



Pandemic Nationalism: How Exposure to Government Social Media Affects Chinese People's Belief in COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories

Anfan Chen (University of Science and Technology of China)

Yingdan Lu (Stanford University)

Kaiping Chen (University of Wisconsin-Madison)

Aaron Yikai Ng (National University of Singapore)



Motivation

Motivation





Motivation

Chinese public **relied greatly on social media** to cope with the epidemic (Wei et al., 2021).

Information exposure on social media is associated with **greater conspiracy beliefs** toward the COVID-19 pandemic (De Coninck et al., 2021; Su et al., 2021) >> in-general social media use



Motivation

Chinese public **relied greatly on social media** to cope with the epidemic (Wei et al., 2021).

Information exposure on social media is associated with **greater conspiracy beliefs** toward the COVID-19 pandemic (De Coninck et al., 2021; Su et al., 2021) >> in-general social media use

Chinese government actively disseminates epidemic statistics, control measures, and responses to public concerns through their **social media channels** during COVID-19 (Chen et al., 2020; Dai et al., 2021; Lu and Pan, 2020; Schlæger and Jiang, 2014)



Motivation

Chinese public **relied greatly on social media** to cope with the epidemic (Wei et al., 2021).

Information exposure on social media is associated with **greater conspiracy beliefs** toward the COVID-19 pandemic (De Coninck et al., 2021; Su et al., 2021) >> in-general social media use

Chinese government actively disseminates epidemic statistics, control measures, and responses to public concerns through their **social media channels** during COVID-19 (Chen et al., 2020; Dai et al., 2021; Lu and Pan, 2020; Schlæger and Jiang, 2014)

How does exposing to government social media associate with the beliefs in conspiracies targeting China and the U.S. among Chinese social media users?



Pandemic nationalism

Nationalism rises globally and manifests differently in unsettled times (Bieber, 2020; Goode et al., 2020) >> **pandemic nationalism**

Pandemic nationalism

Nationalism rises globally and manifests differently in unsettled times (Bieber, 2020; Goode et al., 2020) >> **pandemic nationalism**

Pandemic nationalism in **social-psychological** perspective:



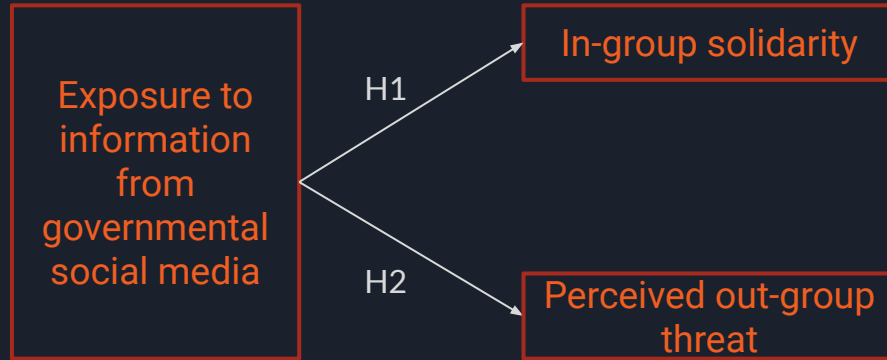


Theoretical framework

In-group solidarity

Perceived out-group
threat

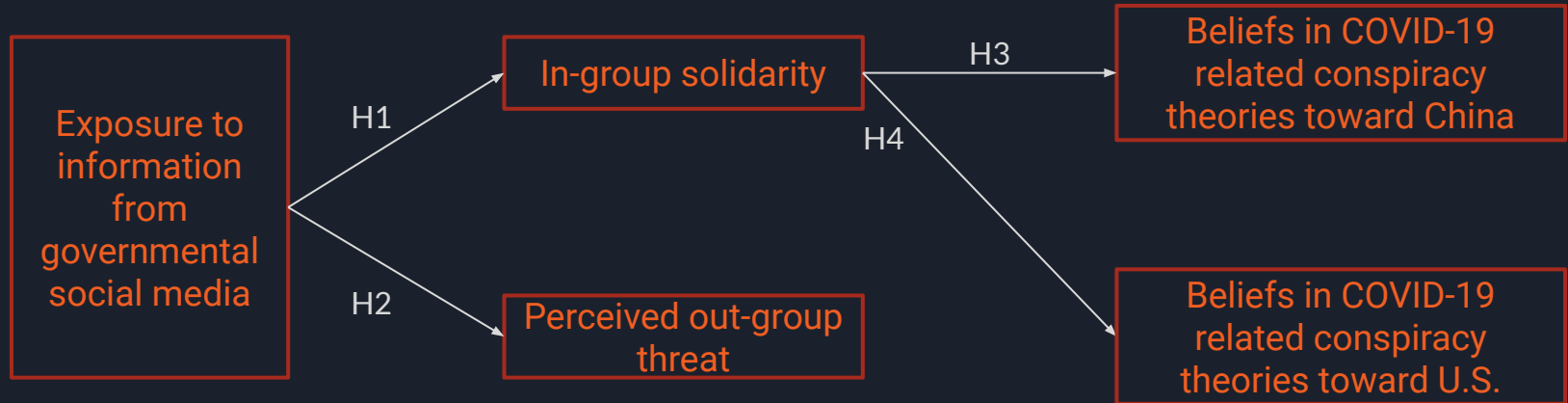
Theoretical framework



H1: Exposure to information from governmental social media accounts will be positively associated with in-group solidarity.

H2: Exposure to information from governmental social media accounts will be positively associated with perceived out-group threat.

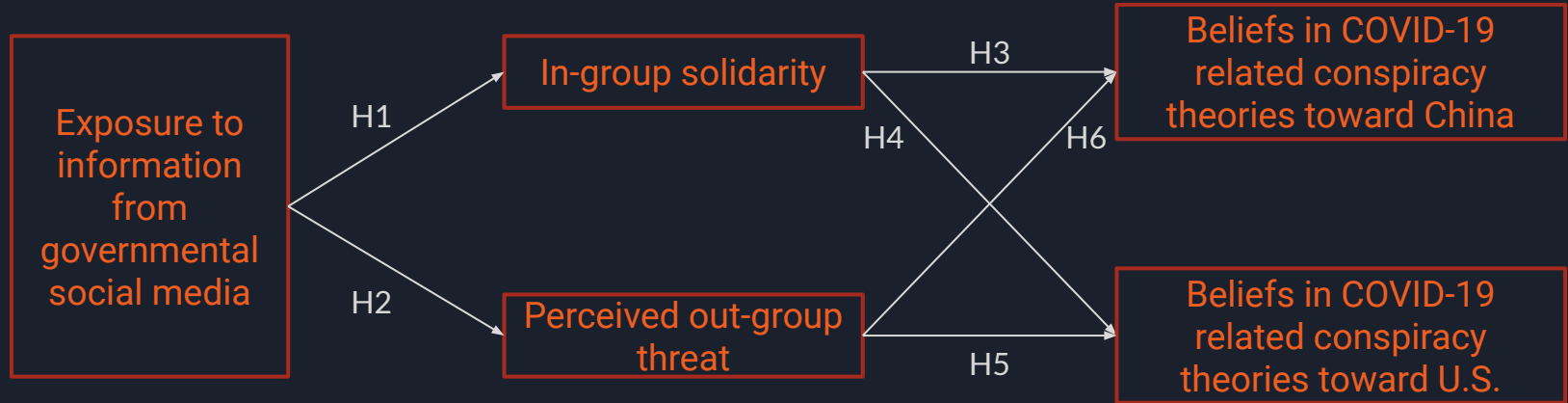
Theoretical framework



H3: In-group solidarity will be negatively associated with beliefs in conspiracy theories toward China.

H4: In-group solidarity will be positively associated with beliefs in conspiracy theories toward the U.S.

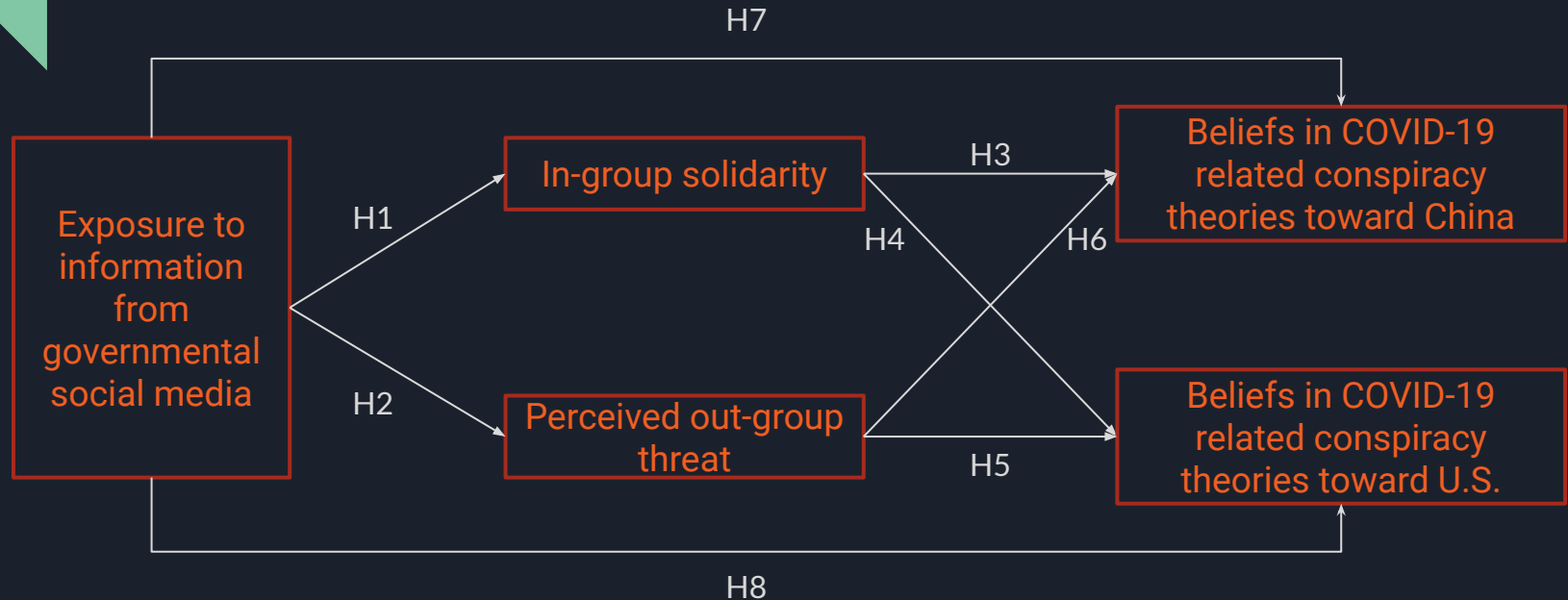
Theoretical framework



H5: Perceived out-group threat will be positively associated with beliefs in conspiracy theories toward the U.S.

H6: Perceived out-group threat will be positively associated with beliefs in conspiracy theories toward China.

Theoretical framework



H7: Exposure to information from governmental social media accounts will be positively associated with in-group solidarity.

H8: Exposure to information from governmental social media accounts will be negatively associated with beliefs in conspiracy theories toward China.

Method

Survey



Feb - Mar 2021

Quota sampling

745 valid participants

Method

Survey



Conspiracy theories



Eight conspiracy theories (four toward China, four toward the U.S.) **prevalent on Chinese SNS**

Example: 美国通过武汉军运会
向中国输送新型冠状病毒

Method

Survey



Conspiracy theories



Exposure to information
from governmental
social media content



Frequency of
consumption

Diverse social
media platforms
(Weibo, WeChat,
Douyin, Toutiao)

Method

Survey



Conspiracy theories



Exposure to information
from governmental
social media content



In-group
solidarity



Four items from established
survey questions
(Woods and Dickson, 2017;
Davidov, 2009; Cameron, 2004)

Example: 作为一个中国人,
我感觉很自豪

Method

Survey



Conspiracy theories



Exposure to information
from governmental
social media content



In-group
solidarity



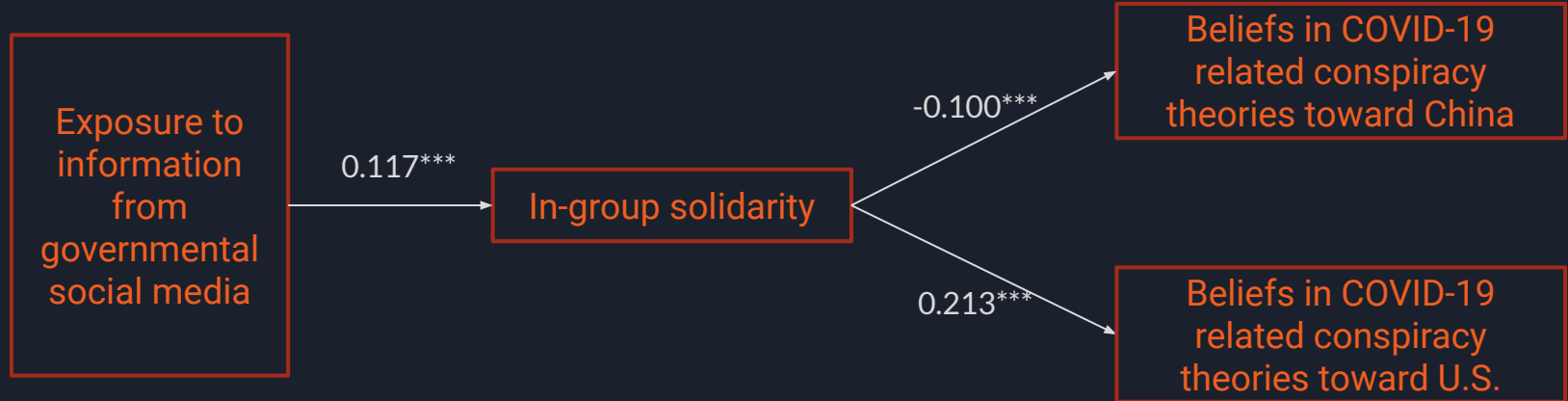
Perceived
out-group
threat



Eight items on
symbolic and
realistic threats

Example: 您认为美国
在【国家领土主权安
全】多大程度上对中
国构成威胁

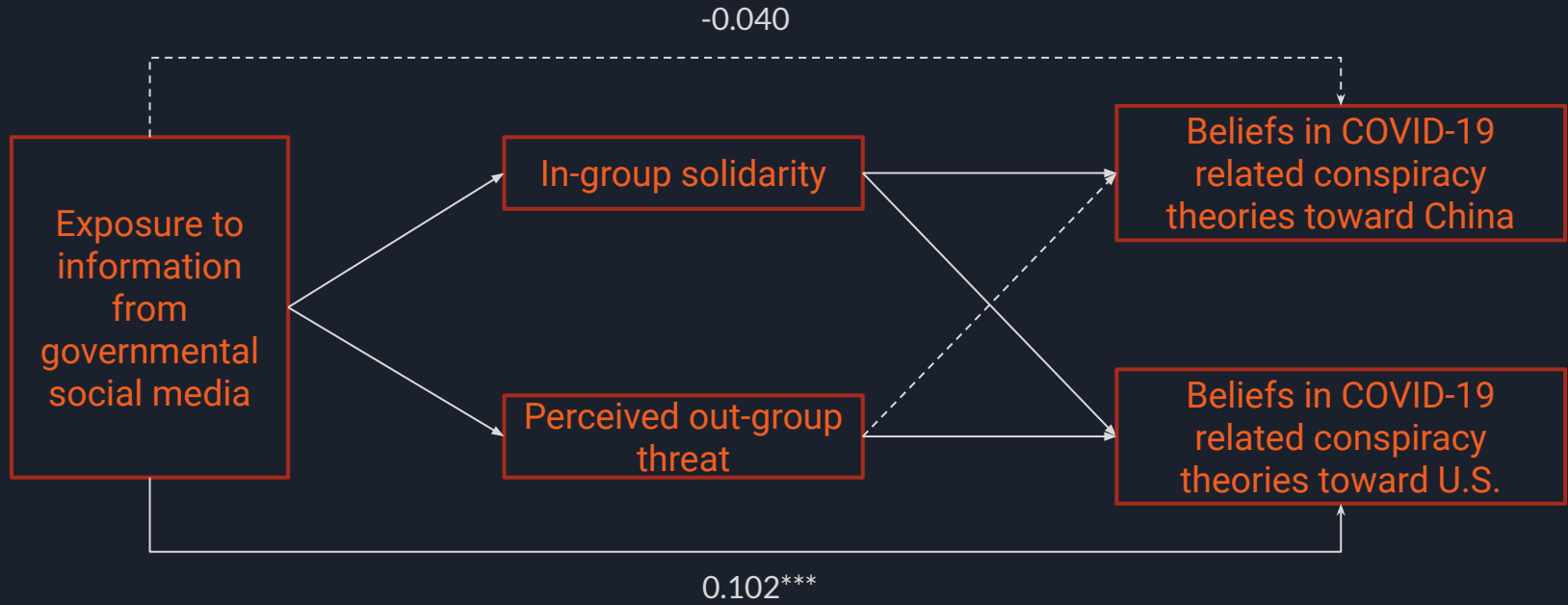
Results: hypothesis testing



Results: hypothesis testing



Results: hypothesis testing





Results: path analysis

| IV | Mediator | Beliefs in COVID-19 related conspiracy theories Toward China | Beliefs in COVID-19 related conspiracy theories Toward US |
|---|-------------------------------|--|---|
| Exposure to information from governmental social media | In-group solidarity | -.012** | .025*** |
| | Perceived out-group threat | N.S | .005* |



Conclusion

Exposure to government social media information >> increased beliefs in COVID-19 conspiracies toward the U.S., both directly and **through triggering nationalism**



Conclusion

Exposure to government social media information >> increased beliefs in COVID-19 conspiracies toward the U.S., both directly and **through triggering nationalism**

Greater exposure to government content on social media decreases beliefs in China-related conspiracies **through triggering a stronger sense of in-group solidarity**



Conclusion

Exposure to government social media information >> increased beliefs in COVID-19 conspiracies toward the U.S., both directly and **through triggering nationalism**

Greater exposure to government content on social media decreases beliefs in China-related conspiracies **through triggering a stronger sense of in-group solidarity**

Results are robust even after controlling for individual-level psychological and contextual that can predict conspiracy beliefs



Discussion

Nationalism in misinformation processing during crisis >> **individual-level factors** associated with **macro-forces** (global upsurge of nationalism)

Influence of government social media accounts on conspiracy perceptions >> more political implications



Discussion

Nationalism in misinformation processing during crisis >> **individual-level factors** associated with **macro-forces** (global upsurge of nationalism)

Influence of government social media accounts on conspiracy perceptions >> more political and contextual meanings



Discussion

Nationalism in misinformation processing during crisis >> **individual-level factors** associated with **macro-forces** (global upsurge of nationalism)

Influence of government social media accounts on conspiracy perceptions >> more political and contextual meanings

Practical implications for **conspiracy mitigation** and **misinformation correction**



Thank you for listening!

Any comments or suggestions
are appreciated!



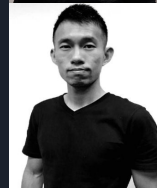
Anfan Chen
anfanchen@cuhk.edu.hk



Yingdan Lu
yingdanlu.com



Kaiping Chen
kaipingchen.com



Aaron Yikai Ng
aaron.casa