

## **Anti-Asian Stigma and Discrimination Amid COVID-19 Pandemic**

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On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of COVID-19 a global pandemic (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020). While the first reported cases occurred in Wuhan, China, the coronavirus rapidly spread to the rest of the world. Two years into the outbreak, the virus has affected over 255 million people worldwide and caused over 5 million deaths (World Health Organization, 2021). As the earliest epicentre of the pandemic, the Chinese government faced political grievances (Tan et al., 2021) which transferred into stigmatization of people of Chinese and the broader Asian origin (Xu et al., 2021). Since the start of the outbreak, news and media reported a striking increase in incidences of discrimination and hate crimes (Reja, 2021) incited by anti-Asian stigma (Xu et al., 2021). The situation was exacerbated by the former President of the United States, Donald Trump, who openly blamed China by referencing COVID-19 as the “China virus” (Reja, 2021; Altheide, 2020) on media and political platforms. A significant increase in stigma-incited hate crimes both in real-world settings and online were reported following Trump’s use of stigmatizing language.

Disease-related stigma is not a newly developed phenomenon. Stigma refers to a characteristic that conveys perceived social identity or group membership that is devalued in some specific social contexts (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998). Researchers have explored the stigmatization of various social groups related to infectious diseases such as SARS and AIDs (Xu et al., 2021). Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the perceived Chinese ethnicity is associated with coronavirus and is devalued, leading to discrimination against people who are perceived as Chinese. Stigmatization can have detrimental effects on public health and is referred to by Doctor Ghebreyesus, the Director-General of WHO, as the “most dangerous enemy” (World Health Organization, 2020a). There is evidence that the perception of stigma, in addition to the stress posed by the pandemic, can lead to a higher risk of mental health problems (Misra et al., 2020). In

addition, perceived stigma also impedes people from getting tested and quarantined (World Health Organization, 2020b). Thus, it is essential to address stigma amid the COVID-19 pandemic as it poses threat to individual and public health. This paper discusses possible explanations of COVID-related stigma at the early stage of the pandemic, aiming at understanding why stigmatization occurs and how it is perpetuated. Based on social psychology theories regarding the behavioural immune system and media transmission, this paper argues that COVID-related anti-Asian stigma and discrimination is a reflection of fear of the unknown virus and is perpetuated by stigmatizing media content.

Studies have found the fear of being infected by the novel coronavirus, which can be fatal and had no effective treatment at the beginning of the pandemic, serves as the underlying reason for stigmatization (Xu et al., 2021). In addition to fear, the WHO also identified the implicit association of fear with foreigners as one of the main factors causing stigma (World Health Organization, 2020b). The association between fear and stigma can be explained by the Error Management Theory (EMT) and the behavioural immune system. The EMT highlights the tendency of people to minimize the more costly error and thus avoid seemingly contagious conditions as if they were truly contagious (Baldassarre et al., 2020) during a public health crisis. Hence, people who are perceived as coming from China, where the first cases of COVID-19 were reported, are believed to contain and transmit the virus and are physically avoided because the higher cost of infection is than avoidance (Baldassarre et al., 2020). Consistent with the EMT, the perception of potential threats of infection activates the behavioural immune system which elicits physical avoidance and affective disgust (Miller & Maner, 2011), which in turn facilitates stigmatization and discrimination. Substantial studies have demonstrated a strong association between the perceived threat of infection and stigmatization of people who are believed to contain

infectious diseases (Schaller & Park, 2011). It is worth noting that, the characterization of whether a person poses a risk of transmission can be based solely and superficially on their physical appearance and does not require them to have the disease (Schaller & Park, 2011). This explains the stigmatization of and discrimination against the broader Asian American population as they share similar physical characteristics as Chinese American people and are thus treated similarly. Furthermore, the activation of the behavioural immune system also leads to xenophobia (Schaller & Park, 2011). Hence, fear of the coronavirus and perceived risk of infection is implicitly associated with the fear of Asian people. In addition, the tendencies of stigmatization and xenophobia are exaggerated when the perceivers are, or perceive themselves to be, especially vulnerable to diseases (Schaller & Park, 2011). Combining pieces of evidence aforementioned, the stigmatization of people of Chinese and Asian origin at the early stage of the pandemic can be partly explained by the increased vulnerability to infectious disease caused by an unknown virus with no effective treatment at the time, and the heightened vigilance to threats of infection and xenophobia which lead to avoidance and disgust of people of perceived Asian origin.

While fear of infection and the behavioural immune system explains COVID-related anti-Asian stigma and discrimination, mass and social media serve as a major channel through which fear, stigma and xenophobia are perpetuated and exacerbated. The powerful impact of mass and social media on real-world beliefs has been proven by studies in social psychology and sociology-related fields. For example, research on sex and gender roles has demonstrated that the portrayal of sexualized characters in popular movies helps to shape the audience's gender role beliefs (Pennell & Behm-Morawitz, 2015); investigation on television shows also demonstrated that subtle racial bias displayed via nonverbal behaviour on television can translate into biased racial attitudes hold by the perceivers (Weisbuch et al., 2009). Based on previous studies, it is evident

that mass and social media have the potential to shape the way perceivers interpret real-world issues and events (Altheide, 2020), and specifically, the potential to transmit prejudicial attitudes and stigmatizing beliefs. At the early stage of the pandemic, some media channels misleadingly reported the outbreak in China as the “Chinese virus pandemonium”, including stigmatizing headlines such as “China is the real sick man of Asia”, which led to increased stigmatization and discrimination of people of Chinese and Asian descent outside mainland China (Wen et al., 2020). The experience of Asian American people was worsened by the former US President Donald Trump’s tweet in March 2020 that referenced the novel coronavirus as the “China virus” (Reja, 2021; Altheide, 2020). Trump’s use of stigmatizing language on one of the most widely-used social media platforms in the US not only labels the disease by ethnicity (Wen et al., 2020) but also creates and perpetuates xenophobia every time he references the term (Altheide, 2020). An analysis that targets Twitter data from the US compared the number of stigmatizing tweets from the US containing terms related to “China virus” that were posted during the week before Trump referred the term and during the week after. A total of over 177,000 tweets were identified during the week following Trump’s tweet, a nearly ten-fold increase compared to the week before Trump’s tweet (Budhwani & Sun, 2020). Yet, the influence of stigmatizing social media content does not merely stay online and is translated into real-world anti-Asian hate crimes (Reja, 2021). During the two months from March 19, 2020, the week immediately after the presidential reference of the term “China virus”, to the week of May 13, 2020, over 1800 incidences of hate crimes against people of Chinese and Asian origin including verbal harassment, physical avoidance and assaults, workplace discrimination, coughing and spitting and other violations of civil rights were reported to the Stop AAPI Hate Reporting Center in the States (Xu et al., 2021). As illustrated by these statistics, Trump’s use of stigmatizing terms is associated with significant increases in anti-

Asian stigma and discriminatory incidents in the USA both online and in the real world. Furthermore, studies profiling anti-Asian patterns in the US show that people who identify as Republicans report stronger anti-Asian sentiment but are also more likely to go to Chinese restaurants and show less concern about COVID-19 (Tan et al., 2021). The inconsistency in attitudes and behaviour implies that anti-Asian stigma is more of a result of political and media context than of actual health concerns (Tan et al., 2021). Thus, anti-Asian stigma and discrimination in the USA amid the pandemic is largely a result of misleading and stigmatizing language on mass and social media, which create and enhance xenophobia and anti-Asian sentiments across the country.

In conclusion, the revitalization of anti-Chinese and anti-Asian stigma and discrimination in the USA and around the world during the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic can be partly explained by people's fear of infection and media context. As suggested by the EMT, the natural tendency to avoid the most costly error drives people to physically avoid others who are perceived as containing infectious diseases. In addition, exposure to infection cues, either real or perceived, activates the behavioural immune system which also leads to avoidance and disgust. Thus, at the early stage of the pandemic when most cases were reported in mainland China, Chinese and Asian American people are perceived as disease-ridden and are thus stigmatized and discriminated against. Furthermore, anti-Asian stigma is perpetuated by misleading media content that associates the virus with ethnicity. Specifically, Trump's reference of the coronavirus as "China virus" is associated with a significant increase of discriminatory incidents in the US, both on social media platforms and in real-world settings.

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