

Word choice and media exposure affected anti-Asian boycotts during the pandemic, study finds

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During 2020, the use of terms like the "China virus" by public officials and in the media negatively connected COVID-19 to China, where the virus originated, causing a detrimental impact. New research from

scholars of the hospitality industry at Penn State and the University of Houston found that this type of virus naming contributed to hostility toward and boycotting of Chinese restaurants and other Asian-related businesses.

In 2020, as a Chinese woman was walking down the street in Nashville, Tennessee, a white woman pulled her car over and yelled, "Go back to China and take your virus with you!" The Chinese woman was the first cousin of Chandler Yu, Elizabeth M. King Early Career Professor in Penn State's School of Hospitality Management, who related the incident during a discussion of this research.

Many people from East Asia or of East Asian descent experienced this type of racism during the first several months of the COVID-19 pandemic, said Yu. To understand why this happened—and to hopefully learn how to prevent similar hostility in the future—Yu joined colleagues from the University of Houston Conrad N. Hilton College of Global Hospitality Leadership to study why people frequently respond to crises with racial hostility.

In a new article in the *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, the researchers demonstrated that the use of China-specific language in discussions of the pandemic contributed to anti-Asian boycotts, especially when that language was paired with information about the deadly nature of the pandemic. Around 30% of study participants indicated they intended to boycott Asian restaurants.

The researchers explained they investigated the phenomenon through "terror management theory," which proposes that all people are constantly afraid of death and that humans behave in ways that help them escape or ignore this fear. The researchers hypothesized that the emergence of the COVID-19 virus activated people's fear of death, especially early in the pandemic when not much about the virus was

known, and this fear of death led to racially motivated responses.

To study whether this fear of death interacted with public language linking the virus to China, the researchers recruited 685 people online from across the United States to participate in one of two online questionnaires. Slightly more than half of participants were male, and around three-quarters were white.

The survey provided different text passages to different sets of participants. Some people read passages that referred to the disease as the "China virus," and some people read passages that referred to the disease as "COVID-19." Additionally, some passages emphasized the survivability of the virus by providing statistics about the number of people who contracted COVID-19 and recovered completely, while other passages emphasized the potentially fatal nature of the disease by providing death statistics.

After reading the provided text, participants answered questions about a variety of topics, including their anxiety level and their attitudes toward China and Chinese products. As the researchers had hypothesized, some people who read passages that used the term "China virus" and who were reminded of the potentially fatal nature of the pandemic were more likely to feel anxiety and express hostility toward Asian-related businesses.

The researchers also discovered that a participant's level of [media exposure](#) also was an important factor in whether or not reading the passages increased their anxiety.

"We asked people how much COVID-19-related media they consumed on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely frequently)," Yu explained. "This research was conducted during the summer of 2020 when business shutdowns were common, and many people were home

watching TV and reading the news online. As a result, the average response was just below 6, meaning that the average person was consuming COVID-19 media multiple times each day.

"Even though all people were consuming a lot of media, we found important differences between people who consumed COVID-19-related media several times a day and those who consumed it only once or a couple of times each day," Yu continued.

"People with the highest level of media exposure displayed high levels of anxiety no matter what they read. People who consumed too much media about the pandemic 'freaked out'—so to speak—and were always worried. But for people who consumed more moderate amounts of media information, language like 'China virus' made a real difference."

Results showed that people who consumed very high amounts of COVID-19-related media information were so consistently anxious that the texts could not increase their anxiety any higher.

Among people who consumed moderate amounts of COVID-19-related media information, results showed that anxiety increased when they were reminded of the deadly nature of the pandemic and also exposed to language connecting the virus to China. People whose anxiety was increased in this manner were more likely to indicate that they intended to boycott Asian-related restaurants.

About 30% of all participants—including those whose [anxiety level](#) was consistently high—indicated their intent to boycott Asian-related restaurants. This suspicion and hostility towards Asian-related businesses was reflected in news stories about boycotts and violence throughout 2020. The researchers said they believe these boycotts and outbursts represent an attempt to feel control by people who had been reminded of their mortality by the pandemic.

According to the researchers, these boycotts and other racially motivated actions lead to financial harm for businesses and—more troublingly—psychological and even physical attacks on individuals in the targeted group.

In response, the researchers recommend that policy makers, [public officials](#), and media outlets are careful whenever they tie a tragedy or disaster—like a pandemic or terrorist attack—to a group of people. The researchers also recommend that restaurants prepare crisis communication plans in case they are needed. Finally, the researchers recommend that individuals limit their level of media exposure during a crisis so they are not overwhelmed with information and anxiety.

Tiffany S. Legendre, associate professor at the University of Houston Conrad N. Hilton College of Global Hospitality Leadership and lead author on this research, said that even though the world has probably moved beyond the worst days of the COVID-19 pandemic, the lessons of this research are still critical.

"During the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks people witnessed the mass murder of fellow Americans. When a connection between the attacks and Muslims was established, violence increased toward people who were—or appeared to be—Muslims or from the Middle East," Legendre said.

"Catastrophes like terrorist attacks and pandemics lead people to increased levels of anxiety and blaming behavior.

"Hospitality businesses usually yield better profits when they are located in crowded, central streets and are open for long hours. Consequently, when situations like the COVID-19 pandemic arise, those hospitality businesses become easy targets for boycotts and hate crimes," said Legendre.

"I hope our research will encourage the development of public-education

programs on consuming media information about catastrophic events. With appropriate education and engagement, we believe hate crimes and racially motivated boycotts can be prevented."

More information: Tiffany S. Legendre et al, Boycotting Asian restaurants: The effect of mortality salience, contagion name, and media exposure on boycotting, *International Journal of Hospitality Management* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ijhm.2022.103333](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2022.103333)

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