

# American identity and the symbolic threat of COVID-19 as determinants of attitudes toward the U.S., China and Chinese people

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## Background

**COVID-19 Background:**  
The outbreak of the COVID-19 was first reported in Wuhan, China in December of 2019. The subsequent spread of coronavirus around the globe has negatively affected the lives of millions of people around the globe.

### Symbolic Threat & COVID-19:

- Symbolic Threat: a threat to their values and/or way of life
- COVID-19 pandemic might be appraised as a symbolic threat (e.g., freedom of mobility, reduced socialization, etc.)

### Threat and Sentiments toward one's Ingroup and Relevant Outgroups

- Intergroup Threat Theory → the consequences of ingroup perception of symbolic threats would induce prejudice against the outgroup associated with the threat (Stephan, Ybarra, & Morrison, 2009)
- Wohl, Branscombe & Reysen (2010) → increase the likelihood that people feel the need to protect their ingroup
- Perceiving COVID-19 as a symbolic threat → the denigration of relevant outgroups that are perceived to be responsible for the threat as well as increase the likelihood that people feel the need to protect their ingroup

### American Identification as a Moderator of Symbolic Threat and Intergroup Attitudes

- Highly identified group members tend to perceived higher symbolic threat and exhibit more negative sentiments toward outgroups associated with threat (Morrison et al., 2010).
- ID as an American likely moderates that the relationship between symbolic threat and intergroup attitudes

### Current Study:

In my study, I examined if identifying as American moderated the relationship between perceiving COVID-19 as a symbolic threat and relevant intergroup attitudes (blamed China and the U.S. for the pandemic, and prejudice toward Chinese people). Specifically, people who identify with their ingroup → more sensitive to potential threats to their group → more like to think in ways that protect their groups interests (e.g., not blame the U.S. government) and denigrate relevant threatening outgroups.

## Hypotheses

Based on the previous literatures I proposed the following predictions:

- 1 The more that Americans perceived COVID-19 as a symbolic threat, the more likely they would be to show blame attribution toward China for the responsibility of the pandemic outbreak and express prejudice toward Chinese people.
- 2 There would be a negative relationship between Americans perceived COVID-19 as a symbolic threat and the Americans' expression of blame attribution toward U.S. federal government for the responsibility of pandemic outbreak.
- 3 Both of these relationships should be moderated by group identification, such that highly identified Americans who perceived COVID-19 as a symbolic threat, should exhibit greater prejudice and blame toward China and Chinese for the COVID-19 outbreak, instead of expressing blame attribution toward U.S. federal government, relative to the Americans who are low in national identification.

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## Method

### Participants & Procedure

Our sample consisted of seven hundred non-ethnically Chinese Americans ( $Mage = 39.12$ ,  $SD = 11.57$ ) residing in the United States.



- Participants completed an online survey and were paid \$1 US.
- Participants were first asked a series of demographic questions (e.g., age, household income, gender, medical insurance coverage).
- Participants then completed measures of identification as an American, the degree to which they appraised COVID-19 as a symbolic threat, the degree to which they blamed China for the pandemic, the degree to which they blamed the U.S. federal government and prejudice toward Chinese people.

### Measures & Sample Items

<b>Identification as an American</b> Roccas, Klar and Liviatan's (2006) The scales ranged from 1 ( <i>strongly disagree</i> ) to 7 ( <i>strongly agree</i> )	- 16 items - E.g., Other nations can learn a lot from us
<b>COVID-19 symbolic threat</b> Kachanoff et al.'s (2020) Response options ranged from 1 ( <i>not a threat</i> ) to 4 ( <i>major threat</i> )	- 5 items - E.g., The Coronavirus outbreak is a threat to the rights and freedoms of the U.S. population as a whole
<b>Blame toward China</b> The response scale ranged from 1 ( <i>strongly disagree</i> ) to 7 ( <i>strongly agree</i> )	- Single item - E.g., The Chinese government's handling of the COVID-19 outbreak is to blame for the spread of the virus in the United States
<b>Blame toward the U.S. government</b> The response scale ranged from 1 ( <i>strongly disagree</i> ) to 7 ( <i>strongly agree</i> )	- Single item - E.g., The U.S. federal government's handling of the COVID-19 outbreak is to blame for the spread of the virus in the United States
<b>Prejudice toward Chinese people</b> Martini et al. (2016) The response scale ranged from 1 ( <i>strongly disagree</i> ) to 7 ( <i>strongly agree</i> )	- 6 items - E.g., Most Chinese people living here who receive support from welfare could get along without if they tried

## Discussion

Corresponding with my predictions I found that highly identified American who perceived COVID-19 as a symbolic threat, was associated with significantly higher levels of prejudice and blame toward China and Chinese, and lower level of blame U.S. federal government for the outbreak.

These results are consistent with intergroup attitudes more broadly in that the psychological connection to ingroup (identification) as well as perception of monumental events (threats) are determinants of how we feel about relevant outgroups (Stephan, Ybarra, & Morrison, 2009).

Take together my findings suggest that future research examining prejudice and blame toward China and Chinese to situations in COVID-19 pandemic would be wise to take into account people's symbolic threat perceived and national identification.

## Limitation

- Measure of identification as an American only assess glorification and attachment to the U.S → difficult to know whether they would respond the same way if they had been asked other dimensions of ingroup identification.
- Future studies: include more modes of ingroup identification to verify its moderating role in symbolic threat perceived from COVID-19 and negative sentiments toward outgroups associated with the threats.

## Future Research

- Compared with democrats, republicans showed more negative views toward China in terms of the COVID-19 outbreak (Devlin et al., 2020)
- Political orientation as a moderator → politically conservative and high-RWA religious Americans perceived higher symbolic threat from atheists and exhibited greater negative sentiments toward them (Simpson et al., 2017).
- Future studies could target research on how the political orientation moderates the effect on symbolic threat perceived from COVID-19 and outgroup prejudice induced.

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## Results

### Correlational Analysis

#### Hypothesis 1:

- A statistically significant relationship: Americans who perceived COVID-19 as a symbolic threat did express blame toward China for the outbreak and prejudice toward Chinese people.
- The more Americans perceived COVID-19 as a threat, the more that they express blame toward China for the outbreak ( $r = .45$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and prejudice toward Chinese people ( $r = .44$ ,  $p < .01$ ) (see Table 1).

#### Hypothesis 2:

- A statistically significant relationship: Americans perceived COVID-19 as a symbolic threat was negatively associated with Americans' blame for the outbreak toward U.S. federal government.
- The more American perceived COVID-19 as a symbolic threat, the less that they express blame toward the U.S. federal government for the outbreak of COVID-19 ( $r = -.37$ ,  $p < .01$ ) (see Table 1).

Table 1. Intercorrelations, Means and Standard Deviations for Measures ( $N = 700$ )

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Symbolic threat	-								
2. Identification as an American	.44**	-							
3. Blame China	.45**	.54**	-						
4. Blame U.S.	-.37**	-.46**	-.41**	-					
5. Prejudice toward Chinese people	.44**	.52**	.47**	-.31**	-				
6. Age	.09*	.17**	.08*	-.20**	-.02	-			
7. Income	.03	.10**	.04	-.01	-.06	.03	-		
8. Gender	-.04	-.03	-.04	.003	-.08*	.13**	-.03	-	
9. Medical Insurance Coverage	.05	-.08*	-.05	.00	.03	-.06	-.21**	.00	-
Mean	2.15	4.28	4.15	4.98	2.03	39.12	2.91	1.45	1.18
SD	.89	1.46	2.10	2.00	.93	11.57	1.40	.50	.38

Note: Household income coded 1 = < \$25,000; 2 = \$25,000 to \$49,999; 3 = \$50,000 to \$74,999; 4 = \$75,000 to \$99,999; 5 = \$100,000 to \$149,999; 6 = \$150,000 to \$199,999; 7 = \$200,000 to \$249,999; 8 = \$250,000. Gender type was coded as: 1 = man, 2 = other gender. Medical Insurance Coverage coded 1 = Yes; 2 = No.

### Multiple Regression Analysis

#### Hypothesis 3:

- To test my moderation hypothesis, I conducted a multiple regression analysis to examine whether there was a significant interaction between national identification and American perceived COVID-19 as a symbolic threat.
- Blame toward China, blame toward the U.S. federal government, and the prejudice toward Chinese people as outcomes and the independent variables were national identification (centered) and symbolic threat that Americans perceived from COVID-19. In my analysis, I also controlled for age, income, gender, and the medical insurance coverage.
- I found significant interactions between national identification and symbolic threat on blame toward China ( $\beta = -.10$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and blame toward U.S. federal government ( $\beta = .12$ ,  $p < .05$ ).
- Individuals who identified highly with being American expressed significantly more blame toward China, less blame toward U.S. federal government, when they perceived COVID-19 as a symbolic threat. National identification and symbolic threat was significantly positively associated with prejudice toward Chinese, but there is no significant interaction between national identification and symbolic threat in this model (see Figures 1, 2, and 3).

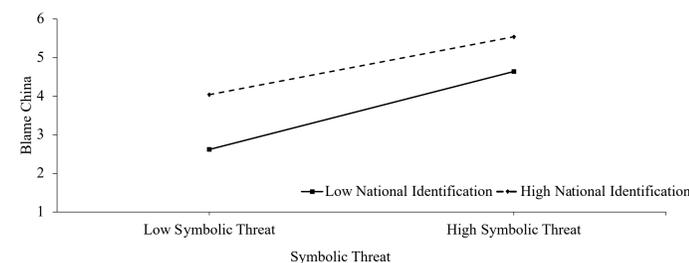


Figure 1. The effect of symbolic threat and national identification on blame toward China.

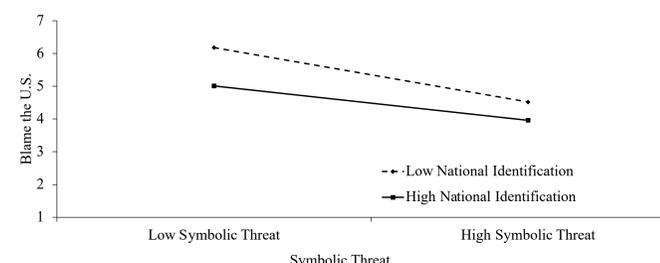


Figure 2. The effect of symbolic threat and national identification on blaming the U.S.

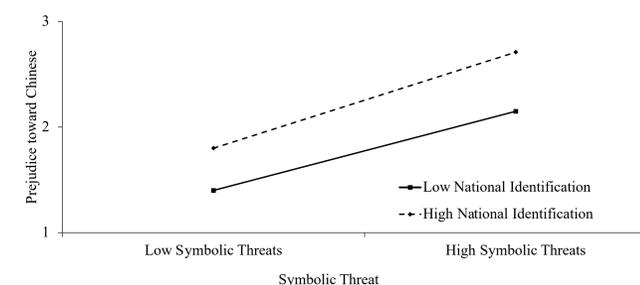


Figure 3. The effect of symbolic threat and national identification on prejudice toward Chinese.