

COVID-19: Relationship between social media use and prejudice against Chinese Americans

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The novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 that originated in China has claimed an estimated 100,000 lives in the United States, while a

different sort of pandemic is spreading online against Asian Americans, particularly of Chinese descent. A study published in *Frontiers in Communication* suggests there is a strong relationship between social media use and prejudice.

The authors surveyed nearly 300 people in the United States on their attitudes about China and Chinese people in the wake of the pandemic. They found that "the more an individual believes their most used daily social media is fair, accurate, presents the facts, and is concerned about the public (social media belief), the more that person sees Chinese Americans as a realistic and symbolic threat."

Lead author Dr. Stephen Croucher, a professor of communication at Massey University in New Zealand whose research focuses on the dynamics between majority and [minority groups](#), states that: "This was a big finding for us, as it shows the relationship between a pandemic, social media use and prejudice."

The online questionnaire of 277 white Americans gathered data on demographics, [social media use](#), and various sentiments about Chinese people. The researchers analyzed the results within the framework of Integrated Threat Theory (ITT). ITT examines the components—realistic threats, symbolic threats, intergroup anxiety and negative stereotypes—that lead to prejudice between social groups.

Realistic threats, for example, represent fears related to economic or social power. A sample question on the survey assessing the degree of realistic threat included, "Because of the presence of Chinese, unemployment will increase." Respondents then answered on a scale of one to five, from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."

Symbolic threats, on the other hand, relate to concerns about a group's "way of life." Intergroup anxiety refers to negative perceptions that arise

from individual interactions between a member of the majority and a minority.

One key finding was that gender plays a significant role in predicting realistic and symbolic threats versus intergroup anxiety among Americans. Women tend to experience realistic or symbolic threats from Chinese Americans, while men experience higher levels of anxiety, according to the study.

"In this case, when faced with a crisis like a pandemic, it just makes sense that men would tend to respond more affectively while women would respond more cognitively—on average," Croucher said.

One head-scratching result from the study found that respondents who identified politically as a Democrat scored higher than Republicans on perceiving Chinese Americans as a symbolic threat.

"The result about political lines really was a surprising result," Croucher said, adding that it would be "really interesting" to further research how political leanings shift when a group is perceived as life threatening.

More than 1,700 incidents of harassment and assaults against Asian Americans have been reported since March 19, according to a website maintained by Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council, San Francisco State University and Chinese for Affirmative Action.

Until the COVID-19 pandemic, anti-Asian hate crime has been on the decline for at least the past two decades, according to a report in The Washington Post, and the FBI has not reported any anti-Asian-motivated murders since at least 2003.

Croucher said that social media channels, like any media, can also be used effectively for spreading positive messages about Asian Americans.

He and his co-authors proposed governments and healthcare industries use social media to combat COVID-19 prejudice.

"In the case of COVID-19, [social media](#), and other media, were and are being used as venues to share and build ideas, values and morals," Croucher said. "Many of these are very positive, but some are not."

More information: *Frontiers in Communication*, [DOI: 10.3389/fcomm.2020.00039](#) , [www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fcomm.2020.00039/full](#)

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