Understanding Who is Blamed for COVID-19: Dynamics of Conspiratorial Beliefs, Blame Attribution, Perceived Economic Threat, and Consumer Ethnocentrism

Abstract

This study investigates individuals' conspiratorial beliefs about China's role in the COVID-19 pandemic and their effects on their attitudes toward China. While many conspiracy theories about China had been propagated on both traditional and social media, little is known about how this affected individuals' views on China's responsibility in the COVID-19 pandemic and the effects of such views. An online survey was conducted with a nationally representative sample of 521 Australian citizens in October 2021. The findings showed that individuals who believed in conspiracy theories regarding China's role in causing the COVID-19 pandemic (a) attributed blame to China, (b) perceived China as an economic threat to Australia, and (c) exhibited stronger preferences for Australian products over Chinese products. This study will contribute to strategic communication scholarship and practice with key insights into how and why specific groups of individuals develop or adopt conspiratorial beliefs during a crisis (147 words).

Keywords: *blame attribution, conspiracy theories, consumer ethnocentrism, COVID-19, crisis*

On February 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced COVID-19 as the official name for the novel coronavirus discovered in Wuhan in 2019 (Bushman, 2022). Despite this announcement, some people still referred to COVID-19 as "the Chinese virus" (Chang, 2020), "the Wuhan virus" (Mangan, 2020), and "kung flu" (Rogers et al., 2020). In times of crisis when people experience negative consequences, people tend to look for causes of the events and attribute responsibility to an entity for causing the events (Coombs, 2007a). The association of COVID-19 with China has affected global publics' perceptions of China. According to a 2020 Pew Research Center survey, negative views of China reached their highest levels in Spain, Germany, Canada, the Netherlands, the United States (U.S.), the United Kingdom, South Korea, Sweden, and Australia (Silver et al., 2020). In Australia, such negative views of China supported the Australian government's call for an inquiry into China's role in the spread of COVID-19 (Hurst, 2020). In addition, more than 7 in 10 people in Australia, South Korea, and Japan considered China to have done a poor job in its response to COVID-19 (Dong, 2021).

There was also a surge of unverified information about China's role in the origins of COVID-19 in Australia. *The Daily Telegraph* in Australia alleged that the evidence at Wuhan's research facilities was destroyed by China (Markson, 2020). *The Sydney Morning Herald* cited a China expert's opinion claiming that "the theory that COVID-19 was accidently leaked from the Wuhan laboratory could not be ruled out" (Galloway & Bagshaw, 2021, para. 36). To date, however, there is no publicly available evidence to verify the above claims about China's role in the cause or spread of COVID-19 (Brennan, 2020). Despite this, conspiracy theories about China's role in the cause and spread of COVID-19 have been circulated since the beginning of the pandemic (see more in Huff, 2020; Wezel et al., 2023; Woodward, 2020)

Until and unless official explanations with sufficient information become available, the aforementioned claims about China's role in COVID-19 may remain *conspiracy theories.* Douglas and Sutton (2008) define conspiracy theories as "attempts to explain the ultimate cause of an event (usually one that is political or social) as a secret plot by a covert alliance of powerful individuals or organizations, rather than an overt activity or natural occurrence" (p. 211). Conspiracy theories are "presently unverified, highly implausible, based on weak to no evidence, and often rely on arguments that are not falsifiable" (Mckernan et al., 2023, p. 1103). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, those who subscribed to conspiracy theories about the pandemic also subscribed to alternative explanations different from the official explanations from authorities like the WHO.

Beliefs in conspiracy theories could cause detrimental effects on individuals' attitudes and behaviors such as refusal to adhere to COVID-19 preventative measures and vaccine hesitancy (e.g., Allington et al., 2021; Freeman et al., 2022; Pummerer et al., 2020; Romer & Jamieson, 2020). When individuals deal with information overload at times of crisis uncertainty such as the COVID-19 pandemic, they tend to experience difficulties in identifying accurate information that, in turn, affects their subsequent behavior (e.g., J.-N. Kim & Gil de Zúñiga, 2021; Nekmat & Kong, 2019). This triggers crises for entities that are blamed for causing the crisis situations.

To date, strategic communication research in the area of crisis communication has focused mainly on how organizations should select crisis-response strategies (e.g., Coombs, 2019) based on the levels of crisis responsibility (e.g., Brown & Ki, 2013) to recover from a crisis. Even though recent strategic communication research in the context of the COVID-19 global pandemic has looked into topics such as the role of government communication (Mazzoni

et al., 2022), publics' compliance and cynicism (Xu et al., 2022), the effects of publics' dangerous world beliefs on COVID -19 preventive behaviors (Yeo et al., 2022) , and CEOs as chief crisis officers (Liu et al., 2022) in the context of the COVID-19 global pandemic, there is still dearth of research that explicates publics' conspiratorial beliefs about the causes and spread of COVID-19 during the crisis. It is only recently that communication scholars have started exploring beliefs in conspiracy theories (i.e., "conspiratorial beliefs" examined in this study) (e.g., Chon et al., 2022; Tam et al., 2021; Wezel et al., 2023). During the pandemic, publics' beliefs in conspiracy theories about the causes and spread of COVID-19 highlight their perceptions of powerful actors and entities who use COVID-19 as a plot for their own gains. Strategic communication scholarship has not yet examined the effects of conspiratorial beliefs about an entity's role in a crisis.

Thus, situating the study in the context of COVID-19, this study is to examine *conspiratorial beliefs* about China's role in the pandemic as an antecedent to the blame attribution, perceived economic threat and consumer ethnocentrism. We propose and test a theoretical framework grounded in the literature on crisis communication (e.g., Brown & Ki, 2013; Coombs, 2007a, 2007b, 2019; Tam et al., 2021) and conspiracy theories within the psychology domain (e.g., Douglas & Sutton, 2011). By explicating individuals' beliefs in and reactions resulting from conspiracy theories in the context of COVID-19 pandemic, this study contributes to strategic communication scholarship and practice with key insights into how and why specific groups of individuals develop and justify competing positions against official accounts during a crisis situation.

Literature Review

Conspiratorial Beliefs During Crises

Much crisis communication literature has dealt with how organizations should choose their crisis responses (Coombs, 2007b) rather than how publics respond to crises. A growing area of strategic communication now tackles rumors (Nekmat & Kong, 2019; Paek & Hove, 2019) which have become more important as we face an infodemic (World Health Organization, 2020) fueled by conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy theories are unique communicative phenomenon. While conspiracy theories have existed for a long time, they are now even more prominent partially due to the increased use of social media (Roulet, 2020). Conspiracy theories are generally known as "unverified and relatively implausible allegation[s] of conspiracy, claiming that significant events are the result of a secret plot carried out by a preternaturally sinister and powerful group of people" (Brotherton & French, 2014, p. 238), or "allegations that powerful people or organizations are plotting together in secret to achieve sinister ends through deception of the public" (Wood & Douglas, 2013, p. 1). When the official accounts of the events appear to look insufficient or inadequate, people turn to conspiracy theories as alternative explanations (Dagnall et al., 2015; Drinkwater et al., 2012; Goreis & Voracek, 2019).

Conspiracy theories often serve as an opposition to the dominant position communicated by the authorities. They offer alternative explanations to those who seek to understand events that are insufficiently explained by mainstream accounts (Hardin, 2002; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). Conspiracy theories allow people to blame the "other" for their predicament (Douglas, 2021). It has been found that beliefs in conspiracy theories can also be explained by individuals' own circumstances; when individuals are disadvantaged in a situation, they may engage in motivated reasoning by using conspiracy theories to explain the situation (Anthony & Moulding, 2019). They then subscribe to the beliefs that there are powerful elites, forces, or entities secretly

plotting the specific event for their own gains, rejecting the official and conventional explanations of the event (Anthony & Moulding, 2019).

Conspiracy theories are different from misinformation and rumors: Not all conspiracy theories are false (unlike misinformation) and they are not used to seek control or closure in uncertain situations (unlike rumors) (M. Kim & Cao, 2016). As scholars noted, "while some conspiracy theories may turn out to be true later, the key element of this understanding is that credible evidence to support the conspiratorial claim is not available to the public or verified by reliable sources at the time (Toepfl et al., 2023, p. 1128). This concept of conspiracy theory should be distinguished from misinformation which is understood as "objectively incorrect information" (Vraga & Bode, 2017, p. 621). Meanwhile disinformation is defined as "misinformation that is spread on purpose and with a malicious intent" (Toepfl et al., 2022, p. 6).

Conspiracy theories thrive in times of crisis when people have to deal with high levels of uncertainty (Douglas, 2021; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). Current literature on psychology has identified factors that cause individuals' beliefs in conspiracy theories (e.g., Lantian et al., 2017; Swami et al., 2016), such as attitudes toward authority (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014), political cynicism (Swami & Furnham, 2012), anomie, distrust in authority, and powerlessness (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Goertzel, 1994; Miller et al., 2016; Swami et al., 2011). People's prejudice against high-power groups is also associated with a general propensity toward conspiracy theories (e.g., Swami et al., 2011; Swami & Coles, 2010), in turn affecting their political behavioral intention to change the status quo (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014).

The study of conspiratorial beliefs in strategic communication research is important because crisis situations are often associated with high levels of uncertainty due to limited information (Y. I. Lee et al., 2021). When there is limited or insufficient information, individuals

tend to draw conclusions about the situation by subscribing to conspiracy theories that are consistent with their pre-existing beliefs (J.-N. Kim & Gil de Zúñiga, 2021). Contemporary crisis communication research has mostly examined the attribution of crisis responsibility based on crisis types (e.g., Cho & Gower, 2006). However, even within a single crisis type, the levels of attribution of crisis responsibility can vary due to the presence and spread of unverified information (Nekmat & Kong, 2019). Yet, how attribution of blame works with conspiratorial beliefs has not been fully investigated yet in current communication literature. Conspiratorial beliefs highlight the attribution of problematic events to powerful groups. This could be caused by the perceptions of power held by certain entities, especially when the entities are perceived to have power *over* others to pursue their self-interest (Berger, 2005). This, in turn, will shape individuals' attitudes and behaviors toward an entity. Based on the above literature review, this study conceptualizes conspiratorial beliefs[1] as *beliefs in conspiracy theories or unverified accounts that provide an alternative explanation to official and conventional explanations of an event*.

Blame Attribution During Crises

Much of the strategic communication research on understanding public response to crises is situated in attribution theory (Coombs, 2007a; Zhou & Ki, 2018). Attribution theory (Weiner, 1985, 2010) posits that people tend to look for the causes of an event when the event is unexpected and negative. However, attribution theory is "concerned with phenomenal causality, rather than seeking the true causes" (Weiner, 2010, p. 558). According to the theory, there are psychologically based antecedents to attribution (Weiner, 2010). Individuals can be biased in their causal reasoning. They tend to believe that they cause their own success, whereas failure is

[1] Scholars use the term conspiratorial beliefs interchangeably with other terms, such as beliefs in conspiracy theories.

due to outside forces. In crisis situations that are unexpected and negative, individuals tend to blame external and situational factors (Weiner, 2010). They, as observers of the event rather than actors of the event, tend to ascribe an action to the dispositions of the involved actor (Weiner, 2010). These dispositions can be the actor's attitudes, intentions, or motivations that may explain the actor's current and future behavior (Bradford & Garrett, 1995). Dispositional bias creates an attribution error (Jones & Nisbett, 1971, as cited in Bradford & Garrett, 1995), underestimating the situational influence on actors' behavior while overestimating the traits or characteristics of such actors (Weiner, 2010). Moreover, incorrect attributions are often affected by incomplete information (Bradford & Garrett, 1995). This misattribution of responsibility may be related to negative dispositions of the actor (Bradford & Garrett, 1995) or organization (Coombs, 2007a). Crisis responsibility is normally assessed based on intentionality (i.e., whether the entities involved intended to cause the crisis) and preventability (i.e., whether the entities involved could have done something to prevent the crisis) (Coombs & Holladay, 1996).

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, there were many unverified claims around China′s role in causing the crisis—many of which have raised doubts about China′s intentionality. Due to the unexpected and negative nature of the pandemic, people were motivated to search for causes and to assess crisis responsibility (Coombs, 2007a; Zhao et al., 2022). When people blame an organization or an entity for causing a crisis, they tend to respond with negative emotions (e.g., anger) and behavioral intentions (e.g., boycott) (Coombs & Holladay, 2005). As there was no sufficient, official information that explicated the circumstances surrounding China (i.e., the involved actor) or its behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic, there were a lot of unverified accounts about China circulated on social and traditional media. Moreover, the lack of explanations by China (i.e., the accused actor), the lack of media

reports about China′s explanations and the lack of scientific consensus on the origin of the virus (Shahsavari et al., 2020) fueled the growth of conspiracy theories.

By subscribing to certain conspiracy theories about COVID-19 and attributing blame to a certain (powerful) entity, individuals can rationalize and justify their attitude and behavior toward the entity. Specifically, believing in unverified claims regarding China′s role in causing the pandemic (Markson, 2020) and concealing the information (N. H. Kim, 2020) made it easy for individuals to attribute blame to China and to justify racism and violence toward Asian people during the pandemic (Findling et al., 2022). Relatedly, individuals who believed in and/or spread conspiracy theories about China's roles during COVID-19 had developed negative attitude toward China (Bushman, 2022; Holt et al., 2022) and anti-Asian xenophobic attitudes (Dhanani & Franz, 2021).

Based on the above literature review, we postulate that individuals who subscribe to conspiracy theories about the role of China in causing and spreading the COVID-19 pandemic also attribute blame to China. These conspiracy theories often over-state the accused actor's (e.g., China) dispositional traits, such as its intentions and motives behind the problematic event, resulting in publics' categorizing the crisis as an *intentional* crisis and attributing a high level of blame. This is an important topic of inquiry for communication scholars because it helps us to connect the dots between individuals' belief systems and attribution processing during crisis. Following this line of thought, the following hypothesis is posited:

H1: During COVID-19, conspiratorial beliefs about China are positively associated with blame attribution towards China.

Perceived Economic Threat and Consumer Ethnocentrism

Due to motivated reasoning, beliefs in conspiracy theories about COVID-19 may allow

individuals to explain the causes of their economic difficulties (e.g., income loss, unemployment, job instability, and economic insecurity) incurred during the pandemic by blaming a specific country (i.e., China) for the negative consequences of the pandemic (e.g., Miller et al., 2016). When cause/crisis responsibility is assigned to a specific entity, it becomes effective for the affected stakeholders to manage future actions (Weiner, 1985). However, because in the case of the pandemic the alleged cause (i.e., China) could not be altered to improve the situation, the country became a target of blame for causing COVID-19.

Those who subscribe to conspiracy theories may also perceive individuals and groups with power to have bad intentions and responsibility for crises in society (Imhoff et al., 2018). Power is a threat cue. In diplomatic relations, when foreign publics consider a counterpart country to possess too much power and to be reluctant to "share" it with other countries for mutual benefit (Tam & Kim, 2020, 2021), they also perceive the country as being an economic threat. Perceived economic threat is defined as the threat that foreign competitors pose to individual consumers or the domestic economy (Sharma et al., 1995). A counterpart-country's economic gains could be perceived as the home-country's economic losses (Burhan & van Leeuwen, 2016).

As a result of the perceived economic threat, some individuals choose not to purchase products from the counterpart country (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011; Fullerton et al., 2007). Shimp and Sharma (1987) conceptualize this phenomenon as consumer ethnocentrism, which explains individuals' attachment to the in-groups (e.g., their home countries) and differentiation from the out-groups (e.g., foreign countries). When consumers "distinguish between products of the in-group (home country) and out-groups (foreign countries)" in their purchase behaviors (Shankarmahesh, 2006, p. 148), they also demonstrate their belief that purchasing foreign-made

products is inappropriate or immoral, and hurts the domestic economy (Sharma et al., 1995). Consumers then try to buy local products or at least avoid the products of the out-group nations.

Considering the negative effects of conspiratorial beliefs about China's role in the COVID-19 pandemic, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2: Conspiratorial beliefs are positively associated with perceived economic threat.

H2-1: Blame attribution mediates the relationship between conspiratorial beliefs and perceived economic threat.

H3: Blame attribution is positively associated with perceived economic threat.

H4: Perceived economic threat is positively associated with consumers' preferences for domestic products over Chinese products (consumer ethnocentrism).

H5: Conspiratorial beliefs are positively associated with consumers' preferences of domestic products over Chinese products (consumer ethnocentrism).

Method

Data Collection

To test the proposed hypotheses, an online survey was conducted using a Qualtrics research panel in October 2021. We selected the country of Australia for the study due to the following reasons: (a) it has a complex trade relationship with China (Heath, 2023) (b) Australians have anxiety about catching COVID-19 from Asians (R. Lee et al., 2021) and have expressed anti-Asian bias (Tan et al., 2021) and (c) there was also a surge of unverified information about China's role in the origins of COVID-19 in Australia (Galloway & Bagshaw, 2021; Markson, 2020) while there is still a lack of research explicating how Australians have developed such views and attitude toward Asians, especially a specific Asian country (i.e., China) during the pandemic.

A total of 521 individuals in Australia responded to the survey. Table 1 provides the breakdown of the sample. Quotas related to age and gender were included to ensure that the sample reflected Australia's population distribution (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016) (Table 1 and 2).

[Insert Table 1, 2]

Survey Procedures

Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with the statements regarding China's role in causing COVID-19 (i.e., blame attribution), to what extent they perceived China as a threat to their home-country's economy (i.e., perceived economic threat), to what extent they believed in the claims associating China with the origins of COVID-19 (i.e., conspiratorial beliefs), and to what extent they preferred domestic products over Chinese products (i.e., consumer ethnocentrism).

Measures

All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale, running from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). All the survey items are shown in Table 3.

Conspiratorial Beliefs. To measure individuals' beliefs in a conspiracy theory regarding China's role in causing COVID-19, 12 measurement items were developed based on literature about conspiracy theories (Douglas & Leite, 2017; Uscinski, 2018; van Prooijen & de Vries, 2016). Extant conspiracy theory literature asked participants to read well-known or common conspiracy theories and to indicate their agreement with each statement (Douglas & Leite, 2017; Romer & Jamieson, 2020; van Prooijen & de Vries, 2016). As such, statements reflecting common conspiracy theories regarding China's role in causing COVID-19 were developed based

on news reports in the Australian print media, including *The Sydney Morning Herald* (Galloway & Bagshaw, 2021) and the *Daily Telegraph* (Markson, 2020).

Blame Attribution. To measure individuals' blame attribution (i.e., the extent to which they attribute blame to China for causing COVID-19), three items were adopted from Brown and Ki (2013).

Perceived Economic Threat. The two items used in Tam and Kim's (2021) measurement of perceived economic threat were used.

Consumer Ethnocentrism. We adapted Tam and Kim's (2021) scales for consumer ethnocentrism.

[Insert Table 3]

Data Analysis

First, Cronbach's alphas for all variables were calculated using IBM SPSS Statistics 27. All variables were greater than .70, with the lowest being .885 and the highest being .949 (Table 3). Bicorrelations were also tested among items (Table 4). As for the measurement items of conspiratorial beliefs, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) were conducted. Third, structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted using IBM SPSS 28 AMOS. For data analysis, maximum likelihood procedures were followed. Expected Maximization imputation was used to treat missing data. In assessing model fit, Hu and Bentler's (1999) joint-criteria were used, whereby the comparative fix index [CFI] > .95, standardized root mean square residual [SRMR] ≤ .10, or root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] ≤ .06;. standardized coefficients are reported.

EFA and CFA Testing

A total of 12 items for conspiratorial beliefs were analyzed using principal components analysis (PCA) using IBM SPSS version 28. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value was .943, exceeding the recommended value of .6 (Kaiser, 1974) and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (Bartlett, 1954) reached statistical significance (χ^2 [*df*]=5493.269[66]), supporting the factorability of the correlation matrix.

PCA revealed the presence of two components with eigen values exceeding 1, explaining 64.272% and 10.940% of the variance respectively. The items under the first factor were individuals' beliefs regarding China's political motives behind the COVID-19 pandemic. The items under the second factor were individuals' beliefs regarding China's communication in reporting or portraying COVID-19 information (see Table 5 for a pattern and structure matrix for PCA with Oblimin Rotation of the two-factor solution for the conspiratorial beliefs items).

Then, CFA using IBM AMOS version 28 was conducted. Based on the above EFA results, the second-order CFA was conducted for factor validity. Four items within the conspiratorial beliefs items were covaried based on the modification index. The model fit was acceptable (χ^2 (49) = 147.031, $p < .001$, CFI = .982, RMSEA =.062, SRMR=.0315).

[Insert Table 5]

Results

Hypotheses Testing

Kline's (1998) two-step process was used for data analysis. The measurement model achieved good fit (χ^2 (196) = 447.575, $p < .001$, CFI = .975, RMSEA =.050, SRMR=.0347). The structural model (see Figure 1) was then tested and was also found to have good fit (χ^2 (198) = 517.391, $p < .001$; CFI = .968, RMSEA =.056, SRMR=.0574). The paths were then analyzed to test the hypotheses. Bootstrapping was performed (number of bootstrap samples = 2000, Bias-

correlated confidence level = 90). Four error terms were covaried within the conspiratorial beliefs items and one error term was covaried within the consumer ethnocentrism items based on the modification index.

Holmbeck's (1997) procedure for testing mediation was used to test a hypothesis positing mediation of blame attribution between conspiratorial beliefs and perceived economic threat (H2-1). The first model (Figure 1), without blame attribution as the mediator, was tested and resulted in good fit ($\chi^2(142) = 314.573$, $p < .001$; CFI = .978, RMSEA = .048, SRMR= .0312). The second model proposing full mediation (Figure 2) was tested and was also found to have good fit ($\chi^2(198) = 470.708$, $p < .001$; CFI = .973, RMSEA = .051, SRMR = .0430). Finally, the third model (Figure 3) containing a partial mediation was tested and was also found to have good model fit ($\chi^2(197) = 447.765$, $p < .001$; CFI = .975, RMSEA = .049, SRMR = .0347). The fit indices for the model in Figure 3 were slightly better than those in Figure 2; therefore, this model was accepted for hypotheses testing.

[Insert Figure 1, 2, and 3]

First, H1 predicted that conspiratorial beliefs in China's role in causing COVID-19 was positively related to attributing blame to China. The predicted relationships between conspiratorial beliefs and blame attribution were identified ($\beta = .834$, $p < .001$). Next, H2 predicted a positive relationship between conspiratorial beliefs and perceived economic threat. The results for H2 showed that when people believe in a conspiracy theory regarding China's role in COVID-19, they perceived China as a threat to their home-country's economy ($\beta = .388$, $p < .001$). In testing H2-1, there was a partial mediation role of blame attribution between conspiratorial beliefs and perceived economic threat. In H3, blame attribution was expected to be positively associated with perceived economic threat. As predicted, when people believed that

China was accountable for COVID-19, they tended to perceive China as an economic threat to their home country. As predicted, H3 was supported (β = .436, $p < .001$). Next, H4 predicted that perceived economic threat would be positively related to consumer ethnocentrism. The results showed that when people perceived China as an economic threat, they were likely to prefer domestic products over Chinese products (consumer ethnocentrism) (β = .158, $p < .05$) (see Figure 4). Finally, H5 predicted a positive association between conspiratorial beliefs and consumer ethnocentrism. The relationship between the two variables was significant (β = .612, $p < .001$).

[Insert Figure 4]

Discussion

This study reflected an audience-oriented approach to crisis communication and management. Scholars in strategic communication need to acknowledge that people who believe in conspiracy theories comprise complex and challenging publics. Understanding publics' cognitive processing is important in times of crises, as it has subsequent affective, attitudinal, or behavioral responses that might affect organizations, stakeholders, and even a broader community involved in a crisis. It is in these challenging times that communication should work toward co-creating meaning. We need to understand the triggers, messaging, channels, and drivers that lead people to believe in conspiracies and identify ways that provide people with information that helps them to allay their concerns. At times of crises when people have negative experiences, people tend to look for causes of the events and attribute responsibility to an entity for causing the events (Coombs, 2007a). At times when there is no sufficient, official information to explain the causes of a crisis, individuals turn to alternative accounts that provide explanations that help them rationalize and decide their next course of action in the context of a

crisis. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many conspiracy theories regarding COVID-19 were spread, many of which associated China with the (intentional) cause of the virus.

Our findings are generative in two ways. First, this study found that conspiratorial beliefs regarding an entity could affect blame attribution, perceived economic threat and consumer ethnocentrism. When people believed in conspiracy theories about China's motives behind the pandemic, they also placed blame on China. This blame resulted in perceptions of China as an economic threat to their home country (Australia) and stronger preferences for domestic products over Chinese products.

Second, our findings point to the need for more research to generate insights into conspiracy believers as a special type of public. Whereas much of the crisis communication literature focuses on organizational responses to crises, conspiracy believers seem to have a much broader sense that powerful people or organizations are plotting together. Communication scholars will need to be able to take a much broader approach to this problem and extend their understanding of public information ecosystems and echo chambers.

Theoretical Implications

At present, there is a lack of empirical study that examines conspiratorial beliefs in strategic communication. Although crisis types have been consistently found as a predecessor of attribution of responsibility (Coombs, 2007a), when there is insufficient information about a crisis, conspiracy theories can become a "cue" to determining crisis responsibility, driving the cognitive process behind the formation of attitudes and behavioral intentions toward an entity involved in the crisis. Based on literature on communication (e.g., Coombs, 2007a; Tam et al., 2021) and psychology (e.g., Douglas & Sutton, 2011), this study provided a theoretical basis that unveils the cognitive mechanisms resulting from conspiratorial beliefs. It also explains how

motivated reasoning comes into play in explaining how individuals subscribe to conspiratorial beliefs to explain a situation (i.e., blame attribution on an entity) and justify their attitudes (i.e., perceived economic behavior and, consumer ethnocentrism) in response to the situation. Communication scholars should work to both reflect on the cognitive mechanisms that result from conspiratorial beliefs into their theories and also theorize about ways to make information and decision-making more transparent. Each of these relates back to a more rigorous interrogation of the psychology of how publics form.

While extant strategic communication scholarship in the area of crisis communication and management is mostly organization-oriented in focusing on crisis response strategies (Dhanesh & Sriramesh, 2018), the present study contributes to the audience-oriented approach in crisis communication research (e.g., B. K. Lee, 2004). It advances scholarship in strategic communication by looking into publics' cognitive, affective, attitudinal, or behavioral responses to a crisis (Krishna & Kim, 2022; Lindenmeier et al., 2012) in the context of COVID-19 conspiracy theories. It provides insights into the cognitive mechanisms behind individuals' conspiratorial reasoning, justifying their negative attitudinal and subsequent behavioral reactions. These insights are crucial for extending theory building around publics' behavior.

The spread of conspiracy theories regarding China's role during COVID-19 was a crisis for China. It has also resulted in discrimination against Asian people who also became a target of blame (Douglas, 2021), which has emerged as a significant social issue in several countries, such as the U.S.A (Croucher et al., 2020), and Australia (Leckie, 2022; R. Lee et al., 2021). When individuals decide to subscribe to alternative accounts rather than official accounts about a specific event and when there is a lack of information, their resulting attitudinal and behavioral reactions toward a country involved and the people associated with the country can be difficult to

amend. When individuals consider a country to be over-powering, they will engage in consumer ethnocentric behaviors, including negative word-of-mouth and boycotts against the country (Tam & Kim, 2021). Thus, it is critical to conduct further research on how to prevent and manage the spread of conspiracy theories during a crisis—especially when there is a lack of verified information.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Like all studies, this study has a few limitations. These results are only generalizable to the Australian population. The relationship between Australia and China has been fraught with tension over the last decade and it may not reflect how citizens in other countries view China's handling of COVID-19. Although this study used quota sampling to reflect the general distribution of the Australian population by age and gender, the findings might be limited to Qualtrics' research panels.

Further research is needed to understand whether these hypotheses are supported in other countries. Furthermore, the antecedents to conspiratorial beliefs regarding the role of China in causing the COVID-19 pandemic, such as political orientation or affiliation, and institutional trust (e.g., trust in authorities) were not investigated. Future scholarship may seek to explore the impact of such antecedents on the variables used in this study and their effects on other types of behavioral reactions, such as publics' negatively valanced information behavior.

Conclusion

This study investigated the relationships among individuals' conspiratorial beliefs, blame attribution, perceived economic threat, and consumer ethnocentrism in a representative Australian sample. We found that the role of conspiratorial beliefs in individuals' cognitive processing of who is to blame for a pandemic crisis (i.e., blame attribution), resulting in

negative attitudes (i.e., perceived economic threat and consumer ethnocentrism) toward an entity as a target of blame. Our findings suggest that Australians who believe conspiracy theories about China's role during COVID-19 use those frames to make decisions about other aspects of their relationship with Chinese goods and actions. Attributions of blame are powerful frames and national reputations rise and fall based on the perceptions of publics in other nations. Communication scholars interested in crisis, public diplomacy, and audience formation can build on these findings to further our understanding and strategy to address conspiracy theories.

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Tables

Table 1

Distribution of Sample by Age

Age group	Frequency	Percent
18–24	83	15.9%
25–34	91	17.5%
35–44	92	17.7%
45–54	78	14.9%
55–64	79	15.2%
65 and older	98	18.8%
Total	521	100%

Table 2

Distribution of Sample by Gender

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	248	47.6%
Female	273	52.4%

Table 3

Summary of Measurement Items, Means, Standard Deviations, and Reliability Estimates

Variable (Cronbach's alpha)	Item	Cronbach's alpha if item deleted	Mean	SD
Conspiratorial beliefs (α = .949)	[conspiracy 1] I believe China has released some information about COVID-19 to serve its own interests.	.950	3.78	0.915
	[conspiracy 2] I believe China has concealed some information about COVID-19 to protect its own interests.	.947	3.95	0.979
	[conspiracy 3] I believe the COVID-19 pandemic is a plot created by China.	.946	3.04	1.245
	[conspiracy 4] I believe it serves China's interests for COVID-19 to spread globally.	.943	3.35	1.226
	[conspiracy 5] I believe that China has a hidden agenda on the issue of COVID-19.	.943	3.35	1.184
	[conspiary 6] I believe that China's political interests play a role in the global spread of COVID-19.	.944	3.49	1.127
	[conspiracy 7] I believe that China's political motives contribute to the global spread of COVID-19.	.943	3.43	1.136
	[conspiracy 8] I believe that China has lied about COVID-19.	.943	3.81	1.135
	[conspiracy 9] I believe that China deliberately withholds information about COVID-19.	.945	3.86	1.108
	[conspiracy 10]I believe that experts in China are pressured to portray COVID-19 differently than is actually the case.	.945	3.74	1.081
	[conspiracy 11] I believe that China deliberately presents wrong information about COVID-19 in order to make it spread globally.	.943	3.39	1.191
	[conspiracy 12] I believe COVID-19 is China's attempt to gain more power internationally.	.944	3.39	1.224
Blame attribution (α = .949)	[attribution 1] I believe China should be held accountable for causing COVID-19.	.935	3.68	1.221
	[attribution 2] I believe China should be blamed for the cause of COVID-19.	.919	3.56	1.271
	[attribution 3] I believe China should be accused of causing COVID-19.	.920	3.59	1.267
Perceived economic threat (α = .885)	[threat 1] Some economic problems in Australia since the COVID-19 outbreak were caused by China.	.835	3.61	1.067
	[threat 2] Since the COVID-19 outbreak, the economy in Australia has suffered because of China.	.823	3.57	1.111

	[threat 3] Since the COVID-19 outbreak, China has been a threat to the Australian economy.	.853	3.65	1.091
Consumer ethnocentrism (α = .785)	[ethnocentrism1] Only those products that are unavailable in Australia should be imported from China.	.650	3.52	1.047
	[ethnocentrism 2] We should purchase products manufactured in Australia instead of letting China get rich off us.	.833	3.81	1.053
	[ethnocentrism3] We should buy from China only products that we cannot obtain within our own country.	.623	3.55	1.055

Table 4

Bicorrelations

	Conspiratorial beliefs	Blame attribution	Perceived economic threat	Consumer ethnocentrism
Conspiratorial beliefs	1			
Blame attribution	.742**	1		
Perceived economic threat	.628**	.698**	1	
Consumer ethnocentrism	.376**	.354**	.358**	1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Table 5

Pattern and Structure Matrix with Oblimin Rotation of the Two-Factor Solution for the Conspiratorial Beliefs Items

Item	Pattern coefficients		Structure coefficients		Communalities
	Component 1	Component 2	Component 1	Component 2	
Conspiracy 3	**.961**		**.861**	.482	.755
Conspiracy 12	**.882**		**.873**	.567	.761
Conspiracy 5	**.847**		**.872**	.595	.761
Conspiracy 6	**.846**		**.861**	.581	.742
Conspiracy 4	**.817**		**.865**	.611	.751
Conspiracy 7	**.0796**		**.875**	.645	.774
Conspiracy 11	**.788**		**.862**	.632	.750
Conspiracy 2		**.941**	.543	**.890**	.795
Conspiracy 9		**.864**	.630	**.904**	.819
Conspiracy 10		**.798**	.624	**.863**	.749
Conspiracy 1		**.784**	.461	**.748**	.561
Conspiracy 8		**.757**	.694	**.886**	.806

Figures

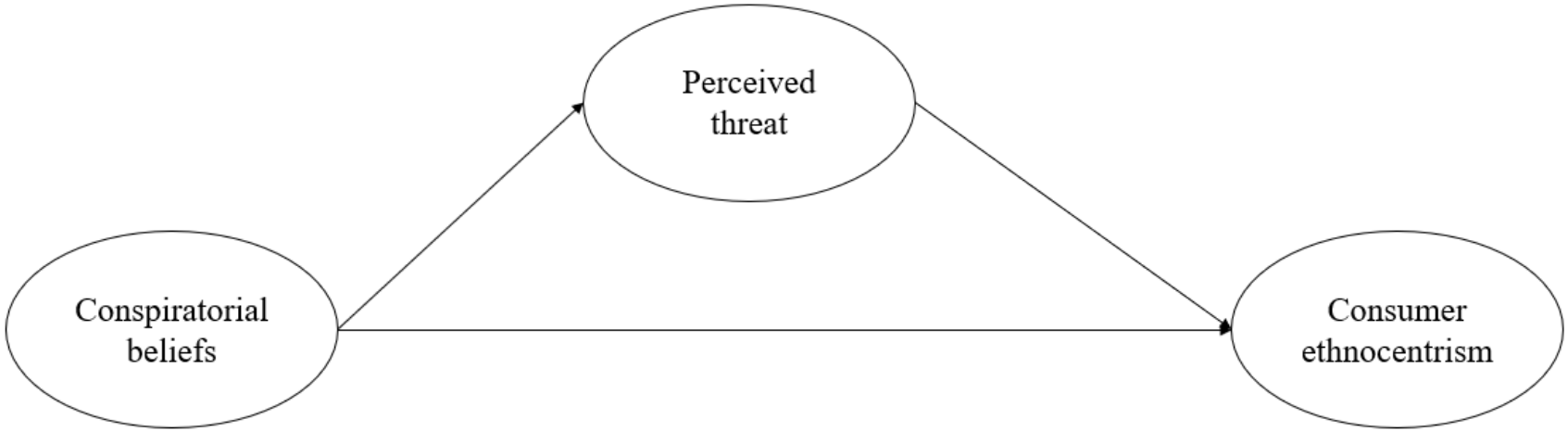

Figure 1

Model with No Mediator

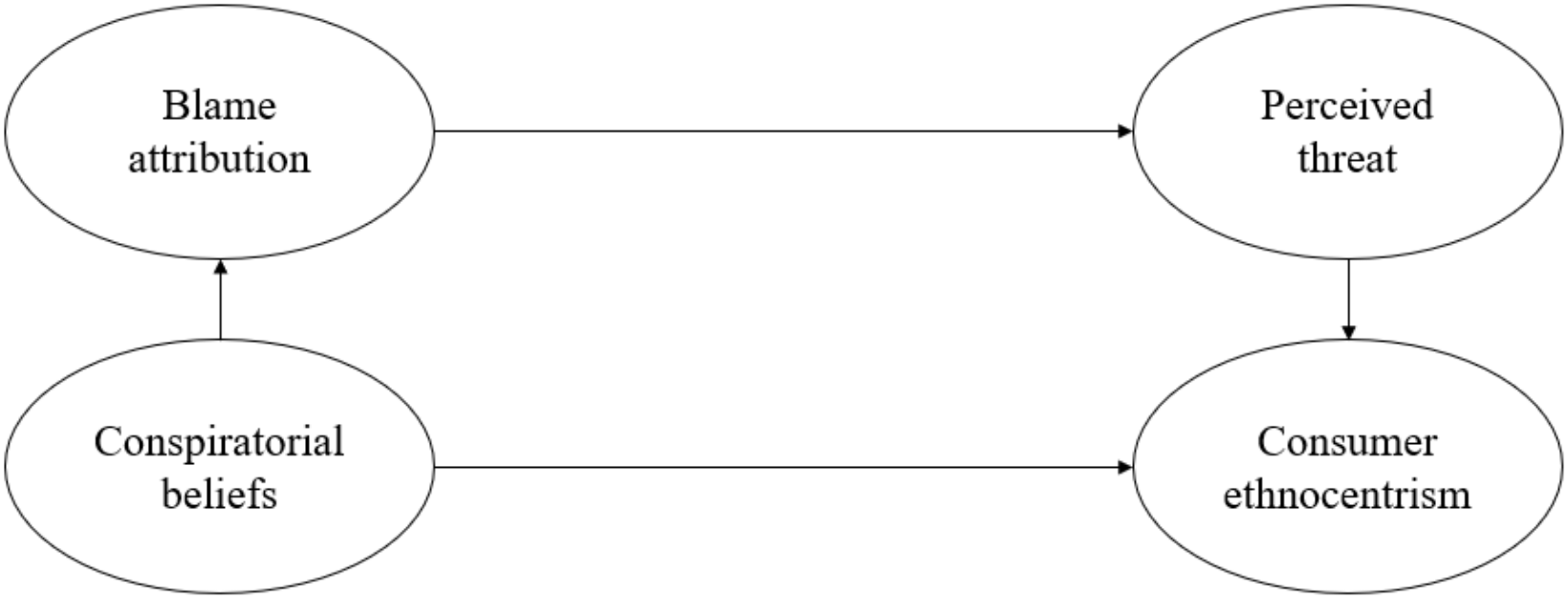

Figure 2

Model with Full Mediation

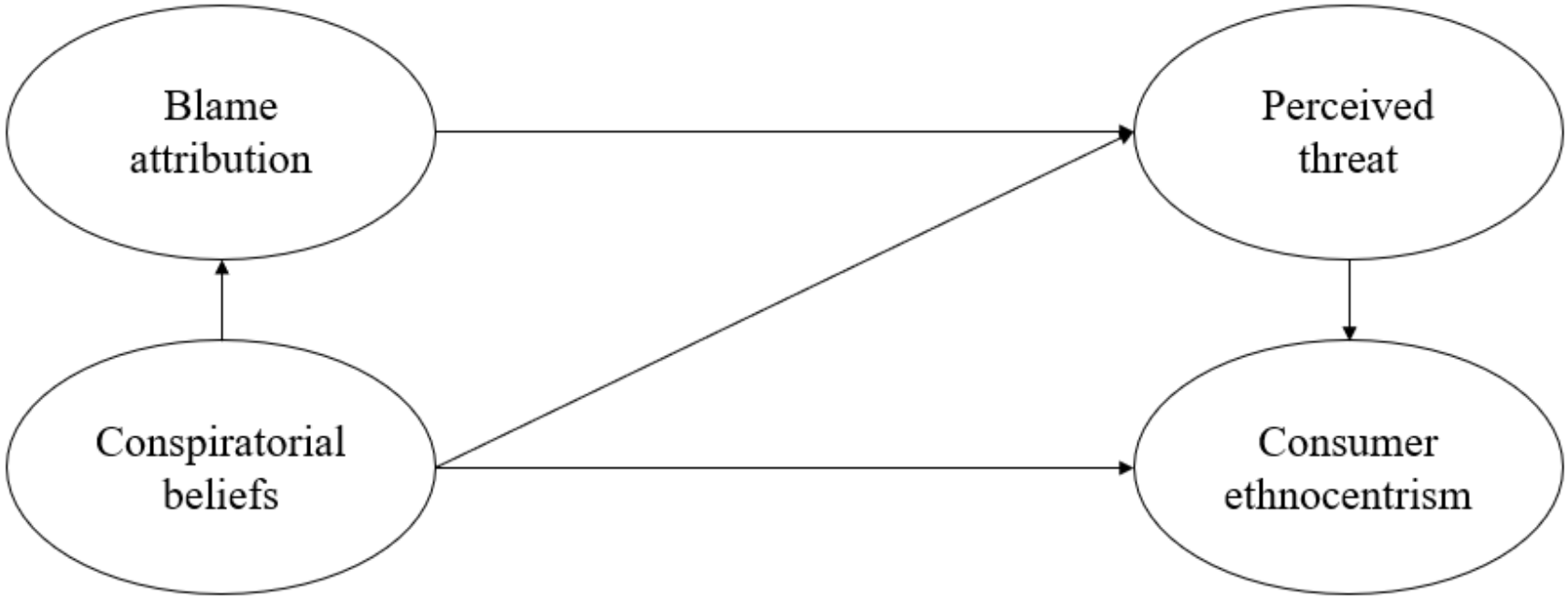

Figure 3

Model with Partial Mediation

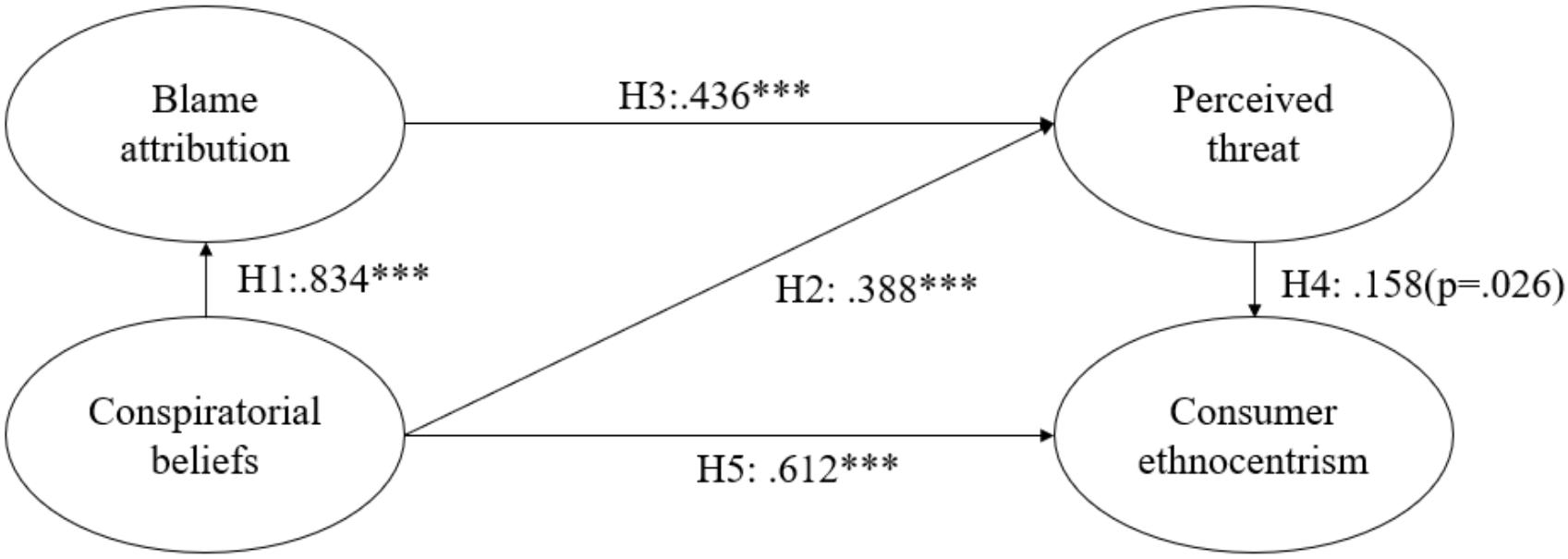

Figure 4

Results of Hypothesis Testing