

Symbolic Threat Mediated Collective Narcissism and Antisemitic Conspiracy Belief

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Abstract

This study aimed to analyze the mediating role of symbolic threat in the relationship between collective narcissism and belief in antisemitic conspiracy theories. The Jewish community in Indonesia is almost nonexistent, yet antisemitic conspiracy theories are relatively widespread. Jews have been used as scapegoats in events that had significant global impact and are often perceived as a threat through symbols associated with them. A bootstrapped mediation analysis with 5,000 iterations was conducted to examine the role of symbolic threat as a mediator between collective narcissism and belief in antisemitic conspiracy theories. Participants were recruited online, and 385 respondents ($M_{age} = 21.57$) completed the belief in Jewish conspiracy theory scale, the collective narcissism scale, and the symbolic threat scale. The analysis revealed that symbolic threat significantly mediated the relationship between collective narcissism and belief in antisemitic conspiracy theories ($B = 0.51$, $SE = 0.06$, $CI_{95\%} = 0.40-0.62$, $p < .001$). Individuals with higher levels of collective narcissism tended to perceive Jews as symbolic threats, which in turn predicted stronger belief in antisemitic conspiracy theories. This study demonstrated how symbolic threat contributes to conspiratorial belief formation and provided empirical evidence on antisemitic attitudes in Indonesia. Furthermore, the findings contributed to extending intergroup relations discourse regarding perceptions of Jews in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: *antisemitic, conspiracy theories, symbolic threat*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis peran ancaman simbolis dalam memediasi narsisme kolektif dan keyakinan terhadap teori konspirasi antisemit. Kelompok Yahudi di Indonesia berjumlah hampir menuju ketiadaan, tetapi keyakinan teori konspirasi mengenai Yahudi menyebar luas. Yahudi kerap menjadi kambing hitam berbagai peristiwa yang berdampak luas. Lebih lanjut, Yahudi dipersepsikan sebagai ancaman secara simbolis melalui hal-hal yang terasosiasi dengan Yahudi. Analisis dengan *bootstrapped mediation* dengan iterasi sampel sebanyak 5000 kali dilakukan untuk menguji peran ancaman simbolis sebagai mediator dari narsisme kolektif dan keyakinan terhadap teori konspirasi antisemit. Partisipan sejumlah 385 orang direkrut secara daring untuk mengisi skala keyakinan terhadap teori konspirasi Yahudi, narsisme kolektif, dan ancaman simbolis. Hasil analisis menemukan bahwa ancaman simbolis memiliki peran dalam memediasi narsisme kolektif dan keyakinan terhadap teori konspirasi antisemit ($B = 0.51$, $SE = 0.06$, $CI_{95\%} = 0.40, 0.62$, $p < .001$). Penelitian ini menjelaskan bahwa individu dengan narsisme kolektif yang semakin tinggi akan mempersepsikan Yahudi sebagai ancaman simbolis sehingga memiliki keyakinan yang lebih tinggi terhadap teori konspirasi antisemit. Penelitian ini juga berimplikasi mengenai ekspresi simbolis yang mengarahkan individu dalam meyakini teori konspirasi tertentu. Selain itu, temuan dalam studi ini

juga berkontribusi dalam meluaskan kajian mengenai ekspresi antisemit di Indonesia. Lebih lanjut, penelitian ini berperan dalam memperluas kajian relasi antarkelompok mengenai persepsi terhadap Yahudi di Asia Tenggara.

Kata Kunci: *antisemit, teori konspirasi, ancaman simbolis*

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Introduction

Conspiracy theories are alternative explanatory narratives that attribute significant societal and global events to covert, malevolent actors operating in secrecy (Douglas et al., 2019). Such narratives often identify a specific group as the orchestrator of major incidents—for instance, the conspiracy theory suggesting that Jews secretly engineered the 9/11 attacks in the United States (Sutton & Douglas, 2020).

Although the Jewish community constitutes an “invisible” minority in Indonesia (Ainslie, 2019), anti-Semitic conspiracy theories are notably pervasive in the country (van Bruinessen, 2013). Jews are frequently portrayed as powerful agents influencing major historical and contemporary developments. For example, former Indonesian President Suharto once attributed the fall of his regime to a global Jewish conspiracy (Hadler, 2004). Anti-Semitic conspiratorial narratives have also penetrated popular culture. One instance is the widespread popularity of the children’s toy *lato-lato*, which has been associated with alleged Jewish symbolism (Rachmadi, 2023). Religious discourse has further amplified such tropes; for example, a public preacher claimed that the Al-Saffar Mosque in West Java designed by Ridwan Kamil displayed Jewish symbols (Wismabrata, 2019). Additionally, conspiracy narratives circulated widely during the COVID-19 pandemic, with some asserting that the virus was a Jewish plot to weaken Muslims (Wicaksono, 2020). Similar claims suggest that the music group Dewa 19 embeds Jewish symbolism in their music and album art (Prihatno, 2016).

The Jewish population in Indonesia is extremely small and constitutes a marginalized minority (Nugroho, 2023; Rompies & Barrett, 2022; Sumandoyo, 2017). Consequently, most Indonesians likely have no direct interaction with Jewish individuals. As a result, “Jewishness” in Indonesian social cognition is largely symbolic and constructed through mediated representations rather than interpersonal contact or lived experience. Despite this minimal physical presence, negative attitudes and conspiratorial beliefs toward Jews remain widespread. Survey data from the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) indicate that 48% of Indonesians endorse anti-Semitic sentiments and conspiracy beliefs, including the view that Jews control global events, manipulate media systems, and dominate the world economy (ADL, 2014).

The sociocultural contexts of North America, Europe, and the Middle East differ substantially from that of Indonesia with respect to Jewish community presence and intergroup dynamics. In these regions, Jewish populations are comparatively larger and more visible, increasing the likelihood of direct contact and historical intergroup engagement. Despite this, anti-Semitic conspiracy theories remain prevalent and socially influential (Kofta et al., 2020; Poli, 2018). For example, research in Poland demonstrates that some individuals endorse conspiracy beliefs suggesting that Jews seek to threaten and undermine Polish national identity (Golec de Zavala & Cichocka, 2012). In addition, conspiracy narratives in Western societies frequently reflect themes similar to those found in Indonesia, including the belief that Jews conspire to

achieve global political and economic control (Glaeser, 2005).

Anti-Semitic conspiratorial beliefs have certain consequences, including negative attitudes towards Jews. In Western countries, the impact on Jewish groups comes directly in the form of discriminatory treatment because Jewish groups, although still a minority, tend to be more “visible” compared to Indonesia. Meanwhile, anti-Semitic conspiratorial beliefs in Indonesia, although the concepts of “Jew” and “Judaism” are more likely to be understood as symbolic cognitive representations, can still manifest in extreme social and political attitudes. For example, belief in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories may correlate with the propensity to accept stereotypes regarding Chinese-Indonesian (Cindo) communities (Reid, 2010; Swami, 2012) and the postponement of vaccinations (Zein et al., 2020). Consequently, the prevalence of belief in Jewish conspiracy theories in Indonesia warrants further investigation.

Prior studies have identified various motivations linked to belief in conspiracy theories. These include psychological factors such as epistemic, existential, and social motives; demographic factors like education and income levels; and political factors involving events that induce uncertainty (Douglas et al., 2019). Research by Mashuri and Zaduqisti (2015) indicates that emphasising threats and social identities reinforces beliefs in conspiracy theories regarding terrorism in Indonesia. Swami’s (2012) research indicates that belief in conspiracy theories in Malaysia correlates with anti-Israel sentiments, contemporary racism, right-wing authoritarianism, and elevated social dominance orientation. Additional research indicates that belief in Jewish conspiracy theories exacerbates prejudice towards the Jewish community (Jolley et al., 2020). A study in Poland reveals that belief in Jewish conspiracy theories is heightened among individuals with elevated collective narcissism, influenced by the perception of Jews as a menacing group (Golec de Zavala & Cichocka, 2012). Previous research indicates that the psychological factors elucidating anti-Semitic conspiratorial beliefs are predominantly associated with intergroup relations, rather than individual factors like personality or cognitive style.

This study seeks to determine if collective narcissism and symbolic threat elucidate the propensity of individuals to endorse anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. This study examines Muslims in Indonesia, as their cognitive representations of “Jews,” “Judaism,” and the Muslim-Jewish relationship predominantly stem from Qur’anic translations. An illustration is the notion that Jewish communities are regarded as “people of the book” (i.e., Jews and Christians who adhere to the scriptures revealed by God) (Ichsan, 2017; Mustakim, 2017). Additional attributes of Jews in Qur’anic interpretations encompass possessing impure souls and harbouring animosity towards Islam from the outset (Sholihah & Hasan, 2020).

The events of the Palestine-Israel conflict significantly influence cognitive representations of 'Jews' and 'Judaism'. While Indonesia is not directly engaged in the conflict between these two nations, sentiments

of solidarity with Palestine also influence the social perceptions of 'Jews' and 'Judaism' in Indonesia. Prior studies indicate that Indonesian Muslims possessing a robust religious identity are more inclined to endorse Palestine in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which elucidates the political behaviour associated with signing digital petitions (Shadiqi et al., 2020).

While certain scholarly commentators perceive Qur'anic references to Judaism and Jewish communities as diverse and ambiguous (Ali, 2010), societal representations of "Judaism" are significantly shaped by anti-Semitic sentiments propagated by certain religious authorities. Anti-Semitic interpretations are disseminated via print media, including Media Dakwah magazine, Sabili, Hidayatullah, and Republika daily (Muhtadi, 2007; Rijal, 2005; van Bruinessen, 1994), as well as through various mailing lists (Lim, 2005). The dynamics between Indonesian Muslim factions and Jews are shaped by the belief that Jews undermine the favourable portrayal of Islam in Indonesia (Burhanuddin, 2007). Consequently, it may be determined that the belief in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories in Indonesia primarily arises from the dynamics of intergroup relations. Collective narcissism is a variable that can elucidate the belief in conspiracy theories targeting a specific group (Cichocka, Marchlewska, Golec de Zavala et al., 2016; Golec de Zavala, 2021; Golec de Zavala et al., 2022).

Collective narcissism refers to the belief held by group members that their group is exceptional and entitled to special recognition, yet this presumed superiority is insufficiently acknowledged by others (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009). Prior research demonstrates that collective narcissism predicts endorsement of conspiracy theories concerning intergroup relations, including conspiracy theories about immigrants (Bertin et al., 2020), gender-related conspiracy theories (Marchlewska et al., 2019), and Jewish conspiracy theories in Poland (Golec de Zavala & Cichocka, 2012). Thus, we expect that individuals who endorse higher levels of collective narcissism will be more likely to believe that Jews conspire to undermine Islam.

Furthermore, we propose that the relationship between collective narcissism and belief in Jewish conspiracy theories in Indonesia is mediated by symbolic threat (Stephan et al., 2009). Given the near absence of a Jewish community in Indonesia, Jews are perceived not as a realistic threat but as a symbolic threat to Islamic values, beliefs, and worldviews. Within this narrative, Jews are portrayed as conspiring to erode Islamic morals and identity. Modernisation and technological advancement have been framed as threats to Islamic tradition, and these developments are sometimes attributed to Jewish influence (van Bruinessen, 2013). Consistent with prior evidence that collective narcissism enhances perceptions of threat from outgroups (Golec de Zavala & Lantos, 2020), we argue that collective narcissism strengthens perceived symbolic threat from Jews among Indonesian Muslims, which in turn increases endorsement of anti-Semitic conspiracy beliefs.

This study aims to examine the role of symbolic threat as a mediating mechanism in the relationship between collective narcissism and belief in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories in Indonesia, as outlined in the background section. Accordingly, this study formulates the following hypotheses:

H1: Individuals with higher levels of collective narcissism are more likely to endorse anti-Semitic conspiracy theories.

H2: Individuals who perceive Jews as a symbolic threat are more likely to endorse anti-Semitic conspiracy theories.

H3: Symbolic threat mediates the association between collective narcissism and endorsement of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories.

Method

This study applied symbolic threat as a mediator, collective narcissism as an independent variable, and belief in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories as a dependent variable. In addition, this study involved 385 Muslim respondents (91 males and 294 females) aged 18-53 years (M Age = 21.57 years) who were recruited online through social media and instant messaging applications, namely WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Participants expressed agreement to participate in this research through informed consent prior to answering some questions in demographic questions and scales. Participants' identities remained anonymous.

Research Instruments

Belief in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories

The belief in Jewish conspiracy theories scale was translated from a scale developed by (Swami, 2012). The translation process was done through backward and forward translation. The scale consisted of 12 items with responses ranging from 1-7 (1=strongly disagree; 7=strongly agree). An example item is 'The Jews are trying to establish a secret world government'. The higher the score, the greater the belief in the Jewish conspiracy theory. Reliability of the belief in Jewish conspiracy theory scale was $\omega_{total} = 0.930$. Construct validity result indicated scale has a good fit (CFI=0.98, TLI=0.98, and RMSEA =0.08).

Collective narcissism

Collective narcissism scale was adapted to the characteristics of the respondents, namely Indonesian Muslim groups from (Zein et al., 2018). The scale consisted of 9 items with responses ranging from 1-7 (1=strongly disagree; 7=strongly agree). An example of an item on the scale is 'Muslims deserve special treatment'. The higher the score, the higher the collective narcissism. The reliability of the collective narcissism scale was $\omega_{total} = 0.808$. Construct validity result indicated scale has a good fit (CFI=0.99, TLI=0.99, and SRMR =0.04).

Symbolic threat

The Symbolic Threat Scale was independently developed by the author based on the threat theory from (Stephan et al., 2009). The Symbolic Threat Scale measured cognitive, emotional and behavioural aspects. The scale consists of 8 items with a response range of 1-7 (1=strongly disagree; 7=strongly agree). An example of an item on the scale is 'Jews are a threat to Muslims because they spread liberalism and secularism.' A higher score indicated a greater sense of threat. Reliability of the symbolic threat scale has a $\omega_{total} = 0.866$. Construct validity result indicated scale has a good fit (CFI=0.97, TLI=0.96, and RMSEA =0.10)

Data Analysis

The data analysis technique used was linear regression analysis with mediator variables, conducted using the Jamovi version 2.3 application with the medmod module (Navarro & Foxcroft, 2018). The mediation analysis aims to determine the role of symbolic threat as a mediator of collective narcissism and belief in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. The analysis procedure was using 5000-sample bootstrapping, where the software resamples 5000 times during the analysis process to generate a confidence interval as a reference for statistical inference (Hayes, 2018).

Results

The results of the descriptive and correlational analyses are presented in Table 1. The results of the bivariate correlation test indicate that the variables are positively correlated. Collective narcissism positively correlated and tends to be strongly correlated with symbolic threat ($r = 0.64$, 95% CI [0.58, 0.64], $p < 0.01$) and belief in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories ($r = 0.58$, 95% CI [0.51, 0.64], $p < 0.01$). Simultaneously, symbolic threat exhibits a positive correlation with the belief in Jewish conspiracy theories ($r = 0.67$, 95% CI [0.61, 0.72], $p < 0.01$).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	N	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation	Min	Max	1	2
Collective Narcissism	385	38,61	40	8,8	11	59	-	-
Symbolic Threat	385	29,45	30	9,48	8	56	0,64***	-
Belief in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories	385	49,26	49	13,68	12	84	0,58***	0,67***

* $p < ,05$, ** $p < ,01$, *** $p < ,001$

Hypothesis testing shows that collective narcissism has a direct effect (path c') in explaining belief in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories ($B = 0.39$, $SE = 0.08$, 95% CI [0.25 - 0.55], $p < 0.01$), thus supporting hypothesis 1. In addition, symbolic threat plays a role in explaining belief in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories (path a, $B = 0.73$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI [0.60 - 0.87], $p < 0.01$), thus supporting hypothesis 2. Meanwhile, symbolic threat plays a role in indirectly explaining (indirect effect, path a x b) or mediating collective narcissism and belief in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories ($B = 0.51$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI [0.40 - 0.62], $p < 0.01$), thus supporting hypothesis 3.

Table 2. Mediations Analysis Results

Effect	Label	Estimate	SE	95% Confidence Interval		Z	p
				Lower	Upper		
Indirect	a × b	0.51	0.06	0.40	0.62	9.06	< .001
Direct	c	0.39	0.08	0.25	0.55	5.21	< .001
Total	c + a × b	0.90	0.07	0.76	1.03	13.02	< .001

Discussion

This study examines the interplay between collective narcissism, symbolic threat, and individual beliefs in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. The research yields several significant findings. First, collective narcissism plays a role in predicting belief in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. Participants exhibiting elevated levels of collective narcissism are more inclined to perceive that other groups fail to recognise their group's superiority, thereby increasing the likelihood of believing that Jewish groups are conspiring to undermine Muslims. Marchlewska and colleagues (2019) also find that collective narcissism among Polish Catholics is associated with their belief in gender conspiracy theories. This finding is comparable. Furthermore, the findings of this study indicate that individuals' perceptions of their group correlate with their belief in conspiracy theories. When individuals perceive their group as large and superior yet inadequately treated, they are likely to believe that malevolent groups are conspiring against them (Cichocka et al., 2015; Cichocka, Marchlewska, Golec de Zavala, et al., 2016; van Prooijen & Song, 2021).

Collective narcissism significantly predicts belief in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. This finding indicates that an individual's perception of their group—as superior and entitled to preferential treatment—can forecast their belief in conspiracy theories. Research conducted by Cichocka, Marchlewska, and Golec de Zavala (2016) identifies that collective narcissism serves as a predictor of conspiratorial beliefs within an intergroup framework. This research is further supported by a meta-analysis conducted by Bowes et al. (2023), which demonstrates that collective narcissism exhibits a stronger correlation with belief in

conspiracy theories within intergroup contexts characterised by specific content rather than general conspiracy beliefs.

This study also finds that symbolic threat predicts belief in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. This finding means that individuals from Muslim groups feel that anti-Semitism threatens Islamic values and therefore believe that Jews are conspiring to threaten Muslims through various efforts, such as secularisation or modernisation. This finding is similar to previous research by Mashuri and Zaduqisti (2015), who explain that threats lead to increased belief in Western conspiracy theories about terrorism in Indonesia. When individuals perceive a threat from other groups, the belief in a conspiracy serves as a rationale for justifying their group's unfavourable status. Adhering to conspiracy theories in a precarious position serves as a means to identify a scapegoat for the group's adverse circumstances (Bilewicz & Krzeminski, 2010).

The relationship between collective narcissism and belief in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories is indirectly established through the mediation of symbolic threat. This indicates that collective narcissism engenders feelings of threat, subsequently facilitating the acceptance of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. Threat serves as a mediator in the relationship between collective narcissism and anti-Semitic conspiracy beliefs, akin to the study by Golec de Zavala and Cichocka (2012). The latter find that collective narcissism within nationalist factions in Poland correlates with anti-Semitic sentiments. Moreover, a study by Cichocka et al. (2016) elucidates the influence of perceived threat in mediating collective narcissism and conspiratorial beliefs within Polish society regarding Russia. Adhering to conspiracy theories serves as a means to bolster the favourable perception of groups perceived as endangered by others. In this study, individuals who regard Muslim groups as superior tend to subscribe to anti-Semitic conspiracy theories to rationalise the belief that Jews pose a threat to Islamic values, corroborating the conclusions of prior research (Golec de Zavala & Lantos, 2020).

This research holds theoretical importance as it validates previous studies examining the impact of intergroup psychological mechanisms, including collective narcissism and perceptions of symbolic threat, in clarifying unique beliefs, such as belief in conspiracy theories. This study also uncovers anti-Semitic sentiments in a nation with an almost negligible Jewish population. Consequently, future researchers must account for cross-cultural differences in anti-Semitic expressions and sentiments. This study has multiple limitations; therefore, it should not be regarded as a conclusive and authoritative scientific investigation but rather as an initial endeavour to reveal manifestations of anti-Semitism in Indonesia. The research employs a cross-sectional design; thus, the results cannot be construed as indicative of a causal relationship. Secondly, participants are recruited via social media and instant messaging, thereby inherently excluding individuals without internet access. Third, most participants are relatively young; hence, future research should

recruit participants from balanced age groups. Finally, this research examines Jews in Southeast Asia, a topic regarded as sensitive due to their association with a specific nation. However, this study aims to explain intergroup perceptions among a population that is socially and geographically distant from Jewish communities.

Conclusion

This research holds theoretical significance as it supports prior studies examining intergroup psychological processes, such as collective narcissism and symbolic threat perceptions, in explaining idiosyncratic beliefs, including conspiracy theories. The study also demonstrates the presence of antisemitic sentiments in a context where the Jewish community is nearly nonexistent. It provides insight into how Indonesian Muslims, who have limited direct contact with Jewish individuals, perceive them. Therefore, future research should consider cross-cultural variations in antisemitic expressions and attitudes. However, this study has several limitations and should not be interpreted as a definitive or authoritative account, but rather as an initial attempt to explore antisemitic expressions in Indonesia. First, the cross-sectional design precludes causal interpretation of the findings. Second, participants were recruited online via social media and instant messaging platforms, which likely excluded individuals without internet access.

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