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COVID-19 RESEARCH SERIES

ONLINE HARASSMENT AGAINST ASIAN AMERICANS DURING COVID-19

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PROJECT SUMMARY

The origination of the coronavirus in Wuhan, China has led to growing xenophobia in the United States, with many Americans blaming China, and Asians more generally, for “allowing” the coronavirus to “escape” into a worldwide pandemic. The study featured in this white paper explored Americans’ awareness and perceptions of increasing **anti-Asian attitudes** during COVID-19. Additionally, we examined if enactment of **resilience strategies** in response to the recent upsurge in online harassment of Asians on social media influenced people's self-reported **mental health** during the pandemic.

Using a nationally representative online survey of 1,767 respondents that oversampled Asian Americans, we found that while Asian and non-Asian Americans reported no differences in the overall disruptive force of COVID-19, in terms of their quality of life, physical health, or (un)employment, Asian Americans did report experiencing significantly higher levels of **negative emotions**. Asian Americans were also acutely more **aware** of pandemic-related racial harassment compared to non-Asians.

Asian Americans' elevated awareness of online harassment fueled a significant **mediation effect**: Compared to non-Asians, Asians who perceived the threat of online pandemic-related harassment were more likely to enact **resilience** in response, which was in turn associated with increases in self-reported **psychological health**.



Figure 1. Mediation Effect

BACKGROUND

RISE IN RECENT RACISM: ANTI-ASIAN ATTITUDES

Since March 2020, the number of US COVID-19 cases continues its climb in the USA – far exceeding the case and fatality rates of any other country. As businesses were shuttered and stay-at-home orders took effect in spring, the USA saw its unemployment claims skyrocket, at rates not seen since the Great Depression (US Bureau of Labor, 2020). But physical and economic health are not the only effects of the pandemic; as Americans grappled with stay-at-home orders, quarantine lockdowns of schools and businesses, reports of anxiety, depression, and other mental health problems have also risen dramatically. Heightened "pandemic fear" has given way to blame and xenophobia for many people—mainly directed toward Asians and Asian Americans (Casciano, 2020). Because the coronavirus originated in Wuhan, China, upwards of 30% of Americans have decided that the blame lies with China and Asians more generally (Jackson, Berg, & Yi, 2020). Politicians like US Senator John Cornyn (R-Texas) and President Trump began using terms such as "Chinese Virus" and "Kung Flu" to describe the coronavirus at public events (Nakamura, 2020).

Evidence of pandemic-related discrimination of Asian Americans showed up early: Between March 19 and May 13, Asian Americans reported an astounding 67.3% increase in verbal harassment incidents and a 10% increase in physical assaults (AAPI, 2019). Recent survey results from Pew Research published in July 2020 (Ruiz, Horowitz, & Tamir, 2020) found that a majority of Asian respondents (58%) thought Americans were more likely to express racist views about Asians now than prior to the pandemic.

The Impact of Social Media. As the pandemic began reducing face-to-face interaction, Americans began using social media to circulate misinformation on platforms like Twitter and Facebook. Upwards of 80,000 tweets containing "#ChineseVirus" and "Gook Flu" reflect the ease with which racist slurs can be communicated online (see Croucher et al., 2020). While scholars documented the increasing rise in online harassment, clinical psychologists also began predicting severe effects on the psychological health of Chinese and other East Asian tourists, immigrants, and citizens in the United States (Litam, 2020; Zheng et al., 2020).

This white paper reports the findings of an **online survey** designed to measure the overall impacts of the pandemic on American life. This study provides an in-depth investigation into our **perceptions** of trending online harassment of Asian Americans, how we **respond** to it, and the effects that escalating pandemic-related racism has had on our **mental health**.



RESEARCH PROCESS

METHOD

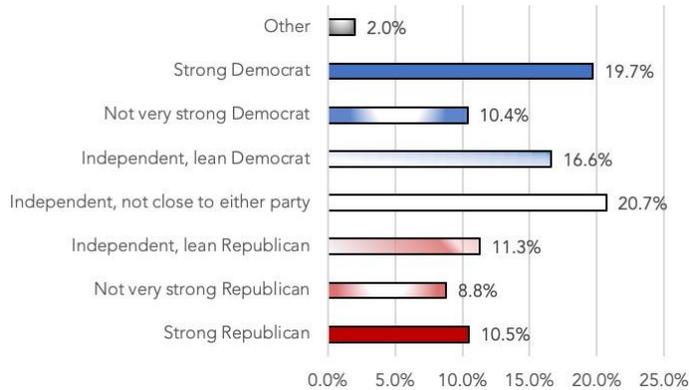


Figure 2. Sample political attitudes.

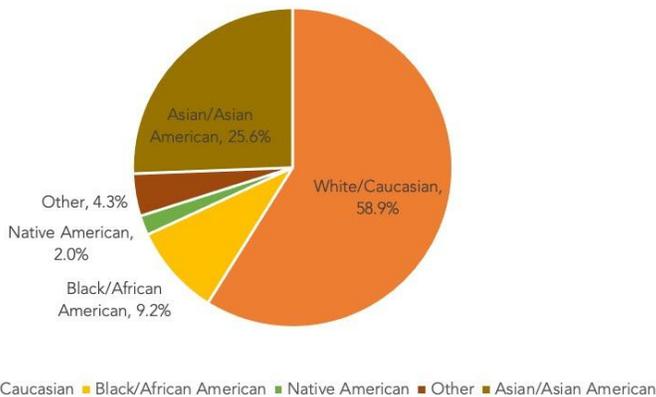


Figure 3. Full sample race/ethnicity. Consistent with US Census categories, the white category contains respondents of Hispanic/Latino descent.

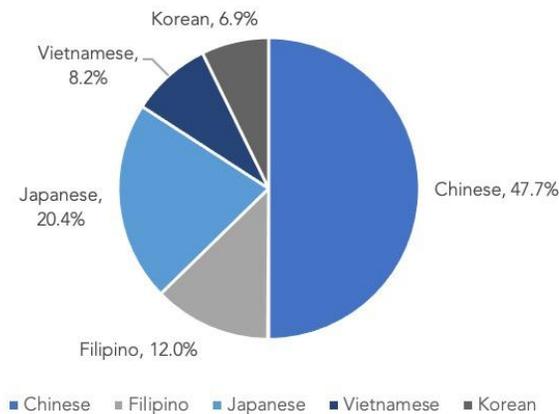


Figure 4. Asian subsample race/ethnicity. Additional categories included Asian Indian, Thai, Laotian, Taiwanese, Indonesian, Nepalese, Malaysian, Other (all at less than 5%).

This study reports the findings of a large-scale online survey collected during May 2020. A nationally-representative sample of 1,767 respondents was recruited in partnership with Dynata Research in accordance with US Census data on age (M = 47.63), sex (47% male), race/ethnicity, and location (suburban = 53.1%; urban or city = 29.6%; rural = 17.3%). As this project focused specifically on understandings and experiences of Asian Americans, we oversampled for 455 Asian respondents in order to test for differences across race.

Key Measures

- Respondents' **perception** of current pandemic-related racism was assessed by asking whether they thought online harassment of Asian Americans had "increased, decreased, or stayed about the same" (see page 4).
- **Resilience response** was measured with the *Communication Resilience Process* (Wilson et al., 2020) scale that contains 39 items designed to capture self-reported estimates of resilience behaviors across seven different categories.
- Overall levels of **COVID-19 concern** were measured by aggregating respondents' beliefs about the pandemic as a health threat, financial threat, perceived risks and severity of the coronavirus, US government response, and social distancing.
- Specific **disruptive effects of COVID-19 on everyday life**: Respondents reported on their current employment status, quality of life, physical health, and negative emotions/affect.
- Finally, **psychological health** was measured using the *WHO Quality of Life* 6-item subscale.

OVERVIEW

RESEARCH QUESTIONS



Q1: EFFECTS

HOW IS THE PANDEMIC AFFECTING OUR EVERYDAY LIFE?

Q2: AWARENESS

ARE WE AWARE OF THE ONLINE HARASSMENT OF ASIANS AMID COVID-19 ?

Q3: RESILIENCE RESPONSE

HOW ARE WE RESPONDING TO THE THREAT OF INCREASED ONLINE HARASSMENT OF ASIAN AMERICANS?

Q4: MENTAL HEALTH

HOW IS THE ESCALATING ONLINE HARASSMENT OF ASIAN AMERICANS IMPACTING OUR MENTAL HEALTH?

RESULTS

Our results are organized into four sections, each corresponding to one over-arching research question. In each section, we summarize key results that pertain to Americans' (a) overall concerns about COVID-19, as well as the disruptive effects that the pandemic has had on their everyday life, (b) their perceptions of the threat of increasing online harassment of Asian Americans, (c) the cultivation of resilience in response to their perceptions of pandemic-related online harassment, and (d) related effects on self-reported mental health.

QUESTION 1

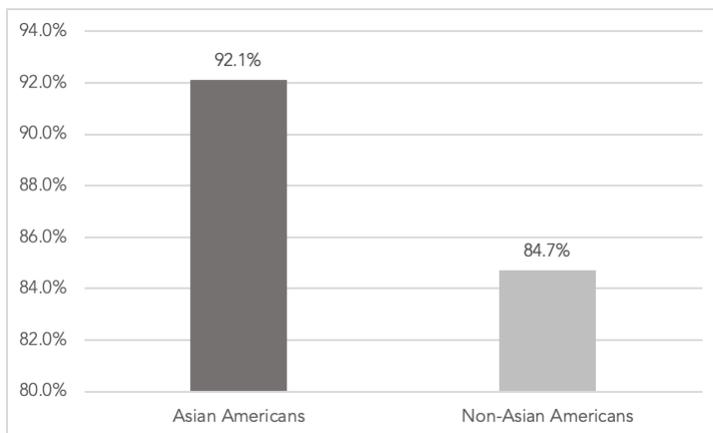
EVERYDAY LIFE DURING COVID-19

KEY FINDINGS

- Asian and non-Asian Americans report similar levels of physical health, (un)employment, and overall quality of life during COVID-19
- Asian Americans report experiencing significantly higher levels of negative emotions, compared to non-Asian Americans

Asian Americans more likely than Non-Asian Americans to report experiencing negative emotions during COVID-19

% reporting negative feelings such as despair, depression, or anxiety



Examining the effects of the pandemic, we compared Asian and non-Asian Americans' self-reported concerns about COVID-19, their overall quality of life, and disruptions to day-to-day living. Generally, Asians and non-Asian Americans reported similar levels of COVID-19 concerns. Both groups reported similar levels of quality of life, physical health, and financial health (i.e., unemployment) at the time of the data collection. In fact, Asian Americans reported **less overall life disruption** compared to non-Asian Americans.

Thus **race** seemingly has little impact in terms of general quality of life during the pandemic, such as physical or financial disruptions during the pandemic. Notably, however, Asian Americans did report experiencing higher levels of **negative emotions** compared to non-Asian Americans.

QUESTION 2

AWARENESS OF ONLINE HARASSMENT OF ASIANS

On the surface, it might seem that Asians are actually better off than non-Asians, who report greater life disruption during the pandemic. And yet, Asians are reporting higher levels of depression and anxiety. What is responsible for Asian Americans' increased negative emotions? We suspect that the added social stressor of being the target of pandemic-related racial discrimination has affected Asian Americans' overall emotional state.

To examine this further, we explored differences in perceptions of pandemic-related online racial discrimination against Asian Americans. Survey results indicated that Asians perceived online harassment during the pandemic to be a significantly more severe problem than non-Asian Americans. This finding echoes the **vigilance perspective**, which suggests that members of victimized groups often have heightened awareness of racial discrimination and harassment that occur in their everyday lives (Allport, 1954).

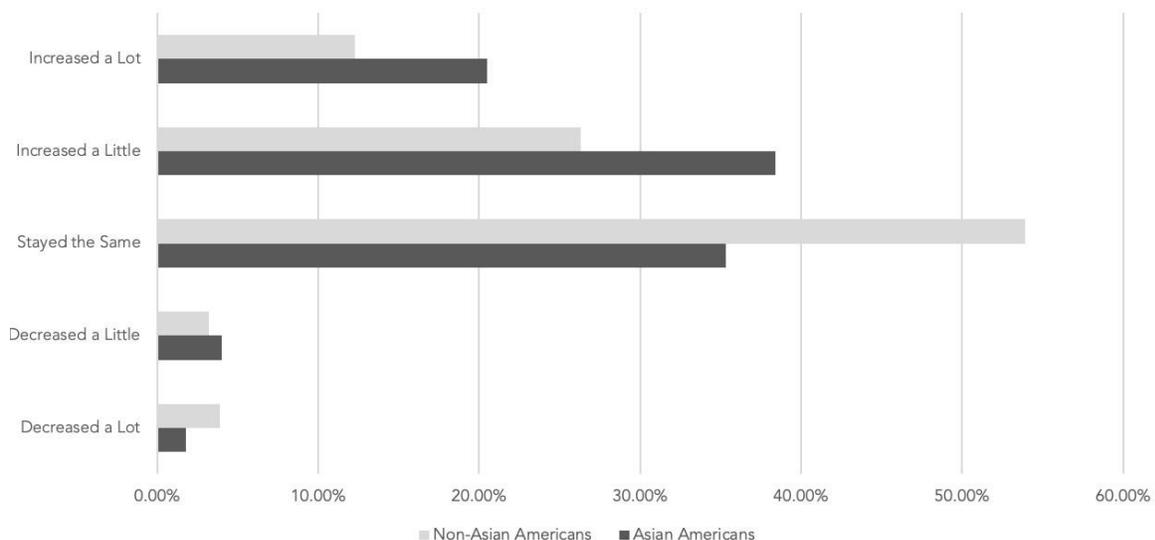
Despite the clear escalation of online harassment against Asian Americans, non-Asian respondents in our sample were less likely to view it as problematic; the majority of them believed that harassment of Asians has "stayed the same". Instead it was Asian respondents who were most likely to perceive the increasing severity of the issue during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"As a result of COVID-19, have you seen racism toward Asians and Asian Americans on social media increase, decrease, or stay about the same?"

KEY FINDINGS

Asian Americans perceived the problem of pandemic-related online harassment of Asians as more severe than non-Asian Americans

% reporting that online harassment of Asians has increased, decreased, or stayed about the same during COVID-19

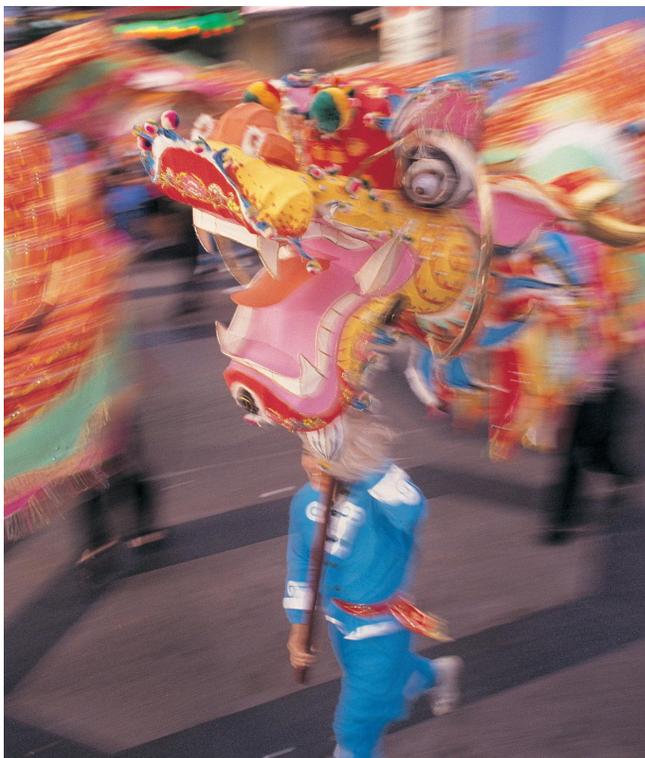


QUESTION 3

RESPONDING TO RACISM WITH RESILIENCE

KEY FINDINGS

- Heightened perception of pandemic-related online harassment activates people's **resilience response**
- Asian Americans report reaching out to **social networks** and **re-affirming their self-identity** as strategies that helped build resilience
- Resilience strategies of maintaining normalcy or humor were seen as **ineffective** ways to respond to the threat of online harassment



We explored people's response to increased online harassment through **resilience**, which is the process of positively adapting to some traumatic or stressful experience (Afifi, 2018; Buzzanell, 2010). People typically engage in resilience to deal with an event that disrupts their lives. In this case, we expect that Asian Americans who perceive the stress of pandemic-related online harassment would be more likely to enact resilience to respond to the threat of racism.

According to scholars, there are **seven strategies** that people can enact to create resilience in response to adversity or stress. In our survey, we asked a smaller subset of 888 respondents to indicate the degree to which they performed each behavior:

1. **Maintaining normalcy:** emphasizing mundane accomplishments
2. **Creating a "new normal":** Implementing new routines during stressful times
3. **Affirming personal identity:** Following core personal, spiritual, or cultural values
4. **Social networks:** Reaching out to friends, family, or peer groups for interaction/support
5. **Reframing:** Reinterpreting the stressor or disruptive event
6. **Humor:** Using humor to make light of difficult events
7. **Foregrounding productive actions:** Choosing to emphasize positivity, while acknowledging negative emotions that stem from disruption or loss

ONLINE HARASSMENT DURING COVID-19

Our analysis showed that compared to non-Asian respondents, Asian Americans' heightened perception of pandemic-related racial discrimination was directly associated with their resilience behaviors. Asians who were more aware of escalating online harassment were more likely to try and create new routines, reach out to their social networks for help, and affirm the most important parts of their own identity.

Interestingly, Asian Americans **did not report using humor** as a resilience strategy, **nor were they able to maintain normal routines** in response to increased online harassment during COVID-19. In interpreting these results, we see that not all resilience communication strategies are created equal--Asian Americans in this study did not find anything funny about racially-divisive rhetoric on social media. Their responses also show the difficulty of maintaining normalcy amid a global pandemic that exacerbates the latent threat of racism.

RESILIENCE

ri-**zil**-yuhns | *noun*

using communication to "bounce back,"
adapt, or respond positively to stressful/
disruptive life events

what have people seen online?

We asked our respondents to describe incidents of racial harassment against Asian Americans that they have witnessed or experienced on social media. Here are some examples:

"[I saw] someone post on Facebook blaming the Chinese for the virus with a pic[tur]e of soup with a bat in it. It used very negative language about Chinese Americans and their culture. I called them out on it and reported the post but i was feeling disgusted and downhearted. We need to support each other now, not tear each other down."

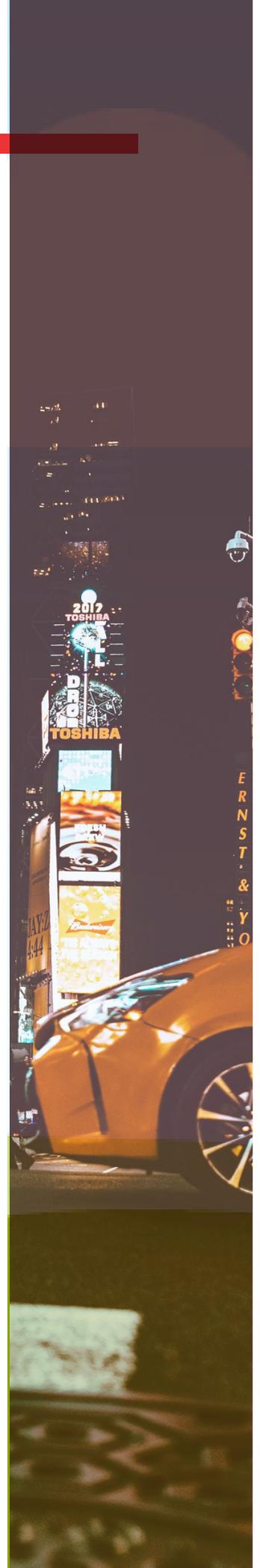
"It was a comment on a friend's post about the 'Chinese virus'. I don't remember exactly what it said but I know it angered me enough for me to get off of Facebook and pray."

"One of my Asian friends was getting harassed by kids online saying she started coronavirus. That is ignorant to tell someone they started a virus just based on their ethnicity alone."

"[I've seen] several people spreading an image describing Asians as subhuman."

"Since the President called it the Chinese virus I have seen people on Facebook blaming the Chinese for this. They have also been taunting them."

"There was a post of Nextdoor about Chinese restaurants and someone said he couldn't believe anyone would be interested in going to the local restaurant since the Chinese brought us Coronavirus. A lot of people were mad about the post, but I reported it, and as a moderator I deleted the offensive post. I was surprised that only one other person reported the post."



QUESTION 4

EFFECTS ON PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH

KEY FINDINGS

- Stronger enactment of resilience communication in response to perceived online harassment is positively associated to self-reported psychological health



Researchers note that the enactment of resilience is not always positive--in some cases, it can exacerbate negative emotions creating feelings of depletion and depression. However, in the current COVID-19 context, we expected that resilience would be positively related to mental health. Prior work in clinical psychology suggests that when members of stigmatized groups learn strategies that help them effectively cope with the threat of discrimination, effects on psychological wellbeing can be positive (Kim, 2013).

In our results, the enactment of **five resilience processes** (creating new normal, affirming identity, social networks, reframing the situation, foregrounding productive actions) were each positively associated with respondents' self-reported **psychological health**.

Combining the key findings from all four research questions suggests that when people perceive the disruption caused by pandemic-related racial discrimination, they are able to respond to it with resilience. Notably, lack of awareness does not mitigate the negative emotional and psychological effects of racism; what it *does* inhibit is the activation of resilience and any subsequent positive effects on the mental health.

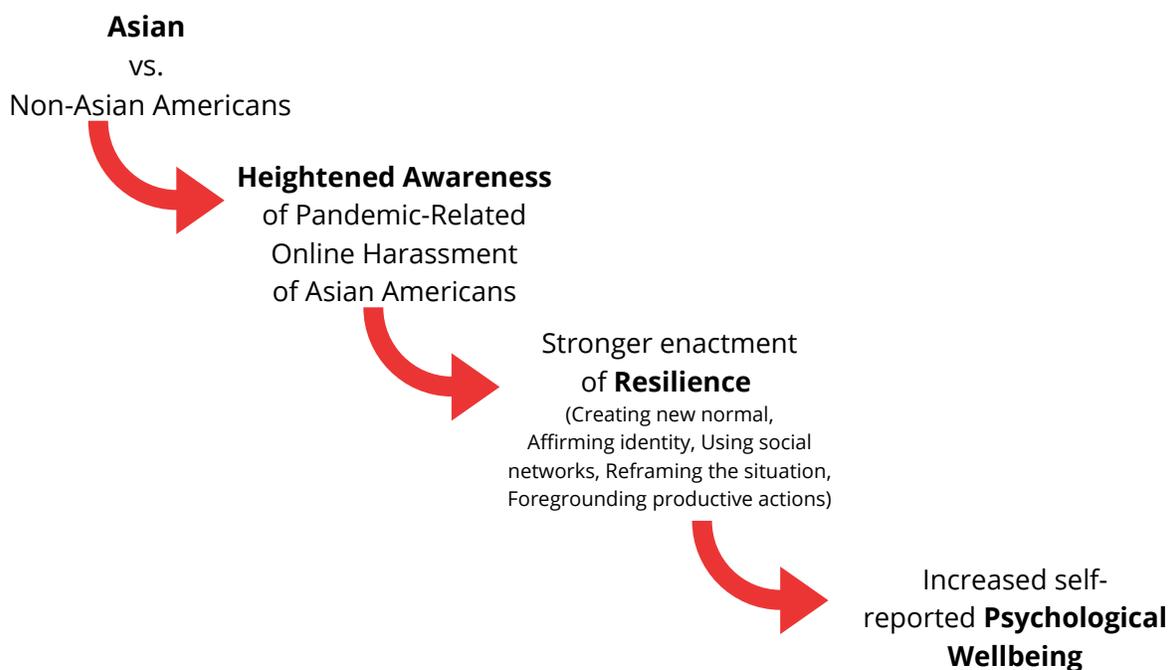
IMPLICATIONS

PAYING MORE ATTENTION, BEING MORE RESILIENT

As a “compound crisis,” the pandemic is upending many areas of everyday life, yet because most Americans are focused on rising rates of infections, deaths, and unemployment, less attention has been devoted to other “social side effects.” This study examined perceptions and outcomes related to one of those social problems—rising online racial discrimination and harassment against Asian Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic. Importantly, our survey results revealed that Americans’ differential perceptions of pandemic-related online harassment of Asian Americans were strongly related to their enactment of resilience communication, which in turn affected psychological health.

Notably, had we not accounted for the perceptions of online racial harassment as an intervening factor, we might be drawing a different—potentially erroneous—conclusion that Asian Americans are not enacting as strong a resilience response as non-Asian Americans during the pandemic. This interpretation of resilience across race could actually make sense, if we recall that Asian Americans report experiencing less overall negative disruption from the pandemic in their everyday lives, compared to non-Asian Americans. But analysis of the “chain reaction” in the larger mediation effect suggests that Asian Americans are activating resilience communication strategies in response to the threat of online racial harassment.

The results of this study also indicate that individuals’ perceptions of racial discrimination and harassment are a pivotal part of the resilience process, reaffirming the importance of examining social stressors during the pandemic. Even though the latent racism and xenophobia being unveiled through the COVID-19 pandemic has not been the focus of the mainstream media, it is still imperative that as Americans, we collectively attend to and reflect on our own behavior in these trying times. This includes paying attention to the words we tweet, stories we post, and messages we send that create harmful effects that we don’t see, but that we can feel.



ANALYSES & REFERENCES

In the analyses reported in this paper, we used the entire 1,767 sample to examine Q1 and Q2. For the remaining analyses testing resilience processes, we removed those participants who did not complete the CRP subscales in their entirety. This deletion left a remaining sample of 888 participants to examine the resilience processes which were the main focus of Q3 and Q4.

Analyses for Q2, Q3, and Q4 also included the covariates of age, sex, education, income, political attitudes, COVID-19 overall life disruption, and social media use. Mediation analyses were conducted using the PROCESS macro (model 6), with 10,000 resamples and estimates of 95% confidence intervals (Hayes, 2017). Zero-order correlations and detailed regression results are available as a supplemental downloadable file.

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