Anger Yes, Boycott No:
Third-Person Effects and the China–U.S. Trade War

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The study examines the perceptual and behavioral effects of news about the ongoing China–U.S. trade war. Results of a survey of 1,047 respondents sampled in China showed that they believed news about the trade war would impact others more than themselves. Moreover, exposure to the news on social media was found to be a stronger correlate of perceived effects of such news on oneself and on others than exposure to traditional media. Other factors that accounted for the perceived effects on oneself and others included nationalism and negative emotions. That is, the higher the nationalist sentiments, the less perceived effects of the news on oneself and on others; however, the more the respondents felt outraged and upset by such news, the more they viewed themselves and other Chinese like them as being influenced by the news. Finally, perceived effects of the trade war news on oneself turned out to be a significant but negative predictor of support for the Chinese government trade policy response and likelihood of boycotting of U.S. goods.

Keywords: China–U.S. trade war, third-person effect, nationalism, negative emotions, and boycott

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A war of tariffs broke out in 2018 between the United States and China, ushering in an era of economic conflict between the world's two trading giants. The Trump administration accused China of "ripping off" the United States in its trade practices and imposed sanctions on billions of dollars of imported Chinese goods, whereas China charged America with engaging in protectionism and responded with counter measures. The China–U.S. trade war continues even after Trump left office in January 2020. President Biden has pledged to work with allies to stop China's "economic abuses."

Given that the U.S. relationship is the most important bilateral relationship for China, the escalating trade war with the United States were covered extensively in the official news media, which dominate China's media landscape. Engaged in aggressive anti-U.S. rhetoric, the Chinese news media were found to focus the coverage of the trade war on the conflict theme (Ha et al., 2020). Also, the Chinese media took their rhetoric online. The state TV distributed its coverage and editorials to Weibo, and the *People's Daily* also posted its reports on the leading social media platforms, on which more Chinese rely to stay informed about the escalating trade war. These posts went viral, heating up nationalist rhetoric on social media (Shepherd, 2019).

Against this backdrop, it is intriguing to examine how the Chinese public attributed the influences of news about the trade war and whether their appraisals about the impact of such news would affect their support for the Chinese government's retaliatory measures. Drawing on the robust third-person effects theory (Davison, 1983), which states that people tend to overestimate media influence on others and underestimate media influence on themselves, this study aimed to investigate how news about the trade war affected Chinese citizens' perceptions about the impact of such news and the consequences of their perceptions for their behavioral responses.

The third-person effect fits the examination of the influence of the trade war news on Chinese citizens for two reasons: First, biased perceptions of media messages are observed to be a robust phenomenon (Perloff, 1993). Second, such cognitive biases are particularly strong in evaluating media messages that are considered negative or undesirable, including political news that has far-reaching social impact (Wei, Lo, & Lu, 2010), news about controversial products (David, Liu, & Myser, 2004), and news about social incidents (Tsfati & Cohen, 2004). In the context of an epic trade war between the world's largest and second largest economies, we anticipated the trade war news to have socially undesirable effect among the Chinese. Though past research documented the pervasive cognitive bias, few studies have addressed such bias from the perspective of the public's vulnerability to media influence, as well as how such perceptions lead to actions to limit that influence to protect one's interest.

Further, this study explored the role of exposure to the news on social media as an antecedent of perceptual effects of the trade-war news. Social media were found to produce greater third-person perceptual gaps than traditional media (Tsay-Vogel, 2016). Social media here refer to Weibo and WeChat, the two most popular social media platforms in China. The number of their active users topped 573 million and 1.2 billion, respectively (Monteiro & Martin, 2022; Weibo Corporation, 2021). Together, a total of nearly two billion registered users routinely use China's social media for news and information. The mere reach and scale of social media sites make them potential sources of social impact. With regard to traditional media, we focused on newspapers and television because they enjoy higher status and influence in China

than do other traditional media outlets (Zhou & Lu, 2017). The theoretical expectation is that attributes of social media would increase the magnitude of an individual's perceptual bias, because social media allow users to exhibit greater control over exposure, seeking, and sharing of information than traditional media. Set in the context of the trade war, we aimed to contribute to the literature by comparing the presumed effects of such news on social media versus traditional media.

The tariff war with its largest trading partner reflects former U.S. president Trump's America First agenda. But from China's perspective, the unprecedented trade war seems to be a new chapter of victimizing China, renewing China's grievances against the West. Levying of higher tariffs on products made in China has boosted popular nationalist feelings among the Chinese. Accordingly, we also explore the role of nationalism and emotions as affective mechanisms concerning the perceptions of the trade war news and behavioral responses trigged by the perceptions. Findings will contribute to the literature in terms of identifying and validating affective mechanisms as antecedents in impacting the relationships between biased perceptions and behavior.

Context of Study: The China–U.S. Trade War

Soon after Trump became the president in 2016, he took steps to implement his American First agenda. With a huge trade imbalance in its favor, China was considered the biggest target for causing the trade imbalance between the two countries. The United States exported US$169.8 billion worth of goods to China, comprising 8% of its total exports, whereas China exported US$478.8 billion to the United States, accounting for roughly 20% of China's total exports (CNBC, 2019). To reduce the huge trade deficits from China, Trump launched a trade war in March 2018 by imposing 25% tariffs on steel imports and 10% on aluminum from all nations. To retaliate, on April 2, 2018, China imposed tariffs of up to 25% on a total of 128 products, including Boeing aircraft and soybeans (Reuters, 2020).

Since then, the war of retaliatory tariffs between the world's two largest economies has escalated. In August 2018, the United States released a list of US$16 billion of Chinese goods to be taxed by 25%. China hit back with 25% duties on the same amount of goods. In September 2018, the 10% tariffs on US$200 billion of Chinese imports kicked in. The Trump administration threatened an increase to 25% starting on January 1, 2019. In response, China announced it would raise tariffs on $60 billion of U.S. goods (Reuters, 2020).

Recent studies examining news coverage of the trade war revealed a major theme—the negative consequences and damages of the conflict on both the Chinese and American people. These reports framed the United States as an instigator and aggressor of the conflict, and China as the victim of the trade war. In addition, the coverage of the conflict emphasized the value of mutual cooperation and advocated for peaceful solutions, which reflected "pragmatic nationalism" endorsed by the Chinese government (Ha et al., 2020; Zeng & Sparks, 2020).

Third-Person Effect and Hypotheses

In estimating the influence of media messages, especially those considered undesirable, there is a widely acknowledged tendency that people believe the message will affect others more than themselves (Davison, 1983). The phenomenon of people's biased perception of greater impact of media messages (e.g., news) on others than on themselves has been well documented in various contexts, including defamatory news, product recalls news, and news concerning controversial political issues (Sun, Pan, & Shen, 2008).

Furthermore, perceived message desirability has been found to be negatively associated with the likelihood and magnitude of self-biased perceptions (Wei et al., 2010). Specifically, individuals are more likely to believe that others are more affected by media messages than are themselves when judging the effects of undesirable messages (e.g., controversial or crises) in the media, such as news about Y2K (Tewksbury, Moy, & Weis, 2004) and melamine-tainted dairy product recalls (Wei et al., 2010). The Chinese official media covered the trade war with the United States as a conflict between the two countries (Ha et al., 2020) with a nationalist tone. Headlines and reports on the *People's Daily* included "Trade War With China Could Backfire Bigly" (Stone, 2018) and "China Fears No Trade War" (People's Daily Online, 2018). News reports about the trade war in Global Times, an official media outlet, were critical of the United States and positive about China, which was seen as confident in its ability to win the war (Zeng & Sparks, 2020). In addition, the study showed that more than 30% of articles were devoted to the trade war and its impacts on the American and Chinese people. Thus, news about the tariff war was undesirable for the Chinese public because it would mean limitations on or higher prices for imported American goods. We expected perceptual bias (i.e., others as more vulnerable than oneself) to be found in appraising the impact of news about the trade war.

H1:   *Respondents in China will perceive news about the trade war to have a greater influence on others than on themselves.*

Media Use and Third-Person Effects

Media use has been identified as an antecedent that enhances the third-person effects in appraising the influences of media messages (McLeod, Eveland, & Nathanson, 1997). That is, the more use of the media, the more that people are likely to view media messages as having a greater influence on others than on themselves.

Research on contemporary China's media system (Wang & Kobayashi, 2021) has revealed differences between traditional media and social media, including level of control by the government, their pattern of information distribution, and their impact on public perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. Traditional media remain under strict control by the authorities with the aim of conveying a positive image of the government and the state (Zhang & Guo, 2021). In contrast, social media are relatively less censored and operate in an open digital environment. Sensitive posts, diverse opinions, and critical views have found their ways in decentralized social media sites (Wang & Kobayashi, 2021). That is, the Chinese government allows unofficial voices (i.e., expressions of emotions and grievances) on social media as long as the content does not threaten the rule of central government (Zhang & Guo, 2021).

To fit into the emerging trends of digitalization and interactivity, traditional media has adopted communication strategies (i.e., less official format, diverse topics, and more entertainment-oriented content) to increase public interest and engagement (Zhang & Xu, 2022). However, these efforts failed to transform its nature of top-down, centralized, and hierarchical culture in news production and information distribution (Luo, 2014). By comparison, the social media on decentralized networks with interactive features provides the public with egalitarian access to diverse opinions, ranging from mainstream to alternative (Ceron, 2015). Social media also allows users to participate in information production and distribution as creators of original content and sharers of existing opinions (Shao & Wang, 2017).

The interactive opportunity of decentralized social media sites combined with a less-censored information environment has greatly increased people's reliance on social media, especially for controversial and sensitive social issues (Luo, 2014). For instance, Li and Guo (2018) found exposure to news about the South China Sea was greater in new media (e.g., news websites and social media) than in traditional media (e.g., newspapers and television) among surveyed Chinese. Implicitly, there should be no exception on the issue of the China–U.S. trade war (Huang & Wang, 2021).

According to the media dependence theory (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976), the more that people depend on the media for information, the more likely they are to be impacted by the media. Thus, media exposure and source reliance serve as the important determinants of perceived effects as people cultivate their perceptions based on media coverage, especially regarding unobtrusive issues that are beyond the first-hand experience of and direct observation by the average person (Li & Guo, 2018). That is, if the public relied more on social media to obtain information about the trade war, their exposure to social media might become a stronger predictor of perceived media effects than would exposure to traditional media. Accordingly,

H2a: *Exposure to news about the trade war on social media will have a stronger positive association with perceived effects of such news on oneself than will exposure to the news on traditional media.*

H2b: *Exposure to news about the trade war on social media will have a stronger positive association with perceived effects of such news on others than will exposure to the news on traditional media.*

Nationalism and Emotions as Affective Mechanisms of Third-Person Effects

A number of factors were identified as mechanisms that affect the third-person effect (Tsfati, 2011). However, those mechanisms are primarily cognitive in nature, such as efficacy, elaboration, perceived issue importance, and need of orientation (Wei, Lo, & Zhu, 2019). Few studies have examined the role of affective mechanisms in influencing the perceptual component of the third-person effects. In the present study, we focus on two such factors that may mitigate or enhance the perceived effects on news about the trade war: nationalism and negative emotions.

First, nationalism refers to one's belief that one's country is better than others (Kecmanovic, 1996). Developed in a historical moment, this belief in the superiority of one's nation is subject to constant modifications. As Anderson (1983) argued:

My point of departure is that nationality, or, as one might prefer to put it in view of that word's multiple significations, nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind. To understand them properly we need to consider carefully how they have come into historical being, in what ways their meanings have changed over time, and why, today, they command such profound emotional legitimacy . . . once created, they became "modular," capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations. (p. 4)

Nationalism has never been a static concept in China. It is multifaced. Some nationalistic sentiments are created by state-owned media based on international relations, geopolitics, global health, propaganda needs, and government policies (Zhang, 2020). These can be called "state-led nationalism." For example, the COVID-19 pandemic has been employed by the Chinese government's vaccine diplomacy in promoting nationalism (Zhang & Jamali, 2022).

Triggered by social media with netizens, others can be called "popular nationalism" or "grass-roots nationalism" beyond the state's control (Zhang, Liu, & Wen, 2018). Both types of nationalism exist in China, engendering a variety of emotions involving national pride and hatred toward rival nations. In the era of the Internet, digital nationalism thrives in China and has become "a driving force for the promotion and spreading of more visible and exclusive forms of nationalism" (Zhang & Xu, 2022, p. 5). Li (2019) showed how Chinese established their national identity through self-categorization and the formation of corresponding groups, particularly in the course of collective action of Chinese cyber-nationalism.

Digital nationalism is particularly pronounced in times of conflict with other countries. The social media serve as a virtual space for people to materialize an imagined community. As Zhang (2020) put it, it "enables netizens to create and express a shared belonging and identity, and finally trigger people's willingness to spread a sense of nationalism online" (p. 15).

Thus, we anticipated that nationalism, which is sanctioned by the Chinese government and mobilized by the Chinese media in its coverage of the trade war, would mitigate the perceptual effects of trade war news because the heightened sense of nationalism at the collective level would serve as a shared identity in times of a major conflict with the United States. It is logical that the sense of "us versus them" in the trade war would inflate the confidence in believing that oneself and the Chinese people like them were better than Americans, and hence they and their fellow countrymen were invulnerable to the trade war news. With nationalism running high, the Chinese people will be motivated to preserve pride by thinking of themselves and other Chinese as less vulnerable to the influence of such news. That is, the stronger the nationalist feelings, the less they would acknowledge being influenced by the news.

H3:   *Nationalism will be significantly but negatively related to perceived effects of news about the trade war on oneself and others.*

Second, emotions affect an individual's information processing strategies. Jasper (1998) argued that affective and reactive emotions accompany all kinds of social action. Such emotions reacting to

information do not render protesters irrational but motivate them. Furthermore, Dillard and Nabi (2006) found that emotions can either enhance or inhibit the persuasive effectiveness of media messages, depending on individuals' cognitive levels. Past research (Nabi, 2003) also suggests that negative emotions such as anger and fear tend to affect information processing, message acceptance or rejection, and information recall.

According to the theory of affective intelligence (Marcus, 2013), negative emotions such as anger, disgust, contempt, and hatred may impel individuals to rely on previously learned routines to manage these situations. MacKuen, Wolak, Keele, and Marcus (2010) reported that people with negative emotions tend to ignore uncomfortable information or bolster their own views by seeking conforming information. Therefore, negative emotions function as an affective mechanism in assessing media's effects on cognition and behavior.

Also, Jasper (1998) suggested that people's emotional reactions to social action are affected by transitory, context-specific emotions, usually reactions to information and events. In the context of the trade war, we expected that negative emotions elicited by news about the trade war would likely motivate Chinese people to think about the influence of such news and to process it deeply, resulting in greater perceived effects of such news on themselves and other Chinese.

H4:   *Negative emotions elicited by news about the trade war will be significantly and positively related to perceived effects of such news on oneself and others.*

Perceived Effects and Behavioral Responses

People's biased perceptions of others as being more vulnerable to media influences have consequences for triggering their behavioral responses (Perloff, 1999). The induced actions include support for restrictions of undesirable media content to protect the proverbial vulnerable others or change in public policies (Sun et al., 2008). Many of the past studies that examined the behavioral component of the third-person effect used third-person perception as a predictor of support for media restriction (Gunther, 1995) and protective actions (Tewksbury et al., 2004). However, Lo and Wei (2002) argued that third-person perception is not a reliable predictor of support for media restriction and other restrictive actions because it does not distinguish between those who perceived media content to have a greater influence on themselves and others and those who perceived media content to have a low influence on themselves and others. As Neuwirth and Frederick (2002) pointed out, a major problem in using third-person perception as a predictor of remedial behavior is that it focuses on the differences between perceived effects on self and on others and ignores situations, in which the self and others may be jointly influenced. Empirically, previous research (Wei et al., 2010) found that perceived effects on self and perceived effects on others were more reliable predictors of support for restrictive actions than third-person perception. Therefore, this study did not use third-person perception as a predictor of behavioral responses triggered by perceived effects of news about the trade war.

Furthermore, past research (Wei et al., 2010) on the third-person effects of public health news and news about tainted product recalls shows that perceived effects of the news on oneself is consistently a

significant predictor of protective behavior such as seeking vaccination or avoiding tainted foods. Based on the findings of previous research, it is expected that the perceived influence of the trade war news on oneself would be a stronger predictor of behavioral responses than would the perceived influence on others. In addition, considering that the trade war hurts consumers in both countries, it would be counter to the interests of respondents in China to support retaliatory responses to escalate the war. Therefore, their behavioral responses induced by perceived effects of the news on themselves would likely be self-protective. The last two hypotheses are stated.

H5:   *Perceived effects on oneself will be more strongly and negatively associated with support for the government's trade policy responses than will perceived effects on others.*

H6:   *Perceived effects on oneself will be more strongly and negatively associated with the likelihood of boycotting U.S. products than will the perceived effects on others.*

The Structural Equation Model

Finally, to explore the process in which nationalism, media exposure, emotions, and perceived effects impact the Chinese public's behavioral responses, a conceptual model that integrates the linkages among nationalism, media exposure, negative emotions, perceived effects of news about the trade war, support for the government's trade policy, and likelihood of boycotting U.S. products is proposed. As Figure 1 shows, nationalism leads to exposure to news about the trade war, which elicits negative emotions, then leads to perceived effects on oneself, which in turn motivates respondents to support government trade policy responses or intention to boycott American products. Based on the model, we raised a research question:

RQ1:   *What are the direct and indirect effects of nationalism, news exposure, negative emotions, and perceived effects of news about the trade war on predicting support for the Chinese government's trade policy and likelihood of boycotting American products?*

Method

Data for this study were collected by Sojump, a leading professional online survey platform and service provider in China. Sojump provides the paid sampling service with an online panel of 2.6 million registered members nationwide, which covers different demographic segments of the population. The trade war between China and the United States has been a pressing nationwide issue that affects average Chinese. We targeted the Chinese adult population in the present study. To do so, we aimed to achieve a sample with key demographics that reflected the country's general population. Specifically, using the most recent national census data released by China's National Bureau of Statistics, the breakdowns of gender and age were used as criteria in sampling. In addition, to reduce invalid responses, a filter question was used to exclude participants who had never heard some news about the trade war. As a result, a total of 1,047 respondents who met these criteria were selected from Sojump online.

Of the 1,047 respondents, 539 (51.5%) were male and 508 (48.5%) were female. The average age was 34.7 years; 6.4% were under the age of 21, 32.0% were aged between 21 and 30, 34.5% were aged between 31 and 40, 20.1% were aged between 41 and 50, and 7.1% were over the age of 51. In terms of education, 2.5% did not finish high school, 6.3% finished high school, 17.9% had some college level education, and 73.4% had a college degree. Compared with the profiles of China's population and Internet users, our sample closely matched the gender ratio of studied population. However, our sample is disproportionally overrepresented in the 20–50 age group and in respondents with college education.

Measurement

Exposure to News About the Trade War on Traditional and Social Media

Respondents were asked to indicate how often they had been exposed to news about the trade war in newspapers, on television, and on social media sites such as WeChat and Weibo. The five-point response categories ranged from 1 (never) to 5 (frequently). A composite measure of *exposure to news about the trade war on traditional media* was constructed by averaging the first two items (M = 3.58, SD = 0.86, *r* = .38). The average of the last two items was used to create a composite measure of *exposure to news about the trade war on social media* (M = 4.02, SD = 0.80, *r* = .24).

Perceived Effects of News About the Trade War on Oneself and Others

Respondents were first asked to indicate the extent to which news about the trade war made "you" feel concerned about (1) a reduction of supply of U.S. products, (2) higher prices for U.S. products, and (3) difficulties in purchasing U.S. products. The response categories ranged on a five-point scale, where 1 meant "not at all" and 5 meant "a great deal." The three items were averaged to create a composite measure of *perceived effects of news about the trade war on oneself* (M = 3.10, SD = 0.98, α = .80).

The measure of the perceived effect of news about the trade war on others consisted of three parallel items (replacing "you" with "others"). The three "others" items were averaged to build a measure of *perceived effects news about the trade war on others* (M = 3.27, SD = 0.98, α = .81).

Nationalism

Nationalism is multifaceted, cultural, political, or tertiary (Dekker, 2001). We adopted the classical definition of nationalism, which emphasizes national differentiation and individuality in competition with other powers. To assess it, respondents were asked to indicate their agreement on a five-point Likert scale (where 1 meant "strongly disagree" and 5 meant "strongly agree") with the following statements adopted from previous studies (Johnston, 2017): (1) "Generally speaking, China is better than most other countries;" (2) "When other people criticize China, it is as though they are criticizing me;" (3) "Even if I could pick any country in the world, I would still want to be a Chinese citizen;" and (4) "To me, it is important to be a citizen of China." These items were averaged to create a composite measure of *nationalism* (M = 3.54, SD = 0.70, α = .77).

Negative Emotions Elicited by News About the Trade War

Negative emotions refer to strong, uncomfortable feelings one has toward a harm or threat. Operationally, we assessed the levels of negative emotion elicited by news about the trade war by asking respondents to indicate the extent to which they felt angry, infuriated, disappointed, and offended by the trade war as reported extensively in the news media. A five-point Likert scale was used, which ranged from 1 ("not at all") to 5 ("very much"). The four items were averaged to create a composite index of *negative emotions elicited by news about the trade war* (M = 3.74, SD = 0.77, α = .74).

Support for Government Policy Response to the Trade War

Using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with four statements (1) "I will support the government's response to levy higher tariffs on U.S. goods"; (2) "Even though the Chinese economy may be negatively impacted, I will support the government's decision to fight back against the U.S. on trade tariffs"; (3) "I am in favor of the government's move to unite other countries in fighting the trade war with the United States"; and (4) "I will support any response from our government in winning the trade war." A composite measure of *support for government policy response to the trade war* was created by using the average (M = 3.96, SD = 0.76, α = .73).

Likelihood of Boycotting U.S. Products

Respondents were then asked about the likelihood that they would (1) avoid buying products imported from the United States, (2) ask family members avoid buying products imported from the United States, (3) ask friends to avoid buying products imported from the United States, (4) avoid traveling to the United States, and (5) avoid using imported products from the United States. The five-point scale ranged from 1 (very unlikely) to 5 (very likely). A composite measure of *likelihood of boycotting U.S. products* was created by averaging the five items (M = 3.79, SD = 0.90, α = .88).

Results

H1 predicted that respondents would perceive news about the Sino-American trade war to have a greater influence on others than on themselves. Table 1 presents the results of a series of paired t-tests, which provided support for H1 [t (1,046) = 7.22 at $p <$ .001]. Consistent with past research, respondents believed others would be impacted more by the trade war news than would they themselves.

Table 1. Mean Estimates of Perceived Effects of News About China–U.S. Trade War on Oneself and Others.

To what extent did news about the China–U.S. trade war made you/ others feel concerned about:	Oneself	Others	*t* Values
A reduction of U.S. products	2.93 (1.11)	3.22 (1.06)	9.07***
Higher prices for U.S. products	3.38 (1.20)	3.45 (1.20)	2.03*
Difficulties in purchasing U.S. products	2.98 (1.20)	3.13 (1.18)	4.46***
Combined index	3.10 (.98)	3.27 (0.98)	7.22***

Note. Values are means, standard deviations in parentheses.

H2a and H2b predicted that exposure to social media would be more strongly and positively associated with perceived effects of news about the trade war on oneself and others than would be exposure to traditional media. To test it, two hierarchical regression analyses were performed. As Table 2 shows, exposure to social media was a significant and positive predictor of perceived effects of news about the trade war on oneself (B = .20, *p* < .001; see column 1), whereas exposure to traditional media was not a significant predictor (B = .01, *p* > .05). Similarly, exposure to social media was a significant and positive predictor of perceived effects of the trade war news on others (B = .20, *p* < .001; see column 2), whereas exposure to traditional media was not a significant predictor (B = .01, p > .05). H2a and H2b were supported.

Table 2. Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Perceived Effects on Oneself and Perceived Effects on Others.

	Perceived effects on	
Independent variable	Oneself	Others
Block 1: Demographics		
Gender	−.02	.02
Age	−.10**	−.13***
Education	−.03	−.02
Income	.07*	.03
Adjusted R^2 (%)	1.4	2.5
Block 2: Nationalism		
Nationalism	−.10**	−.08*
Incremental adjusted R^2 (%)	0.0	0.0
Block 3: Media exposure		
Traditional media	.01	.01
Social media	.20***	.20***
Incremental adjusted R^2 (%)	3.6	3.5
Block 4: Affective response		
Negative emotions	.09**	.07*
Incremental adjusted R^2 (%)	0.5	0.4
Total adjusted R^2 (%)	5.5	6.3
N	1,047	1,047

Notes. Beta weights are from final regression equation with all blocks of variables in the model. *** $p <$ .001; ** $p <$ .01; * $p <$ .05.

Additional tests for the difference between two regression coefficients using Cohen and Cohen's (1983) method showed that the difference between the betas of two media exposure measures on perceived effects of news about the trade war on oneself ($t = 3.72$, $p <$ .001) and perceived effects of such news on others ($t = 3.21$, $p <$ .001) were significant, indicating a greater influence of social media than traditional media on the perceived impacts of trade war news.

H3 predicted that nationalism would be significantly and negatively related to perceived effects of news about the trade war on oneself and others. As expected, results of the regression analysis showed that nationalism was significantly and negatively associated with perceived effects on oneself (B = −.10, $p <$ .01; see Table 2, column 1) and perceived effects on others (B = −.08, $p <$ .05; see Table 2, column 2) while controlling for gender, age, education, income, exposure to traditional media, and exposure to social media. H3 was supported. These results indicate that the higher the nationalist sentiments, the less perceived effects on the trade war news on oneself and on others, suggesting nationalism imbues respondents with overconfidence in themselves as being invulnerable to the influence of news about the escalating trade war.

H4 predicted that negative emotions such as anger, fury and resentment elicited by news about the trade war would be significantly and positively related to perceived effects of such news on oneself and

others. Results of regression analyses showed that negative emotions were significantly and positively associated with perceived effects on oneself (B = .09, p < .01; see Table 2, column 1) and perceived effects on others (B = .07, p < .05; see Table 2, column 2). H4 was also supported, indicating that the more the respondents were outraged and upset by the trade war news, the more they viewed themselves and other Chinese like them as being influenced by such news. That is, negative emotions undercut the respondents' overconfidence in being invulnerable to the impact of the trade war news.

Next, to test the behavioral consequence of perceptual effects of the trade war news, we predicted in H5 that perceived effects of news about the trade war on oneself would be more strongly but negatively related to support for the government trade policy response than would be perceived effects of such news on others. To test it, two separate hierarchical regression analyses were performed. As Table 3 shows (see column 1), perceived effects on oneself were a significant but negative predictor of support for the government trade policy response (B = −.08, p < .05), whereas perceived effects on others were not a significant predictor (B = −.02, p > .05). The results suggest that respondents didn't support retaliatory policies if they saw themselves as affected by the trade war news. Additional tests for the difference between two regression coefficients using Cohen and Cohen's (1983) method showed that the difference between the betas of perceived effects of news about the trade war on oneself and on others was not significant (t = 0.09, p > .05). H5 was not supported.

H6 further predicted that perceived effects of news about the trade war on oneself would be more strongly and negatively related to the likelihood of boycotting American products than would be perceived effects of such news on others. Another hierarchical regression analysis was performed to test H6. Results in Table 3 (see column 2) show that perceived effects on oneself were significantly and negatively associated with the likelihood of boycotting American products (B = −.14, p < .001), while perceived effects on others were not (B = −.01, p > .05). The results indicate that the more the respondents viewed themselves as being impacted by the trade war news, the less likely they would boycott products imported from the United States. The difference between the betas of perceived effects of news about trade war on oneself and on others was significant (t = 1.82, p < .05). H6 was supported.

Table 3. Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Support for Government Trade Policy and Likelihood of Boycotting U.S. Products.

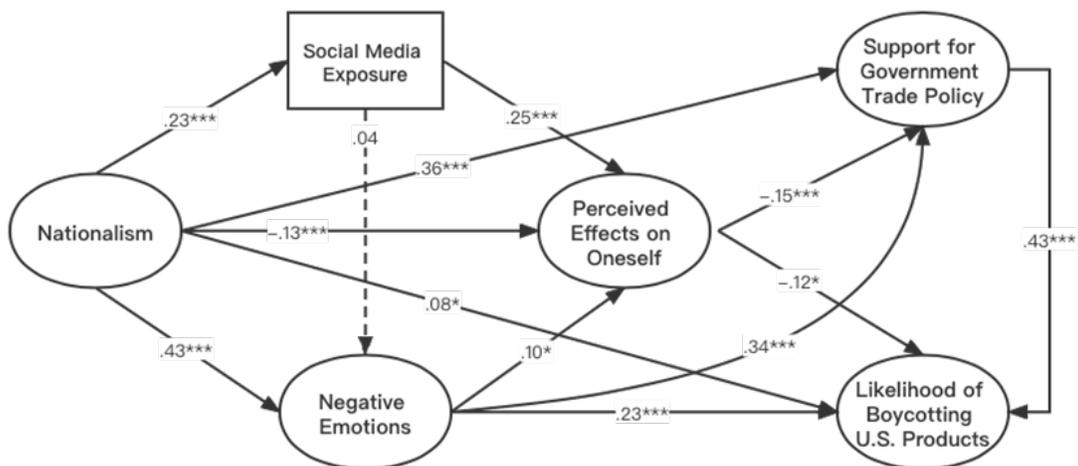| Independent variable	Support for government trade policy	Likelihood of boycotting U.S. products
Block 1: Demographics		
Gender (female)	−.08**	.02
Age	.23***	.09**
Education	.00	−0.0
Income	.06*	−.02
Adjusted R^2 (%)	8.6	0.1
Block 2: Nationalism		
Nationalism	.34***	.25***
Incremental adjusted R^2 (%)	19.0	14.4
Block 3: Media exposure		
Traditional media	.08**	.08**
Social media	−.02	−.02
Incremental adjusted R^2 (%)	1.8	2.6
Block 4: Affective response		
Negative emotions	.22***	.31***
Incremental adjusted R^2 (%)	3.8	7.3
Block 5: Third-person effect variables		
On oneself	−.08*	−.14***
On others	−.02	−.1
Total adjusted R^2 (%)	32.5	25.0
N	1,047	1,047

Notes. Beta weights are from final regression equation with all blocks of variables in the model. *** $p <$ .001; ** $p <$ .01; * $p <$ .05**.**

　　　　To address RQ1, we implemented structural equation modelling using Amos 26.0. (Exposure to traditional media and perceived effects on others were excluded in the model because they were not significantly related to support for the government trade policy response and likelihood of boycotting U.S. products.) Results of the SEM show that the chi-square for the model was not significant, X^2 = 549.85, df = 177, X^2/df ratio = 3.11, $p <$ .001. In addition, the comparative fit index (CFI = .95), the normal fit index (NFI = .93, the Tucker Lewis index (TLI = .94), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA = .045) indicated that the model fit was good. The model explained 5.5% of the variance in social media exposure, 19.3% in negative emotions, 7.2% in perceived effects on oneself, 37.2% in support for the government trade policy response, and 42.1% in likelihood of boycotting U.S. products.

　　　　As shown in Figure 1, the structural equation model indicates that nationalism had a significant effect on social media exposure (B = .23, $p <$ .001), which was then significantly associated with perceived effects on oneself (B = .25, $p <$ .001). Negative emotions were significantly associated with perceived effects

on oneself (B = .10, *p* < .05), support for the government trade policy response (B = .34, *p* < .001) and likelihood of boycotting U.S. products (B = .23, p < .001). Nationalism also had a significant effect on negative emotions (B = .43, *p* < .001), support for the government trade policy response (B = .36, *p* < .001), and likelihood of boycotting U.S. products (B = .08, *p* < .05).

The structural equation model further validates the hypotheses relationships among the studied variables. It is interesting to note that nationalism has a direct and strong effect on support for the government policy response, and a significant but weak effect on likelihood of boycotting products imported from the United States. Furthermore, exposure to trade war news on social media and negative emotions elicited by the news had direct effects on perceived effect on oneself, which in turn had significant but negative effects on the two endogenous variables: support for the government policy response (B = −.15, *p* < .001) and likelihood of boycotting U.S. products (B = −.12, *p* < .001). Taken together, these results underscore the mediating role of perceived effects of the trade war news on oneself, which play the role of a brake on behavioral intentions triggered by nationalism and negative emotions.

Figure 1. Structured equation model of variables predicting support for government trade policy and likelihood of boycotting U.S. products.

To assess the mediating effects of social media exposure and negative emotions in mitigating the effects of nationalism on perceived effects on oneself, we employed the SPSS version of Process Macro Model 4 developed by Hayes (2013). Specifically, we used 5,000 bootstrap samples and 95% bias-corrected bootstrap-confidence intervals. The two mediators in our theoretical model are social media exposure and negative emotions. The results of the analyses show that the indirect effect of nationalism on perceived effects on oneself through social media exposure was significant, B = .06, 95% CI (.032, .084), as was the indirect effect through negative emotion, B = .05, 95% CI (.012, .085). Therefore, we generated evidence in support of the proposed model that social media exposure and negative emotions are significant mediators in the relationship between nationalism and perceived effects on oneself.

Similarly, we used the bootstrapping procedure to assess the mediating effects of perceived effects on oneself in the relationships between social media exposure and the two behavioral outcomes, support for the government trade policy and likelihood of boycotting U.S. products. The results indicated that perceived effects on oneself significantly mediated the relationships between social media exposure and support for the government trade policy, B = −.02, 95% CI (−033, −009), and between social media exposure and likelihood of boycotting U.S. products, B = −.03, 95% CI (−.045, −.014).

Discussion

This study examined how news about the China–U.S. trade war affected Chinese citizen's perceptions about the impact of such news and consequences of their perceptions for their behavioral responses. As expected, respondents exhibited a biased perception in assessing the impact of the trade war news—believing others as being more affected by the news than themselves. In addition, exposure to trade war news on social media enhanced perceived effects of such news on oneself and others. Exposure to the news on traditional media, on the other hand, had no such effect. A number of factors may account for this result. Take for instance the reach and scope of the media (Gunther, 1991): the greater the reach, the greater the bias. China's leading social media platforms such as Weibo and WeChat enjoyed growing numbers of users, who spent more time using social media than traditional media for more diverse opinions on hot button issues facing the nation (Wei, Huang, & Zheng, 2018).

It is worth noting that negative emotions elicited by news about the trade war, such as anger, fury, and resentment, were also found to enhance perceived effects of such news on themselves and others. The angrier the respondents felt about the trade war, the more they believed the news about a national issue that was beyond their personal experience impacted them and other Chinese.

Consistent with the literature (Li & Guo, 2018) on the role of media exposure in enhancing perceived effects, these results suggest the rising importance of social media as sources of stimuli for Chinese citizens to form their perceptions regarding a national issue and to form emotional expressions. Future research should pay attention to news distributed on digital media as antecedents of perceptual effects.

Nationalism heated up by the trade war was positively associated with the negative emotions. That is, the stronger the respondents' nationalist feelings, the angrier they became. The image of an angry Chinese nationalist emerges from these findings. However, nationalism mitigated perceived effects of trade war news on oneself and others. We found that respondents who had strong nationalist feelings tended to believe themselves and their fellow countrymen to be less vulnerable to the news about the trade war. This result is unsurprising because nationalism can bolster a sense of invulnerability and an optimistic feeling of triumph in international conflicts, which leads to underestimation of the influence of the trade war news on oneself and others.

In addition, results of the structural equation model showed both nationalist feelings and negative emotions were positively related to support for the Chinese government's retaliatory trade policy and likelihood of boycotting American goods. These patterns fit the profile of angry Chinese nationalists, who in previous conflicts involving national dignity called for boycotting foreign products (Li & Guo, 2018).

Nevertheless, the results of the structural equation model indicated that perceived effects of trade news on oneself were a negative predictor of support for the Chinese government's retaliatory trade policy and boycotting of American goods. This means the more respondents believed the trade war news impacted them, the less likely they were to support retaliation and boycotts. That the effects of nationalism and negative emotions on behavioral intention were buffered by perceived effects of the trade war news on oneself is the most intriguing finding of our study.

These seemingly contradictory results create interesting implications in the Chinese context. The Chinese, youth in particular, are increasingly nationalistic (Johnston, 2017), believing a rising China needs to fight back against the West. At the same time, they are also the generation that is more familiar than the older generation about the United States and things American—consuming American products, traveling to America as tourists, and going to America to study. Thus, they have love-hate feelings toward the United States. Under such circumstances, findings of this study make sense. Chinese populist nationalism and negative emotions elicited by the news do not render the Chinese respondents irrational. Rather, they seem to be rational in showing nationalist feelings at the collective level and know how to protect their own interests at the individual level. The relationships among negative emotions, perceived effects on oneself and behavioral intentions can be explained by the Chinese people's love-hate relationship with the United States. As Sankey (2020) put it, alongside anger and disappointment, there remains admiration for America.

Theoretically speaking, these results are consistent with the literature. Tewksbury et al. (2004) argued "that people regularly evaluate the likely impact of media messages they encounter. The evaluations are most likely and most relevant in situations in which guessing the impact of a message may be personally useful or important" (p. 140). In this study, even when emotionally responding to a national threat, people's rational reasoning prevails over these strong nationalist feelings and negative emotions—being angry over the trade war did not make them boycott American products. Future research should pay attention to cognitive mechanisms vis-à-vis affective mechanisms in theorizing the mechanisms of biased perception concerning news about a national threat. After all, the third-person effect is fundamentally a faulty thought process.

The significant relationships reported in this study are relational in nature due to the one-shot design. Hence, caution is needed in interpreting them. Considering the trade war continues under the Biden administration, future research can employ longitude data to ascertain the causality of the relationships among media use, affective mechanisms, and third-person effect variables. In addition, the trade war embodies multiple issues beyond trade practices, ranging from geopolitics to global economy, cross-cultural conflict, and postwar international relations (Liu, Boukes, & De Swert, 2022). Past research suggests that perceived effects on behavioral responses tend to be issue-dependent. Different perceived effects, such as a judgment of being injurious to public morals, may lead to robust support for restrictions. Not differentiating the perceived effects regarding trade versus other issues limits our ability to test different and robust behavioral responses. Related to this issue, we did not measure actual behavior but rather behavioral intention. Hence, another limitation.

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