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Published in:

Chinese Journal of Communication

Published: 01/06/2024

Document Version:

Post-print, also known as Accepted Author Manuscript, Peer-reviewed or Author Final version

Publication record in CityU Scholars:

[Go to record](#)

Published version (DOI):

[10.1080/17544750.2023.2238316](https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2023.2238316)

Publication details:

Lu, Y., Chen, X., Huang, Y.-H. C., & Lin, F. (2024). Measuring up in a pandemic: information attention, source credibility, and public evaluation of the government COVID-19 response in mainland China. *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 17(2), 170-188. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2023.2238316>

Citing this paper

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This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in
CHINESE JOURNAL OF COMMUNICATION on 24 Jul 2023, available online:
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2023.2238316>.

Measuring Up in a Pandemic: Information Attention, Source Credibility, and Public Evaluation of the Government COVID-19 Response in Mainland China

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This study examines the interaction effects of attention to COVID-19 information and perceived source credibility on the evaluation of government performance in the Hubei province of mainland China; the study is based on two waves of panel data drawn from a sample of 1,896 respondents. The results demonstrated that COVID-19 information attention positively influences the evaluation of both central and local government performance. These direct relationships are contingent on the perceived source credibility of central and local government institutions, but they are not influenced by the perceived credibility of social media sources. More interestingly, there is a negative moderating effect of the perceived credibility of local institution sources on the relationship between COVID-19 information attention and the evaluation of central government performance. This study extends the current research on the impacts of information consumption on political attitudes by integrating various theories or hypotheses (e.g., cognitive media model, attitudinal policy feedback, message persuasion, and informational incongruity).

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, information attention, source credibility, performance evaluation, Chinese government

Citizen support for the mainland Chinese government's COVID-19 response has remained high since the start of the pandemic (Li et al., 2020; Zhao & Wu, 2020; Wu et al., 2021). The government's success in controlling the COVID-19 outbreak within its borders provided a solid foundation for these positive evaluations (He et al., 2020; Salzberger et al., 2020). Attention to public affairs may enhance cognitive elaboration and knowledge of government policies and services, which can influence citizens' perceptions of government performance (Chingos et al., 2012; Eveland, 2001; Hong, 2016). Previous research has presented mixed results because there are both positive and negative effects of information consumption on the formation of political attitude, which is often contingent on specific social and political contexts (Zhang & Guo, 2019). Considering the unique socio-political and media contexts of mainland China during the COVID-19 outbreak, we ask the following: *How do citizens' attention to COVID-19 information influence their evaluation of government performance in mainland China?*

Moreover, source credibility can influence how COVID-19-related information is processed. As a result, the direct relationship between attention to COVID-19 information and the evaluation of government performance might more or less depend on general awareness about government policies and measures shaped by perceived source credibility. The present study differentiates central and local institutions as two sources that can help

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better reflect the hierarchical structure of China's political system. We also examine the effects of one nonofficial source: social media. To explore and compare the moderating effects of the perceived credibility of three different information sources, the current study integrates the effects of source credibility, the theory of message persuasion, the theory of information incongruity, and the structural perspective of hierarchical political trust. We ask the following research question: *How is the relationship between COVID-19 information consumption and citizens' evaluation of government performance contingent on perceived source credibility in mainland China?*

The present study has two goals. First, we explore the extent to which Chinese citizens' attention to COVID-19 information influenced their evaluation of government performance during the COVID-19 outbreak (between January 2020 and March 2020). This contributes to the literature on the impacts of information consumption on political attitude by showing how this relationship is shaped by the unique policy context (e.g., lockdown in cities, mobilization of national medical resources, ultra-rapid delivery of specialty field hospitals) and socio-political context (i.e., hierarchies of political trust) of mainland China during the COVID-19 outbreak. Second, the present study examines how the perceived credibility of COVID-19 information sources influences the direct relationship between attention to COVID-19 information and the evaluation of government performance. This highlights the role of source credibility in the relationships that exist between information consumption and political attitude.

COVID-19 Information Attention and Evaluation of Government Performance

Attention to COVID-19 information refers to the level of attentive intensity in relation to COVID-19 information (Chaffee & Schleuder, 1986; Eveland, 2001). Compared with information exposure as a passive form of information consumption, information attention is a predictor of more active information consumption (Chaffee & Schleuder, 1986; Eveland, 2001; Zhao et al., 2011). Based on Eveland's (2001) cognitive mediation model, information attention can generate a large amount of awareness and knowledge of relevant issues through cognitive elaboration and learning (Eveland, 2001; Zhao et al., 2011). During the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, citizens with higher levels of attention to COVID-19 may have had greater awareness and knowledge of COVID-19-related issues because of having more cognitive elaboration, through which they were likely to be better informed about the Chinese government's policies and efforts for containing the COVID-19 outbreak.

Recent political research on mass attitudinal policy feedback showed that policy awareness is an important factor shaping the positive relationship between public policies and the attitudes of ordinary citizens (Lü, 2014; Pacheco, 2013). Nevertheless, such a relationship also depends on how citizens perceive various aspects of policy benefits, such as size, proximity, and visibility (Campbell, 2012; Lü, 2014; Pacheco, 2013). During the COVID-19 outbreak, Chinese citizens could perceive the benefits of the government's policies regarding both aspects of proximity (i.e., the tangibility of COVID-19-related policies) and visibility (i.e., the attention that COVID-19-related policies receive) (Campbell, 2012; Pacheco, 2013). Specifically, citizens directly experienced effective anti-pandemic measures and witnessed the effects of virus-mitigation policies facilitated by the Chinese government in their own daily lives such as grid-style social management (He et al., 2020; Li et al., 2020; Salzberger et al., 2020). Moreover, strict information control facilitated by the Chinese government during the COVID-19 outbreak filtered rumors, speculation, and other interpretations of government actions that were inconsistent with the official narrative (Fu & Zhu, 2020; Hua & Shaw, 2020). As such, COVID-19 information consumed by citizens contained less negativity related to the policies of Chinese governmental institutions, making it less likely to induce a negative evaluation of government performance. As a result, we argue that citizens'

attention to COVID-19 information, in general, might positively influence their evaluation of government performance because their received, acquired, and elaborated COVID-19 information was more than likely intended to foster their awareness of the positive policies and measures of the Chinese government, which, in turn, shaped citizens' positive evaluation of government performance.

Particularly, the public's perception toward the government's policies often shows a discrepancy between central and local government in mainland China, which is often related to the hierarchical nature of the political system insofar as central and local government are perceived differently and with different levels of trust and satisfaction (Huang, 2018; Li, 2004). The overall policy developed by the central government has been largely decentralized to and implemented by local governments, with specific and tailored policies (Lü, 2014). This also applies to the policy context during the COVID-19 outbreak. Thus, on the one hand, citizens perceived benefits from the overall policy of epidemic prevention issued by the central government. When local governments implemented specific policies, on the other hand, there were more tensions and conflicts between citizens and local governments, which was further exacerbated by the misconduct and negative image of local governments during the COVID-19 outbreak. For example, the Wuhan government was also heavily questioned and criticized by the public for its lack of transparency and incorrect policies to monitor and prevent the epidemic (Shangguan et al., 2020). Given the potential discrepancy in citizens' perception of government policies, we have divided the evaluation of government performance into two levels (i.e., central vs. local). Nevertheless, considering that Chinese citizens witnessed a victory over the COVID-19 outbreak between February 2020 and April 2020, in which the two waves of panel data were collected, it is also rational to assume that the general relationship between attention to COVID-19 information and evaluation of local government might be positive. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Citizens' attention to COVID-19 information will positively influence their evaluation of central and local government performance in mainland China.

Moderating Effect of Perceived Source Credibility

In a high-choice media environment with the complex nature of contemporary media consumption, individuals are more likely to be exposed to multiple information sources (Balmas, 2012). This also applies to the context of the COVID-19 outbreak in mainland China, where the public was aware of the COVID-19 policies and measures enacted by both the central and local governments through consuming relevant information from different sources (i.e., central institutional source, local institutional source, social media source). During the COVID-19 outbreak, because the Chinese government facilitated relatively strict information control, the public mainly consumed policy-related information from two levels of official information sources (i.e., central and local institutions). In addition, as a nonofficial information source, social media platforms were also popularly used, though they were also under official control, especially for information related to government policies and measures.

Previous research has shown that, when individuals consume information from different sources, their information consumption can shape their political attitudes through two pathways. First, diverse information sources may generate content with different features; thus, individuals form varied political attitudes through the systematic processing of diverse contents in the long term (Balmas, 2012; Boukes & Boomgaarden, 2015; Zhang & Guo, 2019). For example, Zhang, and Guo (2019) found that consuming news from governmental sources positively shaped citizens' satisfaction with the central government, while news consumption based on alternative news sources on social media negatively

influenced citizens' satisfaction with both the central and local governments. Second, the credibility of the information source as an important heuristic cue also influences how citizens perceived COVID-19 policy-related information and form policy awareness, which shapes their evaluation of central and local government performance (Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994; Flanagin & Metzger, 2017; Pornpitakpan, 2004). Source credibility refers to the extent to which information recipients attribute expertise and trustworthiness to an information source (Hovland et al., 1953).

We focus more on the role of source credibility because it can effectively shape citizens' information processing within a short period in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak. Moreover, because the COVID-19 information related to government's policies and measures was under strict information control, its content variations might be reduced, though not necessarily eliminated (Fu & Zhu, 2020; Tang & Zou, 2020). In comparison, citizens still have different levels of source credibility with varied effects in their information processing; thus, we have paid more attention to those variations.

Positive Effect of Perceived Source Credibility

Citizens can know central government policy and local government policy mainly through consuming information from central and local institutional sources, respectively. Central and local governments might have different emphases on COVID-19-related issues: the central institution focused more on national policies and affairs, while the local institution prioritized local policies and affairs in its agenda (Kuang, 2018; Tong, 2010). Thus, COVID-19 policy-related information generated and delivered to the public might also vary between central and local institutions.

When citizens mainly consume central government policy-related information from central institutional sources or when citizens mainly consume local government policy-related information from local institutional sources, they do not experience expectation violation based on their attribution of responsibility to the central and local government (Huang, 2018). In this condition, the persuasion effect of received information about central and local government policy may be enhanced by a higher level of perceived source credibility at the central and local levels, respectively. A key assumption is that, when individuals perceive an information source as more credible, they are more likely to be persuaded by information from that source (Pornpitakpan, 2004). This positive association between source credibility and persuasion exists in political communication studies (Flanagin & Metzger, 2017), and it can be mediated by perceived information validity (Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994; Nan, 2013). Information from a more trustworthy source is perceived as more valid, which can enhance information processing (Petty et al., 2002). In addition, citizens' distrust in a political entity could further influence how they process the messages about or from that political entity, such as the amount and elaborative level of information processing (Brinol & Petty, 2009; Pornpitakpan, 2004). Based on the aforementioned assumption, we argue that those who perceive central institutional sources as being more trustworthy may find information related to central government policy from central institutional sources more valid and persuasive, which would then enhance their awareness of central government policy. The same rationale applies to the case of local government. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

H2-1: The relationship between attention to COVID-19 information and the evaluation of central government performance will be stronger when citizens' perceived source credibility is higher, and it will be weaker when citizens' perceived source credibility is lower.

H2-2: The relationship between attention to COVID-19 information and the evaluation of local government performance will be stronger when citizens' perceived source credibility is higher, and it will be weaker when citizens' perceived source credibility is lower.

Perceived Source Credibility and Informational Incongruity

Citizens can also be aware of central government policy by processing relevant information from local institutional sources. This is particularly true in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak because the central government exerted stricter media control over local governments to drive them to follow the central policies and disseminate them accurately and effectively via media channels. This is aligned with two focal points in central–local government relations: 1) central control over local governments and 2) local compliance with central leadership (Chen, 2017), both of which have been widely recognized by the majority of Chinese citizens (Pye, 1992; Wu et al., 2021). The central government can effectively wield the power of news censorship and media criticism to supervise local governments, but this is not the case in the opposite direction (Chen, 2017; Kuang, 2018).

Compared with those with high credibility of local institutional sources, citizens with low source credibility might pay more attention to the information related to central government policy because they might perceive the incongruity between information source and message. This is partly associated with the discrepancy in institutional trust and responsibility attribution between the central and local governments. In this case, there exists a pattern of hierarchical political trust in mainland China: there is a higher level of political trust placed in central government than in local government (Li, 2004; Wu & Wilkes, 2018). During the COVID-19 outbreak, this discrepancy of political trust was further expanded by the misconduct of local government (e.g., Wuhan in Hubei province). Meanwhile, because Chinese citizens hold the perception of “central good, local bad” (Chen, 2017; Huang, 2018; Li, 2016), they are often favorable to information about central policies. This disparity of government image was also widening during the COVID-19 outbreak, in which the misconduct of local government caused much uncertainty, anxiety, and fear at the societal level (Wu et al., 2021).

From the perspective of informational incongruity, citizens may have perceived the incongruity between an untrust/unfavorable information source (local institution) and a favorable information message (central policy) (Teeny et al., 2021). This could have further influenced the persuasive effects of the central government–related message (Baker & Petty, 1994; Karmarkar & Tormala, 2009; Teeny et al., 2021). Previous research has shown that incongruent source–message pairing has a reverse persuasive effect compared with congruent pairing (Baker & Petty, 1994; Karmarkar & Tormala, 2009). People's expectancies would be violated when receiving incongruent messages, through which their attention and cognitive elaboration could be enhanced, meaning they would be more likely to be persuaded by the incongruent information (Baker & Petty, 1994; Karmarkar & Tormala, 2009). For instance, Karmarkar and Tormala (2009) found that, when participants received a certain message from low expertise sources, they were involved more in message elaboration and were more likely to be persuaded by the incongruent message. In the current research, when citizens received central government–related information from local institutional sources, they may pay more attention and cognitive elaboration toward this incongruent message about the central government. Particularly, this effect might be stronger for those with low credibility of local institutional sources compared with those with high source credibility because the former group would perceive more informational incongruity than the latter group. Thus, citizens who perceive local institutional sources as less trustworthy may find central

government-related information more persuasive and favorable, which, in turn, would enhance their awareness of central government performance.

Meanwhile, citizens can also obtain information about local government policy from central institutional sources. In this case, however, citizens might be less likely to perceive an incongruity between information source and message based on the aforementioned discussion. When it comes to public perception, central institutions are usually considered highly trustworthy authorities, and they are assumed to have political legitimacy to release information about local governments and even make media criticism of the misconduct of local governments (Chen, 2017; Huang, 2018). Thus, when consuming local government-related information from central institutional sources, citizens might show a similar pattern of cognitive attention and elaboration toward the information message, which is less contingent on the level of the credibility of central institutional sources. Nevertheless, given that there is rare empirical research to support the aforementioned assumptions, we are still uncertain about forming specific hypotheses; thus, we propose the following research questions:

RQ1: How does the perceived credibility of local institutional sources moderate the relationship between attention to COVID-19 information and evaluation of central government performance?

RQ2: How does the perceived credibility of central institutional sources moderate the relationship between attention to COVID-19 information and evaluation of local government performance?

Perceived Credibility of Social Media Source and Information Processing

COVID-19 information can also be sourced from social media platforms that Chinese government censors have difficulty controlling (Tang & Huhe, 2014). Moreover, social media platforms contain nonofficial voices that attempt to influence the formation of public opinion (Zhang & Guo, 2019). Still, we argue that COVID-19 information sourced from social media was mainly dominated by official voices from state-owned media agencies and user-generated content that did not harm social stability (Weatherley, 2007). The Chinese government issued guidelines to media agencies for reporting on the COVID-19 outbreak, resulting in a top-down media ecosystem built to cope with the global public health crisis. Thus, the voices of governmental institutions and state-owned media agencies dominated social media platforms as well. In recent years, Chinese state-owned media agencies have widely disseminated e-government platforms (Zheng, 2013). Through various social media platforms (e.g., Weibo, WeChat), citizens can access COVID-19 information from central media agencies (e.g., People's Daily) and central governmental institutions (e.g., The State Council), as well as local media agencies and governmental institutions. The Chinese government also enacted stricter information control measures during the COVID-19 outbreak to filter out unfavorable information (Fu & Zhu, 2020; Hua & Shaw, 2020).

Although we have assumed that social media can serve as a source of both central and local government information, little research indicates the extent to which citizens in mainland China trust social media as an information source. It is still unclear whether the relationship between COVID-19 information attention and evaluation of central/local government performance is different for citizens with less trust in social media sources than those with more trust in social media. Therefore, we propose the following research question:

RQ3: How does the perceived credibility of social media moderate the relationship between COVID-19 information attention and the evaluation of central and local government performance?

Methods

Study Design and Participants

The present study used data from a two-wave longitudinal survey of “*Public Attitudes toward the COVID-19 Pandemic in Hubei Province*,” which was conducted by the China Academy of Science and Technology Development Strategy, the Social Policy Research Institute at Renmin University, and the Institute of Sociology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. The baseline survey was conducted between February 2 and February 8, 2020, a period that marked a particularly severe phase of the COVID-19 outbreak in mainland China. Follow-up survey data were collected between March 23 and April 9, 2020, when the lockdowns were relaxed and eventually lifted.

The survey targeted residents aged between 18 and 80 in urban and rural areas of all 13 prefecture-level divisions in Hubei. The online survey was carried out through a professional survey platform in China. The platform sent a notification with a link for the questionnaire to the respondents in their online panels. Only Hubei residents (with IP address locations in Hubei province) answered the questionnaire. Online surveys can facilitate quick completions for time-sensitive projects (e.g., the COVID-19 outbreak) with required sample sizes (Stanley et al., 2020). We also supplemented the online survey with a telephone survey to recruit noninternet users who were typically older and living in rural areas. The telephone survey was guided by the method of respondent-driven sampling (RDS; Salganik & Heckathorn, 2004), with the initial eligible participants (seeds) being older than 60, living in rural areas, and having limited internet access. The telephone survey was conducted by trained research assistants who are university students in Hubei. Prior studies have shown that RDS samples approximate statistical of random samples (Magnani et al., 2005). A total of 2,054 respondents completed the baseline and follow-up surveys. By removing some survey responses with missing values, we derived a final sample of 1,896 respondents, of which 1,649 (87.0%) completed the online survey and 247 (13.0%) the phone survey. Ethics approval was obtained from the ethics committee of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CHN-2153, 18/0020), which conformed to the principles embodied in the Declaration of Helsinki. Informed consent was obtained from all survey participants. For participants of the telephone survey, verbal content was obtained, and the research assistant signed a form pledging that they had gone through the proper procedures to obtain informed consent.

Variables and Measurement

Dependent Variable

The evaluation of the central/local government performance was assessed by asking respondents to rate on a 5-point Likert scale the performance of the central/local government in managing the pandemic (1 = very bad to 5 = very good).

Independent Variable

Attention to COVID-19 information was measured by asking respondents the following question: “To what extent do you pay attention to the following information related to the COVID-19 pandemic?” (1 = paid no attention at all to 4 = paid a lot of attention). The scale focuses on six types of COVID-19 information, including infection statistics, local availability of supplies, personal prevention strategies, government responses, criticisms and suggestions for disease containment work, and medical and scientific advances during the study period. The mean score of these six items was used to represent respondents’ level of attention to COVID-19 information (six-item scale, $\alpha = 0.88$).

Potential moderators

The perceived credibility of central institutional information sources was gauged by asking respondents how reliable they found the COVID-19 information provided by central government officials and state-owned media (1 = completely unreliable to 4 = completely reliable). The average score of the two items represented the level of perceived credibility of central institutional information sources (two-item scale, correlation = 0.56). Similarly, the perceived credibility of local institutional sources was assessed by asking the respondents how reliable they found the COVID-19 information provided by local government officials and media. The average score of the two items represented the level of perceived credibility of local institutional sources (two-item scale, correlation = 0.6). The perceived credibility of social media sources was measured by asking the respondents how reliable they found the COVID-19 information provided by WeChat's official accounts and Weibo's verified users (single-item scale).

Control Variables

We controlled for various demographic variables, including age (≤ 25 , 26–35, 36–45, 46–55, or ≥ 56), sex (male vs. female), monthly income (no income to over 8000 yuan), region (rural vs. urban), local infection rate, Communist Party membership, and type of neighborhood (high-end commercial housing or villa, regular commercial housing, low-rent/public housing, or village). We also adjusted for risk exposure to COVID-19 in all models. The respondents were asked whether they and any of their coresident family members, acquaintances, or neighbors had been infected with COVID-19. We assumed that respondents were more likely to have a higher risk of exposure when they or a person they had close contact with were infected. The respondents and/or had family members who were confirmed to have COVID-19 received the highest score (3 points), while those who reported zero confirmed cases within their social networks received the lowest score (0). A similar method of calculating risk exposure to COVID-19 has been used in prior studies (Miao et al., 2021).

Statistical Analysis

All analyses were performed using Stata 14.1. We first presented descriptive statistics to characterize the study population. Next, we estimated a series of random-intercept linear regression models, taking into account the nonindependence of repeated measures across two waves of data collection with a subject-specific random intercept (Rabe-Hesketh & Skrondal, 2012). We first investigated the relationship between attention to COVID-19 information and evaluation of central/local performance after adjusting for sociodemographic variables. The effect of different types of perceived source credibility on government performance evaluations was also examined. Furthermore, two-way interaction terms between attention to COVID-19 information and perceived source credibility of central and local governments, as well as social media, were computed (i.e., Attention to COVID-19 information \times Perceived credibility of central institutional source; Attention to COVID-19 information \times Perceived credibility of local institutional source; Attention to COVID-19 information \times Perceived credibility of social media source). These interaction terms were added into models to examine whether the relationship between COVID-19 information consumption and the evaluation of government performance was moderated by different types of source credibility. The variance inflation factors (VIFs) of the independent variables were used to detect whether multicollinearity existed in the regression models. Multicollinearity was not a significant concern because all VIFs were lower than 2.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics for the independent and dependent variables and potential moderators from the two survey waves (see Appendix). In Wave 1, the evaluation of the central government's responses to the pandemic was higher ($M = 4.68$, $SD = 0.64$). The rate declined slightly in Wave 2 ($M = 4.57$, $SD = 0.74$). Local government performance in Wave 1 ranked remarkably lower ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 1.08$) than that of the central government. The evaluation of local government performance increased significantly in Wave 2 ($M = 4.24$, $SD = 0.94$), while remaining lower than central government performance. In addition, the respondents in both waves paid close attention to COVID-19 information (Wave 1: $M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.37$; Wave 2: $M = 3.68$, $SD = 0.42$), such as infection statistics and prevention strategies. As for perceived source credibility, the respondents reported the highest level of trust in COVID-19 information provided by central institutions in both waves (Wave 1: $M = 4.49$, $SD = 0.57$; Wave 2: $M = 4.55$, $SD = 0.63$), followed by local institutions (Wave 1: $M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.68$; Wave 2: $M = 4.26$, $SD = 0.72$). However, the respondents reported the least trust in social media in both waves (Wave 1: $M = 3.61$, $SD = 0.93$; Wave 2: $M = 3.59$, $SD = 0.91$).

[Insert Table 1 here]

Regression Results

Table 2 presents the results from the random-intercept linear regression models used to examine the effects of attention to COVID-19 information and perceived source credibility on the evaluation of central and local government performance in the two survey waves (see Appendix). Compared with the first wave of the survey, the participants' evaluation of central government performance declined significantly but slightly, whereas their evaluation of local government performance significantly increased in the second wave. As for the effect of COVID-19 information attention and source availability, Model 1.1 in Table 2 demonstrates that attention to COVID-19 information positively affected the evaluation of central government performance ($b = 0.56$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that citizens paying more attention to COVID-19 information were more likely to be satisfied with the central government's control of the pandemic. Similarly, Model 2.1 in Table 2 demonstrates that attention to COVID-19 information positively affected the evaluation of local government performance ($b = 0.53$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, H1 was supported.

[Insert Table 2 here]

In addition, Model 1.2 in Table 2 examines the main effects of perceived source credibility on the evaluation of central government performance. The results show that higher levels of trust in COVID-19 information provided by central government institutions ($b = 0.34$, $SE = 0.02$, $p < 0.001$) and local government institutions ($b = 0.16$, $SE = 0.02$, $p < 0.001$) may have caused more positive evaluations of central government performance. However, a higher level of trust in information obtained from social media could have caused a more negative evaluation of central government performance ($b = -0.041$, $SE = 0.01$, $p < 0.001$). Also, Model 2.2 in Table 2 shows that higher levels of trust in COVID-19 information provided by central government institutions ($b = 0.15$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < 0.001$) and local government institutions ($b = 0.49$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < 0.001$) were associated with more positive evaluations of local government performance. However, the level of trust in information obtained from social media did not significantly affect the evaluation of local government performance.

Both Model 1.3 and Model 2.3 in Table 2 illustrate the interaction between attention to COVID-19 information and perceived source credibility. As for the evaluation of central

government performance, there was a positive interaction between attention to COVID-19 information and perceived credibility of central institutional source (Model 1.3: $b = 0.10$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.05$). The results of a simple slopes analysis (see Figure 1 in Appendix) demonstrated that the relationship between attention to COVID-19 information and evaluation of central government performance was stronger among those respondents who perceived a higher level of credibility of the central institutional source. With regard to the evaluation of local government performance, a positive interaction emerged between attention to COVID-19 information and perceived credibility of local institutional source (Model 2.3: $b = 0.23$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < 0.001$). The results of a simple slopes analysis (see Figure 2 in Appendix) demonstrated that the relationship between attention to COVID-19 information and evaluation of local government performance was stronger among respondents who perceived a higher level of credibility of local institutional sources. Therefore, H2-1 and H2-2 were supported.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

[Insert Figure 2 here]

In contrast, as for the evaluation of central government performance, a negative interaction emerged between attention to COVID-19 information and perceived credibility of local institutional source (Model 1.3: $b = -0.11$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that the association between attention to COVID-19 information and evaluation of central government performance was weaker among respondents who perceived a higher level of credibility of local institutional source (see Figure 3 in Appendix). However, as for the evaluation of local government performance, no significant interaction emerged between attention to COVID-19 information and the perceived credibility of the central institutional source (Model 2.3: $b = -0.08$, $SE = 0.06$, $p > 0.05$). Thus, RQ1 and RQ2 were answered. Moreover, as for the evaluation of central and local government performance, no significant interaction emerged between attention to COVID-19 information and perceived social media source credibility (Model 1.3: $b = -0.03$, $SE = 0.03$, $p > 0.05$; Model 2.3: $b = -0.06$, $SE = 0.04$, $p > 0.05$). Therefore, RQ3 was answered.

[Insert Figure 3 here]

Discussion

In mainland China, citizens' attention to COVID-19 information predicted a more positive evaluation of both central and local government performance during the COVID-19 outbreak. Our study has provided more robust causal interpretations because of the two waves of panel surveys that produced longitudinal datasets. This key finding supports previous studies claiming news consumption can positively influence satisfaction with the government in mainland China (Zhang & Guo, 2019). However, this finding contradicts the classic view that news consumption negatively impacts political attitudes (e.g., Boukes & Boomgaarden, 2015; Elenbaas & De Vreese, 2008). Two factors can explain this positive relationship: 1) citizens' increased awareness and knowledge of government policies driven by their greater attention to COVID-19 information (Eveland, 2001) and 2) citizens' perceived benefits of government policies through experienced effective measures and positively tangible outcomes (Campbell, 2012; Pacheco, 2013). Notably, the evaluation of local government performance was much more positive in the second-wave survey than in the first-wave survey, while the evaluation of central government performance slightly changed between the

two surveys. This finding indicates that, during the COVID-19 outbreak, citizens consistently perceived the policy benefits from the central government and highly evaluated its performance. However, citizens might have perceived fewer policy benefits from local governments at the initial stage of the COVID-19 outbreak but gradually experienced positive outcomes based on the local government's sustained measures and efforts. This significant discrepancy in citizens' perception toward policy and performance of two levels of government (i.e., central vs. local) resonates with Lü's (2014) research claiming that the education reform policy could enhance citizens' trust in the central government but not in local governments in mainland China. Essentially, this was rooted in the hierarchies of political structure and trust in mainland China (Li, 2004; Wu & Wilkes, 2018).

Furthermore, for the relationship between attention to COVID-19 information and evaluation of central government performance, it was stronger when perceived credibility of the central institutional source was higher and weaker when perceived credibility was lower. Meanwhile, the perceived credibility of local institutional sources exerted a similar moderating effect on the relationship between attention to COVID-19 information and evaluation of local government performance. These positive effects of perceived source credibility resonate with previous findings in a large body of research on political communication, social psychology, and advertising that have emphasized the effectiveness of message persuasion theory (Flanagin & Metzger, 2017; Nan, 2013; Pornpitakpan, 2004).

More interestingly, source credibility has a negative effect. For the relationship between attention to COVID-19 information and evaluation of central government performance, this is stronger when perceived credibility of local institutional sources is lower and becomes weaker when perceived source credibility is higher. One way to explain this anomaly is through understanding how citizens could perceive informational incongruity (Karmarkar & Tormala, 2009; Teeny et al., 2021), here based on some particular contextual features in mainland China such as hierarchical political trust (Li, 2004; Wu & Wilkes, 2018), attribution of government responsibility (Huang, 2018), and public image of central and local government (Chen, 2017; Huang, 2018; Li, 2016). When local institutional sources with a low level of political trust release COVID-19 information related to the central government, which has a highly positive image, citizens may be more likely to perceive the informational incongruity and be persuaded by the incongruent information (i.e., central government-related messages), thus triggering more cognitive attention and elaboration. However, the perceived credibility of central institutional sources did not moderate the relationship between attention to COVID-19 information and the evaluation of local government performance. One possible explanation is that, because of the high level of trust toward the central government, Chinese citizens might think central institutional sources have the responsibility and capability to deliver local government-related messages (Chen, 2017), through which they are less likely to generate perceptual sensitivity toward informational incongruity.

Finally, perceived social media source credibility did not moderate the relationship between attention to COVID-19 information and the evaluation of government performance (i.e., central, local). Still, the direct negative effect of perceived social media credibility on the evaluation of central government performance is interesting insofar as it sharply contrasts with the positive effects of perceived performance of central and local institution source credibility. This resonates with Zhang and Guo's (2019) finding that consuming news from nongovernmental sources on social media negatively influences satisfaction with the government in mainland China.

Theoretically, the present study first extends Eveland's (2001) cognitive mediation model by revealing the impacts of information attention and elaboration on the formation of political attitude based on the effect of attitudinal policy feedback (related to policy feedback

theory) (Campbell, 2012; Pacheco, 2013). The extent to which individuals' attention to COVID-19 information could influence their evaluation of government performance is not only contingent on the policy awareness that is influenced by cognitive elaboration through active information attention, but also related to the perceived policy benefits that are jointly shaped by various contextual factors such as tangibility, social attention, and outcomes of government's policies. Second, the present study has further expanded the effect of attitudinal policy feedback by linking it with persuasion theory and showing how different kinds of perceived source credibility can modify the relationship between information attention and political attitudes. The current study has shown how the effects of policy awareness and perceived policy benefits on political attitudes also depend on how individuals process the heuristic cues of their consumed information, such as source credibility. Third, the current study also contributes to the research on the impacts of information source credibility on information processing and political attitude, especially for those in the context of mainland China. Although numerous studies have shown the positive persuasive impacts of source credibility, the present study has depicted the negative effects of source credibility on information processing and attitude formation by investigating the perspective of informational incongruity (Baker & Petty, 1994; Karmarkar & Tormala, 2009).

Practically, in the public health crisis, the attitudinal discrepancy between central and local governments in terms of the public's political attitude suggests that local governments need to increase their efforts to frequently communicate their policies and measures with the public to minimize the tensions and conflicts with the public when implementing specific policies. This is particularly important for both central and local governments to mobilize local media agencies and social media channels to frequently express their voices with transparency. Moreover, perceived source credibility matters in COVID-19 information processing, and it is tightly associated with trust in the source-indicated object (e.g., governmental institutions). Thus, conducting risk communication in advance with the public as a strategic management of the government's public image could be an effective pathway to enhance institutional trust in a short period; in addition, developing effective and long-term strategies to foster citizens' trust in institutions at multiple levels (e.g., central, local) is more critical for government to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Limitations and Future Directions

Some limitations should be acknowledged and addressed in future research. First, the sociodemographic profile of the sample was somewhat different from the general population because the survey was mostly conducted online. However, online surveys were perhaps the most efficient and feasible method of data collection because of the social distancing measures during the pandemic. As advised by prior methodological and empirical studies (Qian & Fan, 2020), we adjusted various sociodemographic characteristics in our analysis. Future studies may try various sampling methods to obtain a population-based representative sample. Second, the evaluation of government performance was measured based on a single item, which is problematic regarding the internal validity of the measurement. However, previous studies have used a similar single item to assess government performance during the COVID-19 outbreak (Altıparmakı et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2021). Future studies can use validated scales to gauge citizens' evaluations of government performance. Third, the present study only measured the general attention to COVID-19 information but did not examine such information attention based on different sources, which may cause difficulties in explaining the moderating role of perceived credibility of different sources. Fourth, the survey method might result in bias of social desirability when measuring the variables of government performance evaluation. Future research should utilize multiple items for

measuring government performance, in addition to further exploring COVID-19 information consumption at more than two levels of government.

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Figures**Figure 1**

Interaction Effect of Attention to COVID-19 Information and Perceived Credibility of Central Institutional Sources on the Evaluation of Central Government Performance

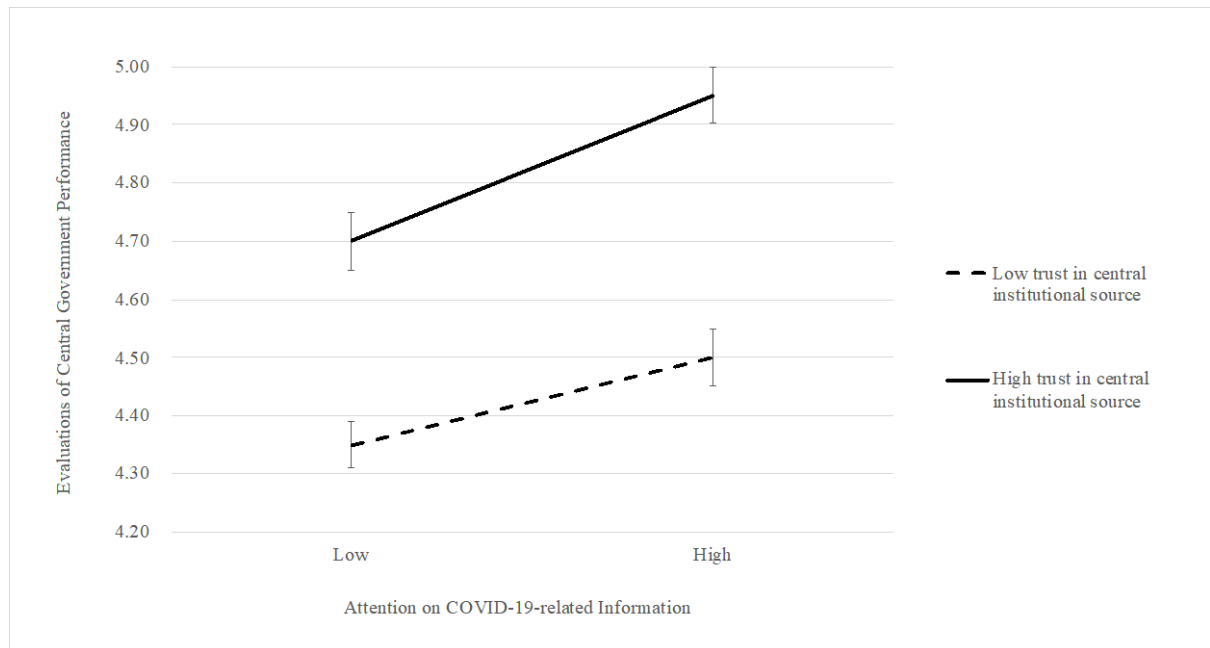


Figure 2

Interaction Effect of Attention to COVID-19 Information and Perceived Credibility of Local Institutional Sources on the Evaluation of Local Government Performance

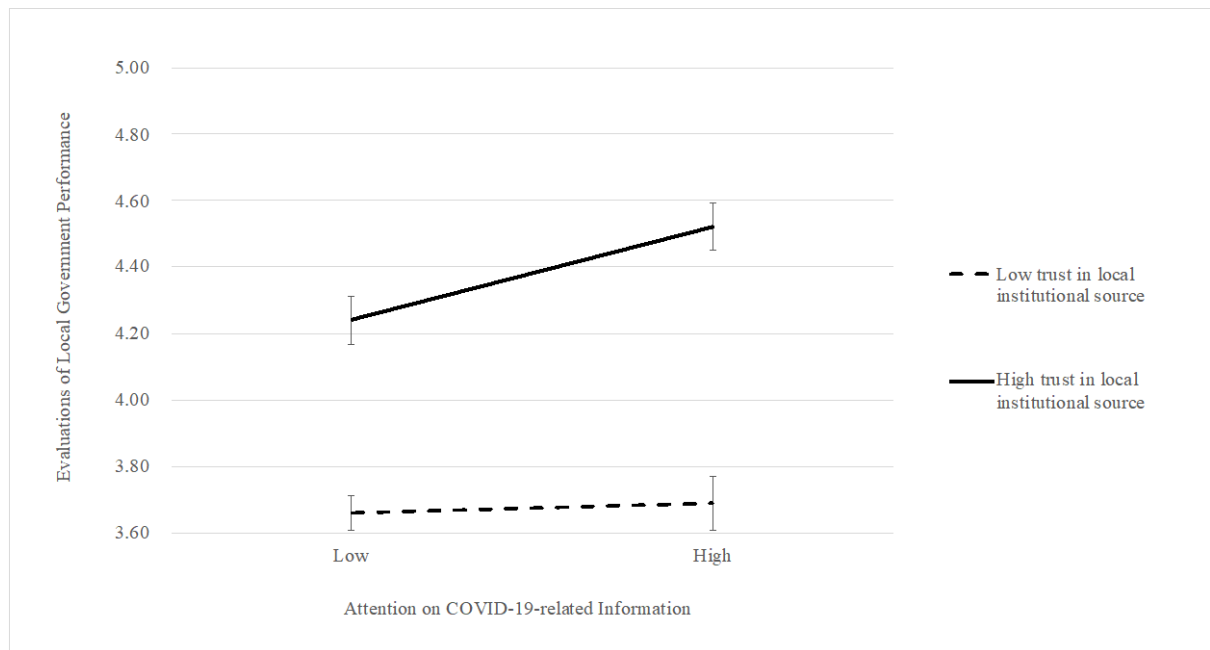
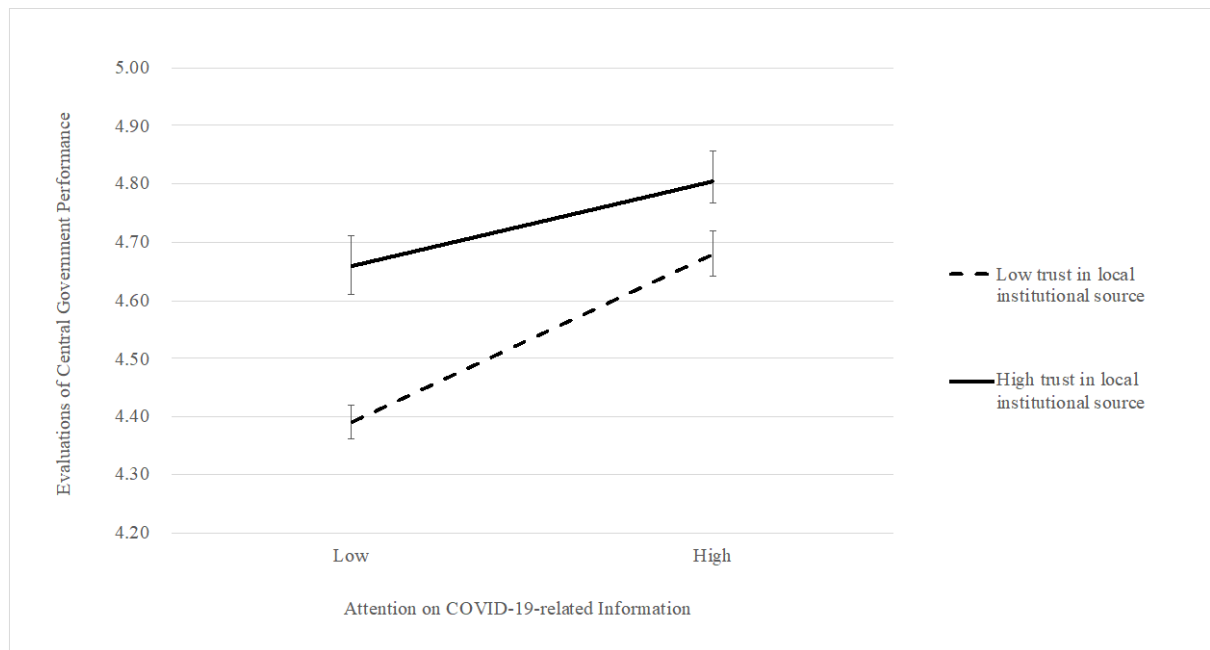


Figure 3

Interaction Effect of Attention to COVID-19 Information and Perceived Credibility of Local Institutional Sources on the Evaluation of Central Government Performance



Tables**Table 1***Descriptive Statistics of Dependent and Independent Variables*

Variable	Wave 1		Wave 2	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Evaluation of central government performance	4.68	0.64	4.57	0.74
Evaluation of local government performance	3.83	1.08	4.24	0.94
Attention to COVID-19 information	3.78	0.37	3.68	0.42
Perceived credibility of central institutional source	4.49	0.57	4.55	0.63
Perceived credibility of local institutional source	4.10	0.68	4.26	0.72
Perceived credibility of social media source	3.61	0.93	3.59	0.91

Table 2

Main Effects and Interactions of Attention to COVID-19 Information and Perceived Credibility of Different Sources on the Evaluation of Government Performance

Variable	Evaluation of central government performance			Evaluation of local government performance		
	Model 1.1	Model 1.2	Model 1.3	Model 2.1	Model 2.2	Model 2.3
	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)
Attention to COVID-19 information	0.563*** (0.028)	0.291*** (0.028)	0.376* (0.148)	0.528*** (0.043)	0.162*** (0.043)	-0.178 (0.223)
Perceived credibility of central institutional source		0.343*** (0.021)	-0.008 (0.137)		0.149*** (0.031)	0.444* (0.207)
Perceived credibility of local institutional source		0.156*** (0.018)	0.541*** (0.138)		0.488*** (0.028)	-0.343 (0.208)
Perceived credibility of social media source		-0.041*** (0.011)	0.055 (0.111)		0.016 (0.017)	0.235 (0.168)
<i>Attention to information × perceived credibility of various sources</i>						
Attention to COVID-19 information × Perceived credibility of central institutional source			0.099* (0.039)			-0.083 (0.058)
Attention to COVID-19 information × Perceived credibility of local institutional source			-0.107** (0.038)			0.229*** (0.057)
Attention to COVID-19 information × Perceived credibility of social media source			-0.025 (0.029)			-0.060 (0.044)
Wave (ref: Wave 1)						
Wave 2	-0.062** (0.020)	-0.132*** (0.019)	-0.131*** (0.019)	0.490*** (0.030)	0.367*** (0.029)	0.356*** (0.029)

$p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Note. SE = Standard errors in parentheses. All models were adjusted for socio-demographics (e.g., age, sex, education, Communist Party membership, rural/urban area, and neighborhood types), risk exposure, and local infection rate.