

# Conspiracy Theories: Psychology Behind Flight MH370

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## Abstract

Recent research into the psychology of conspiracy theories has emphasized the importance of belief systems in the acceptance or rejection of conspiracy theories. As for the acceptance of conspiracy theories, a plethora of research has made the argument that the public buys into the idea of conspiracy theories because we as human beings need to be able to make sense of the world around us. We are curious of the unknown and cannot leave any questions unanswered. Many researchers have confirmed that this is the reason behind why people believe in conspiracy theories so this has become the 'accepted universal' as to why conspiracy theories are developed. However, there is scarce information available as to why people believe the particular conspiracy theory (or explanation(s)) that they do. This paper will use experimental data to analyze the top twelve conspiracy theories associated behind what happened to the Malaysia airlines flight number MH370 and the different personality types that would lead one to come to each conclusion.

## Introduction

The significance of this study is to understand why people think what they do. Conspiracy theories have been around since the beginning of time. The explanation that many credible researchers, such as Marina Abalakina-Paap, have reached regarding why humans come up with conspiracy theories is that we constantly need to be able to make sense of the world around us, but there is little research behind why each person believes what he or she does. This paper looks at the twelve most popular theories that people have come up with for the explanation of the disappearance of the MH370 flight. The MH370 flight was a Malaysia airlines flight that disappeared on March 8, 2014 as it was flying from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia to Beijing, China. There were 227 passengers and 12 crewmembers on board this flight. Through the extensive efforts of experts and search teams there still has been no confirmed debris or crash site of the plane, but there have been many conspiracy theories that have surfaced addressing what many think happened to the plane. This paper will address how the twelve most popular conspiracy theories associated with the MH370 disappearance correlate with the big five personality traits. The hypothesis

is that each personality trait will correlate with specific conspiracy theories leading to the conclusion that personality factors into one's belief system.

## Past Research

Other research that has been done which compares to this study was on conspiracy theories behind the 9/11 terrorist attacks by Michael J. Woods and Viram Swami. Woods' research he came to the conclusion that people come to believe in conspiracy theories because of the power of suggestion. He used different conspiracy theories behind the 9/11 attacks and simply just presented them in different ways. Woods found that the way the media or other external sources present ideas to people has a major role on persuading them to believe it. Woods use the same surveying tactics that this study suggests but his main focus does not examine the psychology behind conspiracy theories and why people believe the things that they do. Woods addresses this and measures conspiracy theories using personality factors but that was not the emphasis of his study. Another study that was done by Viram Swami focused looking at the actual psychology behind conspiracy theories. Swami uses the big five personality factor along with many other

demographics and descriptive statistics (such as age, ethnicity religion, etc.) to find a correlation between that and conspiracy beliefs. Swami's research tends to focus more on other descriptive statistics and not solely on personality. The focus of this research is exclusively on conspiracy theories and the big five personality factors. Because he was measuring more than just personality, Swami used a 17 item big five personality questionnaire and this research will use a 46 item questionnaire. This research will conduct a more comprehensive investigation to understand the personality types of individuals and then aim to find a more accurate correlation between personality types and different conspiracy theories.

### **Materials and Methods**

In order to test the notion of this experiment, a survey will be conducted that measures the participant's personality type, and then list the top twelve conspiracy theories associated with the MH370 disappearance where the individual will state how much they believe in each theory. The conspiracies that are used in the survey were found on the comment sections of various online news articles. Samples were taken from news articles posted between March 8th and October 15, 2014 on four mainstream news websites: ABC (American Broadcasting Company) News, CNN, the *Independent*, and the *Daily Mail*. The four news sites were selected on the reasoning that an ideal sample would not be restricted to a single country, journalistic style, or ideological position, as well as for more practical reasons, such as search capabilities, comment archiving and unpaid access.

The following twelve conspiracy theories will be used:

***Alien Abduction:*** This theory suggests that space aliens are behind the disappearance of the flight. It has been claimed that some passengers' cellular

phones were ringing when they were called and satellites showed no mid-air explosion.

***MH370 and MH17 were the same plane:*** This theory suggests that the plane that crashed in a field in Ukraine was the lost MH370 flight and not flight MH17, which was scheduled to depart from Amsterdam and arrive in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

***The plane was shot down:*** This theory suggests that the plane was accidentally shot down by US-Thai joint strike fighters in a military exercise in the South China Sea. This theory also claims that search and rescue efforts were deliberately sent in the wrong direction as part of a cover up.

***Asian Bermuda Triangle:*** This theory suggests that the area where MH370 vanished is on the exact opposite side of the globe to the Bermuda Triangle and the plane disappeared there.

***The CIA is behind it:*** This theory was suggested that in this day and age there is no way that a plane can just disappear and the American CIA is covering something up that it does not want the public to know.

***9/11 style hijacking mission:*** This theory suggests that Israeli agents planned to crash the Malaysia Airlines plane into a building and then blame it on Iranian forces.

***High-tech hijacking:*** This theory suggests that MH370 was the product of the world's first cyber hijacking, accomplished by accessing the airplane's flight computer and reprogramming the speed, altitude and direction of the plane.

***Cracks in the plane:*** This theory suggests that slow decompression of the cabin left pilots and passengers unconscious. Pilots would not have been

able to put their oxygen masks on in time and passengers would not have been able to detect any oxygen deprivation.

**Microchip 'Kinesis KL-02' motive:** Kinesis KL-02 is the world's smallest microcontroller. Twenty tech employees working for Freescale Semiconductor, the company that invented the microcontroller and is currently testing it, were on board the flight. Drone technology using the microcontroller changed the course of the flight and left it undetectable. The flight landed in Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean. The motive was to prevent the technology from falling in the hands of Iran because it would have become a nightmare for Israeli defense forces.

**US Military Base:** This theory suggests that MH370 landed at a US military base in Diego Garcia, which is located in the Indian Ocean.

**Life Insurance Scam:** This theory suggests that someone on board the flight bought a huge sum of life insurance and wants family to gain from it.

**Pilot Suicide:** This theory claims that the captain of the plane hijacked the plane on a suicide mission after his wife left him.

Based on a cognitive psychological standpoint, the big five personality factors will be used to establish a correlation between the participant's belief or denial in the top twelve conspiracy theories. The big five personality traits are the five basic dimensions of personality as proposed by personality psychologists:

**Extraversion:** This trait includes characteristics such as excitability, sociability, talkativeness, assertiveness and high amounts of emotional

expressiveness.

**Agreeableness:** This personality dimension includes attributes such as trust, altruism, kindness, affection, and other pro social behaviors.

**Conscientiousness:** Common features of this dimension include high levels of thoughtfulness, with good impulse control and goal-directed behaviors. Those high in conscientiousness tend to be organized and mindful of details.

**Neuroticism:** Individuals high in this trait tend to experience emotional instability, anxiety, moodiness, irritability, and sadness.

**Openness:** This trait features characteristics such as imagination and insight, and those high in this trait also tend to have a broad range.

The survey will be assessed using two scales: The first will be a 46 item big five questionnaire, which was created by University of California Berkeley professor Oliver John; this questionnaire assesses the big five personality factors on a 5-point scale (1= strongly agree, 5= strongly disagree). The second will be a MH370 conspiracy belief scale that will be a 12-item scale based on a review of most popular MH370 conspiracy beliefs. Participants will state whether they believe each statement is true or false based on a 9-point scale (1=completely false, 9= completely true).

This experiment will aim to survey 500 participants and the participants will be recruited at random via email. Because this is a lengthy survey, it will take place online. Participants will be required to sign an informed consent form and then continue onto the survey itself.

### **Expected Results**

The analysis of the survey results will be done using a multivariate multiple linear regression on the SPSS program. The results of this

examination of MH370 conspiracist theories can be predicted by a number of personality and individual difference variables. From research that was done conducting a similar experiments involving conspiracy theories behind what happened with the 9/11 terrorist attacks, it is expected that the belief in more radical conspiracy theories will be negatively associated with personality factors of agreeableness and neuroticism, while openness to experience, extraversion and conscientiousness will have a positive association. This experiments is expected to yield the same or very similar results.

### **Discussion**

This research on conspiracy theories could be considered a great stepping-stone for the field of psychology. Other research that has been done aiming to explain the psychological reasoning behind conspiracy theories is that of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The 9/11 research was not done as extensively as this experiment is because the goal of these other studies was not to solely find a correlation between conspiracy theories and the big five

personality factors; there were many other factors involved. The reason why much research has not been done behind the psychology of conspiracy theories is because this is a grey area in psychology. It is ambiguous because it is not something that can be measured using numbers and it can be difficult to interpret; this does not mean that we should not try to understand the psychology behind conspiracy theories. This research can maybe further verify what was found in the study of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and future research can also be conducted with a different set on conspiracy theories so we can have a definite reasoning for why people believe what they do. There is not enough research available to fully verify the findings of this experiment or others like it. More research needs to be done so that the findings of these studies can be looked at as cold hard facts and not just a couple of congruencies among a couple of studies. This study is just one more step towards the goal of proving that there is a scientific reasoning behind why we believe what we do.

### **References**

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