
research article

Why do individuals in democratic societies support stringent policies? A narrative policy framework analysis

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Why do individuals in democratic societies voluntarily request and support stringent policies? What factors contribute to variations in support for different restrictive measures among citizens? This study examines the micro-level impact of the securitisation narrative on individuals' voluntary support for stringent policies within a democratic context, using the narrative policy framework. Based on evidence from a conjoint experiment conducted in Taiwan, the study finds that agreeing with the narrative 'COVID-19 is a national security threat' does not translate into support for all types of restrictive measures. The contents of the securitisation narrative matter significantly; individuals who are more persuaded by the narratives are more likely to support border containment measures and mask mandates because of how narrative contents were structured. These findings highlight the importance for researchers and policymakers to carefully consider policy narrative contents to effectively communicate and garner support for a range of policies during times of crisis.

Keywords narrative policy framework (NPF) • COVID-19 • securitisation • policy preference • conjoint experiment • Taiwan

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Introduction

During public health crises, governments have to implement crisis mitigation policies to reduce potential harm. Often, crisis mitigation policies violate basic civil rights and individual liberties, making the implementation of these policies challenging tasks for democratic governments (Yen and Liu, 2022a). Citizens of democracies need to be persuaded, and very often the distribution of support is still uneven across different dimensions of restrictive measures. Why do democratic citizens voluntarily request and support stringent policies? Moreover, how can we account for support differences across various types of restrictive measures?

Scholars have highlighted the power of issue securitisation in shaping national solidarity during crises to garner support for exceptional and illiberal measures (Buzan et al, 1998; Elbe, 2006). To justify extraordinary measures that go beyond normal political processes, political actors elevate public health emergencies to a national security level by framing them as 'existential threats'. In essence, a type of policy narrative. During COVID-19, the 'waging war' narrative portrays the coronavirus as an enemy threatening the country. By successfully convincing the audience that an issue represents a national security threat, political actors can easily mobilise resources and increase public support for strict policies. Before COVID-19, securitising public health crises (for example, AIDS) has already attracted significant attention in both theoretical and practical realms (McInnes and Rushton, 2013; Hanrieder and Kreuder-Sonnen, 2014). During COVID-19, many governments securitised COVID-19 and framed it as a war to justify the restrictive measures taken to curb the virus's spread.

Despite the solid theoretical foundation and wide application of securitisation theory in public health crises, the existing literature has several shortcomings in empirical research and mechanism testing (Baele and Jalea, 2023). Although the literature has a consensus that a 'waging war' narrative can securitise a crisis and legitimise the government to take extraordinary measures (Buzan et al, 1998; Kirk and McDonald, 2021; Mintrom et al, 2021), existing studies focus solely on the efforts at the macro level, analysing political elites' rhetoric to examine how they securitise COVID-19 (for example, Molnár et al, 2020; Stott et al, 2020; Kirk and McDonald, 2021). These studies often assume that successful securitisation results in uniform public agreement with the securitisation narrative and strong support for all strict measures, despite the lack of empirical evidence supporting such a claim (Kirk and McDonald, 2021; Mintrom et al, 2021). The assertion that securitisation discourse at the elite level leads to unanimous support at the individual level is still untested and requires further examination.

Moreover, in these studies, 'exceptionalism' is often taken as an indicator for successful securitisation without a clear definition of what exceptionalism entails. When political actors securitise an issue, they can structure and shape their securitisation acts and languages differently to justify different policy directions (Peterson et al, 2022). For example, while both South Korea and Taiwan attempted to securitise COVID-19, they framed it differently. South Korea portrayed COVID-19 as an invisible enemy, while Taiwan emphasised the virus as an external threat. The content of the securitisation language has direct policy implications, and different descriptions of the virus justify different aspects of containment measures. While South Korea focused on large-scale testing to combat this 'invisible enemy', Taiwan concentrated on border control to keep threats from entering its territory. Incorporating other theories to further test the impacts of securitisation and investigate how elements of securitisation language affect public support for various containment measures is needed.

To fully examine the effect of securitisation on voluntary support for stricter policies in democratic societies, this article proposes that the narrative policy framework (NPF) can help analyse how an issue is securitised and examine its impact. First, the NPF has been used to examine how policy narratives shape individual policy preferences. It is known to be generalisable and applicable in different contexts (Schlaufer et al, 2022). Second, policy narratives are socially constructed stories to shape the beliefs and actions of decision makers and the public regarding policy choices (Jones and McBeth, 2010). The NPF and securitisation theory share commonalities, including

their foundation in social constructionism, which allows for potential integration. Third, the NPF stands out for its stronger empirical support from quantitative methods such as surveys and experiments, enabling the establishment of mechanisms that link narrative form and content to public support and policy preferences. This aspect of the NPF improves its generalisability and predictive capacity, allowing us a more comprehensive understanding of the policy impacts of COVID-19 securitisation.

Empirically, using evidence from a conjoint experiment in Taiwan, we show that securitising COVID-19 does not lead to uniform agreement and support for all restrictive measures. Furthermore, agreement with the narrative of 'waging war' does not lead to support for all kinds of restrictive measures. The indication is that individuals who are more convinced by the narrative that COVID-19 poses a threat to national security are more likely to support border containment measures. Furthermore, under conditions where people perceive COVID-19 as a threat to national security, a higher COVID-19 risk only increases support for non-border containment measures.

This study contributes to the literature on securitising public health and enhances our understanding of the effect of successful securitisation by incorporating the NPF to explain how the content of securitisation language may lead to variation in the exceptionalism of the health crisis mitigation policy mix. Our article highlights the crucial role of policy narratives in shaping citizens' policy preferences and increasing policy compliance to achieve better governance outcomes during a crisis. Furthermore, empirical findings demonstrate that different elements of the policy narrative, not just the entire narrative, can predict preferences in different aspects of a policy bundle. Therefore, researchers and policymakers alike should pay more attention to specific elements of a policy narrative to effectively communicate and gain support for various policies. Lastly, our article also improves our understanding of COVID-19 politics. The 'waging war' policy narrative is essential in shaping citizens' perceptions of the severity of the crisis. However, our findings indicate that only conditioning on believing in crisis severity and individual risk susceptibility influences citizens' policy preferences.

Securitisation theory and its limitation

During the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous countries implemented extraordinary measures to curb the spread of the virus. In doing so, political actors frequently employed the securitisation narrative, portraying the crisis as an 'existential threat' and elevating it to the realm of national security, helping governments justify the implementation of stringent measures.

Framing an issue as an 'national threat' and its subsequent securitisation has been widely studied (for example, [Elbe, 2006](#)). The application of securitisation theory to public health crises as security issues has also gained attention in both practical and scholarly contexts, as seen in the study by [Kirk and McDonald \(2021\)](#) on COVID-19 securitisation. The theory of securitisation, originating from the Copenhagen School of Security Studies, was first introduced by Ole Wæver and further developed by Buzan and de Wilde ([1998](#)) and others ([Balzacq, 2010](#)). This theoretical perspective challenges the notion that 'security' is an objective and inherent quality of an issue. Instead, it asserts that security is socially constructed by securitisation actors. According to [Buzan et al \(1998\)](#), an issue becomes a security issue not solely based on the presence of a real existential threat, but rather through its presentation as such (p 24).

The process of securitisation operates through discursive politics, whereby securitisation actors utilise speech acts to shape the audience's perception of an issue (Balzacq, 2010). Typically, political leaders and other actors frame an issue as an existential threat to a specific entity, such as humanity, a nation, a government, or the environment. This framing aims to transcend normal political processes and justify the implementation of extraordinary measures to address perceived threat (Buzan et al, 1998; Elbe, 2006). Existing studies argue that successful securitisation of an issue can lead to exceptional public support for stringent measures, which, in turn, allows governments to propose and implement policies that regulate individual liberties which would have not been possible in normal times (Elbe, 2006; McInnes and Rushton, 2013; Kirk and McDonald, 2021).

Although studies have used the securitisation theory to analyse extraordinary measures implemented by governments during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kirk and McDonald, 2021; Kaunert et al, 2022), the theory itself still has several shortcomings and limitations. First, existing research on securitisation mainly focuses on the macro-level analysis, examining how securitisation actors employ speech or action to securitise an issue. Studies in this area primarily analyse securitisation language and the measures implemented in response to perceived crises (Kirk and McDonald, 2021). Though the importance of the interaction between the securitiser, the audience, and the securitisation act is implicitly acknowledged in the literature (Côté, 2016), there is limited empirical evidence testing the micro-level implications of issue securitisation. For instance, to our knowledge, almost little to no research investigates from the audience's perspective to answer whether and how the audience accepts the securitisation framing. The securitisation theory has direct implications at the micro-level that warrant empirical testing, but only a few studies have examined the impact of securitisation acts on individuals.

Second, there is a tendency in the existing literature to consider exceptional emergency measures as indicators of successful securitisation (Buzan and Wæver, 2003). However, the mechanisms linking securitisation acts and the legitimisation of exceptional measures are often assumed rather than empirically tested. In recent years, scholars have highlighted the benefits of clarifying the pathways identified in securitisation theory and the utility of experiments in teasing out the impacts of issue securitisation (Guzzini, 2011; Baele and Thomson, 2017; Baele et al, 2018). Despite some studies pointing out potential directions for applying experiments in securitisation studies to identify the effect of actors and contexts on the effectiveness of securitisation (Baele and Thomson, 2017; Baele and Jalea, 2023), they have not adequately discussed how experiments can be valuable in investigating the effect of securitisation on audience policy preferences. Baele and Thomson (2017) note that the reason why there is restricted utilisation of experiments in securitisation studies is that such quantitative approaches are generally not favoured by securitisation scholars and critical security studies in general (p 648).

Third, securitisation theory argues that successful securitisation leads to exceptionalism, but the specific manifestations of exceptionalism remain unclear in the existing literature. The concept of exceptionalism encompasses various dimensions, including budget allocation, the enactment of stringent policies, and their implementation, among others, to address security issues. However, whether all these dimensions can be classified as exceptionalism has not been thoroughly investigated in the existing literature. To illustrate this point, we can take the COVID-19 pandemic

and the mitigation measures implemented by different countries as an example. While several nations have employed securitisation acts by declaring war on COVID-19, they have adopted distinct approaches in their exceptional measures to combat the virus outbreak. For instance, the Singapore government put heavy restrictions on migrant workers (Dutta, 2021), while Taiwan allocated resources towards mask production (Liu et al, 2021; Chang et al, 2023). The current securitisation theory does not adequately account for these variations and their implications. Additional frameworks are needed.

Policy narrative, COVID-19 securitisation, and support for restrictive measures

The utility of narrative policy framework

To complement theories of securitisation and test the micro-level implications of successful issue securitisation, this article proposes to employ the NPF. The NPF posits that stories are indispensable to human existence and that communication would be challenging or even unattainable without them. According to the NPF, stories are essential to our existence, playing a crucial role in communication and shaping our understanding of reality (Jones et al, 2014). The framework asserts that narratives and storytelling significantly influence how people interpret and comprehend the world around them, ultimately influencing their beliefs about the necessity of specific policies. In this context, a policy narrative refers to the storytelling employed by policymakers, politicians, or policy entrepreneurs who seek to influence public opinion, policy processes, and policy outcomes.

NPF scholars characterise policy narratives in terms of their content and form. Content refers to policy contexts and subject matters, while form pertains to the structure of a narrative (Jones et al, 2014). NPF scholars posit that policy narratives comprise specific elements (form), such as setting (policy phenomena or context), characters (including victims, heroes and villains), plot (actions of characters in time and space that establish the interaction and relationships among different characters), and moral or story (normative actions that should be taken as policy solutions). The framework suggests that elements of narrative forms, such as the portrayal of characters and the structure of narrative plots, should be connected to the moral of the story (policy solution) to effectively enhance the persuasiveness of the policy narrative. These elements are assumed to be generalisable across various policy contexts (Shanahan et al, 2018). The NPF has found application in diverse policy domains, spanning immigration policy (Clemons et al, 2020; Smith-Walter et al, 2021), environmental policy (Jones and Song, 2014; Domorenok and Graziano, 2023), LGBTQ+ policies (Flores et al, 2023), and COVID-19 policies (Peterson et al, 2022; Chadwick et al, 2022). During a crisis, policy narratives also play a vital role in shaping citizens' understanding of the situation and influencing their policy preferences (Hart and Tindall, 2009; Mintrom et al, 2021).

Although securitisation theory and the NPF are not often discussed conjointly, they share several key similarities that make them both unique and important for studying public health crises. Both securitisation theory and NPF are grounded in social constructionism. Both approaches recognise that the meaning and importance attached to a particular issue can be socially constructed and subject to change over time. Both recognise the importance of discourse in shaping policy and political

processes and outcomes. In addition, due to the scientific uncertainty embedded in the public health crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, it provides perfect conditions for policymakers to utilise narratives to shape public perception of the policy.

The NPF can complement the securitisation theory and enhance our understanding of the effectiveness of issue securitisation. Unlike the securitisation theory, the analysis of which stays mostly at the macro-level, NPF scholars apply the NPF framework at all levels, including the macro (institutions, culture), meso (groups, coalitions, organisations), and micro levels (individuals). The ability to test micro-level implications allows for more room for experimental designs and tests for the impacts under the NPF (for example, [Jones, 2018](#); [Peterson et al, 2022](#)). Many NPF experimental studies focus on how different policy narratives influence individual policy preferences (for example, [Zanocco et al, 2018](#); [Peterson et al 2022](#)). As a result, research using theories of securitisation can benefit from the NPF in that the NPF can help us better understand the outcomes of securitisation, especially at the individual level with respect to the audience's policy preferences and support in response to securitisation language/acts.

What is most important is that the form within NPF, especially the morals of the story, play a crucial role in studying the manifestation of exceptionalism as highlighted in securitisation theory. While securitisation theory primarily focuses on how elite discourse and securitisation language/acts shape public support for exceptional measures, it falls short in explaining how exceptionalism is expressed and why exceptionalism is embodied differently in various contexts. Additionally, the theory cannot explain why certain exceptional measures receive higher support than others. The inclusion of NPF, particularly the morals of the story linked to narrative plots, can provide valuable insights into how exceptionalism is manifested and justified. This is because a certain aspect of exceptionalism is justified through the moral of the story, which often revolves around fighting against villains, protecting victims, or supporting heroes.

The integration of the NPF and securitisation theory offers the potential to overcome the limitations of securitisation studies. A policy framework enables researchers to understand the big picture and overarching structure of theories. The elements of the framework also compel theories to provide explanations for the mechanisms involved ([Ostrom, 2011](#)). This integration allows for a more comprehensive analysis of securitisation processes and their impact on policy outcomes.

Narratives of securitisation and support for restrictive measures

Policy narratives can be particularly effective in navigating uncertain and unprecedented crises, serving as a powerful tool to garner public support and compliance with crisis mitigation policies ([Mintrom and O'Connor, 2020](#); [Crow et al, 2023](#)). Since the emergence of the novel coronavirus, governments have developed various policy narratives to justify their unique approaches and improve citizen compliance. In the case of a public health crisis, securitisation rhetoric can be considered one type of policy narrative. Public health security crises involve complex emotions, intertwining fear and hope ([Peterson et al, 2022](#)). According to the securitisation theory, successful securitisation leads to exceptionalism. Securitisation studies often rely on a fear appeal to legitimise measures against perceived threats

posed by an ‘enemy’ or ‘weapon’. However, appealing to fear is only one of the narrative strategies. The NPF offers a wider range of narrative strategies, including the use of hope, to shape policy outcomes. Narrators can portray the virus as a villain while highlighting the heroism of first responders or individuals complying with policies (see [Mintrom and O’Connor, 2020](#); [Mintrom et al, 2021](#)). When the NPF is integrated into the study of public health securitisation, a more comprehensive understanding emerges, allowing the examination of diverse narrative strategies beyond fear-based appeals.

When analysing public health securitisation language using the NPF, as the setting of the policy narrative sets the tone of the narrated contexts ([Jones et al, 2022](#)), the ‘waging war’ metaphor can be seen as the narrative’s setting. This narrative aims to foster national unity and garner public support for restrictive measures by framing the coronavirus as an enemy (villain) threatening national security (plot). This narrative has been observed in various countries, including China, Vietnam, Australia, the United Kingdom, Taiwan and South Korea. For instance, former UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson referred to the virus as a ‘devilish illness’ or an ‘invisible killer’ and called on the public to ‘save lives’ ([McGuinness and Sephton, 2020](#)). Within the context of the ‘waging war’ setting, stringent containment measures are presented as the moral of the story, leading to greater public support. [Table 1](#) presents examples of variations in policy narratives.

Even though the countries listed in [Table 1](#) utilised the ‘waging war’ narrative to justify their COVID-19 measure, they utilised different morals of the story that justify policy actions. For example, the United Kingdom government depicted the virus as an invisible killer, prompting the implementation of social distancing measures to counteract the potential spread of this invisible villain. Singapore, as another example, linked the source of virus contagion to migrant workers but adopted a unique approach by portraying these workers as heroes who needed to make the necessary sacrifices to combat the villain. This narrative of heroism served to justify the discriminatory enforcement of stricter restrictions on this population. The disparities of the morals of stories within these ‘waging war’ narratives resulted in distinct expressions of exceptionalism. For instance, Taiwan’s approach leaned heavily on border control, while South Korea emphasised testing. Based on NPF forms, researchers can understand how the influence of the ‘waging war’ narrative on the support of exceptional measures can vary.

The case of Taiwan and hypotheses

To examine the micro-level implications of the securitisation narrative and how the moral of stories affect public acceptance of certain exceptional measures, we choose Taiwan as a case study. Previous experimental studies on the NPF often employed simulated narratives as a treatment to examine how narrative content and forms influence respondents’ perceptions of specific policies (for example, [Peterson et al, 2022](#); [Zanocco et al, 2018](#); [Jones, 2018](#); [Clemons et al, 2020](#)). These experimental studies typically prioritise high internal validity. In our research, we seek to enhance the external validity of our findings. Rather than creating simulated narratives, we draw upon the existing securitisation narrative surrounding COVID-19. To achieve this, it is crucial to select a context that has consistently immersed itself in the similar

Table 1: Examples of COVID-19 policy narratives

Country	Setting	Plot	Characters	Moral of the story
United Kingdom	War setting (Kirk and McDonald, 2021; Minstrom et al, 2021) For example, 'every one of us is directly enrolled' 'we will fight this virus with everything we have'	'the coronavirus is the biggest threat this country has faced for decades'	'invisible killer' 'devilish disease' (COVID-19 as a villain) 'We must have a world-beating system to test potential victims' (People as victims)	'and in turn that Covid Alert Level will tell us how tough we have to be in our social distancing measures: the lower the level, the fewer the measures... the higher the level, the tougher and stricter we will have to be'
South Korea	War setting (Molnár et al, 2020) For example, 'the entire country has entered war'	'the COVID-19 outbreak has been causing a serious emergency and grave situation for public safety'	'great calamity' (COVID-19 as a villain) 'citizens of Daegu and Gyeongsangbuk-do, who are suffering a great deal of pain... their daily lives are being threatened' (People as the victims)	'we are rapidly screening and diagnosing all of its members to swiftly identify confirmed cases'
Taiwan	War setting (Chang et al, 2023) For example, 'get ready to fight the enemy with our utmost effort' 'battle against COVID-19'	'external threat that endangers the safety of Taiwanese people'	'external enemy' 'external Threat' (COVID-19 as an external villain) 'endangers the safety of Taiwanese people' (People as the victims)	'preemptive preparation and deployment... protect our home... block the virus out' 'secure our border'
Singapore	Crisis setting For example, 'the most dangerous crisis'	'Do not fear. Do not lose heart. Singapore will not falter in its onward march.'	'We could not have done this without your [migrant workers] cooperation and sacrifices' (Migrant workers as the hero)	'extended lockdown period would help bring community cases down decisively and make sure infections in migrant dormitories do not spread into the wider community' (CBC News, 2020)

Source: Author

narratives, including consistent characters, plots and morals of stories. Taiwan, the selected case for our study, offers an ideal setting for our research design.

Specifically, even before the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, Taiwan adopted a proactive approach, framing COVID-19 risk governance as a 'military action' (see Table 1). Starting in January 2020, Taiwan implemented a comprehensive 'whole of nation' strategy to combat COVID-19, focusing on border controls to prevent the entry of the threat (Chang et al, 2023). The establishment of the Central Epidemic Command Center (CECC) as the 'Central Command' and the characterisation of its leader, CHEN Shi-Zhong, as the 'commander' exemplify the government's response. Political leaders and the media refer to these measures as 'advance deployment' strategies. Furthermore, the Taiwanese government portrays COVID-19 as an imminent external threat that threatens the safety of its citizens (Chen, 2020). Consequently, COVID-19 is depicted as an external

antagonist, whereas Taiwanese residents are victims. The narrative's plot implies that the appropriate policy solution is to wage a warlike battle against COVID-19, implementing stringent containment measures to safeguard the victims from the threats posed by the villain.

The Taiwanese government had emphasised this narrative of 'waging war' consistently and repeatedly for more than two years until April 2022, after which point a series of restrictions were gradually lifted. Compared to most other countries that already lifted most of the restrictive measures in the summer of 2021, Taiwan was one of the very few countries (along with China) that still held onto the narrative of 'waging war' and the 'zero-Covid' until 2022 (Yen and Liu, 2022b). The government was the dominant actor shaping public belief about the COVID-19 crisis; no significant competing narratives existed to dilute the influence of the government narrative. Given the absence of significant competing narratives, Taiwan presents a valuable opportunity to analyse the influence of the securitisation narrative framed as 'waging war' on citizens' attitudes toward restrictive measures. Moreover, the morals embedded within these securitisation narratives remain consistent. This unique context enables us to explore whether individuals who embrace the securitisation narrative are more likely to support the morals justified within these narratives.

Notably, unlike other countries that perceive the virus as an invisible enemy, Taiwan's geopolitical challenges have allowed the government to link the viral threat to its enduring political struggles. Taiwan further consolidates the policy narrative that portrays COVID-19 as an external villain by connecting the virus with its existing geopolitical threat, China (Chang et al, 2023). The alignment between the 'waging war' policy narrative and the Taiwanese's pre-existing belief in China being the long-term geopolitical threat makes the narrative even more credible and persuasive as the narrative is aligned with the audiences' existing belief system (Shanahana et al, 2018). The coronavirus was described as an external enemy or a threat outside of Taiwan and can be stopped at its border. To protect people domestically, blocking the virus at the border became the moral of the story.

Furthermore, through the use of its border control measures, Taiwan successfully blocked the coronavirus until mid-2021, which reinforced the effectiveness of the moral of the story. The consistency and wide acceptance of the narrative were vital for decision makers to increase public support and compliance with the illiberal and inconvenient restrictive measures the government adopted (Minstrom et al, 2021). This consistency also makes Taiwan a good case for analysing the impacts of the 'waging war' policy narrative on public policy preferences. Citizens who are more persuaded by the policy narrative that COVID-19 is an external threat are expected to be more likely to accept the moral of the story, which is to support border-related measures. As such, we hypothesise that

H1: Individuals who believe in the narrative of 'waging war against external threats' are more likely to support more stringent measures related to border controls.

Additionally, within the 'waging war' narrative setting, the 'hero' character has also been used to justify resource mobilisation. In Taiwan's 'waging war' policy narrative, masks were viewed as a wartime reserve, and a mask mandate was implemented as an essential policy action to stop the spread of the virus early on. Simultaneously, when

Taiwan declared war against COVID-19, the government formed a 'National Mask Team' and invested in expanding mask production capacity. Workers on the mask production team were portrayed as 'heroes' who sacrificed themselves to protect the Taiwanese people, and wearing masks was considered a 'heroic' act to protect others (Chen, 2020; Chang et al, 2023). The mask mandates were embedded in this narrative as the moral of the story to support the 'heroes'. Therefore, we hypothesise the following:

H2: Individuals who believe in the 'waging war' narrative are more likely to support stricter mask mandates.

While the primary objective of this research is to assess the impact of the morals of the stories embedded within the existing securitisation narratives in Taiwan, we acknowledge the presence of other factors, especially that individual risk susceptibility may also play a pivotal role in shaping individuals' preferences regarding exceptional measures. However, we argue that the effect of an individual's risk susceptibility on their policy preference is conditioned on whether they believe in the 'waging war' narrative. Individual's risk susceptibility is widely accepted as a key determinant to support risk mitigation policies. Scholars have argued and demonstrated that support for risk prevention and reduction measures increases when public risk susceptibility is elevated (Lerner et al, 2003; Lindell and Perry, 2004). However, contrary to the commonly accepted view, some studies find that if one does not agree that the situation is dangerous, one would not support strict risk mitigation measures regardless of their risk perception levels (Weinstein, 1989; Rimal and Morrison, 2006). Recent studies on COVID-19 also indicate that how people perceive the risk of COVID-19 has mixed effects on their policy preferences (for example, Yue et al, 2022). In other words, individual risk perception only affects citizens' policy preferences on restrictive measures if one believes the severity of the COVID-19 crisis first. In Taiwan, the narrative policy setting of 'waging war' should ignite people's fear that COVID-19 is a dangerous external threat, which can increase people's perception of the severity of COVID-19. We also expect that individual risk susceptibility has more influence on people's attitudes towards policies that are more related to daily economic and social activities, such as restrictions imposed on positive cases that are not border-related. Therefore, we hypothesise that

H3: Conditional on believing in the narrative of 'waging war' narrative, individuals with a higher risk susceptibility perception of COVID-19 are more likely to support non-border COVID-19 restrictions

Method

In complex problems such as COVID-19, containment measures consist of policy bundles covering multiple dimensions. To comprehensively assess the effectiveness of securitisation, it is crucial to examine how the securitisation narrative influences individuals' preferences for specific dimensions within the containment policy bundle. To test the hypotheses, we conducted a choice-based conjoint experiment in Taiwan. Conjoint experiments have emerged as a robust method to capture and estimate individuals' multidimensional preferences (Hainmueller et al, 2014). By utilising

conjoint experiments, researchers are able to analyse and measure how individuals weigh and prioritise different dimensions of the containment policy bundle. The conjoint experiment also enables us to assess whether other COVID-19 measures that were not justified as the moral of the story in the 'waging war' narrative receive the same levels of support as border control and mask mandates.

We administered the experiment in May 2022. In mid-2022, most countries already lifted all restrictive measures and opened borders. In Taiwan, after more than two years of the 'waging war' policy narrative, the Taiwanese government also started to loosen restrictive measures to align with the world trend. At the time, 81 per cent of the eligible population was already fully vaccinated and 64 per cent had one booster shot ([National Center for Health Statistics, 2022](#)), so the government began to promote the goal of living with the virus in April 2022. The timing provides a window to test whether the 'waging war' policy narrative setting had gained traction and affected Taiwanese citizens' preference against the lifting of restrictive measures. If the Taiwanese are fully receptive of the 'waging war' narrative, resistance to relaxing containment measures would be high.

Experimental design

The experiment has five attributes, each of which represents one dimension of the containment measures, and each attribute has three or four levels. The first two attributes are border-related restrictions, including eligibility for entering Taiwan and the quarantine requirement for incoming travellers. The other three attributes are domestic restrictions, including the extent to which a mask is mandatory, restrictive guidelines for confirmed cases, and restrictive guidelines for close contacts. All of the attributes correspond to COVID-19 mitigation measures employed by the Taiwanese government. However, only attributes related to border control and mask mandates had consistently been the moral of the story within the 'waging war' narratives. The inclusion of other aspects of COVID-19 measures allows us to examine whether these narratives effectively boost public support for exceptional measures. For every attribute, level 1, which is the baseline level, shows the restrictive level adopted by the Taiwanese government at the time when the experiment was conducted. Levels 2 to 4 relax the restrictions to different degrees. The conjoint experiment was conducted without any restrictions on attribute combinations. [Figure 1](#) shows an example of a pair of policies shown to respondents. For details of all dimensions and levels in the experiment, please see [the Appendix](#).

In the conjoint experiment, respondents are presented with eight pairs of hypothetical COVID-19 restrictive policy bundles. In each pair, the respondents have to choose between two containment policy bundles. We fix the order of attributes within the subject to decrease cognitive taxing. Before the conjoint experiment, the respondents first answer questions on risk levels, whether they agree with COVID-19 as a national security threat, and support for government measures, followed by basic demographic questions to avoid pretreatment priming. We used the single-item survey to determine if participants view COVID-19 as a national security threat, addressing a gap in securitisation theory literature, which lacks clear metrics for audience acceptance of securitisation framing. Our operationalisation is based on the core definition of securitisation theory: successful securitisation occurs when the

Figure 1: Example in the conjoint experiment policy pair

Policy Package A			Policy Package B
Border policy	Entry restriction	All passengers who obtain a negative test 48 hours before boarding are eligible to enter Taiwan	Passengers who obtain a negative test 48 hours before boarding AND meet one of following credentials are eligible to enter Taiwan
	Quarantine requirements for incoming Passenger	No quarantine requirement	For incoming passengers who are fully vaccinated: No quarantine requirement; follow the guideline for 'close contact'
Domestic policy	Mask mandates	No mask requirement	Masks are required both indoors and outdoors when outside of residence
	Quarantine requirements for confirmed	Confirmed cases will be required to complete a five-day quarantine in hospitals, enhanced government quarantine	Confirmed cases will be required to complete a ten-day quarantine in hospitals, enhanced government quarantine
	Quarantine requirements for close contact	No quarantine requirement	No quarantine requirement. Five-day self-health management will be required

audience recognises the subject as a genuine national security threat (Floyd, 2016). The respondents then enter the conjoint experiment. Two attention check questions are embedded before and after the conjoint experiment. Respondents who fail either of the attention checks would be filtered out. Respondents are filtered out mainly because we want to specifically understand the effect of successful securitisation. Our objective is not to examine the choices individuals make when presented with various policy details, but rather to investigate and test the impacts of securitisation at the individual level. Therefore, our focus is on respondents who pay full attention to the survey. After the conjoint experiment, the respondents answer other factual questions such as vaccine status, partisanship and so on.

Subject recruitment and estimation strategy

We conducted the experiment with Taiwanese adults aged 18 years and older using Rakuten Insight from 5 May to 13 May 2022. Responses were collected from the Rakuten Insight panel, which has 230,000 Taiwanese samples, approximately 1 per cent of the Taiwanese population. We used gender and age quotas to closely reflect the demographic distribution in Taiwan and collected 600 samples. With 600 respondents and eight pairs of options, we have 9,600 observations in total. The descriptive statistics of respondents' characteristics and responses can be found in the online Appendix.

Our primary outcome of interest is the respondent's preferred package of policies for the restrictive measures of COVID-19. Our main focus is to estimate the average

marginal component effects (AMCE) of each restrictive dimension on people's preferred policy bundles. The AMCE can be interpreted as the impact of a specific level of a particular containment policy dimension on the likelihood that the respondent selects the policy bundle (Bansak et al, 2022). We used a logistic probability model to estimate the effect and clustered standard errors at the individual level to account for intrasubject correlation.

To measure the extent to which people still believe in the policy narrative of waging war against external enemies, we ask respondents the extent to which they agree with the statement that 'COVID-19 is a national security threat'. The variable takes the value of 1 if respondents agree or agree strongly with the earlier-mentioned statement and 0 if respondents feel neutral about or disagree/disagree strongly with the statement. In our sample, 65 per cent of the respondents still agreed that COVID-19 was still a national security threat in May 2022.

The other main variable is risk susceptibility, which is proxied by respondents' estimated likelihood of getting COVID-19 in the next three months on a 10-point scale. We rescale the variable to 0–1, and respondents scoring higher than 0.5 are in the high-risk perception group and those scoring equal to or lower than 0.5 are in the low-risk perception group. In the sample, still 56 per cent of the respondents perceived high risks of contracting the coronavirus.

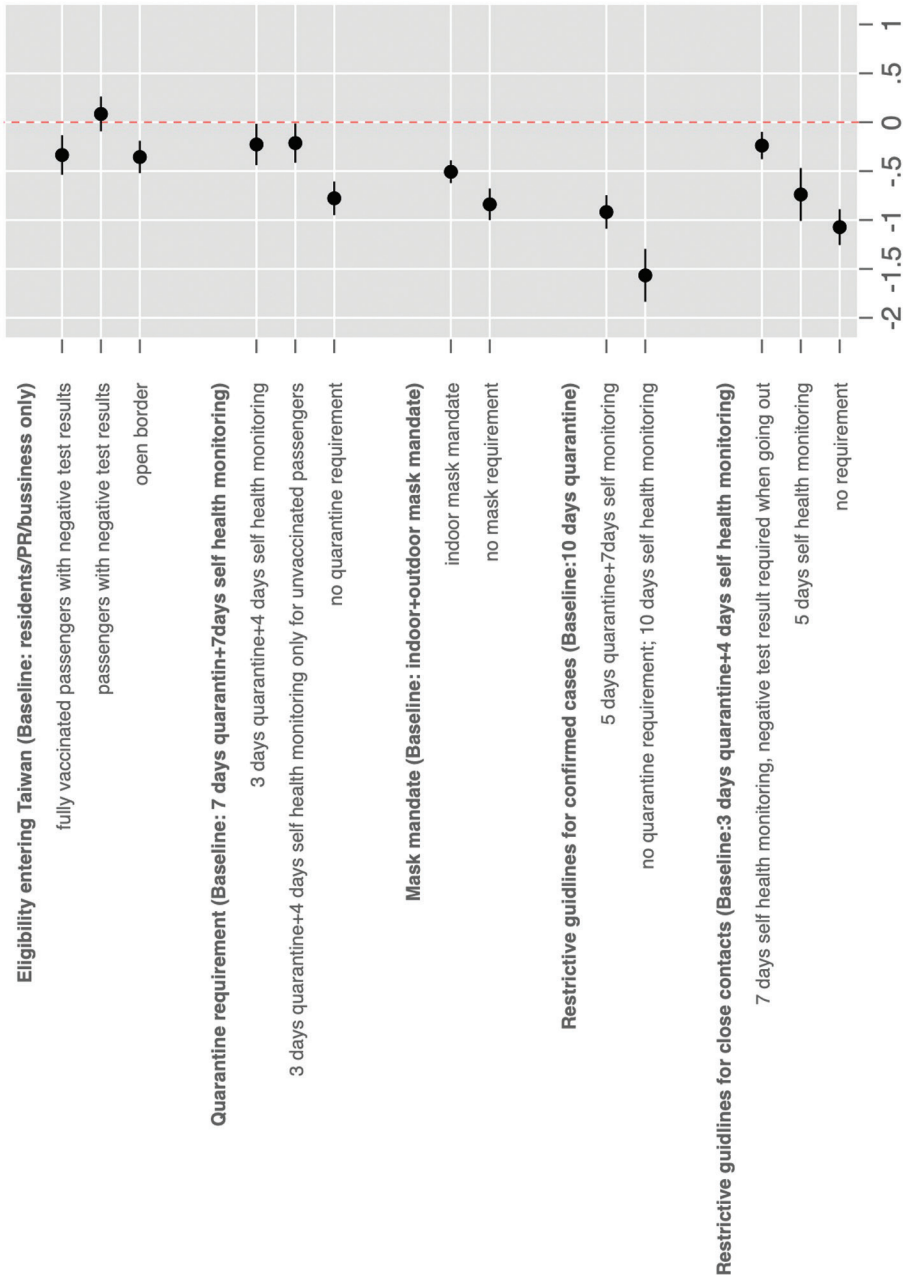
Empirical results

In the analysis, the baseline levels across all attributes are set to be level 1, which was the level of restrictions implemented by the Taiwanese government at the time of the experiment. Figure 2 shows the AMCE at the 95 per cent confidence intervals at all levels of all attributes for the entire sample. The result gives clear evidence that in May 2022, the Taiwanese were still very reluctant to completely lift restrictive measures. Levels with more relaxed restrictions, across all attributes, result in a lower probability of the respondent choosing the policy bundle. Although the Taiwanese government already announced a move away from 'zero COVID' and started living with the virus in early April 2022 (Yen and Liu, 2022b), the new policy direction had not yet altered Taiwanese people's attitudes towards restrictive measures. Taiwanese people were still cautious about the virus.

Specifically, on border-related measures, respondents rejected the idea of an open border and fully lifted the quarantine requirement. Compared to the baseline level, an open border policy decreases the support of respondents for the policy package by 7 percentage points, and completely eliminating quarantine requirements drastically reduces the likelihood of choosing the package of policies by 16.6 percentage points. On non-border related measures, respondents overwhelmingly preferred the status quo over any measures that relax the mask mandate and guidelines for confirmed cases and close contacts. Compared to the baseline level, the mask lifting policy reduces the support of people by 18.5 percentage points, and the most relaxed guidelines for confirmed cases and for close contacts decrease the support by 35.2 and 22.2 percentage points, respectively.

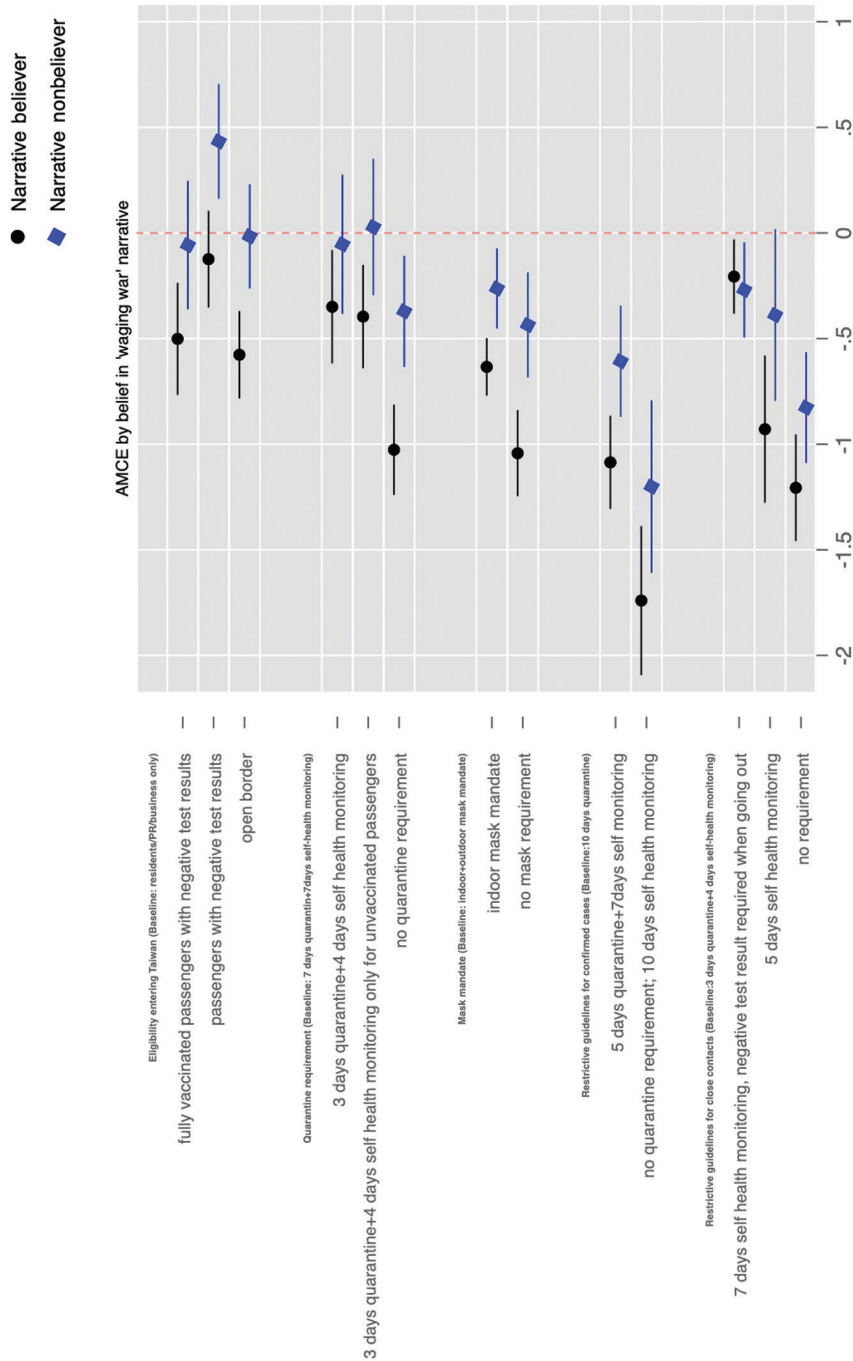
Our main focus is to test whether the 'waging war' narrative believers consist of the subgroup driving support for more restrictive measures. To test hypothesis H1, we divide the experimental results by whether people are persuaded by the policy narrative of 'waging war against the external enemy', which is measured by the degree

Figure 2: AMCE of restrictive measure attributes on support for COVID-19 policy package



to which people agree with the statement that ‘COVID-19 is a national security threat’. Figure 3 shows that the estimated points for all aspects of the containment policy are systematically lower for people who believe that COVID is a threat to national security than for people who do not believe this. This result indicates that narrative believers are generally more resistant to lifting restrictive measures. For the

Figure 3: AMCE of restrictive measure attributes on support for COVID-19 policy package by the level of belief in the 'waging war' policy narrative



securitisation narrative believers, they show significantly lower support for almost all policy bundles with more relaxing measures. Additionally, confirming with H1, the support for maintaining border-related measures is primarily driven by individuals

who agree with the policy narrative. People who have stronger beliefs that COVID-19 is a national security threat demonstrate stronger resistance to relaxing traveller eligibility and quarantine requirements with statistical significance. In particular, the attitude gaps between narrative believers and nonbelievers grow larger as the restrictive measures related to the border get more relaxed. Besides border-related measures, narrative believers are also significantly more resistant to relaxing mask mandates than those without such a belief, which confirms hypothesis H2.

On the other hand, individuals who do not believe in the power of narratives exhibit a greater sense of indifference towards the attributes of the policy bundle that are related to border issues. Narrative believers and nonbelievers also are not significantly different in terms of their favourability on non border-related measures.

In addition to the hypotheses testing, we also tested whether risk susceptibility has an independent or conditional effect on restrictive measures preferences, Figure 4 shows that individual risk susceptibility alone has no explanatory power on the preference for containment measures. Perceiving a high risk of getting COVID-19 is not sufficient to shape one's preference toward containment measures. There is no subgroup variation across attributes and levels.

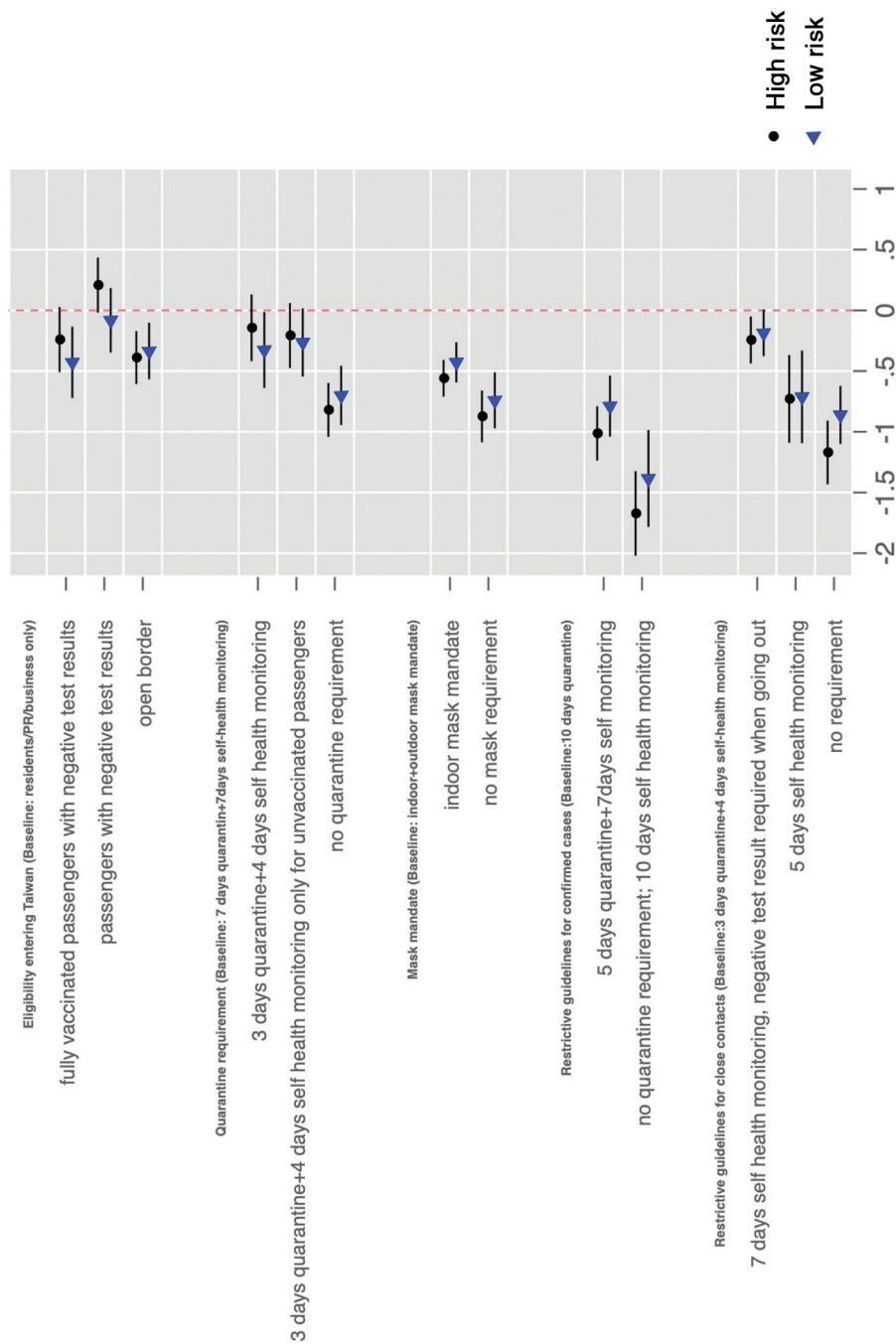
Figure 5 shows the marginal effects of the interaction between *believing COVID-19 as a threat* and *individual risk susceptibility*. Among people who already perceive COVID-19 as a national security threat (left graph), having a higher risk perception of getting COVID-19 increases support for maintaining the status quo restrictions on mask mandates and requirements for confirmed cases. However, among people who do not believe that COVID-19 poses a threat to national security, the perception of risk has no additional impact on people's attitudes, suggesting that the effect of risk perception is conditional. Overall, when individuals hold a belief in the national security threat narrative, their perception of risk plays a significant role in shaping their attitudes towards non border-related restrictive measures.

Discussion and conclusion

Previous studies on securitisation have faced criticism for their lack of empirical evidence and methodological rigour. These studies have primarily focused on analysing securitisation acts and rhetoric, without adequately exploring the policy implications of exceptionalism. In this article, we aim to address these gaps by integrating the NPF and securitisation theory to investigate the impact of successful securitisation. The NPF provides insights into how the forms and contents of policy narratives shape public opinion on related policies, while securitisation theory explains why the 'waging war' policy narrative setting allows policymakers to justify the implementation of illiberal measures, thereby enhancing the theoretical foundation of our model. Specifically, the integration of NPF and securitisation theory allows for a deeper analysis of the complex layers of securitisation narratives and examines how political elites shape the characters, structure the plot, and rationalise the morals of the story. By utilising the NPF, we explore the diverse manifestations of the so-called 'exceptionalism'.

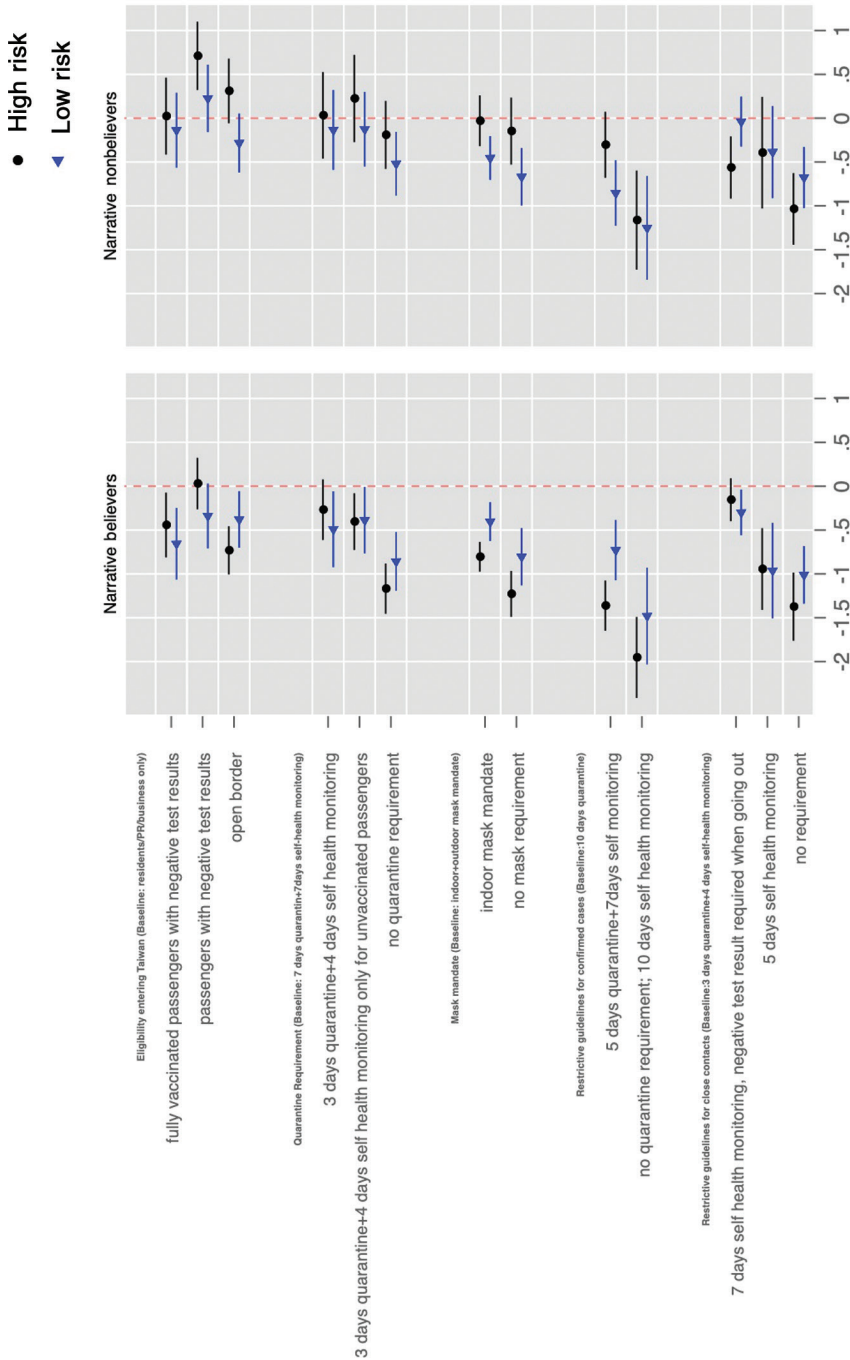
Through the lens of NPF, we test the impact of the 'waging war' policy narrative setting on preferences for restrictive measures in Taiwan, where the government consistently leverages the 'waging war against an external enemy' narrative when addressing COVID-19. While emerging studies argue that securitising COVID-19 is crucial in legitimising stringent containment measures, few studies test this claim.

Figure 4: AMCE of restrictive measure attributes on support for the COVID-19 policy package by levels of individual risk susceptibility



Our conjoint experiment tests the extent to which participants in Taiwan still agree with the ‘waging war’ narrative setting after more than two years since the COVID-19 crisis began. Results show that individuals who accept this policy narrative are more supportive of restrictive measures related to the border and masks because Taiwan

Figure 5: AMCE of restrictive measure attributes on support for COVID-19 policy package for policy believers and policy nonbelievers by the level of individual risk susceptibility



portrays COVID-19 as an ‘external enemy’ to justify these measures. The ‘waging war’ policy narrative setting also alerts citizens to the severity of the crisis, serving as the foundation for activating the effect of individual risk susceptibility.

The Taiwanese government already strongly emphasised the securitisation narrative at the onset of COVID-19 by depicting the virus as an external threat. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Taiwan maintained a consistent securitisation narrative. Had the experiment been conducted earlier, we would have anticipated even more pronounced results. Specifically, we would expect a wider support gap for border-related measures between individuals who subscribe to the 'waging war' narrative and those who do not.

Previous research has not focused on whether securitisation acts lead to variations in support for different aspects of containment measures. Our study shows that support for different aspects of COVID-19 restrictive policies varies, and this variation can be attributed to how characters were portrayed and how the morals of the stories were structured in the 'waging war' narratives. Because Taiwan emphasises COVID-19 as an external threat and heroises the mask production team and mask-wearing, it leads the public to support stringent border measures and mask mandates. Therefore, our study demonstrates that every element of the policy narrative, not just the narrative as a whole, can predict preferences in different aspects of a policy bundle.

We acknowledge that our findings cannot be generalised to suggest universal support for border control policies in all countries that have effectively securitised COVID-19. The article's objective is to highlight how the NPF can strengthen securitisation theory by enhancing our understanding of the policy content related to exceptionalism. Different countries may emphasise distinct narrative elements within their securitisation narratives. Therefore, when analysing securitisation, it is crucial for future studies to examine how 'threats' are portrayed and how the moral aspects of the narratives are justified, which allows predictions or explanations for policy 'exceptionalism'. Moreover, this article relies on only one survey item to capture beliefs of the securitisation narratives and levels of risk susceptibility, which is a potential limitation of this article and can be an area for future studies.

One may argue that there may be alternative hypotheses to explain the high support for containment measures in Taiwan. For instance, one prominent argument that emerged at the beginning of the pandemic suggests that the cultural orientation in Asia, which promotes collectivist values, leads to greater tolerance for state intervention and support for restrictive measures (An and Tang, 2020; Chen et al, 2021). This argument suggests that societies with a more collectivist cultural orientation are more likely to endorse policy measures that may limit personal freedoms but promote societal benefits. However, the cultural explanation fails to capture the nuanced differences in support levels across various policy dimensions and does not explain why support for one particular measure may be higher while support for another restrictive measure may be lower. Our empirical evidence shows that the extent to which people believe in the 'waging war' policy narrative matters for different dimensions of restrictive measures.

Another alternative explanation for the observed empirical outcome is that people in Taiwan continue to support border-related and mask containment measures due to their familiarity with these measures. According to this perspective, repeated exposure to and experience with these measures have led to ongoing support. However, we argue against this explanation based on our experimental design, where all the level 1 choices presented to participants represent the measures implemented by the government at that specific time. Therefore, there is no reason to believe that citizens are more accustomed to certain measures while being less familiar with others. Higher

support for border-related measures among individuals who perceive higher levels of threat may be attributed to the successful communication of the securitisation narrative, which emphasises the crucial role of border control in preventing the spread of the virus.

Though this study does not primarily aim to investigate the determinants of successful securitisation, one policy implication that can be drawn from the study is the importance of the consistency of securitisation policy narratives. Previous research on securitisation has highlighted that when policies fail to align with the level of threats emphasised in the securitisation narratives, it can result in public discontent, reduced policy compliance, and even a reversal of securitisation efforts (Kirk and McDonald, 2021). The example of Taiwan underscores the significance of maintaining consistency throughout the securitisation narrative, where the characters, plot and moral aspects of the story must be interconnected to gain public acceptance of the policy. As such, researchers and policymakers should pay careful attention to the specific elements of a policy narrative to ensure coherence and enhance policy effectiveness.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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