Media's framing of disease may lead to AAPI discrimination

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Describing diseases as originating from animals foreign to the Western diet serves to boost stereotypes of Asian culture and increase discrimination, according to new research from UC Riverside, Texas Tech, and Texas A&M.

Early in the COVID-19 outbreak, media reports identified its origin as meat and seafood markets in Wuhan, China. Researchers say the media preyed on the public's predisposition toward "neophobia"—fear of unfamiliar things—and disgust toward food outside their culinary norms, particularly where animal products are concerned. Further, based on

their study involving several hundred people, researchers say the descriptions can lead the public to avoid and even discriminate against Asians.

"The news media's emphasis on exotic animal food sources as the origin of COVID-19, along with early labeling of the disease as 'the Wuhan virus' may have exacerbated xenophobic attitudes," the researchers wrote in an article published in the journal *Risk Analysis*.

For the study, researchers recruited 701 participants through Amazon's Mechanical Turk, or Mturk, a research collection tool.

Participants were asked questions related to how serious they consider the coronavirus to be, and to what extent they modified their behavior. Questions then segued into whether participants plan to avoid people who had traveled to China, then to whether they would avoid people who immigrated from China or are of Chinese or Asian descent. Researchers also assessed people's perception of whether animal-originating diseases would spread, and gauged their "disgust sensibility" through questions involving cockroaches and rats.

Finally, the participants were shown a news headline and story related to COVID-19 origins. The story variously implicated bats, dogs, food markets, pigs, or snakes.

The researchers found the animal origin of the disease led to significant differences in risk perception and avoidance behavior. When a disease was described as originating with an animal familiar to the Western diet, such as pigs, people engaged in some avoidance behavior, but not nearly as much as when the disease was traced to bats, snakes, or other animals unfamiliar to the Western diet.

"People reported not only greater risk perceptions and disease avoidance

intentions, but also increased intentions to engage in discriminatory behaviors, such as avoiding people of Asian descent," said Brent Hughes, a UCR psychology researcher and one of the study's authors. "This is the first study to demonstrate that describing animal origins for disease can encourage discriminatory behaviors toward cultures viewed as the origin of the disease."

The study holds implications for the media and for health officials, Hughes said. In addition to leading to discriminatory behavior, focusing on exotic animal origins can also increase disease stigma, which might delay treatment and increase disease spread. Once a virus is transmittable among humans, arguments about animal origins are no longer relevant to stopping the spread, Hughes said.

"Rather than focusing on animal origins, focusing on human transmission (e.g., the respiratory nature of a virus) would lead to appropriate health protective behaviors and also reduce xenophobia and disease stigma," Hughes said.

In addition to Hughes, the article, "The Double Bind of Communicating About Zoonotic Origins: Describing Exotic Animal Sources of COVID-19 Increases Both Healthy and Discriminatory Avoidance Intentions," was authored by Mark LaCour, Molly Ireland, Jason Van Allen, Garrett Van-Hoosier, and Tyler Davis, all of Texas Tech University; Micah Goldwater, University of Sydney; Darrell Worthy, Texas A&M; Nick Gaylord, an independent research consultant.

More information: Mark LaCour et al, The Double Bind of Communicating About Zoonotic Origins: Describing Exotic Animal Sources of COVID-19 Increases Both Healthy and Discriminatory Avoidance Intentions, *Risk Analysis* (2021). DOI: 10.1111/risa.13764

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