Verkuyten, 2013). Another research among Muslims in Britain (Hopkins, 2011) reveals that this religious minority group may hold a dual identity as being Muslim and British. Crucially, however, this research suggests that Muslims' negative attitudes against the West may result from the perception that the host society does not recognise such a dual identity and, ultimately, does not treat them justly. Conspiracy theories depict the out-group as collective enemies with hidden activities to exploit the in-group (Bilewicz et al., 2013; Kofta & Slawuta, 2013). As such, a belief in conspiracy theories also indicates negative intergroup attitudes. Taken together, we argue that the perceived discrimination and denial of the dual identity as explained above lead to Muslims' perception that the West poses a threat to Islamic identity. This in turn, leads to Muslims' negative intergroup attitudes, giving rise to this religious group's belief in anti-West conspiracy theories.

A realistic threat stems from a competition over scarce tangible resources such as money or materials, or over intangible resources such as power or status, in which group members perceive that another group will take control over resources so that they are no longer able to use them. The current globalising era, which signifies the supremacy of the West both in terms of economy and politics, leads Muslims to feel that the power of Islam is realistically under threat (Fair & Shepherd, 2006; Robison, Crenshaw & Jenkins, 2006). Economically, due to the prosperity and advanced technology of the West, Muslims consider the West as a realistic threat to Islamic existence. Politically, this realistic threat is attributed to various factors, including the superiority of democracy as the West's secular system, and their incessant support of Israel's occupation over Palestine (Moghaddam, 2008; Robison et al., 2006). This perceived realistic threat gives rise to Muslims' powerlessness vis-à-vis the West (Reid, 2010). Powerlessness in and of itself has been found to instigate belief in conspiracy theories (Crocker, Luhtanen, Broadnax, & Blaine, 1999). This implies that perceived realistic threat augments Muslims' belief in anti-West conspiracy theories.

The ITT (Stephan & Renfro, 2002) in general postulates that both symbolic and realistic threats, because they reflect negative expectations

from the threatening group, elicit negative emotions. In particular, Kay, Whitson, Gaucher, and Galinsky (2009) reasoned that threatening events evoke negative emotions of anxiety and discomfort. Van Hook and Higgins (1988) delineated a range of negative emotions including anger, confusion, dejection, and agitation. Sani (2005) proposed dejection-agitation as a mix of multifarious negative emotions such as disappointment, sadness, apprehension, and uneasiness which in-group members may feel towards another group. Dejection-agitation has been found to provoke negative intergroup attitudes. In the study by Sani (2005), dejection led to schismatic intentions. In the study by Leach and Spears (2009), dejection led to *schadenfreude* or a pleasure towards another group's misfortune. To date, there are no studies which specifically connect dejection-agitation to belief in conspiracy theories. However, Abalakina-Paap, Stephan, Craig, and Gregory (1999) found that hostility is associated with greater belief in conspiracy theories. Berkowitz (1993) argued that hostility is a negative affect that represents agitation-related emotions. In a similar vein, van Hook and Higgins (1988) posited that although distinct to each other, dejection-agitation and hostility are inter-related. These arguments suggest that dejection-agitation and hostility align with each other, despite the controversy over whether they are overlapping or distinct to each other. As such, we contend that dejection-agitation is a potent predictor of Muslims' belief in anti-West conspiracy theories, and that this emotion mediates the effects of symbolic threat and realistic threat on the conspiracy theories belief. As demonstrated later in this work, we argue that the strength of this relationship is dependent upon the extent to which Muslims perceive the West as subverting their Islamic identity.

Sani and Todman (2002) introduced identity subversion and empirically applied this concept to schism within an organisation in an attempt to explain why in-group members decide to resist sharing membership with another group and create a breakaway party. In particular, identity subversion refers to a sense that new norms, values, or practices of other groups have fundamentally changed past or traditional norms, values, and practices of in-group members. Identity subversion thus implies that the new norms imposed by another group cause a dramatic rupture in the cultural continuity of the in-group, rendering in-group members to believe that their group as it used to be no longer exists (Sani, 2005). The core part of identity subversion is thereby people's concerns over their own group's cultural or identity discontinuity between the past and the present due to the new norms and values imposed by another group (Sani, 2005). This sense of collective discontinuity motivates people to

take defensive actions in an attempt to preserve their group, especially when they see their group is under threat (Jetten & Wohl, 2012). Belief in conspiracy theories denotes a defensive coping mechanism with which people regain their sense of predictability and order (Hofstadter, 1966) as well as a sense of control (Kay et al., 2009). These, in turn, mitigate aversive feelings from the threatening events. What we can derive from these rationales is that the more Muslims perceive the West as posing symbolic and realistic threats, and have negative emotion of dejection-agitation toward the West, the more they believe in anti-West conspiracy theories. Moreover, as a means of alleviating this aversive emotion, Muslims embrace this belief more strongly when they perceive the West as subverting Islamic existence, prompting this religious group to view their identity discontinuity as a pivotal source of concern. Given this prediction, as mentioned above, we reasoned that the effect of symbolic threat and realistic threat that passes via dejection-agitation is more pronounced when Muslims' identity subversion is high.

## **The Current Study**

Since the horrible tragedy of the Bali bombings in 2002, Islamist terrorism has been an intractable, serious national problem for the Indonesian government (Sijabat, 2015). As disseminated by the government through various public media, the most accountable actors of terrorism thus far are Indonesian Muslim radicals linked to Islamic extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and their splinter groups (Perdani, 2013). A recent investigation also strongly suggests that Islamist terrorism in Indonesia has local origins, dating back to 1949 when an Islamist group Darul Islam launched an armed revolt for an Islamic state (Solahudin, 2013). Despite such official investigations and reports, many Indonesian Muslims still believe in theories that the US and its allies, such as Israel and other Western countries, are the real actors behind terrorism in Indonesia (Fealy, 2003). For example, in response to the Bali bombings on October 2002, a survey released by Indonesian media revealed that many Indonesians believe that the CIA (the US Central Intelligence Agency) was secretly involved in the Bali bombings (Jones, 2009). The Indonesian conspiracy theories thereby tend to posit terrorist acts in Indonesia as nothing more than pseudo-terrorism. In this discourse, the real performers of terrorism are believed to be the US and its allies, whereas Islamist radical groups are just their puppet (Hilmy, 2010).



In this study, we operationalised the Western countries or people as the US and its allies, more particularly, Israel, UK and Australia. We selected the US and Israel as the target due to some Indonesian Muslims' belief in these two countries' conspiracies to weaken Islam or Muslims (Khisbiyah, 2009). We selected the UK because some Indonesian Muslims believe that to disunite Islam the British conspiracies created an Islamic denomination of the *Ahmadiyya*, the members of which have recently become the victims of violence and persecution by Islamist radicals in Indonesia (Suwarno, 2013). We argued that Muslims' belief in the British conspiracy on the issue of *Ahmadiyya* will connect to their belief in the British conspiracy on the issue of terrorism in Indonesia. This argument rested on the finding in the study by Goertzel (1994) that people who believe in one conspiracy will be likely to also believe in other conspiracies. We selected Australia because a survey conducted by a famous online newspaper Detik.com shortly after the Bali bombings in 2002 revealed that 70 per cent of the respondents accused this country, along with the US, as being involved in a conspiracy behind the tragedy, which victimised many Australian citizens as well (Fealy, 2003). To help participants accurately comprehend the meaning of 'the Western countries or people', we provided them with this operationalisation at the beginning of the questionnaire.

Drawing on the empirical findings and theoretical rationales discussed previously, we generated some hypotheses. First, Muslim participants' dejection-agitation as it relates to their perception that Western people symbolically threaten Islamic existence would mediate the effect of symbolic threat on anti-West conspiracy theories which denote that Western people have conspired to create terrorism in Indonesia (*Hypothesis 1a*). Second, Muslim participants' dejection-agitation as it relates to their perception that Western people realistically threaten Islamic existence would mediate the effect of realistic threat on the anti-West conspiracy theories (*Hypothesis 1b*). Third, the more Muslim participants perceived that the Western ways of life are symbolically threatening the Islamic identity, the more they would believe in anti-West conspiracy theories, but this relationship would be more significant when Muslim participants' perceived identity subversion was high (*Hypothesis 2a*). Fourth, the more Muslim participants perceived that Western political and economic dominance is realistically threatening Islamic power, the more they would believe in anti-West conspiracy theories, but this relationship would be more significant when Muslim participants' perceived identity subversion was high (*Hypothesis 2b*). Fifth, the more dejection-agitation Muslim participants felt in their

intergroup relation with the West, the more they would believe in anti-West conspiracy theories, but this relationship would be more significant when Muslim participants' perceived identity subversion was high (*Hypothesis 3*). Sixth, Muslim participants' dejection-agitation as it relates to their perception that Western people were symbolically threatening Islamic existence would mediate the effects of symbolic threat on anti-West conspiracy theories, but this mediation effect would be more prominent when Muslim participants' perceived identity subversion was high (*Hypothesis 4a*). Seventh, Muslim participants' dejection-agitation as it relates to their perception that Western people realistically threaten Islamic existence would mediate the effect of realistic threat on anti-West conspiracy theories, but this mediation effect would be more prominent when Muslim participants' perceived identity subversion was high (*Hypothesis 4b*).

## Methods

### Participants and Design

Two hundred and forty-six Indonesian Muslim students took part in this research voluntarily, in return of no financial incentive or course credits. Of the total participants, 155 were Muslim students from STAIN Pekalongan, Central Java, 41 from IAIN Pontianak, West Kalimantan, and 50 from IAIN Antasari, South Kalimantan ( $Mean_{age} = 21.03$ ;  $SD_{age} = 3.50$ ). Sixty five participants were ethnically Javanese and 35 participants were ethnically non-Javanese.

The design of this research was a correlational survey, wherein the creation of the variables built on measurements instead of experimental manipulations. Using convenience sampling, we recruited participants on the basis of these participants' willingness to be involved in the research, and ease of access to them for study participation.

### Procedure and Measures

The setting to administer this research was a classroom. Research was administered by distributing scales compiled in a questionnaire to measure each variable. The sequence of the scales presented in the questionnaire were *symbolic threat*, *realistic threat*, *identity subversion*,

*dejection-agitation* and *belief in conspiracy theories* respectively, followed by some demographic variables, including age, gender, ethnicity and university affiliation. Unless otherwise indicated, scales were created by averaging the scores on each item. We calculated the scores using a five-point Likert scale ranging between 1 (Totally Disagree) to 5 (Totally Agree). Table 2 presents the item loadings of each scale in this study. We assessed *symbolic threat* using five items and *realistic threat* using six items, both of which were created by the authors in an explorative way, suited to Indonesian context. *Identity subversion* was assessed using three items and *dejection-agitation* was assessed using six items which were adapted from the study by Sani (2005). Belief in conspiracy theories in the context of terrorism in Indonesia was measured using five items, which was adopted from the study by Mashuri and Zaduqisti (2014).

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## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

As shown in Table 1, bivariate correlations reveal that all measured variables significantly correlated to one another at 0.01 levels. All demographic variables did not significantly correlate with Dejection-Agitation (mediator) and Belief in Conspiracy Theories (dependent variables), despite the significant correlation between Gender and Realistic Threat. Implicatively, each of these demographic variables did not need controlling in the analyses to test the main hypotheses involving Dejection-Agitation and Belief in Conspiracy Theories. Finally, reliabilities of all measured variables were good, exceeding the minimum of 0.07 as a coefficient of Cronbach Alpha ( $\alpha$ ) recommended by Nunnally (1978). These findings clearly indicate that all measured variables live up to a good internal consistency.

### Preliminary Analyses

Assessment of construct validity (convergent and discriminant) in this research was hinged on exploratory factor analysis (EFA). The data yielded KMO Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) with a value of 0.89 and Bartlett's test with the chi-square of 2825.70 ( $df = 300$ ;  $p < .001$ ), the

**Table 1.** Means (M), Standard Deviation (SD), Correlations, and Reliabilities ( $\alpha$ ) of Variables in This Study

Variables	M	SD	$\alpha$	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Age				—	0.08	0.22**	-0.03	0.08	-0.01	0.04	0.08	0.05
2. Gender					—	-0.09	0.10	-0.07	-0.16*	-0.05	-0.12	-0.11
3. Ethnicity						—	-0.86***	-0.04	0.05	-0.01	-0.01	0.08
4. University							—	0.04	-0.10	-0.04	-0.01	-0.10
5. Symbolic Threat	4.25	0.70	0.78					—	0.53**	0.56**	0.46**	0.29**
6. Realistic threat	3.85	0.87	0.87						—	0.60**	0.37**	0.28**
7. Identity subversion	4.08	0.91	0.79							—	0.43**	0.33**
8. Dejection-agitation	3.75	0.80	0.86								—	0.36**
9. Belief in conspiracy theories	3.84	0.83	0.88									—

**Note:** Of the 246 participants, 167 are female, 67 are male, and 12 did not indicate their gender. \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

results of which confirmed that the use of EFA in this study is appropriate (Field, 2009). Through the lens of EFA, convergent validity is satisfactorily met if the items' loading on their corresponding factor is higher than 0.40, while the fulfilment of convergent validity relies on the items' cross-loading on their irrelevant factor that is less than 0.40 (Hinton, Brownlow, McMurray, & Cozens, 2004). Some scholars have recommended using oblique rotation compared to orthogonal rotation (e.g., Conway & Huffcutt, 2003; Gorsuch, 1997) for the rotation methods in EFA. Oblique rotation is more realistic than orthogonal rotation since in most of social phenomena variables or factors tend to have some degree of inter-correlations. Accordingly, we decided to select PROMAX as an oblique rotation that yields factor solutions allowing correlations among the factors (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001).

As shown in Table 2, principal Component Analysis with PROMAX rotation revealed five factors as expected, which accounted for 64.20 of total variance. In Table 2, each item turned out to have cross-loadings less than 0.40 on its opposing factors, which supported the discriminant validity, and loadings more than 0.40 on its corresponding factor, which supported convergent validity. These findings imply that Symbolic Threat, Realistic Threat, Identity Subversion, Dejection-Agitation, and Belief in Conspiracy Theories were correlated, but each item of these variables measured unique constructs, thereby not overlapping one another. These findings in sum were convincingly supportive of convergent validity and discriminant validity of all constructs or measured variables in this research.

### *Main Analyses*

Unless otherwise indicated, main analyses in this study built on a bootstrapping procedure, using a PROCESS Macro provided by Hayes (2013). The Bootstrapping technique is important for assessing to what degree the statistical analyses results are susceptible to Type I Error (false positive) (Holmbeck, 2002). Following recommendations (Hayes, 2009), the bootstrapping was conducted by resampling the data 5000 times as a baseline to produce confidence intervals with which to verify false positive effects. These bootstrapping analyses were done without controlling for any demographic variables, based on the findings as described in the section of descriptive statistics that the demographic variables in this study did not have significant effects on Dejection-Agitation and Belief in Conspiracy Theories.

**Table 2.** Loadings and Variances Explained Based on Exploratory Factor Analysis of All Items in This Study

Items	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5
I am very concerned about the Western ways of life that are not in line with Muslim ways of life (Symbolic Threat 1)	-0.072	-0.162	0.069	0.751	0.179
The possibility that the values and culture of the West will continue to displace and weaken the values and culture of Islam is something that deeply worries me (Symbolic Threat 2)	0.120	-0.050	0.105	0.801	-0.163
I think that the views or ideas of the Western world are very alarming because they deviates from the views and thoughts of Islam (Symbolic Threat 3)	-0.341	0.209	-0.104	0.608	0.314
How the West interpret and judge the life I think is not in tune with how Muslims do, thereby putting the values and culture of the West as a guide is something worrying (Symbolic Threat 4)	0.266	0.112	-0.048	0.571	-0.007
I fear that in the current open society era, the influence of the values and norms of the West will compete with and even displace the values and norms of Islam (Symbolic Threat 5)	0.328	0.005	-0.070	0.575	-0.024
I fear that the economy of the Western world that is more developed and stronger than that of Islamic world will weaken the influence of the Islamic world in the inter-state competition (Realistic Threat 1)	0.806	-0.033	0.016	0.130	-0.119
I fear that the advancement of science and technology of the Western world that significantly surpasses that of the Islamic world will make the Western world to become more powerful (Realistic Threat 2)	0.880	-0.053	-0.075	-0.007	-0.077

1 I fear that the more powerful and influential position of the Western world than that of Islamic world will weaken the power of Islamic world in a cross-country competition (Realistic Threat 3)	0.797	0.036	-0.075	-0.065	0.030
I fear that the Western world with advanced economy and technology will intervene to manage natural resources in the Islamic world so that the resources cannot be fully to increase the welfare of Muslims (Realistic Threat 4)	0.670	0.047	-0.017	0.018	0.150
1 I fear that the strong power of the Western world will debilitate a bargaining position of the Islamic world in the global competition (Realistic Threat 5)	0.631	-0.010	0.077	0.037	0.208
I fear that the strong power of the Western world will make them to easily intervene Islamic world's domestic affairs and problems (Realistic Threat 6)	0.682	0.054	0.088	-0.022	0.121
The Western culture and ways of life has subverted the true nature of Islam (Identity Subversion 1)	0.181	-0.080	-0.014	-0.012	0.767
The Western culture and ways of life has fundamentally changed the identity of Muslims (Identity Subversion 2)	0.113	0.044	-0.021	0.024	0.740
Because of The Western culture and ways of life, the Muslims' current identity contradicts its own history, principles, and values (Identity Subversion 3)	-0.051	-0.030	0.030	0.105	0.785
When I think about The Western culture and ways of life, I feel apprehensive (Dejection-Agitation 1)	0.204	0.414	0.111	-0.058	0.150
When I think about the fact that The Western culture and ways of life, I feel joyful (Dejection-Agitation 2, Reverse)	-0.085	0.774	0.040	0.201	-0.073

(Table 2 Continued)

(Table 2 Continued)

Items	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5
When I think about the fact that The Western culture and ways of life, I feel disappointed (Dejection-Agitation 3)	-0.115	<u>0.818</u>	-0.042	0.194	-0.088
When I think about the fact that The Western culture and ways of life, I feel uneasy (Dejection-Agitation 4)	0.027	<u>0.746</u>	0.042	0.017	0.033
When I think about the fact that The Western culture and ways of life, I feel sad (Dejection-Agitation 5)	0.094	<u>0.883</u>	-0.116	-0.171	0.034
When I think about the fact that The Western culture and ways of life, I feel calm (Dejection-Agitation 6, Reverse)	0.042	<u>0.853</u>	0.088	-0.204	-0.034
The Western world has invisibly funded radical Islamic groups in Indonesia to perpetrate terrorism (Conspiracy theories 1)	-0.108	0.022	<u>0.842</u>	-0.183	0.191
Radical Islamic groups in Indonesia that have been suspected as terrorists are actually created by the Western World's conspiracies (Conspiracy theories 2)	0.004	0.016	<u>0.838</u>	0.113	-0.117
The West have engineered the terrorism in Indonesia so that Indonesian government has acted wrongly by arresting a number of suspected terrorists (Conspiracy theories 3)	-0.004	-0.124	<u>0.838</u>	0.091	0.029
Terrorism in Indonesia was ignited by the creation of the Western people's intelligence (Conspiracy theories 4)	0.120	0.089	<u>0.763</u>	0.028	-0.124
The Western world have cooperated with one another to create surreptitiously radical Islamic groups to perpetrate terrorism in Indonesia (Conspiracy theories 5)	-0.062	0.039	<u>0.800</u>	0.013	0.019
<b>% Variance Explained</b>	<b>32.74</b>	<b>11.51</b>	<b>9.56</b>	<b>6.06</b>	<b>4.34</b>



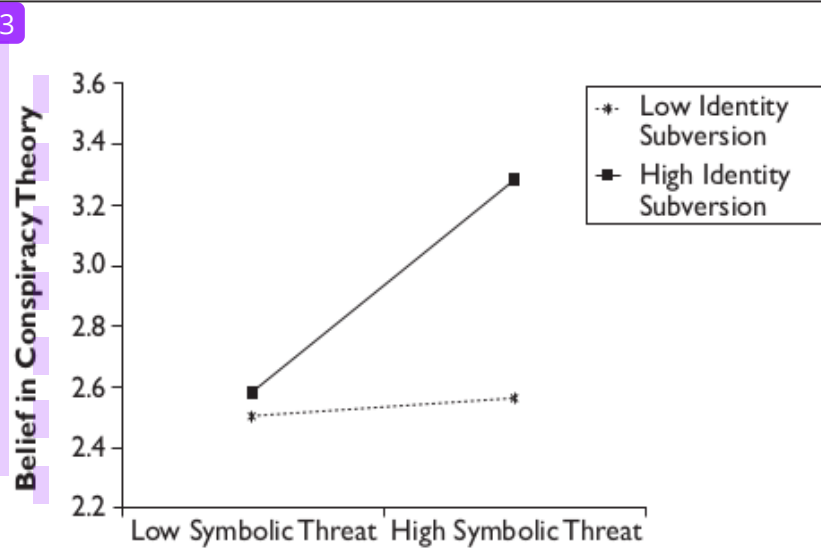
#### 4 Mediation Effect Analyses

To check the role of Dejection-Agitation in mediating the effect of Symbolic Threat on Belief in Conspiracy Theories, we followed PROCESS model 4 (Hayes, 2013). In this procedure, Belief in Conspiracy Theories was specified as outcome variable (Y), Symbolic Threat as independent variable (X), Dejection-Agitation as mediator (M), controlling for Realistic Threat and Identity Subversion. In support of Hypothesis 1a, the result revealed that Dejection-Agitation significantly mediated the effect of Symbolic Threat on Belief in Conspiracy Theories (both indirect effect = 0.08,  $SE = 0.04$ , 95%  $LLCI = 0.032$ , 95%  $ULCI = 0.174$ ). Using the same PROCESS Model 4, the role of Dejection-Agitation in mediating the effect of Realistic Threat on Belief in Conspiracy Theories was examined by entering the first as mediator, the second as independent variable and the third as outcome variable, controlling for Symbolic Threat and Identity Subversion. The result was in line with Hypothesis 1b in which Group Dejection significantly mediated the effect of Realistic Threat on Belief in Conspiracy Theories (both indirect effect = 0.04,  $SE = 0.02$ , 95%  $LLCI = 0.010$ , 95%  $ULCI = 0.099$ ).

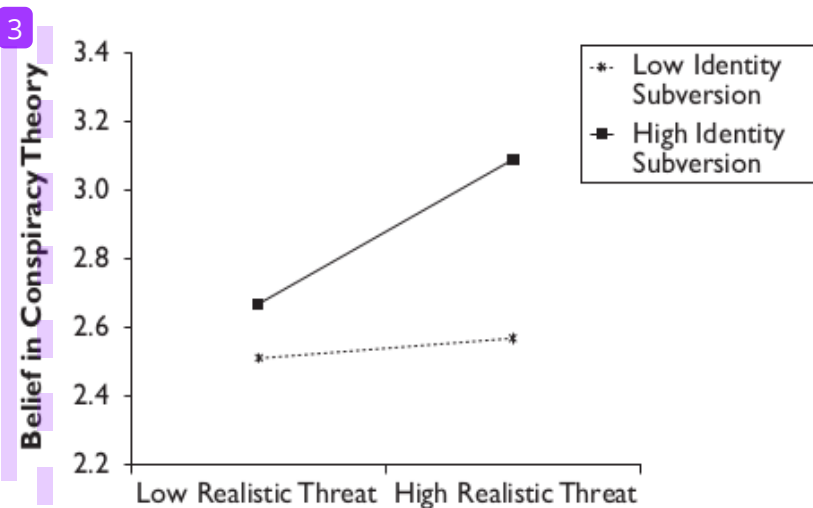
#### 4 Moderation Analyses

To check the role of Identity Subversion in moderating the effect of Symbolic Threat on Belief in Conspiracy Theories, we used a probing interaction procedure (MODPROBE; Hayes & Matthes, 2009). In this procedure, Belief in Conspiracy Theories was entered as dependent variable, Symbolic Threat as a focal variable (mean-centred), Identity Subversion as a moderator (mean-centred) controlling for Realistic Threat and Dejection-Agitation. This analysis revealed that Symbolic Threat and Identity Subversion significantly interacted to affect Belief in Conspiracy Theories,  $B = 0.16$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $t = 2.86$ ,  $p = 0.005$ . As shown in Figure 1, Symbolic Threat was positively related to belief in Conspiracy Theories among participants with high Identity Subversion,  $B = 0.33$ ,  $SE = 0.13$ ,  $t = 2.55$ ,  $p = 0.011$ ,  $LLCI = 0.076$ ,  $ULCI = 0.592$ . Among participants with low Identity Subversion, however, Symbolic Threat was unrelated to Belief in Conspiracy Theories,  $B = 0.04$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ ,  $t = 0.46$ ,  $p = 0.649$ ,  $LLCI = -0.139$ ,  $ULCI = 0.224$ . These findings were in line with Hypothesis 2a.

Another MODPROBE procedure in which Belief in Conspiracy Theories was entered as a dependent variable, Realistic Threat as a focal variable (mean-centred), Identity Subversion as a moderator (mean-centred), controlling for Symbolic Threat and Dejection-Agitation revealed a marginally significant interaction effect,  $B = 0.09$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $t = 1.78$  and  $p = 0.077$ . However, in support of Hypothesis 2b (see Figure 2),



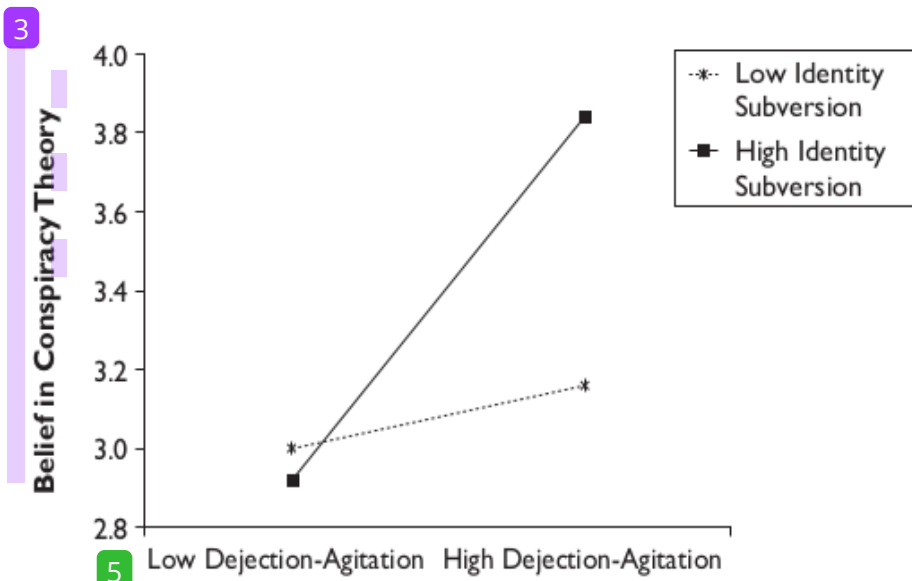
**Figure 1.** The Relationship between Symbolic Threat and Belief in Conspiracy Theories among Participants with High Identity Subversion and Low Identity Subversion



**Figure 2.** The Relationship between Realistic Threat and Belief in Conspiracy Theories among Participants with High Identity Subversion and Low Identity Subversion

Realistic Threat significantly predicted belief in Conspiracy Theories among participants with high Identity Subversion,  $B = 0.19$ ,  $SE = 0.10$ ,  $t = 2.05$ ,  $p = 0.042$ ,  $LLCI = 0.007$  and  $ULCI = 0.380$ . Among participants with low Identity Subversion, the effect of Realistic Threat on Belief in Conspiracy Theories theories was no longer significant,  $B = 0.04$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ ,  $t = 0.45$ ,  $p = 0.654$ ,  $LLCI = -0.122$  and  $ULCI = 0.195$ .

The last MODPROBE procedure in which Belief in Conspiracy Theories was entered as a dependent variable, Dejection-Agitation as a



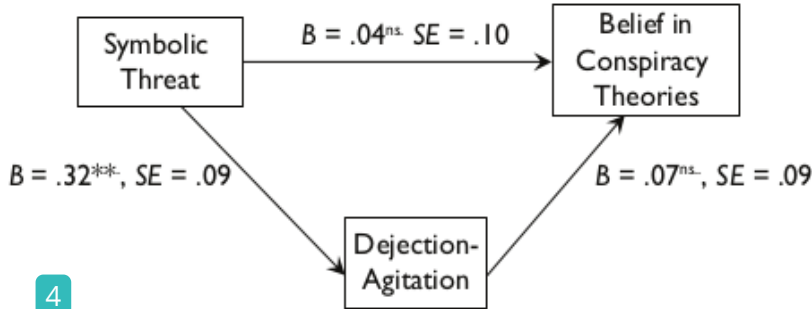
**Figure 3.** The Relationship between Dejection-Agitation and Belief in Conspiracy Theories among Participants with High Identity Subversion and Low Identity Subversion

focal variable, Identity Subversion as a moderator (mean-centred), controlling for Symbolic Threat and Realistic Threat also yielded a significant interaction effect,  $B = 0.19$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $t = 3.117$  and  $p = 0.002$ . In line with Hypothesis 3 (see Figure 3), Dejection-Agitation significantly predicted Belief in Conspiracy Theories among participants with high Identity Subversion,  $B = 0.44$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ ,  $t = 4.66$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $LLCI = 0.252$  and  $ULCI = 0.620$ . This effect was no longer significant among participants with low Identity Subversion,  $B = 0.09$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ ,  $t = 1.11$ ,  $p = 0.268$ ,  $LLCI = -0.073$ ,  $ULCI = 0.262$ .

#### Moderated Mediation Analyses

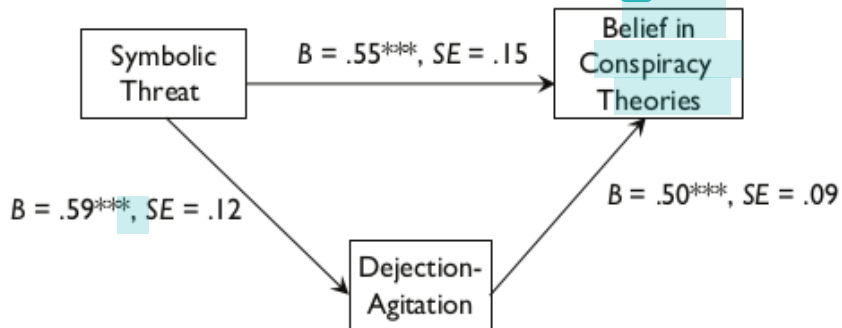
To test whether the mediating role of Dejection-Agitation on the relationship between Symbolic Threat and Belief in Conspiracy Theories was conditional on the level of Identity Subversion, we used PROCESS model 15 (see Hayes, 2013). In this model, Belief in Conspiracy Theories was entered as outcome variable (Y), Symbolic Threat as independent variable (X), Dejection-Agitation as mediator (M), Identity Subversion as moderator (V), controlling for Realistic Threat. This analysis revealed that among participants with low Identity Subversion (see Figure 4a), Dejection-Agitation did not significantly mediate the relationship between Symbolic Threat and Belief in Conspiracy Theories (both indirect effect = 0.03,  $SE = 0.06$ , 95%  $LLCI = -0.086$  and 95%  $ULCI = 0.145$ ). However, as shown in Figure 4b, Dejection-Agitation turned out to

(4a) Low Identity Subversion



**Figure 4a.** The Role of Dejection-Agitation in Mediating the Effect of Symbolic Threat on Belief in Conspiracy Theories among Participants with Low Identity Subversion

(4b) High Identity Subversion



**Figure 4b.** The Role of Dejection-Agitation in Mediating the Effect of Symbolic Threat on Belief in Conspiracy Theories among Participants with High Identity Subversion

**Note:** *B* is an unstandardised regression coefficient, *SE* is Standard Error. Each path in the model was based a simple regression analysis. The path from Symbolic Threat to Belief in Conspiracy Theories is the total effect (without controlling for Dejection-Agitation).

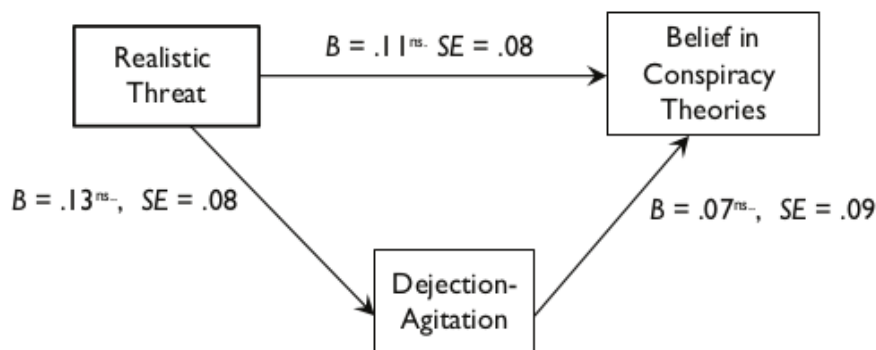
\*\* =  $p < .01$ , \*\*\* =  $p < .001$ , ns. = not significant.

significantly mediate the relationship between Symbolic Threat and Belief in Conspiracy Theories among participants with high Identity Subversion (both indirect effect = 0.15,  $SE = 0.07$ , 95% *LLCI* = 0.050 and 95% *ULCI* = .324). These findings, therefore, support Hypothesis 4a.

The same PROCESS procedure was used to finally test whether the mediating role of Dejection-Agitation on the relationship between Realistic Threat and Belief in Conspiracy Theories was conditional on the level of Identity Subversion. In this model, Belief in Conspiracy Theories was entered as outcome variable (Y), Realistic Threat as

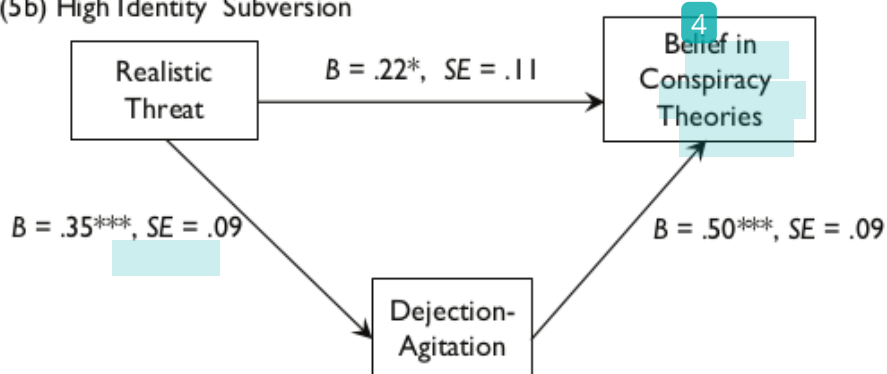
independent variable (X), Dejection-Agitation as mediator (M), Identity Subversion as moderator (V), controlling for Symbolic Threat. The result showed that (see Figure 5a) among participants with low Identity Subversion, Dejection-Agitation did not significantly mediate the relationship between Realistic Threat and Belief in Conspiracy Theories (total indirect effect = 0.02,  $SE = 0.03$ , 95%  $LLCI = -0.034$  and 95%  $ULCI = 0.082$ ). However, as shown in Figure 5b, dejection-agitation

(5a) Low Identity Subversion



**Figure 5a.** The Role of Dejection-Agitation in Mediating the Effect of Realistic Threat on Belief in Conspiracy Theories among Participants with Low Identity Subversion

(5b) High Identity Subversion



**Figure 5b.** The Role of Dejection-Agitation in Mediating the Effect of Realistic Threat on Belief in Conspiracy Theories among Participants with High Identity Subversion

**Note:**  $B$  is an unstandardised regression coefficient,  $SE$  is Standard Error. Each path in the model was based a simple regression analysis. The path from Realistic Threat to Belief in Conspiracy theories is the total effect (without controlling for Dejection-Agitation).

\*\* =  $p < .01$ , \*\*\* =  $p < .001$ ,  $^{ns}$  = not significant.

turned out to significantly mediate the relationship between Realistic Threat and Belief in Conspiracy Theories among participants with high identity subversion (booth indirect effect = 0.07,  $SE = 0.04$ , 95%  $LLCI = 0.008$  and 95%  $ULCI = 0.163$ ). These findings support Hypothesis 4b.

## Discussion

This study confirms the prediction that symbolic threat and realistic threat Muslim participants perceived in their intergroup relationships with Western people triggered dejection-agitation, and in turn this emotion prompted these participants to believe in theories that Western people have conspired to clandestinely create terrorism in Indonesia. We also found that, as expected, symbolic threat, realistic threat and dejection-agitation gave rise to the belief in anti-West conspiracy theories, but only when Muslim participants felt and thought that the Western ways of life highly subverted Islamic identity. Finally, the role of dejection-agitation in mediating the effect of symbolic threat and realistic threat on the belief turned out to be contingent upon the level of identity subversion, such that this mediation effect was significant only among Muslim participants with high identity subversion.

### *Theoretical Implications*

The finding in this study that the emotion of dejection-agitation mediated the effect of symbolic threat and realistic threat on anti-West conspiracy theories supports the model of IAT (Stephan & Renfro, 2002). In this model, symbolic threat and realistic threat are supposed to aggravate negative emotions such as intergroup anxiety, fear and anger, which in turn intensify negative out-group attitudes. Intergroup emotion theory (Smith, Miller & Mackie, 2000) also posits that the negative emotion of fear is often elicited by, on one side, threatening events and, on another side, a sense that there are inadequate resources to deal with the threat, fuelled by the pervasive feeling of powerlessness or weaknesses. Then, fear gives rise to group members' unfavourable attitudes toward the threatening out-group. This role of fear in mediating the impact of threatening events on negative out-group attitude as specified by intergroup emotion theory is in line with the finding in this study. This is so because dejection-agitation stemming from symbolic and realistic threats bears

within it the emotion of fear (i.e., uneasiness, apprehension), and the belief in conspiracy theories bears unfavourable attitude toward the suspected out-group. Moreover, Suci (2008) found that in the context of Muslims in Southeast Asia, such sense of defeat, together with perceived victimhood, has signified an earmark of Muslims' belief in anti-West conspiracy theories.

Another finding in this study was that an increased sense that the Western ways of life have subverted Islamic identity heightened the impact of symbolic threat, realistic threat, and dejection-agitation on Muslim participants' belief that Western people's conspiracies are behind terrorism in Indonesia. The reason identity subversion amplifies the impact of intergroup threats on anti-West conspiracy theories, as discussed earlier, is that identity subversion harbours intergroup differences between Islamic and Western ways of life, and these differences furthermore pose a radical change to the collective continuity of Islamic identity. On one side, perceived intergroup difference, more than intergroup similarity in and of itself, has been found to enhance intergroup threat, negative stereotype and negative attitudes towards the out-group (van Osch & Breugelmans, 2012). Cultural collective discontinuity, on the other side, stirs up the role of group identification in triggering negative emotion in the form of collective angst and negative attitudes towards the out-group (Jetten & Wohl, 2012). Taken together, a sense of identity subversion characterised by perceived intergroup differences between Western ways of life and Muslim ways of life and cultural discontinuity of Islamic identity heightens the extent to which symbolic threat, realistic threat and dejection-agitation in this study arouse Muslim participants' belief in the Western people's conspiracy to evoke terrorism in Indonesia.

Beside the intergroup emotion of dejection-agitation, the combined effect of symbolic threat, realistic threat and identity subversion on belief in conspiracy theories might also be attributable to so-called existential threat, which refers to people's perceived incapability to efficaciously control their environment and fate (Sullivan, Landau & Rothschild, 2012). Indeed, intergroup threats are cited as a cause of the experience of existential threat or uncertainty (Stephan & Renfro, 2002). Existential threat in turn instigates belief in conspiracy theories. In this regard, belief in conspiracy theories functions as a medium through which people cope with the existential threat, in order to regain and maintain their sense of meaning, control and security (Newheiser, Farias & Tausch; 2011; Sullivan et al., 2010).

## Limitations and Follow-up Studies

We acknowledge some limitations in this study, which could be refined in the follow-up studies. First, respondents in this study were drawn on the basis of a non-random convenience sampling among Muslim students from Islamic universities. As a result, the findings of the current study may not be entirely generalised into Indonesian Muslims in general and Indonesian Muslim students in particular. Future studies, therefore, may choose to use random sampling which involves Indonesian Muslim students from more heterogeneous university backgrounds. To develop the generalizability of the findings in this study, future studies may also include other demographic variables such as family education levels, income, social status, academic discipline and political affiliations. Future work may include religious fundamentalism given that this variable, as recommended by Swami (2012), is very relevant to Muslim social identity. As argued by Jikeli (2012), Muslims' negative perceptions towards Western people in terms of threat, injustice and discrimination oftentimes function as a means by which Muslim fundamentalists rationalise their belief in the Western conspiracies to harm Islam. Another limitation is that the operationalisation of Western people or countries in this study is highly subjective, although it derives from some logical argumentations from the existing literature. To make the operationalisation more empirical, future studies need to conduct a preliminary investigation of Indonesian Muslims' perception towards specific Western countries, for example the US, Israel, Australia, Britain and so forth, which are believed to be the conspirators of terrorism in Indonesia. Finally, future studies could measure intergroup threats and identity subversion twice, before and after belief in conspiracy theories. If the belief in conspiracy theories indeed functions as a coping strategy to reduce the experience of existential threat or anxiety, then the levels of intergroup threats and identity subversion should be significantly reduced following belief in conspiracy theories.

## Conclusion

The current article focuses on situational determinants of belief in conspiracy theories, an area which has escaped the attention of existing studies. Within the context of terrorism in Indonesia, this article empirically proves the assumption made by some scholars (Hofstadter, 1966;



Kay et al., 2009) that threatening events evoke belief in conspiracy theories. However, as predicted, we found that the effect of symbolic threat and realistic threat on the belief in conspiracy theories is mediated by negative emotion of dejection-agitation and moderated by identity subversion. These findings overall highlight the importance of identifying and examining strategies to reduce the extent to which Muslims feel that the norms, values or cultures of the West have caused a radical change and, ultimately, collective discontinuity of Islamic identity. Collective discontinuity makes people more concerned with their own group instead of other groups' perspectives, denoting a defensive coping mechanism to preserve their presumed threatened identity (Jetten & Wohl, 2012). A decrease of perceived identity subversion thereby may be instrumental in alleviating Muslims' sense of collective discontinuity in their intergroup relations with the West. This in turn may contribute to diverting Muslims' attention away from their own group to other groups, which has the potential to help this religious group have positive attitudes towards the West. This way, Muslims may no longer be vulnerable to easily believe in anti-West conspiracy theories.

### Acknowledgement

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