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Judgements of Propaganda Near and Far: National Identity and Media Evaluations

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ABSTRACT

Western media often critiques foreign governments for their propaganda efforts while ignoring similar efforts by their own government. We predicted that individuals would demonstrate a similar bias. An experiment with 282 Canadian participants revealed just the opposite: when asked overtly, participants judged a video attributed to their own government to be more like propaganda than identical foreign media. When asked covertly (e.g., about the video's bias), we observed no effect, and national identity was not a moderator for Canadians. In a direct replication, Americans ($N = 457$) also judged domestic videos as more like propaganda than foreign ones, whether perceptions of propaganda were measured overtly or covertly. This difference was especially true of those lower and average in national identity, compared to those higher. A follow-up study demonstrated that Americans ($N = 380$) who are left-leaning are more likely to show this bias against domestic media, compared to those who are centrist or right-leaning. These studies demonstrate that people can be more critical of their own government's messaging relative to the same messaging by a foreign power, the opposite of holding a self-serving double standard.

1 | Introduction

Recognizing our own flaws can be difficult, whereas finding these very same flaws in others tends to be effortless (Ross 1977). Does something similar occur for extensions of our identity, such as national identity? In this set of experiments, we ask whether people judge the media of foreign nations as more like propaganda than their own nation's media, and whether this is more pronounced for those who strongly identify with their country. Do we judge our own country more harshly than foreign ones? To investigate, we employed two tightly controlled pre-registered experiments, including a cross-cultural replication and a follow-up study. Participants judged the degree to which ostensibly government-made videos are like propaganda, with the video attributed to either their own country or a foreign one.

1.1 | What Is Propaganda?

Every nation can be judged on a multitude of factors, such as personal freedom, healthcare, education or infrastructure (Porter et al. 2014). However, the use of propaganda—media produced with an intent to persuade—is one of the only means by which governments can rally support for their actions (e.g., advertisements touting public transit projects) or encourage action on behalf of citizens. As a medium, government propaganda necessarily communicates national values and champions causes that align with government agendas (Bernays 2005). Given its association with the manipulation of the masses (often during wartime), the term 'propaganda' has long had serious negative connotations (Lasswell 1928). However, its conceptual definition contains more nuance. In its original usage, propaganda merely meant to 'propagate or disseminate information', derived from

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the Latin verb *propagare* (Kim n.d.; Simpson and Weiner 1989). A modern definition, from the field of communications, is as follows:

> Propaganda is neutrally defined as a systematic form of purposeful persuasion that attempts to influence the emotions, attitudes, opinions, and actions of specified target audiences for ideological, political or commercial purposes. (Nelson 1996)

Although there is an abundance of theories and conceptualizations regarding propaganda, this definition aptly summarizes most scholarship on the subject (Cull et al., 2003).

According to the definition above, all governments produce propaganda. Whether it is encouraging citizens to recycle or enlist in the military, these messages involve systematic attempts to persuade citizens. Although propaganda can technically be positive or negative in nature, lay beliefs surrounding propaganda are predominantly negative because the term is often used in association with totalitarian regimes such as Communist China (Pew Research Center 2021). As Douglas Walton writes in his article, 'What Is Propaganda, and What Exactly Is Wrong With It?':

> The term 'propaganda' has such highly negative connotations that people tend to see only the arguments of their opposition as describable with this label, as if their own arguments could never be.

This quote summarizes how propaganda is seen as so despicable that it invites usage only for one's opponents, and never for one's own actions. Our study examines whether this generalizes to the media produced by one's own nation, versus a foreign one.

1.2 | Asymmetrical Judgements of Propaganda

Western media has long relished the opportunity to report on foreign propaganda efforts. For example, the American magazine *Variety* frequently reports on Chinese propaganda in the film industry (Davis 2021). Although this is certainly worth reporting, *Variety* avoids similar critiques that could be levelled at its own government. The US Department of Defense (DoD) plays a critical role in curating how the military is portrayed in film (Keegan 2011), but this involvement hardly seems controversial or notable as propaganda when the focus is on China. Entertainment magazines have openly reported on actors and directors being invited to spend time at the CIA's headquarters without critique (Jenkins 2016), and the DoD's Twitter account publicly champions their efforts to influence Hollywood films:

> It's #Oscars90 Sunday and did you know the #DoD works with #Hollywood to ensure the #military is correctly portrayed in films? (@DeptofDefense 2018)

When it comes to China, Western media considers the meddling of the government in mass media to be newsworthy propaganda. But when it comes to their own nation, this same criticism often remains absent. Of course, the free press can also play an important role in critiquing the government and acting as a whistleblower when power is being abused. However, when it comes to propaganda, there has historically been a greater sensitivity towards the actions of foreign governments. As one scholar put it, 'After World War I the word [propaganda] came to be applied to what you don't like of the other fellow's publicity' (McKean and Mac Kean 1949).

This asymmetry between judgements of foreign and domestic propaganda may appear in mainstream Western media, but it is unclear whether this also exists at the individual level. Our goal was to examine whether people are prone to judge government propaganda from foreign nations more harshly, simply by virtue of it being foreign. In this way, judgements of foreign propaganda may mimic judgements of others, whereas judgements of domestic propaganda may mimic judgements of the self.

1.3 | Asymmetrical Judgements of the Self and Others

Judging others more harshly than ourselves is far from a new phenomenon, and within psychology, this is known as moral hypocrisy (Batson et al. 1999; Hale and Pillow 2015). One factor that drives this asymmetry is that critiquing others is not as costly as noticing our own flaws: reflecting on our own flaws involves confronting feelings of discomfort, regret or guilt (Tangney 1991; Smith et al. 2002; Wolf et al. 2010). Since these negative feelings often motivate a desire to change, one is now responsible for doing something about these flaws (De Hooge et al. 2010; Lickel et al. 2014). To avoid the personal cost of change, we are often motivated to explain away poor behaviours on our own part to avoid cognitive dissonance (Kunda 1990; Festinger 1957).

Another possible explanation for asymmetrical judgements lies in our ability to justify our own behaviour. We have an unparalleled amount of information about ourselves and often rely on this extra information to justify our own poor behaviours. It is easy to feel less guilty for snapping at someone when we know we have not slept well for the past few days. In contrast, we lack the same information about the sleeping habits of others that might usefully explain their flawed behaviours. This asymmetry is the basis for the fundamental attribution error, in which negative judgements of others are attributed to their intrinsic quality, whereas the same judgements of the self are attributed to contextual factors (Ross 1977; Berry and Frederickson 2015; Hooper et al. 2015). Apart from over-attending to the contextual factors that might excuse our own behaviour, we can also fall prey to the belief that we are more multifaceted than others (Sande et al. 1988). This belief in our multifaceted nature can easily justify our negative actions by focusing on our positive attributes (i.e., self-serving bias; Heider 1958; Campbell and Sedikides 1999). Although an asymmetry in judgements of the self versus others is well-established, one aspect that has not been explored as often is whether this asymmetry extends to broader aspects of the self. Do similar errors in judgement also occur for extensions of the self, like when comparing one's own nation with a foreign nation?

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1.4 | Nations as Extensions of the Self

The nature of one's self-concept includes factors related to one's surroundings and individual roles, called 'self-extensions' (e.g., I am a dentist, I am a mother, I am Estonian; Rosenberg 1986; Lancaster and Foddy 1988). National identity is one salient self-extension, in which one's sense of belonging to their nation informs how they see themselves as an individual (Huddy and Khatib 2007). Contemporary work on national identity stems from empirical work demonstrating a tendency to create self-extensions for one's group, even when the nature of that group is rooted in the most trivial of ties (e.g., our group overestimates dots in a guessing task; Tajfel 1970; see also Tajfel 1974; Clement and Krueger 2002; Gramzow and Gaertner 2005). Compared to these meaningless group ties, national identity represents a far more meaningful and influential self-extension, since it is shaped by powerful cultural narratives (Hammack 2008). Because we draw clear distinctions between the self and others that bias our judgements, it follows that we are likely to do the same with respect to our own nation and other nations, based on a sense of national identity. In other words, national identity may cloud judgements of our own nation in the same way we experience clouded judgements of the self, clarifying judgements of foreign nations, much like when judging others.

Empirical research confirms this idea that we are biased towards viewing our own nation positively and other nations more harshly. For example, citizens appear to overestimate the role of their own nation in world history (Zaromb et al. 2018). This is akin to the form of self-enhancement known as the better-than-average effect, observed at the level of individuals (Zell et al. 2020). Citizens also seem to hold stereotyped and positive representations of their own nation (Hirshberg 1993). This can translate into a fundamental attribution error at the national level, whereby positive actions by a country are attributed to its nature, and negative actions are seen as a function of some contextual influence (Hirshberg 1993). These biases also affect how we process information regarding other nations, in particular enemy nations (Silverstein and Flamenbaum 1989). This bias can lead citizens to judge identical actions more harshly when they are attributed to an enemy nation, relative to one's own, in what has become known as the double standards effect (Oskamp 1965; Ashmore et al. 1979). This positive bias we have towards our own country can also extend to our allied countries in a conflict (Ashmore et al. 1979). In our research, we investigate whether this double standards effect generalizes to any foreign nation, and not just enemy nations. We also investigate whether this effect might be moderated by national identity.

Strength of national identity, like any self-extension, varies across individuals (Huddy and Khatib 2007). The more central one's nation is to their identity, the more likely it seems that a self-other distinction will exist when judging foreign nations. For those with a strong sense of national identity, criticisms of the nation may be experienced as self-criticisms, encouraging relatively harsher judgements of foreign nations. Citizenship in any given nation has a large influence on quality of life (Poushter 2020). Therefore, those with a strong sense of national identity may also be more motivated to see their own nation in a favourable light, and more susceptible to harshly judging other nations. This results from a greater personal stake in one's own country relative to a foreign one. When it comes to critiquing government media, citizens may be motivated to ignore instances of domestic propaganda to avoid questioning their own national identity.

2 | Current Research

In our first experiment, we examine whether judgements of one's own nation differ from those for foreign nations, with respect to propaganda. The propaganda employed in these studies are videos that are presented as government-sponsored messages. We tested two hypotheses: (1) videos will be seen more like propaganda when they ostensibly originate from a foreign government, relative to one's own; and (2) this effect will be stronger among those who score higher in national identity. This experiment was conducted first with Canadians, and then a second experiment replicated the results of the first with Americans. A third study gathered additional data from these American participants to test the influence of other potential moderators (e.g., political orientation). All research was pre-registered, and all materials, data and analysis code are publicly available (https://aspredicted.org/f98dn.pdf; https://osf.io/h28d9).

3 | Study 1. Method

3.1 | Participants

Participants were recruited from the crowd-sourcing platform Prolific Academic. We recruited monocultural Canadians because a bicultural identity would influence perceptions of foreign media. Participants had to be (1) born in Canada, (2) monolingual, (3) monocultural and (4) could not have a history of living abroad. We collected data from 304 participants. Following our pre-registered exclusion criteria, we removed participants who did not consent to have their data used ($n = 1$), failed the attention checks ($n = 11$) and had more than 5% of their data missing ($n = 1$). In addition, we employed two other exclusion criteria that were not pre-registered but were enacted prior to any hypothesis testing. First, we elected to remove participants who were not born in Canada or were not Canadian citizens (as per the requirements to participate, $n = 2$). Second, to increase the validity of our data by reducing demand characteristics, we also removed participants who indicated that they knew the study was about propaganda ($n = 7$). After exclusions, we were left with a final sample of 282, with an average age of 32.45 years ($SD = 11.65$) that was predominantly composed of women (69%). A post-hoc sensitivity analysis indicated that with a minimum of 282 participants, a two-group comparison has 80% power to detect effects equal to $d = 0.24$ or larger ({pwr} package; Champeley 2020).

3.2 | Independent Variable: Country of Origin

The independent variable was country of origin: domestic or foreign. In the domestic condition, all videos were portrayed as created in Canada and in reference to Canada. In the foreign condition, videos were attributed to one of the following three countries: Ecuador, Japan or Armenia. Results across these three countries were collapsed to form the foreign condition. Using a

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FIGURE 1 | *Example of videos for national and foreign conditions.*

counterbalanced within-subjects design in which all randomized variables were presented equally across the entire sample, participants were exposed to both the Canadian and foreign conditions, allowing us to assess judgements of propaganda for media originating in one's own nation (Canadian) compared to other nations (foreign) with maximum power (Maxwell et al. 2017).

3.2.1 | Foreign Country Selection

We included several countries for the foreign condition to ensure that judgements of foreign videos were not dependent on one particular country. The selection of these countries was carefully considered, taking into account both reputation and perceived foreignness of the nation. We selected countries that were perceived as distant from Canada in their culture, but without a widely held negative reputation. For example, if we were to present videos from Australia or the United Kingdom, we may not detect a difference from Canadian videos because Canadians view these countries as similar to their own. On the other hand, countries like China or Russia are seen as quite different from Canada. However, any difference in judgements could be easily attributed to the fact that Canadians are likely to hold these countries in contempt thanks to their global reputations (Silver et al. 2021; Vice 2020). Because we are interested in the effect of foreignness, and not a country's reputation, we avoided including countries whose reputations would influence judgements of perceived propaganda.

Fortunately, cultural psychologists have created a publicly available database that contains the 'cultural distance' score between any two given countries (Bell et al. n.d.). Cultural distance refers to how similar or different countries are in terms of their values (Schwartz 2014), and this cultural distance score is based on responses to the World Values Survey (World Values Survey Association, 2014). To determine which countries to use for our foreign condition, we selected 16 countries with a high cultural distance score compared to Canada, and whose reputations were not obviously in question (e.g., not China, Russia). Next, we ran a pilot study using an undergraduate sample of monocultural Canadians at York University (N = 67) to determine which countries had the most favourable reputation of the group. This pilot study identified three countries that were maximally distant, but most neutral in reputation: Japan (Reputation = 2.67 [scores are out of 5 and higher scores indicate a more positive reputation]; Cultural Distance = 3.26), Armenia (Reputation = 2.24; Cultural Distance = 4.13) and Ecuador (Reputation = 2.23; Cultural Distance = 4.05).

3.3 | Stimuli

3.3.1 | Topics

Due to the within-subjects design, it was necessary to present two videos with different topics, which also increases the generalizability of any result. Participants therefore saw one video promoting national pride and another promoting the capital city's police. Topics were counterbalanced both in their order and between countries (Figure 2). Both are examples of government media that could be perceived as propaganda.

3.3.2 | Videos

Videos were carefully crafted to be identical apart from their national origin. People were depicted with race-neutral cartoons, and the text, style and music were identical across conditions (Figure 1). Each video was short (i.e., 37 seconds), with messages conveyed via text on screen in both English and the language of the ostensible country of origin. Participants watched one video for each condition, Canadian and Foreign, with order randomly determined, and the two topics were also randomized and counterbalanced (Figure 2). All videos are available on our OSF.

3.4 | Measures

All measures employed a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly disagree*).

3.4.1 | Perceived Propaganda (Covert and Overt Measures)

Unfortunately, there is no established measure of the degree to which something is viewed as propaganda. Although a great deal of psychology research on propaganda exists (e.g., Doob 1935; Sproule 1987; Marek 2008; Chakotin 2017; Huang and Cruz 2021), none have measured the degree to which participants consider something to be propaganda.

We therefore developed a covert measure of propaganda consisting of 4 items, along with a single-item overtly measuring propaganda. The covert measure contained items that were derived from prior work on propaganda (Doob 1935; Lasswell 1928, Cull et al. 2003), reflecting the four critical components of propaganda: Persuasion, Bias, Emotion and Symbolism.

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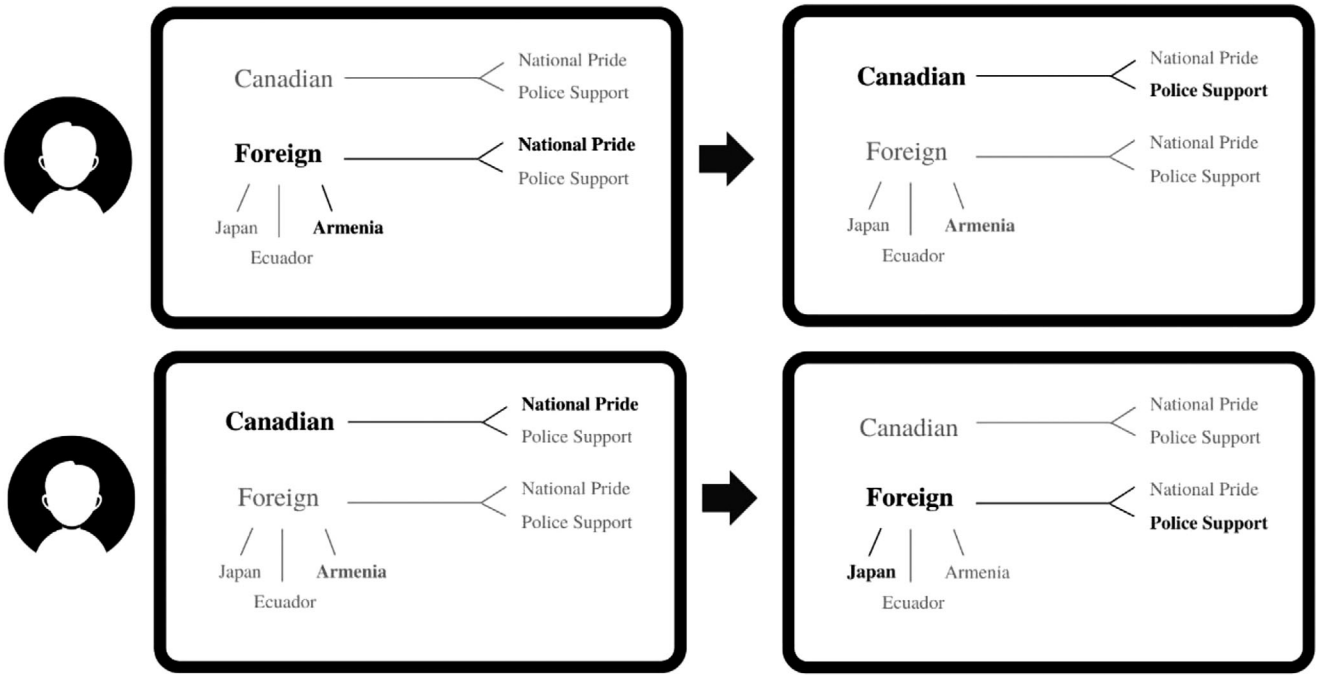

FIGURE 2 | *Study design. Note*: Every participant saw a Canadian and a foreign video and saw both topics (National Pride and Police Support). Every aspect was randomized and counterbalanced (i.e., country of origin, foreign country presented and topic).

Consequently, we employed the following four items to measure these aspects: (1) The creators of this video are trying to be persuasive; (2) This video is biased; (3) This video uses emotion to convince the audience of something and (4) This video uses symbols to change the mind of the audience. Responses were averaged across these four items to form our covert measure of propaganda. Internal reliability was somewhat low for this measure, likely due to the fact that these items measure notably different aspects of propaganda (Video 1: $\omega = 0.55$, 95% CI: 0.43, 0.63; Video 2: $\omega = 0.60$, 95% CI: 0.50, 0.67). Intermixed with these items were six filler questions intended to conceal the purpose of the study by obscuring our measurement of propaganda. These items related to the aesthetic properties of the video and were not analysed (e.g., 'This video is creative').

Because our covert measure was new and untested, it was imperative that we ask participants directly whether the videos they watched could be classified as propaganda to ensure we captured this construct. This overt item was simply: 'This video about [Country] was propaganda'. This item was presented at the end of the study, after participants described what they thought the study was about, so as not to contaminate our probe for suspicion about the study's purpose. Moderately positive correlations between the covert and overt measures suggest that our covert measure had construct validity (Video 1 $r = 0.41$; Video 2 $r = 0.41$).

3.4.2 | Country Reputation

To rule out an alternative explanation for any condition differences, we measured the reputation of the foreign countries. Believing that a country has a poor reputation may lead to foreign media being judged as propaganda solely due to this reputation, so we controlled for this possibility (which was not of interest). Each country's reputation was measured using three items: (1) [Country] is democratic, (2) [Country] is controlling (reversed), and (3) [Country] is a fair place to live. Responses were averaged across these items, with higher scores indicating a more positive reputation ($\omega = 0.68$; 95% CI: 0.59, 0.77). The same questions were asked about Canada, but consistent with our pre-registration, we did not analyse these data ($\omega = 0.68$; 95% CI: 0.60, 0.75).

3.4.3 | Cultural Distance

As a manipulation check, to ensure that the foreign countries were perceived as culturally different from Canada, we measured cultural distance using three items: (1) [Country] is foreign to me, (2) [Country] feels far away to me and (3) The average person from [Country] is quite different from myself. Responses were averaged with higher scores indicating greater distance, foreign: $\omega = 0.60$; 95% CI: 0.49, 0.68; Canada: $\omega = 0.68$; 95% CI: 0.56, 0.78.

3.4.4 | National Identity

National Identity was hypothesized to act as a moderator and was measured using two scales. First, we adapted the Inclusion of the Other in the Self (IOS) scale to create the Canadian-IOS (CAN-IOS), which employs pairs of overlapping circles to assess the degree to which another target is incorporated into one's sense of self (Aron et al. 1992; Figure 3). We presented six overlapping circles labelled with 'Self' and 'Canada', and participants were asked to select the pair of overlapping circles that best represent how much Canada overlaps with their sense of self. We also measured national identity using items from work on American national identity, just adapted for Canadians (Huddy and Khatib

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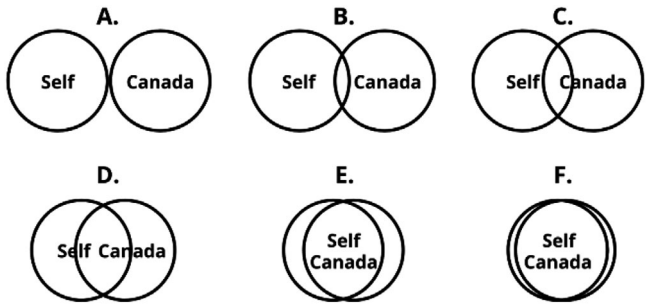

FIGURE 3 | *Adapted IOS scale.*

2007). The four items on a 5-point scale were: (1) 'How important is being Canadian to you?,' (2) 'To what extent do you see yourself as a typical Canadian?,' (3) 'How well does the term Canadian describe you?' and (4) 'When talking about Canadians, how often do you say "we" instead of "they"?'. Internal reliability was high for these items, $\omega = 0.80$ (95% CI: 0.73, 0.85).

3.5 | Procedure

Those who met our eligibility criteria and elected to participate were directed to a Qualtrics survey (www.Qualtrics.com). The study was presented as being about evaluating the aesthetic quality of infographic videos. After providing consent, participants watched the first video (Canadian or foreign), then completed the covert propaganda measure. Participants also completed an attention check, asking them about the national origin of the video. Next, participants watched the second video (condition and topic opposite to the first), completed the covert propaganda measure and an identical attention check. After watching both videos, participants were probed for suspicion by asking about the study aims. Finally, participants responded to the overt propaganda item for each video. We then collected demographics and measured national identity (order randomized). The final section included the Reputation and Distance measures for the countries. An exit consent was then presented, along with a debriefing.

4 | Study 1. Results

4.1 | Manipulation Check

As intended, participants rated the countries in the foreign condition as culturally and physically distant ($M = 4.17$, $med = 4.33$, $SD = 0.6$), whereas Canada was perceived as near ($M = 1.60$, $med = 1.33$, $SD = 0.60$). All other descriptive statistics appear in the Supplementary Materials on our OSF.

4.2 | Country-of-Origin Effects

4.2.1 | Linear Mixed-Effects Models

Our pre-registered analyses employed linear mixed-effects models (LMMs) using the {lmer} package in R (Kuznetsova et al. 2017; R Core Team 2022). The two propaganda ratings were nested within participants, so all analyses account for participant-level variance by including a random intercept for participant ID. According to our pre-registration, we originally planned on averaging across both the covert items and overt items to create a single 'propaganda score'. We not only report this total score analysis in our results but also report a more conceptually appropriate analysis that treats these measures as distinct. Although this latter analysis was done exploratorily in Study 1, we pre-registered our replication to treat the covert and overt measures as distinct in Study 2.

4.2.2 | Total Score Model

In the total score model, propaganda scores (covert and overt aggregated) were the outcome variable, and national origin was the main predictor. Various factors were controlled as fixed effects, including the video topic (i.e., police or national pride), whether the foreign or domestic video was shown first, and foreign reputation. After controlling for these variables, we did not observe strong evidence for condition differences in total propaganda ratings (overt and covert combined) between Canadian videos ($M_{adj} = 3.62$, $SE = 0.04$) and foreign videos ($M_{adj} = 3.57$, $SE = 0.04$), $b = -0.05$ (95% CI: −0.13, 0.03), $t(281) = -1.11$, $p = 0.27$, $d = 0.09$ (95% CI: −0.07, 0.26).

4.2.3 | Distinct Models: Covert and Overt Perceptions of Propaganda

Separate models were then created for covert and overt ratings of propaganda (an exploratory, non–pre-registered analysis).

Covert propaganda ratings. Identical to our pre-registered model, national origin was modelled as the main predictor of covert propaganda scores, controlling for order of conditions and topics, and foreign reputation (as fixed effects). Participant variance was controlled as a random effect. After controlling for these variables, we observed no effect of condition on covert propaganda ratings, with judgements of Canadian videos ($M_{adj} = 3.68$, $SE = 0.04$) not appreciably different from foreign videos ($M_{adj} = 3.70$, $SE = 0.04$), $b = 0.01$ (95% CI: −0.06, 0.09), $t(281) = 0.32$, $p = .75$, $d = -0.03$ (95% CI: −0.19, 0.14).

Overt propaganda ratings. A second model for overt judgements was created, identical to the first in terms of fixed and random effects. This model revealed an effect of condition on overt ratings, with participants rating Canadian videos ($M_{adj} = 3.34$, $SE = 0.07$) to be more like propaganda than foreign ones ($M_{adj} = 3.06$, $SE = 0.07$), $b = -0.28$ (95% CI: −0.43, −0.13), $t(281) = -3.58$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.30$ (95% CI: 0.14, 0.47). This result was opposite to what we hypothesized.

4.3 | Moderation by Canadian National Identity

To examine whether national identity moderates the association between condition (Canadian or foreign) and perceptions of propaganda, we included origin of the video and national identity as interaction terms predicting the dependent variables: covert and overt propaganda ratings. We analysed each national identity

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measure separately (national identity items and CAN-IOS), and the control variables were the same as our original LMMs.

4.3.1 | Total Score

Contrary to our hypothesis, there was no evidence of moderation by national identity for total propaganda scores. This was true for both the national identity items and the CAN-IOS, national identity items: $b = 0.03$ (95% CI: −0.08, 0.15), $t(280) = 0.58$, $p = 0.56$; CAN-IOS: $b = 0.01$ (95% CI: −0.06, 0.07), $t(280) = 0.23$, $p = 0.82$.

4.3.2 | Covert Ratings

There was also no evidence of moderation by national identity for covert propaganda scores, for neither measure of national identity, national identity items: $b = 0.02$ (95% CI: −0.09, 0.13), $SE = 0.06$, $t(280) = 0.36$, $p = 0.72$; CAN-IOS: $b = 0.00$ (95% CI: −0.06, 0.07), $t(280) = 0.12$, $p = 0.91$.

4.3.3 | Overt Ratings

No evidence of moderation was observed for the overt propaganda scores, national identity items: $b = 0.09$ (95% CI: −0.13, 0.31), $t(280) = 0.81$, $p = .42$; CAN-IOS: $b = 0.02$ (95% CI: −0.10, 0.15), $t(280) = 0.36$, $p = 0.72$.

5 | Study 2. Introduction

After the unexpected results from our Canadian sample—harsher overt judgements of domestic media relative to foreign—we decided to run the same experiment with an American sample. This allowed us to determine whether the effects we observed would replicate in another cultural context or if the effects were specific to a Canadian cultural context. Our cross-cultural replication study also improves on Study 1 by employing a larger sample size for greater precision in estimating effects. Since we observed an effect of video condition on overt judgements in Study 1, such that domestic videos were seen as more like propaganda, we expected the same effect to emerge with the American sample. We also suspected that this would emerge for both the overt and covert conditions thanks to the larger sample. These hypotheses were pre-registered and we specified that we would analyse covert and overt propaganda ratings separately (https://aspredicted.org/sjc8-vpbw.pdf). Although we anticipated that Americans would view domestic government media as more like propaganda than foreign media, we did not predict any moderation, as none was observed in Study 1. Instead, this possibility was investigated in an exploratory fashion.

6 | Study 2a. Method

6.1 | Participants

To maximize statistical power in our replication, we aimed to collect nearly double the number of participants from Study 1 before exclusions. We collected data from 518 American participants on Prolific. Of these participants, only 19 correctly identified that the study was about propaganda, and these cases were removed. After using the same exclusion criteria as in Study 1 (consent, attention checks, missing data, and citizenship) we had 457[1] participants (93% culturally North American/Western European), with an average age of 41.64 years ($SD = 13.85$), with a gender balanced sample (female: 44%, male: 53%, other response: 3%). Based on a post-hoc sensitivity analysis, a sample this size can detect effect sizes of Cohen's $d = 0.19$ or higher, with 80% power ({pwr} package; Champeley 2020).

6.2 | Measures

All measures were the same as those in Study 1 but adapted for an American sample. Internal reliability for the covert measure of propaganda was low (Video 1 $\omega = 0.51$; 95% CI: 0.42, 0.59; Video 2 $\omega = 0.57$; 95% CI: 0.50, 0.64), but the correlations between covert and overt measures again provided evidence of construct validity (Video 1 $r = 0.45$; Video 2 $r = 0.43$). Reliabilities for foreign reputation ($\omega = 0.67$; 95% CI: 0.60, 0.73), cultural distance (foreign: $\omega = 0.65$; 95% CI: .58, 0.71; US: $\omega = 0.71$; 95% CI: 0.64, 0.77), and national identity items ($\omega = 0.83$; 95% CI: 0.79, 0.86) were similar to in Study 1.

6.3 | Procedure

The procedure for the American sample was identical in every way to the methods presented for Study 1, but simply adapted for the US sample. The IOS for Americans is referred to as AM-IOS. All materials, data and analysis code are publicly available on our OSF.

7 | Study 2a. Results

7.1 | Cultural Distance

As intended, participants rated the foreign countries as culturally and physically distant ($M = 4.18$, $med = 4.33$, $SD = 0.67$), whereas America was rated as near ($M = 1.75$, $med = 1.67$, $SD = 0.71$). Descriptives for all measures appear in our Supplementary Materials on OSF.

7.2 | Country-of-Origin Effects

7.2.1 | Covert Propaganda Ratings

LMMs were constructed as in Study 1. As predicted, there was a small effect of condition on covert ratings, such that participants rated American videos ($M_{adj} = 3.82$, $SE = 0.03$) as more like propaganda than foreign videos ($M_{adj} = 3.76$, $SE = 0.03$), $b = -0.06$ (95% CI: −0.12, −0.01), $t(456) = -2.26$, $p = .02$, $d = 0.15$ (95% CI: 0.02, 0.28).

7.2.2 | Overt Propaganda Ratings

As predicted, and replicating the results of Study 1, participants rated American ($M_{adj} = 3.59$, $SE = 0.06$) videos as more like

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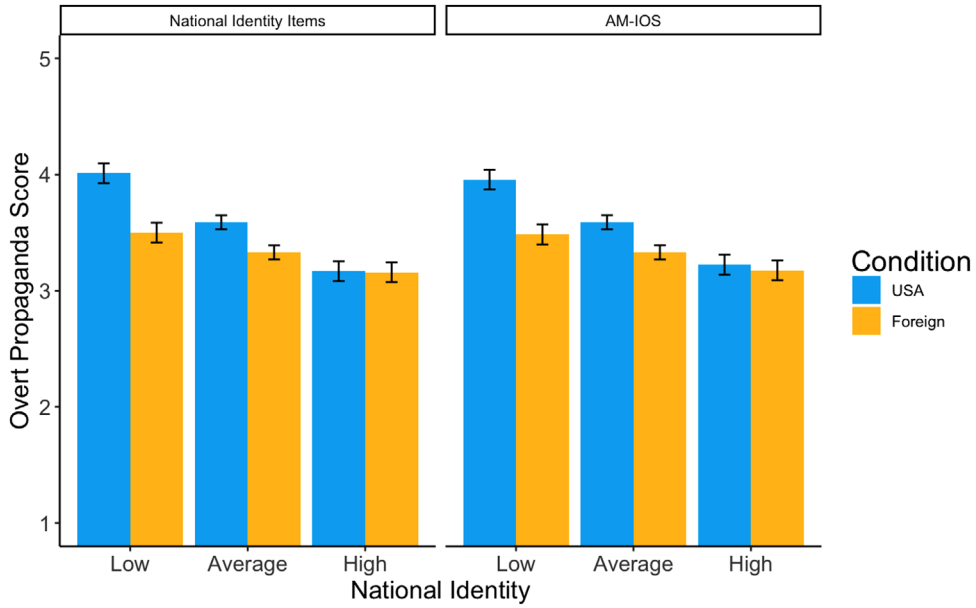

FIGURE 4 | Moderation by American national identity for overt propaganda ratings.

propaganda than foreign videos (M_{adj} = 3.33, SE = 0.06) when asked overtly, b = −0.26 (95% CI: −0.36, −0.16), $t(456)$ = −5.07, $p < 0.001$, d = 0.34 (95% CI: 0.20, 0.47).

7.3 | Moderation by American National Identity

Moderation of the association between ostensible country-of-origin and perceptions of propaganda by national identity was examined as an exploratory analysis. These analyses were not pre-registered, as no moderation was observed in Study 1.

7.3.1 | Covert Ratings

There was no evidence of moderation by national identity for covert propaganda scores using either measure, national identity items: b = 0.03 (95% CI: −0.03, 0.09), $t(455)$ = 1.03, p = 0.30; AM-IOS: b = 0.02 (95% CI: −0.02, 0.06), $t(455)$ = 0.99, p = 0.32.

7.3.2 | Overt Ratings

In contrast to the covert ratings, there was evidence of moderation by national identity for overt propaganda scores, based on both measures, national identity items: b = 0.26 (95% CI: 0.16, 0.37), $t(455)$ = 4.99, $p < 0.001$; AM-IOS: b = 0.15 (95% CI: 0.08, 0.22), $t(455)$ = 4.19, $p < 0.001$. For both models, we probed the interaction by testing condition differences at mean levels of national identity, and one standard deviation below and above this mean. For national identity items, at low and mean levels of national identity, American videos were rated more like propaganda (−1 SD: M_{adj} = 4.01, SE = 0.08; mean: M_{adj} = 3.59, SE = 0.06) compared to foreign videos, −1 SD: M_{adj} = 3.50, SE = 0.08, mean: M_{adj} = 3.33, SE = 0.06; −1 SD: $t(455)$ = 7.20, $p < .001$, d = 0.67 (95% CI: 0.49, 0.86), mean: $t(455)$ = 5.20, $p < .001$, d = 0.34 (95% CI: 0.21, 0.48). At high levels of national identity, however, American videos (+1 SD: M_{adj} = 3.17, SE = 0.08) were rated similarly to foreign videos, M_{adj} = 3.16, SE = 0.08; $t(455)$ = 0.15, p = 0.88, d = 0.01 (95% CI: −0.17, 0.20).

We found similar results with the AM-IOS (see Figure 4), such that at low and mean levels of national identity, American videos were rated to be more like propaganda (−1 SD: M_{adj} = 3.96 SE = 0.09; mean: M_{adj} = 3.59, SE = 0.06) compared to foreign videos, −1 SD: M_{adj} = 3.49, SE = 0.09, mean: M_{adj} = 3.33, SE = 0.06; −1 SD: $t(455)$ = 6.61, $p < 0.001$, d = 0.62 (95% CI: 0.43, 0.81), mean: $t(455)$ = 5.16, $p < 0.001$, d = 0.34 (95% CI: 0.21, 0.47). Once again, at high levels of national identity, American videos (+1 SD: M_{adj} = 3.22, SE = 0.09) were rated similarly to foreign videos, M_{adj} = 3.18, SE = 0.09; $t(455)$ = 0.68, p = 0.49, d = 0.06 (95% CI: −0.12, 0.248).

Although this sample was composed of monocultural Americans who all strongly identified with America, there was still sufficient variability in national identity such that those with lower and average national identity exhibited a bias against domestic media. Those higher in national identity rated both foreign and domestic videos as not like propaganda.

8 | Study 2b. Introduction

In order to build on these results, additional individual differences data from those who participated in Study 2 were collected. This follow-up study measured political orientation, trust in government and willingness to criticize foreign nations. Political orientation was examined as a potential moderator akin to national identity, and the latter two variables were included to investigate whether they predict a bias against domestic media. These predictions and analyses were pre-registered (https://aspredicted.org/2xbk-hnf2.pdf).

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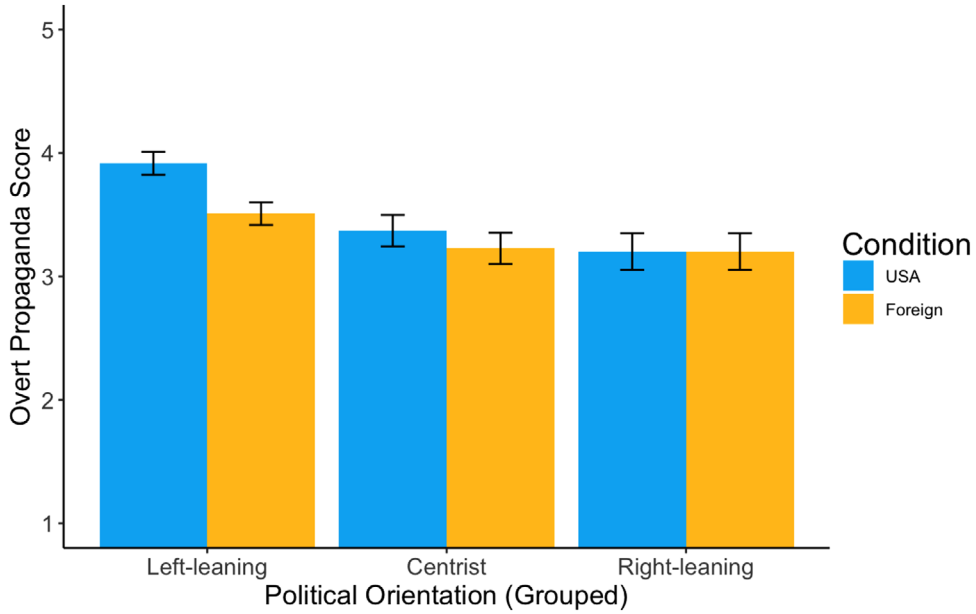

FIGURE 5 | Moderation by political orientation (grouped) for overt propaganda ratings.

9 | Study 2b. Method

9.1 | Participants

We used Prolific Academic to contact and collect additional data from our Study 2 participants. Of the original 457 participants, 380 completed our follow-up study (83%). Accordingly, the average age ($M = 42.00$, $SD = 13.73$) and gender distribution (female: 45%, male: 52%, other responses: 3%) were similar to the full sample of Study 2a.

9.2 | Measures

Political orientation was measured by asking participants, 'Where would you place yourself on the political spectrum from Left to Right?'. A Likert response scale ranged from 1 (*Left*) to 11 (*Right*) with a midpoint of 6 (*Center*). Trust in government was measured using two items and a 5-point Likert scale (*strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*): 'I can trust my government to make fair decisions' and 'I believe the leaders of my country want what is best for the nation'. Willingness to judge foreign nations was also measured with 2 items: 'I feel comfortable pointing out the flaws of foreign nations' and 'It is hard to criticize foreign nations unless you know a lot about them'.

10 | Study 2b. Results

10.1 | Political Orientation

To examine whether political orientation moderates the association between national origin of the video and perceptions of propaganda, the same analysis was employed as in Study 2a (as pre-registered). We did not observe an interaction between condition and political orientation based on the covert measure for propaganda, $b = -0.02$ (95% CI: −0.04, 0.00), $t(378) = -1.76$, $p = 0.08$. However, there was an interaction between condition and political orientation using the overt measure, $b = -0.05$ (95% CI: −0.09, −0.02), $t(378) = -2.90$, $p = 0.004$. The interaction was probed by testing condition differences at three levels of political orientation, creating a grouping variable for 'left-leaning' (1 to 4; $n = 199$, $M = 2.03$, $SD = 1.04$), 'centrist' (5 to 7; $n = 105$, $M = 6.06$, $SD = 0.71$), and 'right-leaning' (8 to 11; $n = 76$, $M = 9.61$, $SD = 1.11$).

As predicted, political orientation behaved much like national identity (Figure 5). Left-leaning participants rated American videos as more like propaganda ($M_{adj} = 3.92$, $SE = 0.09$) than foreign videos ($M_{adj} = 3.51$, $SE = 0.09$), $t(377) = 5.30$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.53$ (95% CI: 0.33, 0.73). Centrist and right-leaning participants, however, did not rate American videos any differently ([Centrist] $M_{adj} = 3.37$, $SE = 0.13$; [Right-leaning] $M_{adj} = 3.20$, $SE = 0.15$) than foreign videos ([Centrist] $M_{adj} = 3.23$, $SE = 0.13$; [Right-leaning] $M_{adj} = 3.20$, $SE = 0.15$).

10.2 | Government Trust and Foreign Judgement

Pre-registered analyses next tested the extent to which government trust and willingness to judge foreign nations predicted propaganda ratings. To quantify the degree to which participants rated domestic media as more like propaganda than foreign media, we calculated a bias score (Bias = Domestic propaganda rating—Foreign propaganda rating). This bias score was then correlated with both government trust and comfort with judging foreign nations. Contrary to our hypotheses, neither had much success predicting bias scores. This was the case regardless of whether the propaganda scores were measured covertly or overtly, Covert: $r_{\text{Government Trust}}(378) = -0.03$, (95% CI: −0.13, 0.07), $p = 0.53$; $r_{\text{Foreign Judgement}}(378) = -0.04$ (95% CI: −0.14, 0.06), $p = .48$; Overt: $r_{\text{Government Trust}}(378) = -0.06$, (95% CI: −0.16, 0.04), $p = 0.22$; $r_{\text{Foreign Judgement}}(378) = -0.05$ (95% CI: −0.15, 0.05), $p = 0.35$. Based on this result, there is no evidence that trust in one's own

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government, or comfort judging other nations, is responsible for this bias against domestic government media.

In non–pre-registered, exploratory follow-up analyses, we also considered whether government trust moderates the association between condition and perceptions of propaganda. However, there was no interaction for both the covert and overt measures, Covert:, $b = -0.02$ (95% CI: −0.07, 0.04), $t(378) = -0.63$, $p = 0.53$; Overt: $b = -0.06$ (95% CI: −0.17, 0.04), $t(378) = -1.23$, $p = 0.22$. There was similarly little evidence of moderation for willingness to judge foreign nations, Covert: $b = -0.03$ (95% CI: −0.10, 0.04), $t(378) = -0.95$, $p = 0.34$; Overt: $b = -0.12$ (95% CI: −0.25, 0.01), $t(378) = -1.86$, $p = 0.06$.

11 | Discussion

Historically, mass media tends to be a harsher judge of propaganda in foreign countries compared to their own: is the same true for individuals? Across three studies, including two tightly controlled pre-registered experiments, we examined whether people's judgements of whether a video resembles propaganda differed based on whether it was ostensibly produced by one's own government or a foreign one (i.e., a culturally distant other country). First, we probed these judgements covertly, by asking questions that pertain to the characteristics of propaganda without using the term. Importantly, these items were embedded among filler items, to help disguise their purpose. Then, we probed these judgements overtly, explicitly asking the degree to which each video resembled propaganda. Counter to our initial expectations, when asked overtly, domestic media was more likely to be judged as propaganda relative to foreign media. This result was observed for both Canadians and Americans. In addition, a similar effect was observed for the covert measure, but only in our larger sample of Americans. For this sample, both national identity and political orientation moderated their asymmetrical judgements. Specifically, those scoring lower in national identity judged domestic media as more like propaganda compared to those who scored higher. The same was observed for those more politically left-wing compared to those who are centrist or more right-wing. Several alternative explanations were ruled out, including the effect of the country's reputation, respondents' trust in government and their comfort criticizing other nations. Important strengths of this research include the fact that the content and style of the target videos were held constant across conditions, everything was counterbalanced, and all predictions and initial analyses were pre-registered. Our key finding, that people judge domestic media as more like propaganda than foreign media when asked overtly, was successfully replicated in two different countries. In essence, we have discovered what appears to be the inverse of the typical double standard effect (Oskamp 1965; Oskamp and Hartry 1968), in which citizens judge enemy countries more harshly than their own. It appears that within the realm of propaganda, and when examining foreign countries that are not enemy nations, people are harsher judges of their own nation. This effect was more pronounced in our American sample, and the typical double standard effect also appears to be larger among Americans compared to Canadians (Tobin and Eagles 1992). That said, our American sample was also larger, meaning that it may have provided a more accurate and more sensitive estimate relative to our Canadian one, so we cannot be certain that this is a cross-national difference. These novel results are unlikely to be a result of low data quality. First, we succeeded in recruiting samples of Canadians and Americans who saw themselves as such. As intended, both samples possessed a strong sense of national identity (see descriptives in our OSF), so these results reflect the intuitions of those who are staunchly Canadian or American. Second, we took great pains to conceal the true intent of our study to reduce demand characteristics (e.g., using filler questions, excluding those who suspected our true intent, ensuring overt mention of propaganda did not contaminate other measurements). As we hoped, very few participants identified the goal of the study as being related to propaganda. This allows us to conclude that our stimuli were effective in portraying government messaging without betraying the true purpose of our experiment. Lastly, despite the covert items never explicitly referring to 'propaganda', we can be certain of the validity of this measure as it correlated with the overt item.

In light of these factors, why might individuals be more likely to judge domestic media as propaganda compared to foreign media? In terms of moderation, we observed that Americans lower in national identity, and more left-leaning politically, were more likely to view domestic media as propaganda. For those lower in national identity, there is likely less of a personal stake in their nation's reputation. For these individuals, their country might not constitute a strong extension of the self. As a result, criticizing government media does not threaten their sense of identity, as they do not have a strong connection to their nation. Indeed, some research has found that there is little difference between low national identity and complete disidentification (i.e., seeing oneself as outside of the group archetype; Gligorić and Obradović 2024). Low national identity has even been tied to dehumanization of the ingroup (Gligorić and Obradović 2024). This offers another helpful lens for interpreting our findings. Americans who reject (or hold loosely) American identity may be more critical of the American government compared to foreign governments, for whom they hold no particular feelings.

For those on the political left, viewing domestic media as more like propaganda than foreign media may also stem from a distaste for the topics chosen (i.e., national pride and support for the police). Although the videos did not explicitly promote nationalism or pardon the issues that exist in policing, these could be seen as implicit messages in these videos. Problematic nationalism and the problems of policing are both of greater concern for left-leaning individuals than those right-leaning (Smeltz and Helm 2021; Brown 2017). Along similar lines, the reason those who are politically conservative and patriotic might not view these videos as propaganda could be due to the topics addressed. Both topics represent values that are strongly held by conservatives: national pride and respect for police (Pew Research Center 2014; Brown 2017). As a result, it is likely that endorsement of these messages attenuated any potential criticism related to their propagandic qualities.

Another possible explanation for the observed bias against domestic media may lie in the greater relevance it has in one's life. As a citizen, exposure to media from one's own government is relatively frequent, and its messages have a direct impact on

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one's quality of life (e.g., taxation and healthcare). In contrast, the consequences of a foreign government's messaging are irrelevant to many people, leaving them unmotivated to critique such media. This explanation fits with research showing that the personal relevance of a message can influence the degree to which it is critically evaluated (Petty and Cacioppo 1979; Briñol and Petty 2015). Since the domestic videos ostensibly reflect one's own government, it could be the case that participants' critical thinking skills were heightened by this personal relevance. That being said, government media should feel most relevant for those higher in national identity. But in our American sample, it was those who were lower in national identity who judged domestic media more harshly. Perhaps those who are lower in national identity are motivated by a desire to be accurate about their nation. This would align with work on motivated reasoning that suggests that a motivation to be accurate can attenuate biases (see Kunda 1990; Molden et al. 2012). Ultimately, more empirical research is needed to uncover the mechanisms influencing these judgements.

11.1 | Limitations and Future Directions

There exist some limitations of our experiments. For one, the historical context during our data collection should be considered. Study 1 data were collected during March of 2022, when tens of thousands of Canadians were protesting the pandemic mandates (Ottawa Police Service 2022). During this time, Canadians also reported record losses of trust in both the media and public information (Edelman 2021). This means that Canadians may have been more likely to identify national media as propaganda at this time. Similarly, Study 2 data were collected in January of 2023, when trust in American media was also nearing all-time lows (Brenan 2023). Different results could be observed when—and where—trust in government is higher.

In addition, we measured some of our constructs with only a few items, in the service of minimizing participant fatigue. In order to better measure relevant individual differences, future research should use more robust measurements.

The findings we observed for covert judgements should also be interpreted with some caution. The measure itself was novel and did not boast strong reliability. However, despite this reliability issue, it did correlate well with the overt item ($r \sim 0.40$), indicating sufficient construct validity and adequate reliability to support associations. Future work could improve the reliability of this measure by adding additional items for each factor and validating subscales for each. In terms of our moderation results, although we observed no effect of Canadian national identity on propaganda judgements, we did not measure political orientation in this sample. Political orientation would have been valuable to measure for this sample as national identity may differ between Canadians and Americans. For example, some Canadians consider multiculturalism to be a key feature of the country's ethos, whereas others associate more traditional values with being Canadian (Padgett 2023). The potential indistinctness of national identity for Canadians could explain why it was not a meaningful moderator of judgements (for an exploration of the complexity of Canadian national identity, see Padgett 2023).

Although we ruled out whether one's discomfort in judging other nations could explain discrepancies in their judgements (Study 2), we cannot fully rule out the influence of social desirability as it was not directly measured.

Finally, there are many other potential variables to consider when building upon this research. For example, selecting foreign nations that are politically similar to one's own nation might help elucidate the degree to which political orientation is related to judgements of national versus foreign media.

12 | Conclusion

All else being held equal—such as the content and style of presentation—participants judged media from their own government as more like propaganda than foreign media, and this is more pronounced among those lower in national identity or those who are politically left-leaning. This work contributes to a broader understanding of how people evaluate persuasive media. The fact that we observed a pattern among individuals contrary to what appears in the mass media speaks to the importance of investigating this topic further. Categorizing the general public as either critical or uncritical of government media dilutes the nuances of individual difference factors like national identity and political orientation. In addition to national identity and political orientation, future work should investigate other individual differences that might moderate criticisms of government media. Similarly, perceptions of propaganda may differ depending on the content (e.g., negative messaging about outgroups, rather than positive messages about the ingroup). Future efforts to understand media literacy will need to account for our changing cultural attitudes towards government messaging. This kind of work highlights the importance of teaching the skills necessary to engage in even-handed evaluations of media, regardless of its origin.

Preregistrations

Study 1: https://aspredicted.org/f98dn.pdf

Study 2a: https://aspredicted.org/sjc8-vpbw.pdf

Study 2b: https://aspredicted.org/2xbk-hnf2.pdf

Ethics Statement

This work was conducted with ethics approval from York University's Office of Research Ethics (Certificate # STU 2021-147).

Conflicts of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest or funding bodies associated with this work.

Data Availability Statement

All data, materials, and supplementary materials can be found on our OSF repository: https://osf.io/h28d9/?view_only=51826d3505d34193b590ce125c78d84f.

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Endnotes

[1] Outlier analyses with Cook's Distance values suggested four observations above 1. Excluding the participants with those observations (a total of eight observations removed per model) did not change the pattern of results, so all results reported here include the full sample.

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