

# The real-world effects of calling the COVID-19 virus the 'Chinese virus'

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A new study has found that calling COVID-19 the "Chinese virus"—a term rejected by health officials and tied to antagonism against people of Asian descent—did affect views of Americans who saw the term in a news article.

But the effect was relatively small compared to the pre-existing attitudes

of people who encountered the term.

Researchers at The Ohio State University found that people who read the term "Chinese virus" in a fabricated media report about the coronavirus were more likely to later blame China for the pandemic than people who read the same report that used the correct term, "COVID-19."

The effect was found in participants regardless of their political party and ideology, although the effect was modest.

"What we found is that the political views people brought to the study overwhelmed what we did in the study itself," said Lanier Frush Holt, lead author of the study and associate professor of communication at Ohio State.

Findings showed that Republicans and conservatives were more likely to blame China for the pandemic than were Democrats and liberals, regardless of which story they read.

"It's not surprising that people's pre-existing beliefs had such a huge impact compared to reading a single article," said study co-author Brad Bushman, professor of communication at Ohio State.

"But the fact that reading the article did have some effect on people's views, regardless of their pre-existing beliefs, is still troubling and shows the importance of how the media frames issues."

The findings were published recently in the journal *Media Psychology*. Sophie Kjaervik, a doctoral student in communication at Ohio State, was also a co-author.

The study involved 614 American adults who participated online from April 15 to May 21, 2020, when stay-at-home orders were in place in

many U.S. states to stop the spread of the coronavirus.

Participants were randomly assigned to read one of two fabricated news stories, supposedly from National Public Radio. Both articles discussed theories about the origins of the coronavirus, as well as the development of the vaccine. But one story used the term "COVID-19 virus" while the other used the term "Chinese virus."

After reading the article, participants rated how authoritative, believable, credible, informative and persuasive they thought the article was—which the researchers combined into an overall favorability rating.

In the second part of the study, participants completed surveys measuring prejudice against Chinese- and Asian-Americans, their [political party](#) and ideology, and how much they blamed China for the pandemic.

Results showed that Democrats and liberals viewed the "Chinese virus" article more negatively than the "COVID-19 virus" article. In contrast, Republicans and conservatives rated the two articles about the same.

Which article the participants read was not related to measures of prejudice, but those who read the "Chinese virus" article were slightly more likely to blame China for the spread of the virus.

Overall, Republicans and conservatives scored higher than Democrats and liberals on measures of prejudiced attitudes against Chinese- and Asian-Americans, regardless of which story they read.

In addition, Republicans and conservatives were more likely than Democrats and liberals to blame China for the pandemic, regardless of which story they read.

The results suggest that the biggest impact of reading the story may have been how it triggered pre-existing partisan leanings, Holt said.

"We showed that just a tiny dose of reading one article activated what people already believed," he said.

"Those who were predisposed to believe that China was responsible for the virus liked the article that used "Chinese virus" and those who didn't have those pre-existing beliefs did not."

Bushman said the findings also underscore why the World Health Organization issued a statement in 2015 recommending that [infectious diseases](#) should not be named after geographic locations to "minimize unnecessary negative effects on nations, economies and people."

"How you frame a deadly [virus](#) is not a trivial point and can have effects in how people are viewed and treated in the real world," he said.

"That's what we found in this study and that's why the World Health Organization put out that statement."

**More information:** Lanier Frush Holt et al, Harm and Shaming through Naming: Examining Why Calling the Coronavirus the "COVID-19 Virus," Not the "Chinese Virus," Matters, *Media Psychology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/15213269.2022.2034021](https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2022.2034021)

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