

Moral Values Underpinning COVID-19 Online Communication Patterns

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BACKGROUND

The Moral Foundation Theory (MFT)
(Haidt and Joseph, 2004)
was created to explain the dimensions of human moral reasoning

Care/Harm

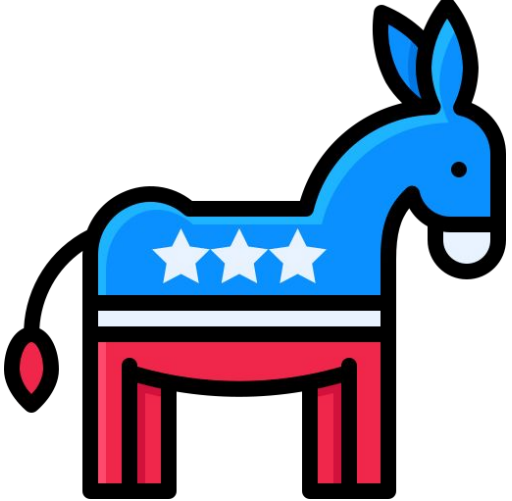
Fairness/Cheating

Loyalty/Betrayal

Purity/Degradation

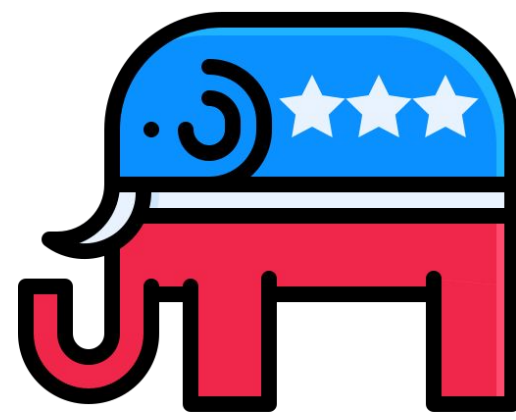
Authority/Subversion

Morality and Politics (Haidt and Graham, 2007)



Liberals prefer the two *individualizing* foundations: care and fairness

Conservatives like all five, incl. the *binding* foundations: loyalty, authority and purity



Moral differences could lead to political divide

This Research
We know COVID was politicized (Jiang et al., 2020) and also moralized:

Masks

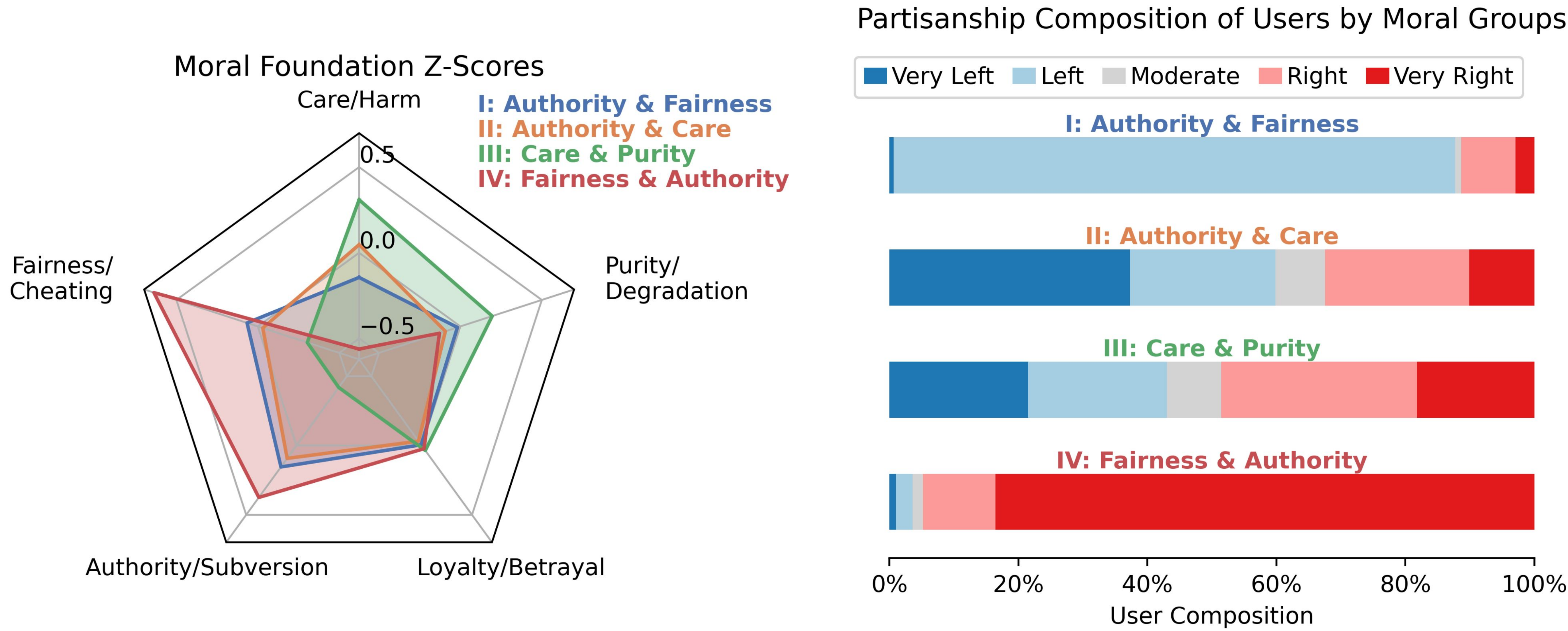
Stay Home

Social Distance

Vax

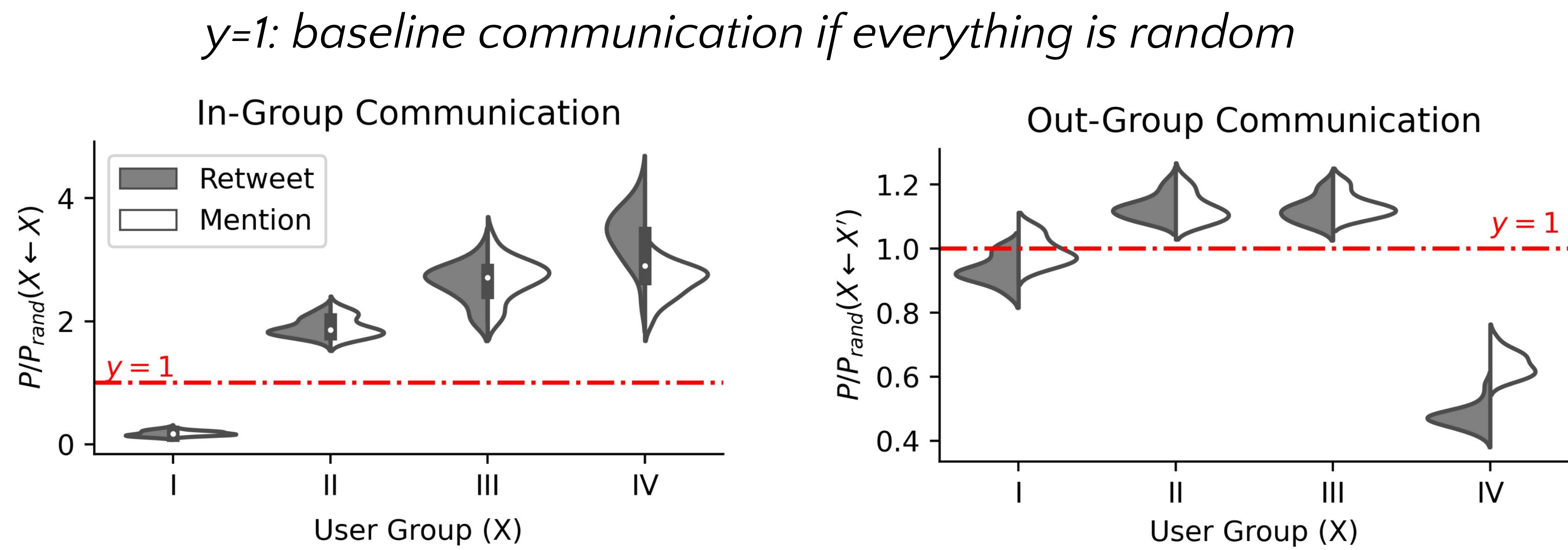
How can MFT explain the COVID polarization, echo chambers, and misinformation we've seen?

RQ1: What distinct user groups emerge?



- Four groups, each w/ diff. moral priorities & unique political composition
- **BUT** is different from what previous literature suggest
- Moral + political differences in communication are more nuanced

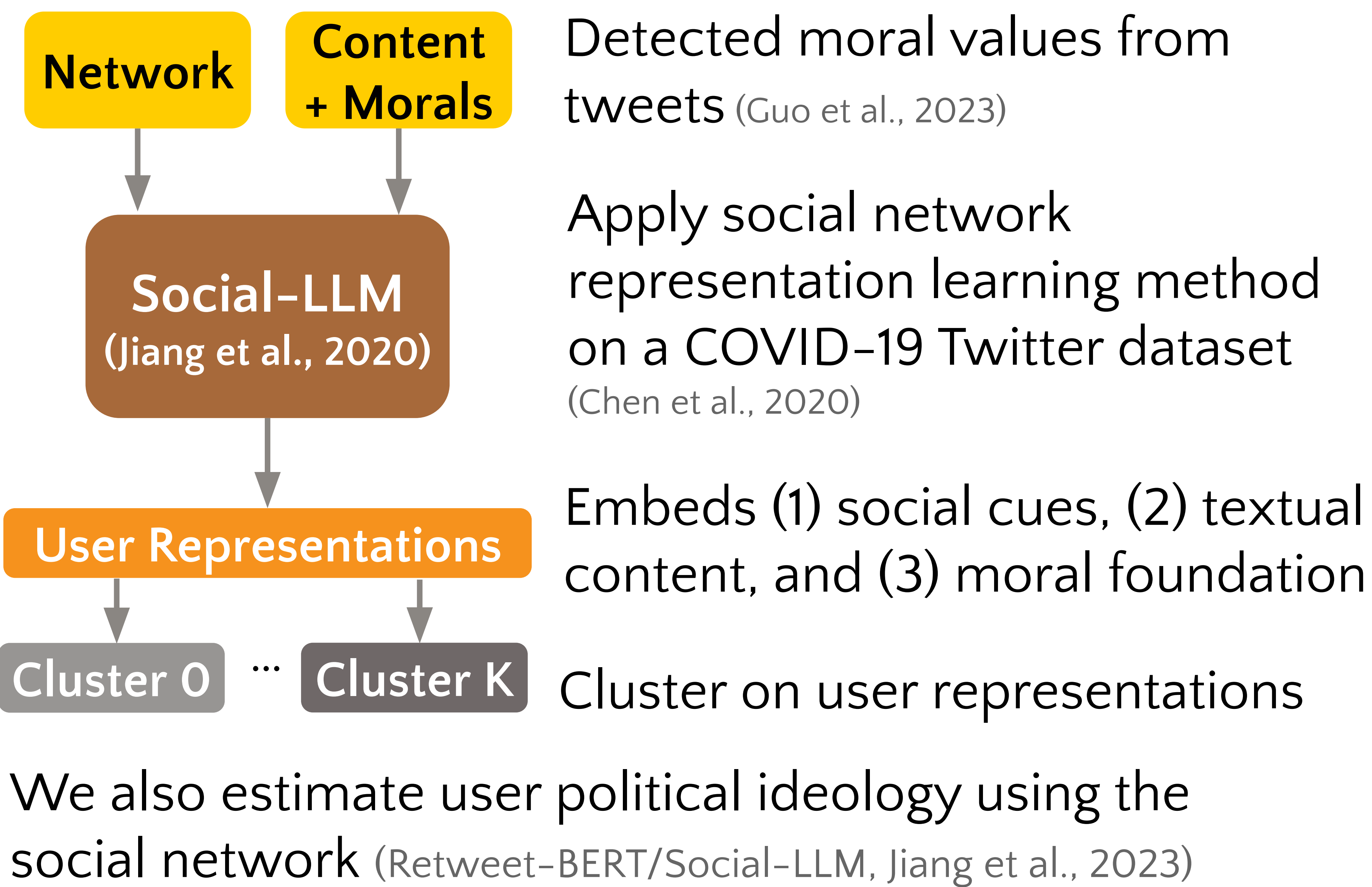
RQ2: Do communication patterns reflect moral homophily, and how do they compare across groups?



Groups II-IV all exhibit **moral homophily**: they prefer communicating w/ their in-group members
(agrees w/ Deghani et al. (2016) & Singh et al. (2020))

Group IV also don't like to communicate w/ out-group members → Group IV is likely in an **moral echo chamber**

METHOD



RQ3: Which moral themes resonate more effectively w/ out-group members?

Table: for each group, the top 5 combo of morality in messages that were retweeted more by out-group
(**Red**: moral foundations the user does not prefer)

Group I	Group II	Group III	Group IV
Care, Purity	Care, Loyalty, Purity	Fairness , Authority , Purity	Care , Loyalty
Fairness	Fairness , Loyalty	Care, Authority , Purity	Care , Authority, Loyalty
Care , Authority, Purity	Care, Fairness , Loyalty	Care, Purity	Care , Authority, Purity
Care , Loyalty	Authority, Loyalty, Purity	Care	Care , Loyalty
Care , Fairness, Loyalty	Authority, Loyalty	Fairness , Authority	Authority

What can potentially bridge moral divide?

- **Diversity**: use a moralities you don't usually prefer
- **Plurality**: use multiple moralities
(very infrequent, only 13% of tweets have >1 moral foundation)