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Racism and resilience of pandemic proportions: online harassment of Asian Americans during COVID-19

Stephanie Tom Tong , Elizabeth Stoycheff and Rahul Mitra

Department of Communication, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, USA

ABSTRACT

This study explores perceptions of online racial hate speech directed at Asian Americans in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. We examined how individuals' enactment of resilience communication in response to that threat affected their self-reported estimates of personal health. Using a nationally representative survey ($n=1767$) that oversampled Asian Americans ($n=455$), we found that Asian Americans perceived the problem of online hate speech to be more severe than members of non-targeted groups. Analysis revealed a mediated pathway through which heightened perceptions of online racial hate speech were positively associated with individuals' enactment of specific resilience processes tied to identity affirmation, which was linked to positive gains in psychological health. Results contribute to resilience theory in the context of racism and the observed relationships between resilience communication and health. We discuss how individuals in minoritized communities and allies might use resilience to combat the synergistic stressors of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Resilience, widely studied across the social sciences, involves 'bouncing back' or adaptation in response to stressful or traumatic circumstances that disrupt the 'normal' flow of life (Luthar et al., 2000). Communication scholars, guided by the Communication Theory of Resilience (CTR; Buzzanell, 2010, 2018), have focused on practices that cultivate resilience in varying contexts, such as family dynamics (Kam et al., 2018), health and illness (Ishibashi et al., 2010), political crises (Tian & Bush, 2020), and natural disasters (Spialek & Houston, 2019). We extend this work by examining how Asian Americans – subjected to online racial hate speech related to the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States – enact resilience practices to accomplish positive health outcomes.

In contrast to extant CTR research that has focused on single-issue trauma (e.g. job loss, cancer) experienced in offline or 'real life' conditions (exception, Eddington, 2020), our study examines resilience when traumas are 'synergistic' – online racial harassment and hate speech in the midst of a worldwide pandemic (Cheng et al., 2021). This

CONTACT Stephanie Tom Tong  stephanie.tong@wayne.edu

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approach acknowledges how individuals live both offline and online, using social media extensively to discuss their lived experiences.

While the coronavirus has impacted society on multiple fronts – health, social, economic, and political – one of the most heinous fallouts has been the racial hate speech directed at people of Asian origin (Dhanani & Franz, 2020). Instigated by former President Trump, who termed it ‘kung flu’ and ‘China virus,’ outward displays of racist attitudes directed toward Asian Americans have risen since March 2020, with upwards of 30% of Americans blaming China (and Asians more generally) for causing the coronavirus (Jackson et al., 2020). Given that social media have long been associated with bullying, doxxing, and other forms of harassment, it is perhaps inevitable that much of this pandemic-related hate is directed online toward people of Asian origin. Recent estimates indicate that on platforms like Twitter, anti-Asian hate speech has risen 900% (Gilbert, 2020).

This study has the following aims. First, we explore how non-Asian Americans perceive and respond to the threat of pandemic-related online racial hate speech, defined as threatening language that discriminates against people specifically because of their race or ethnicity (Bliuc et al., 2018). We then compare these perceptions to those reported by people of Asian origin. Our second aim is to examine the enactment of resilience communication in more detail; because the CTR outlines ‘five interconnected processes’ (Buzzanell, 2010) but does not specify how people use them in response to specific threats, we explore which resilience communication practices are most contextually relevant to the threat of online racial hate speech. Drawing from Wilson et al. (2021), who refined CTR’s processes into seven discrete behaviors, we determine which behaviors are enacted in this context. Lastly, we examine the health outcomes related to specific resilience practices: because racism adversely affects physical and social health (Ong et al., 2013), our final aim focuses on how people’s self-reported enactment of resilience practices is related to their self-ratings of personal health. In accomplishing these aims, our study calls attention to the pandemic-related racial harassment of an understudied minority group, intensified by social media, and how people respond to such a threat.

Discrimination against Asian Americans

The United States has a sordid history accepting immigrants of Asian origin while codifying racism: The Page Act of 1875 and its better-known successor, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, was followed by President Roosevelt’s executive order that established Japanese internment camps after World War II (Nakanishi & Lai, 2002). Although these legal frameworks were ultimately dismantled, public norms have been slow to change, and Asians in the United States continue to battle prejudice, institutional racism, and ethnic and racial stereotyping. For example, since the 1960s, Asian Americans have been subject to a ‘model minority’ stereotype, which presents them as a group that has achieved quiet, consistent success through perseverance and intelligence (Nakayama, 1988). As a consequence, Asians in the United States are not often viewed as victims of racism and are instead thought to enjoy more successes than other minority groups or even white Americans.

It is through this stereotyped lens that people have come to understand the contemporary Asian American experience. Research suggests that belief in the model minority

myth has led many to ‘mask’ the racial inequalities that Asian Americans have faced, as it perpetuates false assumptions that Asians are problem-free, having already been able to find success and security within American society (Kawai, 2005; Yi & Museums, 2015). As a result, the model minority myth can delegitimize the racial discrimination that Asians actually face, such as the 1982 racially motivated murder of 27-year-old Vincent Chin in Detroit by two white auto workers, who mistook the Chinese-American citizen to be Japanese and thus ‘responsible’ for the American automotive industry’s downturn at the time (Kurashige, 2016).

Ironically, following flashpoints like Chin’s murder, the emergence of a strong multi-ethnic Asian American identity (Wu, 2010) and successful coalition-building with Black and Chicano community organizers for civil rights (Kim, 1999), may have strengthened the general perception that Asian Americans do not face discrimination anymore. Survey data from the last 30 years suggest that most people living in the United States do not perceive racial discrimination against Asian Americans to be problematic (Yoo et al., 2010). This attitude was documented as recently as 2019 in Pew Research’s ‘Race in America’ survey (Horowitz et al., 2019), which asked if being a member of various minority groups helps or hurts an individual’s ability ‘to get ahead’ in the United States. Most respondents indicated that being Black (56%) or Hispanic (51%) puts people at a disadvantage, but when asked the same question about Asians, ‘more say it helps (34%) than hurts (21%) people’s ability to get ahead.’ Such responses reflect the pervasive belief that because Asian Americans no longer face overt discrimination, they no longer need help fighting racism.

Though non-Asians tend to view discrimination against Asians as a non-issue in the United States, Asian Americans themselves perceive the problem very differently. That same 2019 survey by Pew Research found that 76% of Asian Americans reported experiencing discrimination or unfair treatment due to their ethnicity; Asians in that sample were also more likely than any other respondent minority group to report being the target of racial slurs or jokes (Horowitz et al., 2019). Even more notable was that 72% of Asian respondents from that study indicated that ‘the bigger problem is people not seeing racial discrimination where it really exists’ – a finding that suggests Asian Americans see racial discrimination against members of their ingroup as problematic but believe that others around them do not.

More recently, Pew Research (Ruiz et al., 2020) examined Americans’ awareness of racial discrimination during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and found that most Asian respondents (58%) thought Americans were more likely to express racist views about Asians in 2020 than prior to the pandemic. Additionally, compared to other minorities, Asians were more likely to report being the subject of racial hate speech (31% of Asians, compared to 21% of Blacks; 15% of Hispanics) and physical attacks (26% of Asians, compared to 20% of Blacks; 10% of Hispanics).

Online racial hate speech against Asian Americans during COVID-19

Alongside the recent trend toward pandemic-related anti-Asian attitudes, more pointed research has shown that anti-Asian racial hate speech has also increased in online spaces. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) and social media scholarship has long argued that key features of the online environment can foster the formation of intergroup

dynamics (e.g. ingroup identification/outgroup vilification) that support the exchange of hate speech; for example, the ‘public yet anonymous’ nature of some social media platforms can encourage an online disinhibition effect that affords people a sense of freedom to spew racial hatred without fear of negative social sanction or repercussions that they might face if their identity were known (Barnidge et al., 2019; Suler, 2004).

In the current COVID-19 context, several public-but-anonymous social media platforms have seen spikes in anti-Asian hate speech. Tahmasbi et al. (2021) collected large-scale data sets of Twitter tweets and 4chan posts from November 2019 to March 2020, noting that post-pandemic content contained ‘new emerging Sinophobic slurs and terms’ that were related specifically to COVID-19, such as ‘kungflu’ and ‘asshoe’ which ‘aims to make fun of the accent of Chinese people speaking English’ (p. 1123). Croucher et al. (2020) also found that increased Facebook use among white Americans in the United States during the pandemic was directly correlated with their perception of Chinese Americans as a ‘symbolic threat’ to American way of life, defined as ‘group differences in morals, values, standards, beliefs, and attitudes’ (Stephan & Stephan, 1996). Although compared to Twitter or 4chan, Facebook is a more ‘identified’ (i.e. less anonymous) social media platform, these findings show how deeply anti-Asian sentiment has resonated in online spaces.

Such trends provide contemporary illustration of how the threat of disease can unearth deeper-rooted prejudices – in particular, the more sinister ‘yellow peril’ trope in which Asians are portrayed as perpetual foreigners who bring germs into (otherwise healthy) American communities – that coexist with the model minority myth (Kawai, 2005). In the past, outbreaks of novel diseases or viruses have paved the way for racial othering and aggression toward immigrants, whose mere presence provides a scapegoat for people’s anger, fear, and frustration. As Li and Nicholson (2021) point out, people’s stereotyped perceptions of Asian Americans tend to swing between opposite poles depending on the circumstances: While the model minority myth described above tends to be the prevalent stereotype of Asian Americans in general, the more threatening yellow peril trope is typically brought into sharper view during ‘moments of crisis or competition’ (p. 4), such as SARS in 2003 (Leung, 2008) and now the COVID-19 pandemic (see also Le et al., 2020).

However, despite these empirical findings, it is unknown if people in the United States have detected the increased intensity and severity of anti-Asian online hate speech. On the one hand, the spread of disinformation online during the pandemic has placed greater attention on the rapid exchange of damaging social media content; this suggests that perhaps both Asians and non-Asians could be aware of the surge in online racial hate speech. But a more likely prediction is that against other stressors of lost jobs, physical illness, and deaths, most Americans will perceive online racial hate speech as comparatively less of a problem. We expect that reduced awareness of pandemic-related online racial hate is even more likely in light of the evidence cited above, which demonstrates the differential perceptions regarding racial discrimination against Asian Americans, even prior to the pandemic. Thus, our first hypothesis is a ‘perception check,’ in which we predict differences in perceptions regarding the threat of online racial hate speech against Asians during COVID-19 among targeted and non-targeted groups:

H1: Asian Americans will perceive pandemic-related online hate speech against Asian Americans to be a more severe problem than non-Asian Americans.

Resilience in response to stress and trauma

The second aim of this study is to understand how people respond to the stress of pandemic-related online hate speech through resilience communication. In CTR, resilience is conceptualized as a dynamic process that is activated by disruptive threats in a person's life. CTR offers a process-driven perspective, defining resilience as a blend of one's 'nature' and 'nurture' – that is, resilience is not simply an individual trait, it is also dependent on others' responses, social networks and relationships, and external resources such as money, services, and education – all of which can help or hinder a person's resilience response (Buzzanell, 2010; 2018; see also, Afifi, 2018). As an ongoing process, then, resilience 'does not reside in the individual' but is a distinctly communicative practice found in the continual exchange of messages and interaction.

Drawing from Wilson et al.'s (2021) recent definition and measure of resilience, we operationalize resilience response in terms of specific behavioral practices of (a) maintaining routines (b) creating new routines, (c) affirming identity anchors, (d) maintaining and leveraging communication networks, (e) reframing the stressful situation, (f) using humor, and (g) foregrounding productive actions while backgrounding negative emotions. Logically, it is expected that a person must first perceive a disruption before activating a response to it (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Following CTR, we expect that an individual's perception of online racial hate will prompt them to engage in one or more resilience communication strategies:

H2a-H2g: Individuals' perceptions of the severity of the threat of online racial hate speech against Asian Americans will be positively associated with their enactment of seven dimensions of resilience communication.

Outcomes associated with resilience and related coping processes

In the field of relational communication, resilience (and related processes such as social support) has been positively associated with a variety of outcomes, such as stress reduction, relational closeness, and psychological well-being (Afifi, 2018). Though few communication researchers have examined resilience in the context of online hate speech, there is a larger body of related work examining minorities' coping strategies in response to the threat of racial discrimination (Brown & Tylka, 2011). Studies that examine stigmatized groups' enactment of coping behaviors suggest that perceiving the problem of racism is associated with increased psychological wellbeing through coping behaviors such as enhanced community-building, social support, and prioritizing collective identity (Carranza, 2007).

In this literature, a handful of published studies examining the relationships among racial discrimination perceptions → coping → mental health outcomes do suggest some interesting patterns. In line with the traditional stress and coping model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), Kim (2013) found that Asian Americans' who engage active, emotion-focused coping strategies (e.g. social support seeking) in response to perceived racial discrimination report decreased levels of depression, whereas those who use

emotion-disengaged coping (e.g. avoidance, social withdrawal) to deal with discrimination report increased depression. In this way, active coping seems to help Asians effectively reduce the stress associated with the perceived threat of racial discrimination, thus accounting for their average – or even better-than-average – self-reported psychological health.

Similarly, while literature from communication allows us to predict that generally, resilience practices will be directly related to positive gains in psychological wellbeing, none of this work has specifically examined people's enactment of resilience in response to the perceived threat of online racial hate. In a recent exception, Eddington (2020) examined how right-wing 'men's rights' groups cultivated what they called resilience (which Eddington terms 'alt-resilience' after 'alt-right'). However, unlike most CTR research that studies 'productive change' the members of these online men's rights groups practiced alt-resilience to 'communicatively construct an idea of both identity and reality that is alternative to mainstream approaches' (p. 130). In Eddington's study, though participants in online men's rights groups used alt-resilience logics to organize a response, we do not draw comparisons between what these participants encountered and the current context of online hate we articulate here.

Meanwhile, some scholars have argued that practicing resilience in the face of virulent racism (especially when one is a member of a community that has not hitherto been considered a model minority) may be negatively related to one's psychological health and perpetuate ideologies of hyper-individualism without structural reform (e.g. Clay, 2019). Such work, however, discounts the capacity for internal fortification via resilience, whereas a larger swathe of interdisciplinary research demonstrates how people from minoritized groups can transcend socio-structural stressors such as racism, incarceration, and unemployment. For instance, Teti et al. (2012) identified perseverance, commitment to learning from hardship, refocusing to address difficulties, creating a supportive environment, and finding spiritual support as vital to promote low-income, urban Black men's resilience. These prior studies – and their underlying definition of resilience – align well with CTR, and the trauma-based perspective from which it originates. Thus, similar to past research examining members of other marginalized communities, we suspect that when communication behaviors are treated and measured as the core mechanism of resilience, they will be positively related to psychological health outcomes:

H3a-H3g: Individuals' self-reported performance of resilience behaviors will be positively related to their estimates of personal psychological health during the pandemic.

Finally, we link the entire sequence together:

H4: Heightened perceptions of the severity of pandemic-related online racial hate speech against Asian Americans that are (a) positively related to self-reported enactment of seven resilience practices, will be in turn (b) positively related to self-reported estimates of psychological health during the pandemic.

Method

A sample of 1,767 participants was recruited by Dynata Research in May 2020. All participants were over age 18 and living in the United States. Age ($M = 47.63$, $SD = 17.11$), sex (47% male), and location (suburban = 53.1%; urban or city = 29.6%; rural = 17.3%)

categories were matched to estimates from the most recent 2010 U.S. Census data, with Asian-American participants being deliberately oversampled ($n = 455$) to execute planned comparisons between Asian and non-Asian Americans in H1 (see Appendix B, C). After indicating consent, participants were directed to an online survey that was developed by the authors and hosted on the Qualtrics platform. Participants provided demographics and responded to items that assessed their perceptions regarding pandemic-related online racial hate speech against Asian Americans and the impact of the pandemic on their overall lifestyle. They also estimated their current levels of personal health. Notably, given the length of the Communication Resilience Processes scale (see below), only 874 participants (315 Asian) completed the full scale. Below, we note which analyses were conducted with the entire sample and which were conducted with the subsample. Though Dynata assisted with participant recruitment, the authors are the owners of these anonymous data. All procedures were approved by the authors' institutional research board (Wayne State University, IRB #20-04-2068-B3).

Measures

Demographics, perceptions of racial hate speech, and resilience

Demographic information included race, age, sex, education, income, locality, and political attitudes. Participants also estimated their overall social media use. A single item assessed *perceptions of pandemic-related online hate speech toward Asian Americans*: 'As a result of COVID-19, have you seen acts of race-based harassment, discrimination, or hate speech toward Asian and Asian Americans on social media increase, decrease, or stay about the same?' with responses ranging from 1 = 'Decreased a lot' to 5 = 'Increased a lot.' *Resilience* was measured using 39 items from the Communication Resilience Process scale (CRP; Wilson et al., 2021). CFA estimates with R using the lavaan package showed that subscales exhibited acceptable fit and reliability estimates were sufficient.

COVID-19 concerns

Because the pandemic has brought about simultaneous stressors, robust measures of individuals' COVID-19 concerns were included as covariates. Participants were asked about their beliefs regarding the pandemic as a health threat, financial threat, perceived risks and severity of the coronavirus, U.S. government response, and social distancing. These items were averaged to form a composite score reflecting *overall COVID-19 concerns*. To measure life stressors/disruption due to the pandemic, participants were shown nine known effects of COVID-19 and asked to select those that applied to them. Their choices were then summed to create a total score of *everyday COVID-19 life disruption*.

Estimates of personal health

We used the World Health Organization's Quality of Life (WHOQOL-BREF) to measure domains of *psychological, social, physical, and environmental health*. Each domain is measured using a separate subscale of items, which asked participants to consider their experiences 'over the last two weeks' (WHO, 2004). Though the focus of this study was on psychological health, prior work indicates that racism is also linked to self-reported negative effects on physical and social health (Ong et al., 2013). The primary analysis reported below focuses on psychological health, but we examined

each of the remaining domains from the WHOQOL-BREF as potential outcome variables, replicating the mediation analyses in H4. See Appendix A for survey item wordings and descriptive statistics.

Results

Perceptions of pandemic-related anti-Asian online racial hate speech

Hypothesis 1 examined if racial group membership affected how individuals perceived the increasing problem of pandemic-related online racial hate speech toward Asian Americans. After controlling for effects of age, sex, education, income, political attitudes (social and fiscal), overall COVID-19 life disruption, COVID-19 concerns, and social media use, ANCOVA results indicated that Asians ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 0.90$) perceived online racial hate speech during the pandemic to be a significantly more severe problem than non-Asian Americans ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 0.89$), $F(1, 1758) = 38.58$, $p < .001$, partial eta square = .024. This echoes previous studies examining differential perceptions of racial discrimination (see Major et al., 2002). The majority of non-Asian Americans in our sample did not perceive increasing online hate speech against Asian Americans to be as problematic as members of the targeted group.

Resilience response to online racial hate speech

As noted above, self-reported psychological wellbeing is not solely dependent on individuals' perceptions of the threat of online racial hate; it may also depend on how they respond to that threat. It was predicted in H2a-H2g that in order to respond to a threat with resilience communication, people must first perceive online racial hate speech against Asian Americans as a problem. Thus, we expected heightened perceptions of problem severity to be directly related to performance of resilience. To examine H2a-H2g, we analyzed the subsample of 874 individuals who completed the entire CRP, examining correlations between perceptions of online racial hate speech problem severity with each of the seven subscales of resilience communication. Results indicated that only maintaining routines and humor were unrelated to perceptions of online racial hate speech; we return to this in the discussion section.

Following prior work, H3a-H3g predicted positive relationships between performance of resilience communication and self-reported psychological health. Examination of the correlations in Table 1 show all seven resilience processes were related to estimates of psychological health, consistent with prior literature (Afifi, 2018; Kim, 2013).

Links between perceptions of online hate speech, resilience, and psychological health

The final analysis examined the indirect effect of perceptions of online hate speech problem severity (X) \rightarrow resilience communication (M_1 - M_5) \rightarrow psychological health (Y). With respect to the resilience behaviors, since the results of H2 suggested that maintaining normal routines and humor were not significantly related to perceptions of online racial hate against Asian Americans, we dropped them from the model to simplify analyses.



Table 1. Correlations for study variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	
1. Race (0 = non Asian; 1 = Asian)																						
2. Perceptions of Online Hate	.096 [^]																					
3. Maintain Routines	-.06	0.006																				
4. New Routines	-.013	.097 [^]	.399 [^]																			
5. Affirm Identity Anchors	-.034	.105 [^]	.569 [^]	.550 [^]																		
6. Networks	-.094 [^]	.102 [^]	.253 [^]	.459 [^]	.326 [^]																	
7. Reframing	-.056	.092 [^]	.395 [^]	.570 [^]	.570 [^]	.591 [^]																
8. Humor	-.139 [^]	0.047	.355 [^]	.409 [^]	.439 [^]	.512 [^]	.627 [^]															
9. Foregrounding Productive Actions	-.068*	.110 [^]	.451 [^]	.559 [^]	.722 [^]	.474 [^]	.728 [^]	.560 [^]														
10. Physical Health	.123 [^]	-.037	.288 [^]	.257 [^]	.398 [^]	.031	.185 [^]	.175 [^]	.294 [^]													
11. Psychological Health	.079*	-.027	.360 [^]	.310 [^]	.478 [^]	.197 [^]	.321 [^]	.249 [^]	.359 [^]	.643 [^]												
12. Social Health	.041	-.001	.322 [^]	.251 [^]	.400 [^]	.309 [^]	.304 [^]	.289 [^]	.327 [^]	.531 [^]	.661 [^]											
13. Environmental Health	.057	.008	.396 [^]	.343 [^]	.543 [^]	.153 [^]	.322 [^]	.301 [^]	.428 [^]	.718 [^]	.730 [^]	.611 [^]										
14. Age	.294 [^]	-.088 [^]	.056	-0.03	.168 [^]	-.197 [^]	-.007	-0.054	.053	.179 [^]	.216 [^]	.123 [^]	.189 [^]									
15. Sex	-.004	.027	-0.01	.05	.023	.103 [^]	.089 [^]	.081*	.094 [^]	-.088 [^]	-.079*	.044	-0.059	-.155 [^]								
16. Education	.220 [^]	.002	.035	.141 [^]	.097 [^]	.056	.069*	0.064	.071*	.128 [^]	.137 [^]	.072*	.162 [^]	.178 [^]	-.119 [^]							
17. Income	.210 [^]	-.001	.022	.078*	.114 [^]	-.024	.029	0.054	.06	.306 [^]	.218 [^]	.228 [^]	.259 [^]	.217 [^]	-.120 [^]	.394 [^]						
18. Political Attitudes (fiscal)	.03	.212 [^]	-.034	.075*	-.015	.067*	.013	.018	.02	-.054	-.100 [^]	-.073*	-.037	-.134 [^]	.119 [^]	.029	-.064					
19. Political Attitudes (social)	.008	.254 [^]	-.064	.070*	-0.004	.005	-.026	.026	.046	-.008	-.102 [^]	-.076*	.014	-.123 [^]	.038	.106 [^]	.039	.757 [^]				
20. CV-19 Concerns	.064	.262 [^]	-.045	.173 [^]	.201 [^]	.026	.130 [^]	.063	.196 [^]	.075*	-.012	-.019	.097 [^]	.136 [^]	.082*	.093 [^]	.087 [^]	.306 [^]	.336 [^]			
21. CV-19 Life Stressors	-.162 [^]	-.013	-.113 [^]	.078*	-0.036	.138 [^]	.051	0.039	.038	-.136 [^]	-.044	-.011	-.080*	-.127 [^]	-.008	.042	.021	-.076*	-.058	-.001		
22. Social Media Use	-.211 [^]	.079*	.043	.143 [^]	0.013	.316 [^]	.199 [^]	.194 [^]	.136 [^]	-.133 [^]	-.066	.025	-.011	-.477 [^]	.054	-.045	-.080*	.118 [^]	.079*	-.049	.201 [^]	

*Note: Correlation is significant at the .05 level; [^] correlation is significant at the .01 level.

To test H4, we used the PROCESS macro with 10,000 resamples and estimates of 95% confidence intervals (Hayes, 2017). This mediation analysis contained the same covariates as H2, with results indicating significant indirect effects of perceptions of online racial hate speech against Asian Americans on psychological health through the practice of resilience communication. Though the total indirect effect was significant (see Table 2), the only resilience practice that significantly mediated the relationship between perceptions of online racial hate and self-reported psychological health was *affirming identity anchors*.

Supplementary analyses

We replicated the mediation analysis for the remaining self-reported estimates of *physical health*, *social health*, and *environmental health* as measured by the WHOQOL-BREF instrument (see Table 3 and Appendix D). For *physical health*, significant mediation was again detected for affirming identity and creating new routines; *social health*, significant mediators included affirming identity and leveraging social networks. Finally, for *environmental health*, we see significant mediation effects for affirming identity anchors and foregrounding positive actions. We note that while CFA estimates with R using the lavaan package revealed that the psychological, physical, and social health measures showed acceptable fit, the estimates for environmental health indicated relatively poor fit (CFI = .89, TLI = .85, RMSEA = .12) and so results of these data should be interpreted with caution.

Together, the results from H4 and the supplemental replications suggest that when people perceive the disruption caused by pandemic-related online racial hate speech and enact resilience, they report better overall health outcomes. Mediation analyses revealed a theorized process in which heightened perception of the severity of online racial hate speech was related to the activation of resilience behaviors that were, in turn, associated with increased self-reported personal health. Analyses also revealed that *maintaining normal routines* and *humor* were not preferred responses to the problem of online racial hate speech; instead *affirming identity* was identified as a resilience strategy that many turned to in order to cope with the stress of online racial hate.

Discussion

Against the background of the larger COVID-19 pandemic, this study examined how perceptions of the severity of pandemic-related online racial hate speech against Asian Americans affect enactment of resilience practices, and whether those practices were related to self-reported personal health. Our findings should be interpreted in light of several methodological decisions. First, this study relied on a nationally representative survey that, despite all its advantages, only provides correlational evidence. Very likely, the relationships identified here are dynamic, and our cross-sectional design captured one meaningful pathway that aligns with theory and is consistent with existing research. Potentially, individuals who report better psychological health are also more likely to implement resilience communication behaviors and may be more aware of the plight of others. Second, a key independent variable – perceptions of online harassment against Asian Americans – was measured with a single item, which was not ideal, but doing so allowed us to incorporate full batteries of the CRP and the WHOQOL-BREF



Table 2. Model summary for the mediation effect of H4 on psychological health.

Var.	<i>M</i> ₁			<i>M</i> ₂			<i>M</i> ₃			<i>M</i> ₄			<i>M</i> ₅			Y (Psychological Health)									
	Coef	SE	<i>p</i>	Coef.	SE	<i>p</i>	Coef.	SE	<i>p</i>	Coef.	SE	<i>p</i>	Coef.	SE	<i>p</i>	Coef.	SE	<i>p</i>							
<i>X</i>	<i>a</i> ₁	-0.06	.04	.16	<i>a</i> ₂	0.10	.04	.014	<i>a</i> ₃	.12	.05	.016	<i>a</i> ₄	.09	.05	.042	<i>a</i> ₅	.08	.04	.047	<i>c</i> '	-.10	.11	.33	
<i>M</i> ₁																					<i>b</i> ₁	.18	.10	.08	
<i>M</i> ₂																						<i>b</i> ₂	1.11	.13	.001
<i>M</i> ₃																						<i>b</i> ₃	.14	.09	.11
<i>M</i> ₄																						<i>b</i> ₄	.14	.12	.25
<i>M</i> ₅																						<i>b</i> ₅	.01	.14	.93
Con	<i>iM</i> ₁	2.62	.33	.001	<i>iM</i> ₂	3.08	.30	.001	<i>iM</i> ₃	2.16	.37	.001	<i>iM</i> ₄	2.31	.33	.001	<i>iM</i> ₅	2.57	.31	.001	<i>i_y</i>	7.23	.83	.001	
		<i>R</i> ² = .08				<i>R</i> ² = .09				<i>R</i> ² = .14				<i>R</i> ² = .09				<i>R</i> ² = .09				<i>R</i> ² = .30			
		<i>F</i> (10, 863) = 7.24, <i>p</i> < .001				<i>F</i> (10, 863) = 8.66, <i>p</i> < .001				<i>F</i> (10, 863) = 13.48, <i>p</i> < .001				<i>F</i> (10, 863) = 8.43, <i>p</i> < .001				<i>F</i> (10, 863) = 8.57, <i>p</i> < .001				<i>F</i> (15, 858) = 24.98, <i>p</i> < .001			

Note: *n* = 874; *X* (Perceptions of online racial hate speech), *M*₁ (Creating New Routines), *M*₂ (Affirm Identity Anchors), *M*₃ (Networks), *M*₄ (Reframing), *M*₅ (Foreground Positive Actions). Covariates include age, sex, education, income, political attitudes (social), political attitudes (fiscal), CV-19 life impacts, CV-19 concerns, social media use.

Table 3. Summaries for the mediation effect of H4 on social health, physical health, & environmental health.

Var.	Y (Social Health)				Var.	Y (Physical Health)				Var.	Y (Environmental Health)			
	Coef.	SE	<i>p</i>			Coef.	SE	<i>p</i>			Coef.	SE	<i>p</i>	
<i>X</i>	<i>c'</i>	-.062	.12	.61	<i>c'</i>	-.21	.09	.03	<i>c'</i>	-.14	.09	.15		
<i>M</i> ₁	<i>b</i> ₁	-.16	.12	.60	<i>b</i> ₁	.28	.09	.003	<i>b</i> ₁	.18	.09	.05		
<i>M</i> ₂	<i>b</i> ₂	1.05	.15	.001	<i>b</i> ₂	.76	.11	.001	<i>b</i> ₂	1.17	.11	.001		
<i>M</i> ₃	<i>b</i> ₃	.65	.10	.001	<i>b</i> ₃	-.15	.08	.05	<i>b</i> ₃	-.07	.08	.36		
<i>M</i> ₄	<i>b</i> ₄	-.003	.14	.98	<i>b</i> ₄	-.12	.11	.27	<i>b</i> ₄	-.03	.11	.08		
<i>M</i> ₅	<i>b</i> ₅	-.012	.17	.94	<i>b</i> ₅	.29	.13	.03	<i>b</i> ₅	.28	.13	.035		
Con	<i>i</i> _y	5.51	.96	.001	<i>i</i> _y	10.87	.75	.001	<i>i</i> _y	6.24	.75	.001		
		<i>R</i> ² = .26				<i>R</i> ² = .28				<i>R</i> ² = .36				
		<i>F</i> (15, 858) = 20.16, <i>p</i> < .001				<i>F</i> (15, 858) = 21.70, <i>p</i> < .001				<i>F</i> (15, 858) = 31.71, <i>p</i> < .001				

Note: *n* = 874; *X* (Perceptions of online racial hate speech), *M*₁ (Creating New Routines), *M*₂ (Affirm Identity Anchors), *M*₃ (Networks), *M*₄ (Reframing), *M*₅ (Foreground Positive Actions). Covariates include age, sex, education, income, political attitudes (social), political attitudes (fiscal), CV-19 life impacts, CV-19 concerns, social media use.

scales. This decision allowed us to tease apart the specific resilience practices and dimensions of health that are impacted by perceptions of online harassment.

Third, while Sinophobic attitudes reflect the coronavirus's geographic origins in Wuhan, China, many Asian Americans of different ethnicities have also been the targets of hate speech and discrimination in the United States. The commonly held belief that because all Asians 'look alike' they must be equally responsible for the coronavirus is also reflected in the propensity to 'blame *all* Asians as a group for COVID-19' (Li & Nicholson, 2021, p. 5). It is because non-Chinese Asian Americans have also become targets of COVID-19-related racial hate speech – both online and offline – that we decided to study perceptions and reactions of the larger group. While we were careful to capture the various ethnic backgrounds of our respondents, future work may tease apart differences among East, Southeast, and South Asian individuals, as research suggests that ethnic subgroups can be perceived and treated differently (Bonilla-Silva, 2004; Goh & McCue, 2021). Future research might also explore the intersection of race and ethnicity with other variables – such as class or education – which likely affect perceptions of online hate and resilience.

Contributions to resilience theory

Contributions to the resilience literature include demonstrating the utility of the CRP scale (Wilson et al., 2021) *in situ* with a nationally representative (U.S.) sample. In addition, the augmented sample of Asian participants acts together, with other recent work on Asian resilience (Luthar et al., 2021; Xie & Wong, 2021) to acknowledge the important role that culture, race, and identity play in the performance of resilience. Because resilience is wedded so deeply to perceived adversity – rather than actual adversity – a diverse sample helps test this scale's applicability to different cultural contexts. For example, Xie and Wong (2021) describe how resilience in the Chinese culture is heavily influenced by spiritual and personal relationships; our findings illustrate the mediated pathway from perceived adversity to health outcomes through affirming one's identity that underlies these relationships. Hence, while the CRP scale is already multidimensional, the addition of cultural-specific items could improve its applicability.

As we can see here, not all resilience processes are created equal; they may be context-specific, circumstantial, and more or less likely to address particular threats perceived differently by different groups of people. Although the frameworks we have drawn from tended to be U.S.-centric and sometimes presume that similar dynamics play out in every context, we make no such presumptions. Rather, by reviewing the (U.S.) historical trajectory of anti-Asian discrimination, citing the work of non-white scholars across various disciplines, and examining past research on resilience among marginalized groups, we emphasize that when examining resilience communication among underserved communities, future research should be more closely attuned to the socio-material histories at stake.

Secondly, we see that, at least in the context of COVID-19, individuals in this sample were unlikely to see maintaining routines or humor as productive ways to deal with the stress of racial hate speech. Given that online racial hate speech is not something easily 'laughed off' and that simply 'continuing on as normal' may not be possible during the pandemic, it makes sense as to why these were perceived as less effective. On the other hand, the results did uncover that the affirmation of identity was positively related to all four domains of self-reported health. The perceived utility of this resilience strategy becomes clear when we consider the specific threat of pandemic-related online racial hate speech – leaning into 'key aspects' of one's identity or trying to hold on 'to the most important parts of oneself' amidst current stresses may be especially important when attacks are being directed at an essential component of identity such as race or ethnicity.¹

Third, our study moves resilience into an online context, whereas most work has focused primarily on stressors originating or encountered in offline settings. Our results suggest that in online environments like social media where people are often anonymous, authority is limited, and intergroup norms are quickly established, it may be difficult to influence the (bad) behavior of others, and so focusing on oneself (and resilience practices under one's control) may be the best option (Joinson, 2001). However, there are other theoretical perspectives that suggest that if individuals actively seek out and receive social support from networked groups, CMC interaction can foster active resilience among disempowered individuals through collective action (Spears et al., 2002). Such perspectives may further theoretical thinking about how *communal resilience* might occur among larger groups in mediated spaces (Afifi et al., 2020; Spialek & Houston, 2019).

Applied recommendations

The universality of the COVID-19 pandemic has generated media messaging that 'we are all in this together,' a sentiment that has been disputed on a variety of fronts (Guarnieri, 2020). As this study shows, non-Asian Americans are significantly less likely to perceive the stress of online hate speech against their Asian American counterparts, presenting an empathy challenge to those who aren't cognizant of the problem. The global nature of this crisis provides yet another opportunity to combat the model minority myth and address high-profile acts of physical violence and online verbal (micro)aggressions that compound larger environmental stressors. *The New York Times* (Proulx, 2021) has initiated this effort through a 'lesson' directed at Asian and non-Asian Americans

alike to increase awareness of racism, discrimination, and hate speech in their own communities. It is the first of many steps the media and public at large can undertake to acknowledge how minority groups and non-targeted allies can raise awareness and resilience.

In the United States, emerging research corroborates our claim that, because of COVID-19, Asian Americans have experienced increased racial discrimination, which (in the absence of resilience) contributes to anxiety and depression (Lee & Waters, 2021). These outcomes are particularly problematic given that Asian Americans are known to significantly underutilize mental health services, especially amid the pandemic (Lee & Rose, 2022). Access to those services (especially among foreign-born Asian Americans), the stigma associated with seeking professional treatment, language barriers, and differences between Asian and Western values (e.g. prioritizing collective over the individual) are all factors that contribute to this reluctance (Abe-Kim et al., 2007). Our research suggests that the implementation of resilience behaviors, especially ones congruent to personal identity can improve, rather than erode, individuals' psychological well-being. We echo the call of Misra et al. (2020) to all levels of U.S. government to commit more resources toward culturally appropriate mental health services, particularly those that emphasize the benefits of resilience communication.

Moreover, the affirming identity resilience process identified in this study is not necessarily tied to one's racial or ethnic identity. By including non-Asian Americans in our sample, we demonstrate that allies can also glean benefits from acknowledging the problems Asian Americans face. Many U.S. policymakers, including President Biden, have allied themselves with Asian Americans and are now codifying legislation, including the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act, which strives to raise awareness of hate crimes and facilitate incident reporting (Sprunt, 2021). This and other policies are critical to institutionalizing ally support and dismantling the United States' long history of racial discrimination against people of Asian origin. While we offer these recommendations in terms of U.S.-based policies, we note that the issue of online racial harassment is a global one that affects people of many different racial backgrounds, and hope that research into this topic continues to examine its causes, effects, and treatment internationally, as well.

Finally, we note that as communication researchers, we are in a unique position to call attention to the issue of racial hate speech through engaged scholarship. Although the current surge of racial hate is being examined in the context of COVID-19, this is not a 'one-time' issue – rather it is an ongoing problem that will require sustained study. Many scholars have conducted studies and published articles on this topic in the last few months, but rather than treating this as a trendy topic, we hope others will join our efforts and contribute to a thoughtful and rigorous research agenda guided by theory, so we can shed light on a problem that continues to grow.

Note

1. In support of this interpretation, a post-hoc analysis of the 315 Asians included in the resilience analyses indicated a strong sense of *racial identity salience* ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 1.13$)—or the extent to which race is relevant to one's self-concept (Sellers & Shelton, 2003). A one-sample *t*-test indicated that racial identity salience was above the midpoint of the 7-point scale, $t(314) = 12.78$, $p < .001$, suggesting that among the Asian Americans in this

sample, race was a significant component of their personal identity. Facing increased online hate speech in which this component of the self was directly attacked may have made the affirming identity behavior a more important resilience strategy.

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ORCID

Stephanie Tom Tong  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1612-4425>

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