





Pandemic Nationalism: Use of Government Social Media for Political Information and Belief in COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories in China

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic unleashed a torrent of conspiracy theories across different social media platforms. Parallel to this conspiracy wave was a heightened sense of nationalism, which manifested through both in-group solidarity and perceived out-group threats. In this study, we examine how individuals' use of government social media to gather political information correlated with nation-related conspiracy beliefs during the pandemic. Data were collected from 745 subjects in China and analyzed through path analyses, which allowed us to examine the direct association with political information consumption from government social media and the indirect association with nationalism on conspiracy beliefs. The results indicated that the use of government social media to gather political information was associated with greater beliefs in nation-variant COVID-19 conspiracies, both directly and through different

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mediations of nationalism. Our findings highlight the importance of examining government social media use and how nationalism can have differentiated mediation effects on beliefs in conspiracy theories.

Keywords

conspiracy beliefs, pandemic, nationalism, government social media, China, political information

Introduction

Conspiracy theories have become increasingly viral on social media platforms during public health crises. During the Zika virus outbreak in 2015–16, conspiracies on the side effects of Zika vaccines were prominently disseminated on Twitter (Dredze et al. 2016). More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic unleashed a torrent of conspiracy theories across social media platforms, such as Twitter and Weibo (Chen et al. 2020a; Freiling et al. 2021). In particular, nation-related conspiracy theories proliferated on social media, which either targeted an out-group nation or the in-group government as a conspirator. During public health crises such as COVID-19, these nation-related conspiracy theories can reduce intentions for health protection or induce intergroup conflicts (Jia and Luo 2021; Pummerer et al. 2022). Therefore, understanding the correlates of nation-related conspiracy theories on social media is critical for managing public health crises.

Information seeking is particularly salient among the predictors of conspiracy beliefs, as it reveals how people process uncertainty (Tandoc and Lee 2020). While greater reliance on social media is associated with greater conspiracy beliefs about the COVID-19 crisis (Allington et al. 2021; De Coninck et al. 2021), other research has suggested a more nuanced view of social media on opinion polarization and how differences in social media use can result in differentiated effects on beliefs in conspiracy theories (Duggan and Smith 2016; Theocharis et al. 2021). Unlike existing studies that focus on general social media habits, we specifically focus on individuals' use of government social media for political information because many governments increasingly rely on social media for crisis management (Chatfield et al. 2013; Chen et al. 2020b; Kim et al. 2021). Especially in authoritarian contexts, social media is employed as a major publicity tool by state-owned media during normal times (King et al. 2017; Woolley and Howard 2016) and unexpected situations, such as health crises (Chen et al. 2020b) and recent geopolitical conflicts. We located this study in the context of mainland China, as state-owned media outlets play critical roles through which citizens seek political information (Lu and Pan 2021; Schlæger and Jiang 2014). As the Chinese public relies heavily on social media accounts for political information and social connections to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic (Wei et al. 2021), frequent use of government social media for political information can significantly influence people's beliefs and behaviors about the pandemic. Therefore, in the present study, we investigate how the use of government social

media to seek political information correlates with beliefs in conspiracies that target China and the United States among Chinese citizens.

Parallel to the spread of conspiracy theories, there has been an increase in nationalism across countries during the pandemic, which has manifested in both micro-individual social practices and governmental policies (Bieber 2020; Goode et al. 2020; Wang 2021). The current literature has investigated the potential influence of nationalism on conspiracy beliefs (Luo and Jia 2021) and how nationalism, as a crucial concept in social psychology and political science, could be affected by government–citizen communication practices (Marmura 2014; Zheng 2020). However, the research offers little in terms of how nationalism can mediate the relationship between the use of government social media and conspiracy beliefs. Drawing on social psychology and political science literature, we conceptualize nationalism into the dimensions of in-group solidarity and perceived out-group threats (Jardina 2020; Kosterman and Feshbach 1989; Levin and Sidanius 1999). Using survey responses from 745 participants in China and path analyses, we explore the direct relationship between public information-seeking behavior through government social media and beliefs in nation-related conspiracies and the mediating effects of both in- and out-group nationalism.

Our findings contribute to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the potential media consumption factors that can influence nation-related conspiracy beliefs. Moreover, they extend conspiracy research to more diverse contexts and enhance the understanding of how conspiracy theories have become a global issue that can affect (mis)perceptions between countries. By focusing on the public's use of government social media to find political information, which is a salient feature of media consumption patterns in authoritarian contexts, our study highlights the importance of understanding specific social media use patterns in the political context, where state actors play a critical and irreplaceable role in mass communication. In addition, this study reveals the differentiated role of nationalism, which influences conspiracy beliefs as a mediator. In summation, these findings reveal the strategies and resilience of authoritarian governance and the individual factors that construct this resilience in crises.

Nation-Related Conspiracy Theory and its Manifestations in the Chinese Context During the COVID-19 Pandemic

With increases in the use and availability of digital media, conspiracy theories have become a serious threat to informed citizenship across nations (Chen et al. 2020a, 2022a; Sutton and Douglas 2020). As defined by Keeley (1999) and Uscinski (2017), a conspiracy theory is “a proposed explanation” (Keeley 1999: 10) that identifies a group of conspirators “acting in secret for their own benefit against the common good” as the primary cause of “historical, ongoing, or future events” (Uscinski 2017: 3). Moreover, conspiracy theories that violate the spirit of democratic discourse often assume unrealistic power assumptions about conspirators, contain a Manichean binary

view of good and bad, and are based on a corrupt epistemology (Baden and Sharon 2021).

Although people may possess different levels of innate propensity to believe in conspiracies (known as conspiracy mentality), their belief in specific conspiracy theories can vary across different topics (Douglas et al. 2017, Douglas et al. 2019; van Prooijen and Song 2021). Recent research has focused on “intergroup conspiracy theories,” where “a powerful and evil out-group” (van Prooijen and Van Lange 2014: 239) is imagined as the conspirator (Cichocka et al. 2016a; Jolley et al. 2020). Conspiracy theories can also target in-groups, such as domestic governments or social hierarchies, and crises, including race (Crocker et al. 1999) and pandemics (Oleksy et al. 2021). In addition, some studies (e.g., Cichocka et al. 2016a) have examined conspiracies about different nation groups and highlighted the need to study the predictors of both intergroup and intragroup conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy theories are not limited to Western contexts. Nation-relevant conspiracy theories in other countries (such as Russia, the Middle East, North Africa, and China) have proliferated on different social media platforms (Chen et al. 2020a, 2022a; Mölder and Sazonov 2019; Nyhan and Zeitzoff 2018). This became more salient during the COVID-19 pandemic, when conspiracy theories regarding which countries were responsible for the virus origins were widespread (Chen et al. 2020a, 2022a; Wang 2021). For example, more than 80 percent of the most prevalent COVID-19 conspiracy theories on Weibo (the mainstream social media platform in China) were nation-related and attributed responsibility for spreading the virus to either the United States or China (Chen et al. 2020a, 2022a). Examples of this included “the COVID-19 virus was brought in by US soldiers during the Wuhan Military Exhibition” and “COVID-19 was made in the Wuhan lab.” These conspiracies resulted in consequences such as reduced intentions for health protection (Jia and Luo 2021) and the obstruction of public engagement with counter-conspiracy narratives on social media (Chen et al. 2020a, 2022a). While an increasing amount of research has examined the correlates of beliefs in nation-related conspiracy theories during normal periods and during the COVID-19 pandemic (Duggan and Smith 2016; Kiik 2020), less is known about the predictors of conspiracy theories for people in social contexts such as China, especially during crises. Therefore, using China as our inquiry context, we examined the predictors of nation-related conspiracy theories during the COVID-19 crisis.

Political Information Seeking From Government Social Media and Conspiracy Beliefs

Among the predictors of beliefs in conspiracy theories, recent research has focused on information-seeking behaviors, which are highly salient in terms of how people make sense of uncertainty (Tandoc and Lee 2020). In particular, due to nationwide implemented lockdowns and mandatory quarantines in the early stages of pandemics, people rely on social media for information. However, whether information-seeking behaviors on social media are associated with greater conspiracy beliefs remains

inconclusive. While studies have found a positive relationship between the use of social media for information and COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs (Allington et al. 2021; De Coninck et al. 2021; Xiao et al. 2021), others have argued that social media affords diverse opinions (Duggan and Smith 2016) to counter conspiracies. Moreover, Theocharis et al. (2021) recently revealed a negative association between Twitter use and conspiracy beliefs.

Although social media can facilitate greater access to diverse information and boost online political participation (Diamond 2015; Enikolopov et al. 2020), recent studies have also highlighted that governments in different national contexts utilize social media for early warnings of natural disasters and disease control during crises (Chatfield et al. 2013; Kim et al. 2021). Moreover, governments in authoritarian contexts have increasingly been using social media to mobilize content for publicity and to maintain state stability (King et al. 2013; Schlæger and Jiang 2014). Accordingly, the relationship between political information consumption through social media and beliefs about nation-related conspiracies in these contexts requires a more cautious consideration of the circulation of government-supplied information on social media.

The Chinese government actively leverages social media, operating tens of thousands of state-owned media accounts on Chinese social media platforms (such as WeChat and Weibo) to promote public communication, especially “in response to sudden events”¹ (Lu and Pan 2021; Schlæger and Jiang 2014). During the COVID-19 outbreak, government social media accounts in China actively disseminated epidemic statistics and control measures (Chen et al. 2020b) and maintained an active presence on social media platforms (Lu and Pan 2022). As the Chinese public relied greatly on social media to cope with the pandemic (Wei et al. 2021), this was significantly affected by government accounts. Jiang and Tang (2022) revealed that crisis-related social media posts from local governments in China resulted in higher offline citizen compliance during the COVID-19 crisis, illustrating the potential power of government social media accounts.

While conspiracies about COVID-19 being a “Chinese virus” or “lab-made virus” were trending on Twitter, anti-US conspiracies also went viral on Chinese social media (Chen et al. 2021). Although accounts affiliated with Chinese state agencies and county-level multimedia centers played a critical role in effectively debunking and correcting conspiracy theories toward itself, some state media published speculation pertaining to the United States being the origin of the virus (Zou 2021). Unfortunately, such rival framing by the state could cause aggressive attitudes toward foreign countries among people (Pan et al. 2022), increasing beliefs in conspiracies about foreign countries. As people are exposed to both in-group and out-group messages on social media to learn about COVID-19 conspiracies, we hypothesize the following:

H1: The public’s use of government social media for political information is negatively associated with beliefs in anti-China conspiracy theories (1a) and positively associated with beliefs in anti-US conspiracy theories (1b).

Nationalism as a Key Mechanism in Nation-Related Conspiracies in a Pandemic Context

The geopolitical tensions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have fueled the popularity of exclusionary nationalism and a Manichean understanding of politics that justify one's own country's good actions while depicting other entities as "evil" (Bieber 2022). This Manichean narrative of nationhood can contribute to a greater acceptance of conspiracy theories caused by a binary view of good and evil. In contexts such as China, state media and publicity departments have been influencing public emotions (i.e., pride and confidence) through nationalistic events and patriotism education (Perry 2017), which heightens the importance of exploring how nationalism mediates public perceptions.

In unsettled times, nationalism encompasses socio historical concepts (such as political sovereignty, culture, ethnicity, religion, and institutions) (Anderson 1983; Gellner 1983) in addition to pandemic-specific geopolitical characteristics (Goode et al. 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, isolation policies enacted under the guise of pandemic control (such as border closures and travel bans) heightened senses of nationalism and protectionism (Bieber 2020; Wang 2021). Moreover, the exclusion policies that were amplified in mass media reports and social media discussions heightened discrimination against people from badly affected countries, such as the increased public hatred toward domestic Asian subgroups in the United States (Goode et al. 2020). Border policies were also misused for expelling immigrants or asylum seekers (Bieber 2020), exacerbating identity conflicts between in- and out-groups. At the grass-roots level, individuals boycotted Asian markets and spread conspiracies to consolidate their collective identity, excluding others whose identities were deemed outside the collective (Goode et al. 2020). Therefore, examining how the dynamics of nationalism mediated beliefs in nation-related conspiracies during the pandemic is of both theoretical and practical importance.

We conceptualize nationalism by drawing on both social psychology and political science theories. Following a social-psychological tradition, we approach nationalism from the perspective of individual attitudes toward their own nation and those of others (in-groups and out-groups) (Druckman 1994). Such attitudes "are at the heart of nationalism" (Druckman 1994: 44) and are normally divided into two categories: in-group love and out-group hostility (Jardina 2020; Kosterman and Feshbach 1989; Levin and Sidanius 1999). Differentiating between these elements is important because in-group love can be independent of out-group hostility or they can reinforce each other under certain conditions (Brewer 1999). Hence, it remains unclear whether their effects on conspiracy beliefs are uniform. As nationalistic tensions between China and the United States were most salient during the pandemic (BBC 2020), we position the former as the in-group and the latter as the out-group, because this study examined the Chinese context.

In addition to the social-psychological conceptualization of nationalism, studies in Chinese politics and international relations have measured nationalism through policy attitudes and preferences (Pan and Xu 2018; Weiss 2019). To consolidate both of these

research strands, we conceptualize our in-group elements of nationalism as “in-group solidarity,” which incorporates the concept of in-group love as the “familiarity, attachment, and preference for one’s in-groups” (Brewer 1999: 430). Nationalism can manifest through policy preferences to defend and advance national interests, such as protecting territorial integrity and winning national glories (Pan and Xu 2018), which can shape in-group solidarity among Chinese citizens.

Out-group hostility is a form of exclusionary nationalism based on feelings of superiority over other groups, which often manifests as racism and civil conflicts (Fearon and Laitin 2003; Marx 2005). Typically, this involves framing out-groups as threats to the in-group (Stephan et al. 1998). Taking a social-psychological approach, we define out-group threats as either perceived symbolic group threats (“a group’s religion, values, belief system, ideology, philosophy, morality, or worldview”) or realistic group threats (“a group’s power, resources, and general welfare”) (Stephan et al. 2016: 257–258). Specifically, in the context of Sino–US rivalry, perceived threats between both countries have been widely explored by scholars in terms of international relations, regional studies, and public opinion (Broomfield 2003; Chen 2001). Thus, this paper considers ideological and cultural threats as symbolic, and economic and military threats as realistic.

In-group and out-group nationalism elements can influence nation-related conspiracy beliefs differently. Moreover, research has indicated that increased in-group pride can reduce intra-group conflicts (Druckman 1994). Moreover, Luo and Jia (2021) demonstrated that in-group pride has a negative association with “China as culprit” COVID-19 conspiracy theories in China. In addition, enhanced in-group solidarity can result in hostility and prejudice toward out-groups (Gibson 2006; Kosterman and Feshbach 1989). Frischlich and Humprecht (2021) suggested that the pursuit of in-group positivity can render people more susceptible to conspiracy theories about out-groups. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in nationalist conspiracy theories toward the United States (Mu 2020), suggesting that in-group solidarity among Chinese citizens could have influenced bias against the United States. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

H2: In-group solidarity is negatively associated with beliefs in anti-China conspiracy theories (2a) and positively associated with beliefs in anti-US conspiracy theories (2b).

With regard to out-group nationalism, studies have indicated that perceived out-group threats can predict negative evaluations of out-group members (Esses et al. 1993; Stephan and Stephan 2013). Chen et al. (2022b) revealed that out-group symbolic threats are positively associated with COVID-19 out-group conspiracy beliefs. Thus, higher perceived out-group threats can be associated with beliefs in conspiracy theories when pondering out-groups, which motivated us to hypothesize the following:

H3: Perceived out-group threats are positively associated with beliefs in anti-US conspiracy theories.

However, the current literature offers little evidence of how perceived out-group threats can influence beliefs in in-group conspiracy theories. Therefore, we raise the following research question:

RQ1: How are perceived out-group threats associated with beliefs in anti-China conspiracy theories?

As nationalist rhetoric has been employed to shape social and health behaviors in controlling the pandemic (Goode et al. 2020), both in-group solidarity and perceived out-group threats can be influenced by government information circulated through social media. For example, in mainland China and Hong Kong, government narratives about face masks and early vaccinations invoked themes of national duty and in-group solidarity with regard to reducing disease transmission (Zheng 2020). The Chinese government also actively co-opted pop culture with patriotic political discourse in its content creation (Zou 2019). People seeking information on government social media accounts could consume such “playful patriotism” (Chen et al. 2021), increasing a sense of in-group solidarity.

While seeking political information from government social media accounts can reinforce pre-existing in-group solidarity, this information seeking can strengthen out-group bias. With increased Sino–US tensions and the global spread of COVID-19, anti-US sentiments were amplified by highlighting the US government’s pandemic management failures and unfair claims of China’s responsibility for the pandemic by US political leaders (Zhao 2020). Research has also indicated that social media users who encountered such out-group narratives when seeking political information could have perceived a heightened sense of threat and exclusionism toward out-groups (Marmura 2014). Thus, we hypothesize the following:

H4: Public use of government social media for political information is positively associated with in-group solidarity (4a) and perceived out-group threats (4b).

This reinforcement of nationalism through seeking political information from government social media (H4) and how nationalism could be associated with nation-related conspiracy beliefs (as hypothesized in H2, H3) motivated the examination of nationalism as a critical mechanism that mediates the relationship between people’s use of government social media and their beliefs in nation-related conspiracies. While prior research has investigated how emotional factors (such as depression and anxiety) could mediate the relationship between exposure to information sources and conspiracy beliefs (De Coninck et al. 2021), the mediation role of nationalism remains poorly understood. Thus, we propose the following hypotheses:

H5: In-group solidarity mediates the negative relationship between the public’s use of government social media for political information and beliefs in

anti-China conspiracy theories (5a) and the positive relationship between the public's use of government social media for political information and beliefs in anti-US conspiracy theories (5b).

H6: Perceived out-group threats mediate the negative relationship between the public's use of government social media for political information and beliefs in anti-China conspiracy theories (6a) and the positive relationship between the public's use of government social media for political information and beliefs in anti-US conspiracy theories (6b).

Data and Methods

Survey

The data for this research were collected from a representative sample of Chinese citizens in mainland China through an online survey conducted from February to March 2021. Although some studies relied on digital trace data to mitigate self-reporting bias when measuring media consumption and social media activities (Haenschen 2020; Shin 2020), we adopted a self-reported survey. This was because our variables of interest are mostly individual-level characteristics and psychological factors, which are difficult to fully capture by digital trace data and methods.

To ensure representativeness, the survey employed quota sampling, with information on gender, age, and education quotas derived from the 2017 Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS2017).² A professional Chinese market and survey company Diaoyanba³ with a panel of over 490,000 Chinese internet users provided 1,073 participants who completed our online questionnaire. The final sample comprised 745 respondents (see Supplemental Material A for demographic information) after 328 were removed due to minimum age requirements, attention checks, or low-quality responses (i.e., the same response to most questions or extreme values). To evaluate the impact of this data exclusion on our results, we compared results of our hypothesis testing on the qualified respondents (745 participants) against all respondents (1073 participants). We found that dropping the unqualified respondents did not change the conclusions (see Supplemental Material K for details).

Measures (Dependent Variables)

Beliefs in Anti-China and Anti-US COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories. We used eight items about beliefs in COVID-19 nation-related conspiracy theories prevalent on Chinese social media (see Supplemental Materials B and F for details). Four of these were about China (in-group), and the other four pertained to the United States (out-group). Following Keeley (1999) and Uscinski (2017), we included conspiracy theories that clearly suggest COVID-19 facts as secret acts by conspirators, such as "The new coronavirus is a biological weapon made by a US laboratory to target China." We also adopted a contextual approach to include widely known conspiracy theories on Chinese social media

during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic (Chen et al. 2020a), such as the case of “a graduate student of the Wuhan Institute of Virology, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Huang Yanling, is the index case of COVID-19.” All selected conspiracy theories were listed on Chinese fact-checking websites (e.g., Sina Weibo official rumor-debunking account) or mainstream news websites (e.g., China Daily). Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they believed in the eight statements using a 4-point Likert scale⁴ (1 = completely do not believe, 4 = totally believe; anti-US conspiracy theories: mean = 2.338, SD = 0.657; anti-China conspiracy theories: mean = 1.645, SD = 0.491). All items loaded onto the same scale with high reliability ($\alpha = 0.81$ for anti-US conspiracy theories and $\alpha = 0.80$ for anti-China conspiracy theories).

Measures (Independent Variables)

Frequency of Seeking Political Information From Government Social Media Accounts (SPIGSM). To measure the public’s use of government social media for political information, respondents indicated the frequency with which they searched for political information from social media accounts owned and operated by the Chinese central and local governmental departments (e.g., Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC, Shanghai government, and local party organizations) on diverse platforms (e.g., Weibo, WeChat, TikTok, and Toutiao). This was measured on a 4-point scale (1 = never to 4 = almost every day; mean = 2.64, SD = 0.86).

In-group Solidarity. Four items were selected from the established survey questions (Davidov 2009; Pan and Xu 2018; see Supplemental Material D): “Being a Chinese makes me feel proud;” “Generally speaking, China is better than most other countries;” “National unity and territorial integrity are the highest interest of society;” and “The state should take measures to train and support athletes so they can win glory for the country in various international competitions.” In-group solidarity was measured on a 4-point scale (from 1 = totally disagree to 4 = totally agree; mean = 3.73, SD = 0.50, $\alpha = 0.84$) and was successfully loaded onto the same scale.

Perceived Out-group Threats. Drawing from prior research in social psychology and international relations (Broomfield 2003; Stephan and Stephan 2013), we developed eight items to measure perceived out-group threats (mean = 2.31, SD = 0.68, $\alpha = 0.90$). The participants were asked to rate ideological, cultural, economic, and military threats using eight components: (a) military security in the Pacific circle; (b) sovereign security in the Chinese national realm; (c) security in the field of economy and international trade; (d) autonomy of science and technology development; (e) Chinese traditional culture; (f) socialist core values; (g) the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics; and (h) national unity in China. All elements were measured on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from no threat (1) to huge threat (4).

Measures (Control Variables)

Previous studies have indicated that in-group solidarity, perceived out-group threats, and beliefs in conspiracy theories co-varied with demographic factors (Mancosu et al. 2017). Thus, age, gender, education, and household income were added as control variables to our models. Individual cognitive ability, individual prior knowledge of COVID-19, and non-governmental media use, which were previously examined as covariates (Ståhl and Van Prooijen 2018), were also included as control variables in the models (Supplemental Material B and E for details).

Analysis

To test the main conceptual model and examine the hypotheses and research questions, we performed path analyses using the *Lavaan* package in R. Path analyses were conducted using the maximum likelihood procedure to examine the hypotheses and test the overall fit of the theoretical model. The model fit was acceptable on most of the commonly employed criteria (Hu and Bentler 1999): $\chi^2(38) = 251.202, p < .001$ ($\chi^2/df = 6.611$), comparative fit index [CFI] = 0.998, normed fit index [NFI] = 0.999, root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = 0.001. These results suggest a good fit of the proposed model to the dataset. To test alternative models, we conducted causal mediation analysis to examine the ACME (average causal mediation effect) and ADE (average direct effect) of our proposed models versus the competing/alternative models. More details and results can be found in the Supplemental Material L and the Discussion section.

Results

Descriptive Statistics for Model Variables

As shown in Table 1, the mean values for most variables (except beliefs in anti-China COVID-19 conspiracy theories) were above the midpoint of their respective scales, indicating that the participants had overall positive responses about the characteristics measured. Moreover, most of the correlations between the model variables were positive.⁵

Hypothesis Testing

The resulting standardized path estimates for the model are presented in Table 2. We found a positive and significant relationship between SPIGSM and beliefs in the anti-US COVID-19 conspiracy theories ($\beta = 0.102, p < .001$). However, SPIGSM had a nonsignificant association with beliefs in the anti-China COVID-19 conspiracy theories ($\beta = -0.040, p > .05$). Therefore, H1b was supported, while H1a was rejected.

We found a significant and negative association of in-group solidarity with beliefs in anti-China COVID-19 conspiracy theories ($\beta = -0.100, p < .01$) and a significant and positive association with beliefs in anti-US COVID-19 conspiracy theories ($\beta = 0.213, p < .001$), supporting H2. There was also a significant and positive association

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Results.

Variable	Correlation coefficient					Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
	2	3	4	5	6				
1 Beliefs in Anti-China COVID-19 conspiracy theories	0.05	-0.08*	-0.13***	-0.06	-0.13***	1.65	0.49	0.52	-0.28
2 Beliefs in Anti-US COVID-19 conspiracy theories	—	0.17***	0.20***	0.15***	-0.01	2.34	0.66	-0.02	0.22
3 SPIGSM		—	0.24***	0.10**	0.05	2.64	0.86	-0.31	-0.51
4 In-group solidarity			—	0.06	0.05	3.73	0.50	-2.26	8.43
5 Perceived out-group threats				—	0.03	2.31	0.68	0.12	-0.53
6 Knowledge of COVID-19					—	3.47	1.13	-0.048	-0.269

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

between perceived out-group threats and beliefs in anti-US COVID-19 conspiracy theories ($\beta = 0.121, p < .001$). Thus, H3 was supported. However, perceived out-group threats had a nonsignificant association with beliefs in COVID-19 conspiracy theories toward China ($\beta = -0.018, p > 0.05$), which answered RQ1.

We also found that SPIGSM was positively associated with in-group solidarity ($\beta = 0.117, p < .001$). In other words, the more individuals use government social media outlets for political information, the higher their in-group solidarity. These results also suggested that SPIGSM positively correlates with perceived out-group threats ($\beta = 0.039, p < .05$). Accordingly, hypotheses H4a and H4b were supported.

Mediation of In-group Solidarity and Perceived Out-group Threats

We also found in-group solidarity and perceived out-group threats mediate the associations of SPIGSM and beliefs in nation-related COVID-19 conspiracy theories. In addition, in-group solidarity ($\beta = 0.025, p < .001$) and perceived out-group threats ($\beta = 0.005, p < .05$) were also found to be mediators between SPIGSM and beliefs in anti-US COVID-19 conspiracy theories, supporting H5b and H6b. Although the rejection of H1a indicated no significant direct association, we observed a negative indirect correlation of SPIGSM on beliefs in anti-China COVID-19 conspiracy theories via in-group solidarity ($\beta = -0.012, p < .01$), supporting H5a. In other words, SPIGSM negatively associates with beliefs in anti-China COVID-19 conspiracy theories through in-group solidarity. However, H6a was rejected as we did not find an indirect association of SPIGSM on

Table 2. Results of Path Analysis.

				β
H1a	SPIGSM	→	Beliefs in anti-China conspiracy theories	-0.040
H1b	SPIGSM	→	Beliefs in anti-US conspiracy theories	0.102***
H2a	In-group solidarity	→	Beliefs in anti-China conspiracy theories	-0.100**
H2b	In-group solidarity	→	Beliefs in anti-US conspiracy theories	0.213***
H3	Perceived out-group threats	→	Beliefs in anti-China conspiracy theories	-0.018
RQ1	Perceived out-group threats	→	Beliefs in anti-US conspiracy theories	0.121***
H4a	SPIGSM	→	In-group solidarity	0.117***
H4b	SPIGSM	→	Perceived out-group threats	0.039*

beliefs in anti-China COVID-19 conspiracy theories through perceived out-group threats ($\beta = -0.001, p > .05$). We further tested whether the findings remained robust without control variables, after which the path coefficients remained statistically significant and consistent (see Supplemental Material C). In other words, despite the confounding demographic and cognitive factors of people who consumed government social media content, we observed robust direct association of SPIGSM with nation-related conspiracy beliefs and indirect association mediated by in- and out-group nationalism.

Discussion

Through the use of national survey data collected during the COVID-19 outbreak in China, we examined the relationships between social media political information seeking, nationalism, and nation-related conspiracy beliefs. To the best of our knowledge, our study is the first to investigate the dynamics of psychological factors and mechanisms between the public's use of government social media for political information and their beliefs in nation-related conspiracies during a pandemic. Although the public's use of government social media for information seeking has received little attention in social and new media research, it is particularly essential in the Chinese context because government agencies actively use them for pandemic control, and people rely heavily on social media for information seeking. In the following sections, we discuss several implications of our results and the limitations of this study.

Studying Individuals' Social Media Behavior in an Authoritarian Context: From General Social Media Habits to Purposive Use of Government Social Media in Conspiracy Studies

Existing research on how social media use predicts conspiracy beliefs often discusses the reliance on social media as an information source (Allington et al. 2021; De Coninck et al. 2021) or the public's overall social media habits (Xiao et al. 2021). In contrast, our paper highlights the need to contextualize information consumption in specific political contexts. In authoritarian contexts, such as China, state actors maintain a high presence on social media (Lu and Pan 2022). Therefore, people's attitudes

and behaviors can be affected by information from government outlets. Recent research has revealed that different topics of government content can result in differences in terms of online engagement (Chen et al. 2020b). Moreover, government efforts to manage online information facilitated more offline citizen compliance during the COVID-19 pandemic (Jiang and Tang 2022).

Our findings add to these recent efforts to understand the nuances of government social media in authoritarian contexts through a psychological-based micro perspective. We discovered that conspiracy beliefs in out-groups can influence how individuals process political information from governmental social media. Thus, the consumption of information from government social media outlets also requires caution, as suggested by the regulations of local government accounts by the central government in China.⁶ Importantly, although not statistically significant, we found the use of government social media to find political information is associated with a lower level of belief in anti-China COVID-19 conspiracies. This aligns with findings that the state can shape public opinion toward its favored position by state-owned media (Pan et al. 2022) and explains how the information circulated by government social media outlets can increase the resilience of authoritarian governance. Importantly, citizens can be informed about the pandemic situation through government social media outlets, which can increase perceived government legitimacy (Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer 2015) and decrease beliefs in in-group conspiracies.

Nationalism as a Double-Edged Linkage Between Media Consumption and Conspiracy Beliefs

In recent studies on COVID-19 conspiracy theories and misinformation, individual-level mechanisms that drive such beliefs (including emotions such as depression and anxiety) have been examined (De Coninck et al. 2021; Freiling et al. 2021). In our paper, we examined a different individual-level mechanism (nationalism) and its role in forming conspiracy beliefs in authoritarian contexts. Although extant research has consistently investigated the interplay between group identity and group-related conspiracy beliefs by focusing on either in-group favoritism or out-group hostility (Cichocka et al. 2016a, 2016b; Jia and Luo 2021; Sternisko et al. 2021; Wang 2021), we contrasted both elements in terms of influencing group-variant conspiracy beliefs.

By measuring the mediation role of nationalism, we revealed that nationalism plays a differentiated role in influencing how individuals process political information from government social media accounts to form their in-group and out-group conspiracy beliefs. On the one hand, we found that in-group solidarity significantly mediated the negative relationship between government social media use and individuals' intra-group conspiracy beliefs. This aligns with existing studies that have examined how state media and publicity departments in authoritarian governments actively strengthen patriotism and national unification through nationalistic events and patriotism education to garner wider acceptance of the central political agenda (Perry 2017). Such framing efforts have been incorporated into popular culture or other innovative

formats (Chen et al. 2021; Lu and Pan 2021; Zou 2019) through which citizens who seek government content on social media can increase in-group solidarity. On the other hand, we found that perceived out-group threats can mediate the positive relationship between government social media use and beliefs in anti-US conspiracies. As these conspiracy theories were heavily circulated on Chinese social media and appeared on some state social media accounts (Zou 2021), people who consumed such information could perceive the United States negatively through a heightened sense of threat. Once again, this calls for more careful management of content disseminated by government social media and more research into the effects of content disseminated by government social media outlets on public opinion.

Methodologically, our paper demonstrates how communication researchers can draw from theories in psychology and political science to measure nationalism, which combines the lenses of micro-level psychological processes and political standpoints. The findings from this study also illustrate that nationalism in a pandemic context is a unique phenomenon with rich implications that require further scrutiny. Compared to nationalism in non-pandemic periods, pandemic nationalism results from the confluence of its global reach, strict border controls by most countries, and heavy dependency on social media for both political and non-political information (as people now spend more time online). Our discovery of the mediating effect of nationalism on conspiracy processing at the individual level suggests an association with these macro-level forces.

Implications for Understanding the Nuanced Roles of Social Media in International Politics

Beyond the Chinese context, our study also highlights the importance of understanding the nuanced role of social media in broader contemporary international politics and risk communication. By examining the influence of consuming government social media on conspiracy perceptions, this study provides a rare glimpse into the relationships between government-produced social media information and conspiracies during a global crisis, offering insights into international politics and conspiracy mitigation.

Our work suggests that the role of social media in the acceptance of conspiracy beliefs should be re-examined. While prior research has suggested different associations between social media and conspiracy beliefs (Allington et al. 2021; De Coninck et al. 2021; Theocharis et al. 2021; Xiao et al. 2021), we provide empirical evidence that social media use can boost the acceptance of conspiracy theories that specifically target external political entities in an authoritarian context. However, this increased control and influence of information by government social media outlets is not limited to authoritarian contexts, as democratic systems (such as India) are also experiencing a similar phenomenon (Hirwani 2020). Accordingly, the utopian view of social media as a “liberation technology” (Diamond 2015) is becoming increasingly questionable and could blind us to the potential of social media in fomenting new types of inequality and restrictions on civil liberties that privilege certain groups over others (Deibert 2015). Given that governments across the globe are increasingly active on

social media platforms to influence public opinion and behavior, more work should be conducted to understand the role of social media in specific national contexts.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations of our study should be considered. First, while the survey enabled us to investigate individual psychological factors on conspiracy perceptions, this resulted in the issue of self-reporting bias, which manifested as unconsciously under-reporting governmental social media use due to high familiarity with publicity, or over-reporting in-group solidarity due to “political fear” (Parry et al. 2021; Shin 2020; Stockmann et al. 2018). Future studies could triangulate survey data with digital trace data or qualitative evidence to provide richer and more granular insights into the nuances of processing conspiracy theories. The relatively high exclusion rate of our survey also yielded some methodological limitations. Future self-administered survey research designs should develop potential methods to address the problem of “shirkers,” such as using multiple “screener” questions (Berinsky et al. 2014). Additionally, given the correlational design of this study, we were unable to establish a causal relationship between social media use and conspiracy perceptions. We also tested several potential alternative models (by changing the path directions and positions of variables) and conducted causal mediation analysis and sensitivity analysis for our proposed model (see Supplemental Material L for details). From the results of causal mediation analyses, we found that the alternative models are not supported, whereas our proposed model is supported. However, the sensitivity analysis results indicate that there may be some potential unobserved confounders that could impact the robustness of the results, suggesting more complicated mechanisms among the factors in our framework. Thus, we call for more research, either in experimental design or causal inferences on time-series data, to further investigate these potential confounding factors regarding how they might influence the relationship between people’s use of government social media for political information and their conspiracy beliefs. Furthermore, as our study focused only on nation-related conspiracy beliefs, future work could also investigate whether our findings are valid for non-nation-related conspiracy beliefs.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. See 2018 State Council “Opinions on Promoting the Healthy and Orderly Development of New Media in Government Affairs,” http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2018-12/27/content_5352666.htm.
2. The CGSS is China’s first nationwide, comprehensive, large-scale social survey project conducted by the Survey and Data Center, Renmin University. It adopted a multistage stratified sampling method and is recognized as one of the most representative data with scientific research value in academia. The 2017 CGSS data were released in October 2020 and is the latest version.
3. See Diaoyanba: <http://www.diaoyanba.com/>.
4. We used a 4-point scale in which there is no neutral option to extract a “solid” specific response from the respondents.
5. We have done a correlation analysis between pro-Chinese government/anti-U.S. attitudes and COVID conspiracies, See Supplemental Material G.
6. See 2018 State Council “Opinions on Promoting the Healthy and Orderly Development of New Media in Government Affairs,” http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2018-12/27/content_5352666.htm.

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