



Outgroup threat, ideology, and favorable evaluations of the government's responses to COVID-19

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Abstract

Based on social psychological theories of intergroup relations, perceptions of threat from outgroups contribute to ingroup favoritism. This research examined the effects of the perceived threat from outgroups (the US) on Chinese people's favorable evaluations of their government's responses to coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). Study 1 conducted an experiment and found that the US' criticism of China's responses to the pandemic increased Chinese citizens' favorable evaluations of the government's performance. Study 2 was a correlational design and found that the relationship between perceptions of outgroup threats and evaluations of the government's performance was moderated by ideology and the approval of lockdown policies. These results show that outgroups are sophisticatedly employed by politicians to increase ingroup favoritism and suggest that ideological divide is an important moderator in the association between outgroup threat and the evaluation of ingroup.

Keywords Conservatism · COVID-19 · Ideology · Intergroup relations · Lockdowns · Outgroup threat

Introduction

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has spread globally. According to the statistics of the World Health Organization (WHO), as of January 28, 2022, there have been more than 364 million confirmed cases and five million deaths. Facing the catastrophic outcomes of the pandemic, governments in many countries tightened restrictions on daily activities to combat the spread of COVID-19, restricting people's freedoms and liberties (Anderson et al., 2020; Jia et al., 2021; Kupferschmidt & Cohen, 2020). People suffered from indefinite isolation, loss of work, shortage of essentials, and misinformation on the media. Many studies have found that the COVID-19 crisis increased stress, anxiety, loneliness, and depression, as well as weakened people's social interaction and social support (Brooks et al., 2020; Duan & Zhu, 2020; Elmer et al., 2020; Rubin & Wessely, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). Some countries have implemented strict lockdown policies, and various restrictive measures

have disrupted people's lives immensely. The increasing infections and deaths, as well as the government's ineffective responses, led to the public's discontent with the government's handling of the crisis.

During the pandemic, China took radical measures such as shutting down cities, closure of businesses, and compulsory stay-at-home orders. Although citizens expressed complaints about the inconvenience of quarantines and lockdowns, no large-scale protests occurred against the government. Chinese people's evaluations of the national government's performance during the pandemic were relatively favorable (Wu et al., 2021; Zhai et al., 2022). Previous studies state that high levels of collectivist culture and power distance culture are related to compliance with authority (Farh et al., 2007; Hofstede, 1984; Hwang, 2012). Moreover, COVID-19 amplifies nationalist conflict between the US and China (Boylan et al., 2020; Woods et al., 2020). Since the 2010s, the US-China competition has been accelerating. Trade wars, restrictions on technology export, and building alliances against China made more Chinese people recognize that the US strives to contain China's development (Gries & Sanders, 2016; Zhai, 2019). During the pandemic, the US took a lead in attacking China for lack of transparency and delay in reporting COVID-19 during the initial outbreak, holding China responsible for the global spread of disease.

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The Trump administration used labels like “Wuhan virus” and “China virus” instead of the neutral name “COVID-19” (Bruce, 2020; Mangan, 2020), which caused strong resentment among the Chinese.

From a social–psychological perspective, psychological dynamics of intergroup relations can contribute to ingroup favoritism (Zhai et al., 2022). The US criticism of China and Chinese citizens’ perception of a US threat may affect their attitudes toward the government’s responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. The current research aims to examine the influence of outgroups (the US) on Chinese citizens’ favorable evaluations of the government’s performance during the pandemic by drawing insights from social-psychological studies on the influence of outgroups on favorable attitudes toward ingroups.

Intergroup relations and ideology

The US-China competition can be understood from a perspective of intergroup relations; the studies on this theme have a long history in social psychology. In world politics, realist competition or conflict exists in the relations between China and the US. It has been widely acknowledged that competition for resources can cause intergroup conflict, with their value being the motivator. When the competition crosses the boundary, intergroup rivalry emerges (Campbell, 1965; Collier et al., 2009; Sherif & Sherif, 1953). Beyond this resource-based theory, social psychologists found that mere artificial categorization of people into different groups (minimal categorization) is sufficient for intergroup competition and discrimination even in the absence of realistic competition for resources (Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Tajfel, 1970). Social identity theory indicates that individuals tend to categorize the world into a variety of ingroups and outgroups, and the self-concept partly derives from the membership to a social group (Tajfel, 1974, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). People tend to distinguish themselves from others based on group identity. Social categorization between “us” and “them” can influence individual attitudes toward ingroup and outgroup members (Hogg, 2014; Leonardelli & Toh, 2011; Patterson & Bigler, 2006). Specifically, there is a tendency of ingroup favoritism (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel et al., 1971). Individuals are inclined to make more favorable evaluations of their group and positively maximize relative differences between their benefits and those of other groups (Efferson et al., 2008; Romano et al., 2017; Tajfel et al., 1971).

Intergroup relations influence individual attitudes and behaviors in groups. Previous studies found that intergroup competition or conflict decreases free-riding within groups (Reuben & Tyran, 2010; Tan & Bolle, 2007) and increases intragroup cooperation (Burton-Chellew et al., 2010; Guillen

et al., 2015; Puurtinen & Mappes, 2009). Rivalry with outgroup enhances ingroup cohesion. Individuals identify themselves with their ingroups and internalize the benefit or loss of the group as personal. Moreover, ingroup cohesion increases because competition makes individuals willing to contribute more to their ingroups. Proximate emotions such as guilt (when one contributes less than group mates) and the perceptions of common fate within the group increase ingroup favoritism (Burton-Chellew et al., 2010; Fessler & Haley, 2003).

We employed the approach of an outgroup threat to examine the influence of outgroups on members’ evaluations of their ingroups. Individual attitudes and behavior are affected by rival outgroups (Puurtinen & Mappes, 2009; Radford et al., 2016; Tan & Bolle, 2007; West et al., 2006). Social psychologists have found that threats from outgroups can reinforce ingroup cohesion. Perceived threat generates feelings of uncertainty and uneasiness. Individuals can reduce such uncomfortable feelings by boosting their ingroup identity (Grieve & Hogg, 1999; Hogg, 2000; Mullin & Hogg, 1998; Reid & Hogg, 2005). Members’ perception of threat from outgroups forms favorable attitudes toward ingroup. The group ranges from small, interactive teams to large-scale groups such as ethnic, religious, or political entities. On the national level, the group that has strong leadership and ideological and ethnocentric belief systems is the ingroup with which individuals choose to identify (Hogg, 2014).

Identification with ingroups leads to feelings of security and power, which can balance the negative effects of threat on the self. The intensified group identity generates favorable attitudes toward the ingroup. The nation is one of the most frequently used groups by which people define their identity (Billig, 1995; Roccas et al., 2010). Crisis increases individual identification with the nation, and the threat from other countries generates ingroup favoritism for their country (Moskalenko et al., 2006). Many observers contend that the pandemic has fueled nationalism globally (Rachman, 2020; Vogel, 2020). Notably, perceptions of an outgroup’s threat influence attitudes toward ingroups and outgroups (Caricati, 2018; Ljujic et al., 2013). The criticism and sanctions by the US on China signify identity and the realistic threat that may elicit Chinese people’s favorable evaluation of their country.

The influence of outgroups on people depends on individual differences. The relationship between ideology and people’s attitudes toward intergroup relations needs to be investigated. Although we expected that perceived threat from outgroup will lead to ingroup bias, but not all group members express ingroup favoritism to the same extent. Therefore, we aimed to examine not only how the perception of threat from outgroup affects attitudes toward ingroup but also who within the group displays the most ingroup favoritism. Among various factors, the ideological divide is relevant. Ideology is a stable belief system and pre-exists specific political attitudes. It affects interpretations

of facts, judgments of right and wrong, and emotions (Hatemi et al., 2019; Jost & Amodio, 2012; Kraft et al., 2015; Napier & Jost, 2008). Ideology serves some psychological needs, offering a sense of certainty, security, and shared reality (Jost, 2017; Jost et al., 2013). Previous studies found that conservatives and liberals have distinct views of the world and disagree with each other in attitudes toward social and political affairs (Cohen, 2003; Hatemi et al., 2019; Jost, 2006, 2009; Jost & Amodio, 2012). In the COVID-19 pandemic, conservatives had lower risk estimates of activities, endorsed various conspiracy theories, and resisted preventive measures (Havey, 2020; Weil & Wolfe, 2021; Zhai & Yan, 2022).

This research consists of two sub-studies. Through an experiment, Study 1 first examined the causal relationship between Chinese citizens' perceptions of the US' criticism of China and their evaluations of the Chinese government's performance. Ideology predisposes people's attitudes toward social issues, and the approval of lockdown policies is associated with the evaluations of governments' performance. Therefore, Study 2 examined a more complicated situation in which the relationship between perceptions of threats from the US and evaluations of the Chinese government's performance was moderated by ideology and attitudes toward lockdown policies. This research used these two sub-studies to explore how perceptions of outgroup threats are employed to enhance ingroup favoritism amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Study 1

Study 1 examined the effects of threat from outgroups on individual attitudes toward ingroups in the context of COVID-19. Criticism from outgroups constitutes a threat to group identity. Tajfel (1974) defines social identity not only by individual's knowledge of their membership in a social group but also the emotional significance attached to it. Criticism from outgroups threatens the collective self-esteem of people who socially identify with their groups, which may increase ingroup favoritism. Hence, outgroups' criticism will increase ingroup solidarity and members' favorable evaluations of ingroups. Regarding COVID-19, we tested the effect of the US criticisms about China on Chinese citizens' evaluations of the government's performance. We posit that the threat of outgroups generates favorable evaluations of the government's performance during the COVID-19 pandemic. The experimental design was used to explore the causal relationship.

Methods

Participants

A priori power analysis was conducted using G*Power 3.1. For the independent samples *t*-test, assuming medium effect

size ($d=0.5$), a sample size of 102 is needed to have power of 80% to yield a significant effect. A total of 118 participants studying in a Chinese university were recruited for Study 1 (46% males, 54% females). Their age ranged from 17 to 25 years ($M=19.26$, $SD=1.37$). They participated voluntarily and were offered monetary compensation after completing the survey.

Procedures

The experiment followed a double-blind procedure. The lead researcher designed the experiment and arranged for the research associates to administer the experiment. The latter did not know the study purposes and each participant's assignment until after the experiment was finished. The participants first completed a demographic questionnaire; then, they were instructed to read a paragraph of a statement about the pandemic. The two types of statements—control or experimental conditions—were randomly assigned to them. In the experimental group ($n=58$), participants read a vignette: "COVID-19 has spread rapidly around the world and endangered public health. However, American politicians accused China of withholding information and blamed it for the global spread of the disease. They used the term 'Chinese virus' or 'Wuhan virus.' How would you evaluate the Chinese government's performance in handling the pandemic?" In the control group ($n=60$), there was no mention of the US criticism of China. Participants read a vignette: "COVID-19 has spread rapidly around the world and endangered public health. The infection rates continue to rise. How would you evaluate the Chinese government's performance in handling the pandemic?" The responses were coded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly unfavorable to 5 = strongly favorable). Greater scores indicate higher levels of favorable evaluations.

Results and discussion

Study 1 compared the level of favorable evaluations of the government's performance between the control and experimental groups. An independent-samples *t*-test showed a significant difference. Scores were higher for the experimental group ($M=4.67$, $SE=0.06$, $CI [4.55, 4.80]$) than for the control group ($M=4.31$, $SE=0.09$, $CI [4.13, 4.50]$). On average, the experimental group had a higher score for the evaluations of the government's performance ($t(116)=3.15$, $p<0.01$, Cohen's $d=0.58$, $CI [0.21, 0.95]$). The results indicate that participants who learned about the US criticism of China tended to make a more favorable evaluation of the Chinese government's performance.

The prosperity and success of the group are important to the well-being of its members. Criticism about the group affects its members equally. Individual self-respect and

self-esteem are related to their collective self-esteem (Chiesa & Rossi, 2016, 168; Margalit & Raz, 1995, 87). Collective self-esteem is the overall evaluation of one's worth or value based on their membership in social groups (Crocker and Luhtanen, 1990; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). When collective esteem is threatened, group-based identity will motivate orientations of ingroup favoritism to restore it (Branscombe & Wann, 1992). Foreign countries' criticism of nations can trigger nationalist responses, and nationalism has increased during the pandemic (Boylan et al., 2020; Woods et al., 2020). As a form of threat from outgroups, the US criticism of China threatened Chinese citizens' collective self-esteem and reinforced their national solidarity. Ultimately, the US criticism had a positive effect on Chinese citizens' favorable evaluations of the government's performance in handling the pandemic.

Study 2

The experiment in Study 1 revealed that the US' criticism of China enhanced Chinese citizens' favorable evaluations of their government's performance amid the pandemic. Study 2 extended the US' criticism of China to the general threat of the US and examined how the relationship between perceptions of threats from the US and approval of China's response to address COVID-19 was moderated by attitudes toward lockdown policies and ideology.

During the pandemic, governments implemented lockdown policies to prevent the spread of the virus. Experts also warned about the expanded power of the government and the rise of authoritarianism during the pandemic (Woods et al., 2020). However, some people believe that lockdowns are justifiable at the cost of people's freedom. Support for lockdown policies indicate a tendency of system justification. Hence, we posit that people who support lockdown policies may have more favorable evaluations of the government's performance in controlling the spread of COVID-19. Moreover, the threat of outgroup increased support for the authority; the latter seized this opportunity to reinforce authoritarian control of the society (Woods et al., 2020). Accordingly, perceptions of threats from outgroups may interact with support for lockdown policies. We posit that the relationship between threat perceptions and evaluations of the government's performance during the COVID-19 pandemic was moderated by attitudes toward lockdown policies.

As stated earlier, ideology is an important factor in determining people's specific socio-political attitudes. Conservatives tend to maintain order, stability, and hierarchy (Jost et al., 2003, 2008). As ideology predicts individuals' understanding of COVID-19 and the associated risks (Havey, 2020; Weil & Wolfe, 2021; Zhai & Yan, 2022), we posit that ideology could be an important predictor of evaluations of the

government's performance during COVID-19. Moreover, ideology moderates the effect of the perception of threats (Steffen & Cheng, 2021; Vaala et al., 2021). The relationship between perceptions of threat and favorable evaluations of the government's performance may vary across different ideologies. We posit that the relationship between perceptions of threats and evaluations of the government's response to the pandemic may vary among people with different ideologies.

Methods

Participants

A priori power analysis was conducted using G*Power 3.1. For F tests for a multiple regression model, assuming medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$), a sample size of 138 is needed to have power of 95% to yield a significant effect. A total of 172 undergraduate students (54% women and 46% men) from a Chinese university participated in Study 2. Their age ranged from 18 to 23 years ($M = 19.45$, $SD = 0.98$). Participants completed a questionnaire that included demographic items, ideology, the perception of threat from the US, and their evaluations of the Chinese government's performance in handling the COVID-19 crisis. They were offered monetary compensation for their participation.

Measures

Liberal-conservative ideology The ideological divide was regularly measured by asking the respondents to identify as "liberal" or "conservative," as indicated on the left and right side on the scale, respectively. The communist party's ideology is generally left. However, the ruling party, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), engaging in authoritarian politics, resists liberal democratic principles. Identification with the CCP is conservative rather than liberal. Therefore, the traditional division of ideology using "left" or "right" does not work in China. We used an alternative measure of ideology. Respondents were asked to indicate their attitudes toward the statement, "Western multiparty systems are unsuitable for China." Disagreement to this statement was considered liberal, while agreement indicated a conservative tendency. Responses were coded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Greater scores indicate higher levels of conservative orientations ($M = 4.01$, $SD = 0.99$).

Threat perception was measured using the item "The US is a threat to China's development." The responses were coded on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree." Greater scores indicate higher levels of threat perception ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 1.04$).

Support for lockdown policies Respondents were asked to state their attitudes toward supporting the lockdown policies during the pandemic. Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Higher scores indicate more favorable attitudes about the policy ($M = 4.37, SD = 0.84$).

Evaluations of the government's performance Participants reported how favorably they evaluate the government's handling of the COVID-19 crisis. Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly unfavorable to 5 = strongly favorable). Higher scores indicate more favorable evaluations of the government's performance in handling the crisis ($M = 4.46, SD = 0.66$).

Analytical strategy

We first conducted multivariate regression analysis of the relationship between ideology and evaluations of the government's performance. We then examined how the relationship between perceptions of threats from the US and evaluations of the government's performance was moderated by ideology. Second, we used the same procedure to examine the relationship between attitudes toward lockdown policies and evaluations of the government's performance and the moderation effect of attitudes toward lockdown policies and perceptions of threats from the US on evaluations of the government's performance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Results and discussion

Correlations among variables are presented in Table 1. Conservative ideology was positively correlated with threat perception ($r = 0.25, p < 0.01$), support for lockdown policies ($r = 0.33, p < 0.001$), and favorable evaluations of the government's performance ($r = 0.39, p < 0.001$). Support for lockdown policies was positively correlated with favorable evaluations of the government's performance in handling the COVID-19 crisis ($r = 0.49, p < 0.001$). Threat perception was positively correlated with support for lockdown policies ($r = 0.26, p < 0.001$).

Multiple regression analyses were performed to examine how the relationship between perceptions of threat and evaluations of the government's performance was moderated by ideology and attitudes toward lockdown policies. Model 1 examined the relationship of threat perception and ideology with evaluations of the government's performance and the interaction effect of threat perception and ideology. Conservative ideology positively predicted favorable evaluations of government's performance ($\beta = 0.24, p < 0.001$). However, threat perception did not affect the evaluations significantly ($\beta = 0.03, p > 0.05$). Interaction effects of ideology and threat perception were significant ($\beta = -0.11, p < 0.05$) (Table 2).

Figure 1 plots the interaction effect of ideology and threat perception on evaluations of the government's performance. When perception of threat was low (-1SD), the gap in evaluations between conservatives and liberals was large. When the level of perceived threat was high (+1SD), favorable evaluations increased drastically among liberals but declined among conservatives. As a result, the gap between conservatives and liberals decreased.

Model 2 examined the relationships of threat perception and attitudes toward lockdown policies with evaluations of the government's performance and the interaction effect of

Table 2 The effect of threat perception and ideology on evaluations the government's responses to the pandemic

Dependent variables: Evaluations of governmental performance	
	Model 1
	β (SE)
Age	0.03 (0.05)
Gender (Female = 1)	0.09 (0.10)
Ideology	0.24 (0.05) ***
Threat perception	0.03 (0.05)
Intercept	3.88 (0.94) ***
R ²	0.16
Ideology × Threat perception	-0.11 (0.04) *
R ²	0.19
ΔR^2	0.03
N	172

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, two-tailed test

Table 1 Means, Standard Deviations, and Zero-order correlations between the variables

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Age	19.45	0.98	1.00					
2. Gender (Female = 1)	0.55	0.50	0.20	1.00				
3. Ideology	4.01	0.99	0.07	0.11	1.00			
4. Threat perception	3.88	1.04	0.09	0.11	0.25	1.00		
5. Support for lockdown policies	4.37	0.84	0.09	0.05	0.33	0.26	1.00	
6. Evaluations of governmental performance	4.46	0.66	0.08	0.12	0.39	0.15	0.49	1.00

Bold font indicates the correlation coefficients are statistically significant at the 1% level (two-tailed test)

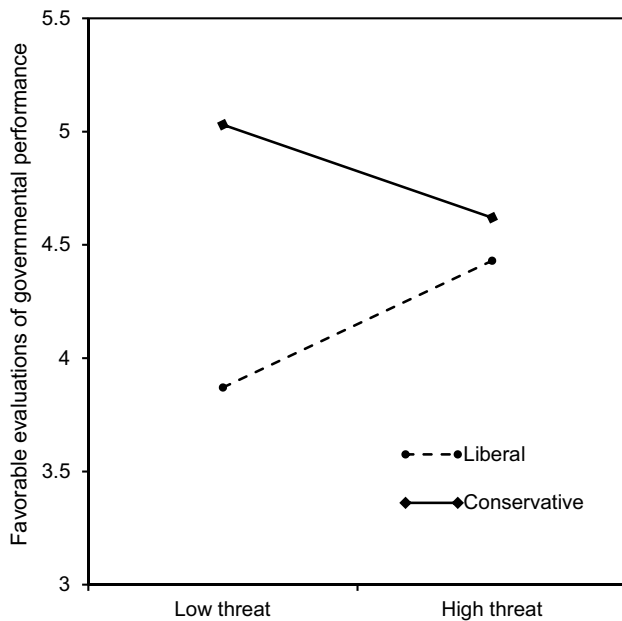


Fig. 1 Interaction effects of ideology and threat perception on favorable evaluations of governmental performance, $p < .05$

threat perception and attitudes toward lockdown policies. Support for lockdown policies positively predicted favorable evaluations ($\beta = 0.32$, $p < 0.001$). However, threat perception was not significantly associated with favorable evaluations ($\beta = 0.01$, $p > 0.05$). Interaction effects of threat perception and support for lockdown policies were significant ($\beta = -0.16$, $p < 0.001$) (Table 3).

Figure 2 plots the interaction effect of threat perception and attitudes toward lockdown policies on evaluations of the government's performance. When the perception of threats was low ($-1SD$), those who supported lockdown policies had more favorable evaluations than their counterparts who opposed lockdown policies. When the level of the perceived threat was high ($+1SD$), favorable evaluations increased among those who expressed less support for lockdown policies but decreased among the counterparts who supported lockdown policies. People with low levels of perception of threat had more favorable evaluations than those who perceived greater threat when the level of support for lockdown policies was high.

The results summarized above reveal that conservative ideology was positively associated with favorable evaluations of the government's performance in handling the COVID-19 crisis. Support for lockdown policies was highly associated with favorable evaluations of the government's performance. In addition, outgroups' criticism of the ingroup enhanced ingroup favoritism. The US' criticism of China increased Chinese citizens' approval of their government. However, when the threat was framed in general terms, its perception did not ensure a favorable

Table 3 The effect of threat perception and attitudes toward lockdown policies on evaluations the government's responses to the pandemic

Dependent variables: Evaluations of governmental performance	
	Model 2
	β (SE)
Age	0.01 (0.05)
Gender (Female = 1)	0.12 (0.09)
Threat perception	0.01 (0.05)
Support for lockdown policies	0.32 (0.05) ***
Intercept	4.11 (0.89) ***
R^2	0.25
Threat perception \times Support for lockdown	-0.16 (0.04) ***
R^2	0.33
ΔR^2	0.08
N	172

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, two-tailed test

evaluation of the authority's performance. The significant interaction effects between ideology and threat perceptions and between the approval of lockdown policies and threat perceptions indicate that the effect of one variable on evaluations of the government's performance varied across different levels of another variable.

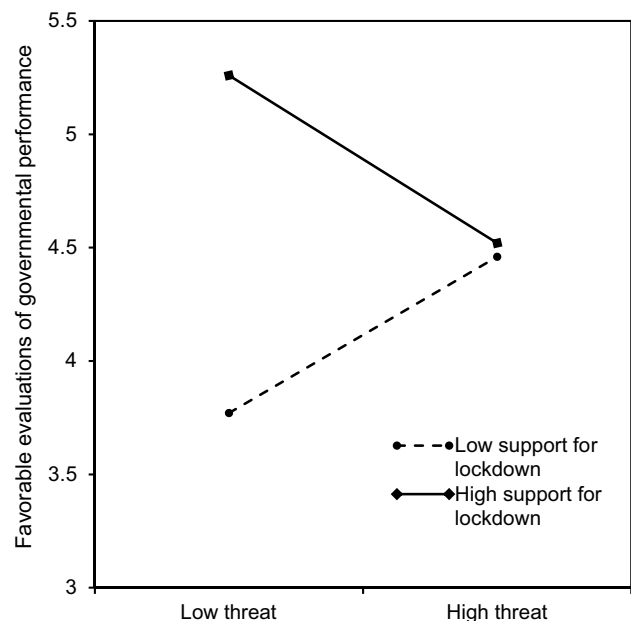


Fig. 2 Interaction effects of threat perception and attitudes toward the lockdown policies on favorable evaluations of governmental performance, $p < .001$

General Discussion

This current research studied individual favorable evaluations of the government's performance during COVID-19. From a social-psychological perspective, we examined the positive effect of outgroups (the US) on Chinese people's favorable evaluation of their country (the ingroup). Specifically, we examined the effects of US criticism of China on Chinese citizens' evaluations of their government. Social identity theory contends that self-concept is socially constructed in groups (Tajfel, 1974, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Group-based identity is a primary determinant of social perceptions and behavior (Ellemers & Haslam, 2012; Zhai, 2017). In intergroup relations, the need for a positive ingroup identity drives individual attitudes toward outgroups and their ingroups (Turner, 1975). Criticism about one's group threatens individual group-based identity which leads to ingroup favoritism. As US politicians took a tough stance on China, the Chinese government employed criticism to strengthen national cohesion in the public.

Favorable evaluations of the government's performance are derived from positive attitudes toward lockdown policies. During uncertainty, individuals are prone to welcome and comply with directive, powerful leadership (Hogg, 2005, 2007; Woods et al., 2020). Therefore, the government tried to stress the necessities and effectiveness of lockdown policies. Even though such policies restrict individual freedoms and liberties, the government persuaded the public to believe that they should comply because only lockdowns can control the spread of the virus. In the official propaganda, the government stressed that other countries implemented lockdown policies, indicating that it was not merely carried out in China. The government also told people that the countries that did not implement this policy suffered a great loss. Implementation of lockdown policies needs individual obedience and respect for the authority. Increasing the public's support for lockdown policies is a way to strengthen the expanded power of the authority. As a result, people became more willing to admit the necessity for this policy, and their support for the lockdown increased. In this situation, those who perceived a low level of threat from outgroups tended to build their favorable evaluations of the government's performance on their positive attitudes toward the lockdown policies rather than outgroup threat.

Conservative ideology is positively associated with favorable evaluations of the government's handling of the pandemic. Previous studies show that conservative ideology is associated with system justification of political authority (Jost et al., 2003, 2008). Conservative people are supportive of the status quo and prefer stability and

tradition. They resist social change and rationalize existing social and economic inequality (Jost & Sidanius, 2004; Napier & Jost, 2008). Our results show that conservatives tended to be supporters of lockdown policies that substantially restricted individual freedoms and liberties. They were also more likely to favorably evaluate the government's performance in handling the pandemic. However, people with liberal ideology took opposite standpoints. In China, the latter was relatively less in number so the authority met less opposition to the lockdown policies and obtained favorable evaluations of the government's performance in response to the COVID-19 crisis.

The ideological divide is an important intervening variable. The effect of threat perception on evaluations of the government's performance varies between conservatives and liberals. High perception of threat increased favorable evaluations of the government's performance by liberals but mitigated their conservative counterpart's evaluations. A high level of the perceived threat of outgroup generated pressure for reinforcing ingroup solidarity (Grieve & Hogg, 1999; Hogg, 2000; Mullin & Hogg, 1998; Reid & Hogg, 2005). Under such circumstances, even liberals tended to increase favorable evaluations of the government's performance. Conservative people are more sensitive to outgroup threats (Jost, 2017; Jost et al., 2003, 2007; van Leeuwen & Park, 2009), and they expect the authority to employ tougher policies to fight them. During COVID-19, the Chinese government's response to the US criticism was not as strong as they expected. Therefore, they withdrew their favorable evaluations of the government's performance when the perception of threat from outgroup was high.

Moreover, the relationship between perceptions of threat and favorable evaluations of the government's performance was moderated by support for lockdown policies. For those who opposed lockdown policies, when the degree of the perceived threat of outgroups was low, they had less favorable evaluations of the government's performance. These people contended the importance of freedoms and questioned the government's stringent measures. However, when the perception of threat was high, their favorable evaluations of the government significantly increased. The perception of threats from outgroups motivated them to adopt more favorable evaluations of the government. In contrast, for those who supported lockdown policies, even if the perception of threat was low, they approved the strict measures and favorably evaluated the government's performance. However, when the perception of a threat was high, their favorable evaluations of governments decreased. One possible explanation is that perceived threat can lead to the approval of strong government action (such as lockdowns); however, if that action is not viewed as being overall strong enough, the threat amplifies the disapproval.

The samples of this study were college students, which was a limitation. Previous studies show that Chinese citizens had a high level of satisfaction with the government's handling of COVID-19 (Wu et al., 2021; Zhai et al., 2022); notably, this tendency did not change across different age groups. Our study's findings concerning perceptions of threat, ideology, attitudes toward lockdown policies, and evaluations of the government's performance should be validated by other segments of the population, such as employees. In future research, nationally representative samples and cross-cultural comparisons are needed to ensure the generality of the results.

Data Availability All data and materials are openly available at <https://osf.io/vbwznz/>

Declarations

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Conflict of Interest The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest.

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