

## **The Other Side of the Pandemic: Effects of Racialized News Coverage on Attitudes Toward Asians and Immigrants**

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Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, U.S. news coverage related to race in 2 distinct ways: coverage of how foreign countries, particularly Asian countries, responded to the pandemic, and coverage of episodes of racism against Asian Americans and Asian-looking individuals. Past research has firmly established that different types of racialized news coverage can lead to very different effects among audiences. This study employs an online survey-experiment to investigate the effects of exposure to these 2 types of racialized news coverage amid the pandemic. Our findings reveal that exposure to an anti-Asian racism news story negatively affected attitudes toward the group depicted in the news. Anti-Asian racism news also increased opposition to immigration. News about an Asian country, however, did not influence attitudes toward Asians and instead decreased opposition to immigration. Trump support played a moderating role for some of these effects. As hate crimes targeting Asians continue in the United States and abroad, the implications of these findings are discussed.

*Keywords: anti-Asian racism, racialized news coverage, racialized rhetoric, media effects, and COVID-19*

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In the United States, a wave of anti-Asian racism started in early 2020 after the news that the COVID-19 virus had originated in Wuhan, China, and manifested in more than 11,000 incidents of verbal harassment, physical assaults, and hate crimes against Asian Americans and Asian-looking individuals (Yam, 2022). Derived from misguided disease fears and groundless blame for the consequences of COVID-19 (Haynes, 2021), these incidents eventually culminated in March 2021 with the shootings at three Atlanta-area massage parlors that left eight dead, including six Asian women, and a subsequent hate crime bill to counter the rise of anti-Asian racism (Sprunt, 2021; Taylor & Hauser, 2021).

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, in response to criticisms, mainstream news outlets ceased referring to the virus using labels based on its initial outbreak location in China. Subsequently, two kinds of coverage may still have stimulated audiences to think of this issue in relation to Asian people: coverage of how Asian countries responded to the pandemic and coverage of racist episodes against Asians. We focus on the effects of these two kinds of coverage because these continued to be major themes in coverage of the pandemic far longer than the more overtly problematic early coverage of COVID-19 as a Chinese virus. We suspect they may have reinforced associations created by early coverage.

Mentioning Asian countries and mentioning anti-Asian racism may have very different effects, or they may operate similarly because they both cue race. Racial priming research (Valentino, 1999) suggests that either kind of race-related coverage would activate roughly the same set of race-related concepts in the human mind through a cognitive mechanism of spreading activation (Anderson, 1983; Higgins, 1996). However, coverage about racism could do much more than simply activate race-related concepts in memory. Stories about episodes of racism could activate a defensive affective response among some individuals through a mechanism driven by perceived threat to a group identity (Blalock, 1967). Thus, news about anti-Asian racism may backfire, leading to more negative attitudes toward Asians and perhaps even spilling over into general anti-immigration attitudes, as has been found in group threat research (Jardina, 2019; Valentino, Brader, & Jardina, 2013).

Although past research has examined media coverage of pandemics (e.g., Lee & Basnyat, 2013; Vasterman & Ruigrok, 2013), the COVID-19 pandemic offers a unique opportunity to investigate how individuals process race-related news coverage and how they cope with the need to explain away or diminish feelings of lack of control (Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). We employ an online survey-experiment to investigate the effects of two forms of race-related COVID-19 news. By independently manipulating exposure to a news article about COVID-19 measures employed in an Asian country and to a news headline about an episode of anti-Asian racism, we test the effects of these two kinds of stories on attitudes toward Asians and immigration. As hate crimes targeting Asians continue in the United States and abroad (Yam, 2022), it is imperative to assess the effects of media coverage related to race to avoid potential backfire effects when discussing sensitive topics in times of crisis.

### **Racialized Media Coverage During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

A large body of media-effects research suggests that racialized coverage has the potential to influence public attitudes and solidify prejudices (e.g., Domke, 2001; Mastro, 2009; Schemer, 2012, 2014). Racialized coverage often cues bias, which in turn may activate negative stereotypes toward the portrayed

individual or group (Dixon & Maddox, 2005; Oliver & Fonash, 2002) and decrease support for racialized public policies related to the group, such as in the case of African Americans and affirmative action (Domke, 2001; Mastro & Kopacz, 2006). This appears to be the case for ordinary media coverage dealing with minorities (Mastro & Kopacz, 2006; Mastro & Stamps, 2018), but it could be especially relevant in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Cho, Li, Cannon, Lopez, & Song, 2021).

Following the media's initial references to COVID-19 as the "Wuhan virus" and the "Chinese coronavirus" to indicate that the virus was first detected in Wuhan, China, before spreading quickly to other continents (Rogers, 2020), Asian Americans and Asian-looking individuals received all sorts of blame for the virus outbreak. This appeared to be a coping strategy to make sense of the long chain of societal, economic, and public health disruptions occurring across the United States, including shelter-in-place orders, travel restrictions, fiscal maneuvers, and social distancing recommendations (Ma & Ma, 2022).

Attribution of blame, however, is not a novel phenomenon during epidemics (Hewstone, 1989). Throughout history, individuals whose national, racial, or religious backgrounds differed from those of the majority have often been accused of spreading germs and transmitting diseases (Hewstone, 1989). For instance, in the Middle Ages, Jewish people were accused of spreading the plague (Atlani-Duault, Mercier, Rousseau, Guyot, & Moatti, 2015). Similarly, the SARS outbreak of 2002–2004 was associated with Chinese immigrants in New York City (Eichelberger, 2007), the 2009 H1N1 flu with Mexicans (Atlani-Duault et al., 2015; McCauley, Minsky, & Viswanath, 2013), Ebola with West Africans (Monson, 2017), and the Zika epidemic with the people of Central and South America (Linde-Arias, Roura, & Siqueira, 2020).

Accusations of blame toward Asians could be traced back to the early stages of the pandemic, which were predominantly marked by two different kinds of media coverage: coverage of how Asian countries responded to the health crisis and coverage of racist episodes against Asians and Asian-looking individuals (but see also Kim et al., 2022). We argue that the racial cue that characterizes both kinds of coverage may have fueled antagonism, prejudice, and xenophobic feelings against Asians (Batova, 2021). However, we suspect two competing mechanisms of news processing at work behind these two separate kinds of coverage, with the first relying on racial priming (Valentino, 1999) and the other on group threat (Blalock, 1967).

### ***Coverage of Asian Countries***

As the COVID-19 crisis affected many countries simultaneously, media outlets offered extensive coverage comparing the policy strategies adopted by some Asian countries and the United States to contrast the spread of the virus and its consequences (Kim et al., 2022). This practice created an avenue for political and public debate on how to best handle the health emergency (Ballhaus, 2020; Elegant, 2020; Navarro, 2021). Covering the policies adopted by Asian countries, however, may have cued the element of race and activated racial predispositions toward Asians through a mechanism of racial priming (Aaroe, Petersen, & Arceneaux, 2017; Valentino, 1999). At its most basic level, racial priming occurs when individuals are exposed to specific cues in media coverage, which in turn can activate other race-related concepts and influence judgments related to these activated concepts (Aaroe, Petersen, & Arceneaux, 2017; Valentino,

1999). To illustrate, employing words such as “inner city” or “welfare” could remind audiences about race and affect attitudes related to such issues (Valentino, Hutchings, & White, 2002), with potential implications for policy preferences.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, we argue that the race cue could be found in the mere mention of Asian countries when the media reported on their performance to halt the spread of the virus. Mentioning an Asian country could have been a sufficient condition for some individuals to pick up the race element, activate connections with other race-related concepts stored in memory, and influence attitudes related to such connections. This may have negatively affected attitudes toward Asians and reinforced the stereotypes that have long been associated with this group, including the “perpetual foreigner” stereotype, which conceives Asians as an outside menace (Ancheta, 2006), and the “yellow peril” racist trope (DeI Visco, 2019).

### ***Coverage of Anti-Asian Racism***

Race also appeared in the context of COVID-19 through coverage of racist acts against Asian Americans and people of Asian descent (Haynes, 2021). Similar to news about Asian countries, coverage of anti-Asian racism also could have activated race-related concepts and made some individuals think of the pandemic in relation to Asians (Valentino, 1999). However, we suspect that this type of coverage could have done much more than simply reminding audiences of Asians: It also could have activated a mechanism of group threat. As White identity becomes an increasingly salient marker of group consciousness (Jardina, 2019), covering racism may be interpreted as an implicit criticism of the White majority. Some members of the dominant group, who share a strong sense of White identity, may interpret racism-related news as an attack on their group. Seeking to protect the interests and well-being of the ingroup (Effron & Knowles, 2015; Valentino et al., 2013), this mechanism of defense may manifest as hostility to the outgroup (i.e., Asians), but it may also go beyond the outgroup directly implicated and spill onto unrelated outgroups, including immigrants (see Santia, Pingree, Bryanov, & Watson, 2022). Spillover effects are possible because cognitions are related in people’s minds and can activate one another (Collins & Loftus, 1975). To illustrate, activation of one cognition (e.g., race) can activate other cognitions (e.g., race-related cognitions) that are connected (Collins & Loftus, 1975). We argue that some ingroup individuals may not only exhibit negative attitudes toward Asians but also toward immigrants who arguably represent a similar threat to the existing status quo and the well-being of the ingroup.

### **The Influence of Political Elite Rhetoric**

Besides media coverage, political elites can also sway public opinion and stir emotional responses (Druckman, 2001; Stuckey, 2020; Zarefsky, 2004). Politicians on both sides of the spectrum often emphasize race-related concepts and images so that audiences will use these same concepts when asked to express their policy preferences and evaluate candidates for office (Domke, 2001; Valentino, Neuner, & Vandebroek, 2018). During the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, many conservative U.S. politicians, skeptics, and conspiracy believers adopted inflammatory racist rhetoric as scapegoating and fear-mongering strategies to blame Asians for the spread of COVID-19 and its consequences (Budhwani & Sun, 2020; Haynes, 2021; Rogers, 2020). Former U.S. president Donald Trump is a prominent example

(e.g., Stuckey, 2020). Despite vivid criticisms, Trump repeatedly employed racially insensitive terms, including the “China virus” and the infamous epithet “kung flu” (Nakamura, 2020), to victimize Asians and reinforce their connection with the geographical origin of the virus in China. This, in turn, may have activated negative stereotypes about Asians among some individuals, including his supporters. Research by Chong and Chen (2021), for instance, confirms that Trump’s racist rhetoric around the “Chinese virus” led to increased use of anti-Asian hashtags on Twitter, with important implications on the perpetuation of stigma and prejudicial sentiments (see also Budhwani & Sun, 2020; Zhang & Trifiro, 2022). Trump’s rhetoric may have influenced how some of his supporters processed news coverage of the pandemic by triggering negative, disparaging cognitions about Asian Americans.

Past research has often analyzed the use of racialized rhetoric to shape attitudes toward outgroups and related policy preferences, including immigration (e.g., Nelson & Kinder, 1996). Directing the blame for the misfortunes of the ingroup to outside groups has been a widespread strategy to normalize racial responses to immigration policy (see e.g., Eshbaugh-Soha & Juenke, 2022). Trump’s anti-immigration rhetoric, which was often condoned by right-leaning partisans and conservative media (Dost, Enos, & Hochschild, 2019), partially led to his success (Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2018). Support for Trump similarly affected attitudes toward outgroups, a phenomenon dubbed the “Trump effect,” resulting in an increase in reported bias incidents and hate crimes toward outgroups (Feinberg, Branton, & Martinez-Ebers, 2022). We argue that being supportive of Trump may uniquely predict the use of racial cues to interpret media coverage of Asian countries and coverage of anti-Asian racism.

### **Hypotheses and Research Question**

We separately test the effects of the two different types of race-related pandemic news on Asian aversion, which is a measure of avoidance of Asian people in everyday situations. Past research on “disease avoidance” (Kurzban & Leary, 2001) shows that some individuals may be seen as disease vectors, and this may lead to a generalized fear while also triggering specific emotional (e.g., disgust), cognitive (e.g., activation of concepts connected to disease), and behavioral (e.g., readily avoiding contact) responses to protect against the disease (Park, Faulkner, & Schaller, 2003). We anticipate that exposure to news focusing on how Asian countries approached the pandemic could activate race-related concepts and lead to negative feelings toward Asians in general. We also predict that exposure to news mentioning anti-Asian racism could trigger a defensive mechanism of identity protection, leading to negative attitudes toward Asians. Accordingly:

*H1: Exposure to (a) a news story mentioning an Asian country or (b) a news story mentioning anti-Asian racism will increase Asian aversion.*

Activation of a defensive mechanism of identity protection may not only result in hostility toward Asians, but it may also spill into negative perceptions of immigrants, especially given the “perpetual foreigner” stereotype and the “yellow peril” trope (Ancheta, 2006). This spillover mechanism could be specific to racism coverage—as found in past research (e.g., Santia et al., 2022)—but it could similarly be activated from exposure to racial cues embedded within coverage mentioning Asian countries. Coverage of how an Asian country confronted the COVID-19 emergency may trigger a sense of identity threat and make

some individuals think of outgroups as a menace to the well-being and interests of the ingroup. However, we suspect that the opposite effect may also be plausible. Asian Americans are often perceived as a hardworking, diligent, and high-achieving "model minority" (Kiang, Huynh, Cheah, Wang, & Yoshikawa, 2017; Xu & Lee, 2013), and this seemingly favorable perception may equally result in more positive attitudes toward immigrants when Asians come to mind as the immigrant group in question. In other words, either kind of coverage might simply remind people of Asians and make Asians the salient group. Individuals could be more likely to think of Asians when asked about their immigration attitudes, and this could result in more positive attitudes toward the group because of model minority perceptions. Given these competing rationales, we ask:

*RQ: Will exposure to (a) a news story mentioning an Asian country or (b) a news story mentioning anti-Asian racism affect opposition to immigration?*

Past research shows that elite-targeted rhetoric drives public opinion in meaningful ways (Druckman, 2001; Stuckey, 2020; Zarefsky, 2004). Given Trump's inflammatory rhetoric during the early stages of the pandemic, we test how support for Trump may have moderated how some individuals interpreted coverage of the pandemic independently of its focus. Since 2016, other studies have used Trump support as a moderator of effects rather than political ideology or party identity (see e.g., McGregor & Mourão, 2017). Though some might equate Trump support with extreme, conservative ideology (Oliver & Rahn, 2016), support for Trump could serve as an important moderator of effects because of the former president's prominence in the public eye (Conway, Repke, & Houck, 2017; Saldaña, Chacón, & García-Perdomo, 2018). We test the moderating role of Trump support by predicting:

*H2: Trump support will moderate the effects of (a) exposure to a news story mentioning an Asian country and (b) a news story mentioning anti-Asian racism on Asian aversion and opposition to immigration, such that those with higher Trump support will have more aversive reactions.*

## Method

We conducted an online survey-experiment in early May 2020, after various episodes of xenophobic violence and discrimination against Asians had already occurred in the United States and around the world. This experiment uses a post-only design to avoid eventual concerns with social desirability biases that may arise from prompting study participants about the outcomes of interest (see Kim et al., 2022). We operationalized racialized news coverage in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic as coverage mentioning an Asian country as well as coverage of anti-Asian racism. We manipulated the presence or absence of a news story mentioning an Asian country as the main treatment and the presence or absence of an anti-Asian racism story in the sidebar of a news website page that closely resembled the layout of the *Wall Street Journal's* online website. See Figure 1 below for a screenshot of the website layout.

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# COVID-19 Cases Continue To Climb In The U.S. And Around The World

By **Andrew Restuccia**  
Updated April 30, 2020 3:03 pm ET

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As of Sunday, nearly three months since the first confirmed case of the coronavirus was reported in the United States, there are over one million confirmed cases of the virus in the country, according to data compiled by Johns Hopkins University.

### Daily New Cases in the United States

Line graph showing daily new cases in the United States from March 11 to April 29, 2020. The y-axis is labeled 'New Confirmed Daily Cases' and ranges from 0 to 100k. The x-axis is labeled 'Date' and shows dates from 3/11 to 4/29. The graph shows a sharp increase in cases starting in late March, peaking around 100,000 cases per day in late April, and then showing a slight downward trend.

Cases of COVID-19 have been reported in at least 212 countries and territories, according to the World Health Organization. And according to the Johns Hopkins data, over 3 million people have been infected globally.

The disease has been detected everywhere from remote areas of the Amazon, to the Syrian province of Idlib, which even before the pandemic hit was mired in one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. In the United Kingdom, around 800 people died from the virus on Saturday, pushing the nation's death toll above 21,000, according to the Department for Health and Social Care.

One of the last cruise ships still at sea after the coronavirus outbreak began has docked in Marseille, France. The MSC Magnifica docked Monday morning with 1,769 mostly European passengers on board. All of them are healthy, the spokesperson told CNN, but before disembarking they are being checked by firefighters for temperature and symptoms.

In the U.S., which has more cases than any other nation, another 34,955 new confirmed cases of COVID-19 were reported on Saturday and over 2,000 more people infected with the virus died.

In some parts of the country, officials have been encouraged by some slowing signs of growth in the number of deaths and new hospitalizations. In New York, the nation's hardest-hit state, Gov. Andrew Cuomo said Sunday that the state is "on the other side of the plateau." Cuomo said the state's death rate dropped below 400 people for the first time this month. New York Governor Andrew Cuomo said Monday that nearly one-quarter of New York City residents tested positive for coronavirus antibodies, suggesting that Covid-19 spread farther than previously believed. Cuomo initially announced on Thursday that antibody tests suggested around 21 percent of New York City residents and 13.9 percent of state residents had been infected with the virus.

Still, as the number of coronavirus cases continues to mount nationally, President Trump has made clear in recent days his eagerness to reopen the U.S. economy. Some U.S. governors are gradually easing social-distancing restrictions, as in the case in Georgia, where local businesses including restaurants have reopened.

In Maryland, hundreds of citizens protested coronavirus restrictions. Similar scenes have played out across the U.S., as people protested in Minnesota, Utah and Oregon. One of the loudest recent protests was in Michigan, where protesters denounced Gov. Gretchen Whitmer's extension of the state's stay-home order through May 15.

As of Sunday afternoon, more than 57,000 American lives have been claimed in the pandemic, according to the Johns Hopkins data. Worldwide, more than 211,000 people have died as a result of the coronavirus. Of those infected globally, nearly 900,000 have recovered.

Health officials have warned additional waves of coronavirus are virtually inevitable. But "it's up to us how big those other waves will be," epidemiologist Dr. Larry Brilliant said.

President Trump said Sunday night that the administration was preparing to use the Defense Production Act to compel an unspecified U.S. facility to increase production of test swabs by over 20 million per month. There are currently about 150,000 diagnostic tests conducted each day, according to the Covid Tracking Project. The symptoms of COVID-19 include coughing, trouble breathing, fever, chills, muscle pain, sore throat and new loss of taste or smell.

The \$349 billion stimulus effort, which was distributed on a first-come, first-served basis, was exhausted in just two weeks. Republican and Democratic governors are warning of financial calamity if Washington doesn't provide relief. Some GOP lawmakers have joined with Democrats to call for a massive aid bill to help boost the economy.

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Figure 1. Screenshot of the website layout.

### **Participants**

We recruited a convenience sample of U.S. adult residents (final  $N = 878$ ; 58.4% male, 39.6% female, 0.6% other) from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) marketplace and directed them to a Qualtrics online survey in exchange for monetary compensation (\$1.40). MTurk samples have been found to be a relatively low-cost alternative in terms of demographic characteristics, sociopsychological attitudes, and political beliefs (Shaw & Hargittai, 2021). We argue that our MTurk sample is appropriate for examining the effects of our experimental manipulations, even though it falls short of the representativeness of probability samples (Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012; Shaw & Hargittai, 2021).

Of the sample, 72.4% identified as White/Caucasian, 14.9% as Black/African American, 5.4% as Asian, 5.7% as Hispanic/Latino, and 1.2% indicated other or multiple races/ethnicities. The sample skewed slightly Democratic—as is typical with MTurk samples (Berinsky et al., 2012)—with 47.8% of participants indicating a preference for the Democratic Party, 42.1% for the Republican Party, and 8.6% who did not indicate a preference for either party. The average age was 37.92 years ( $SD = 1.83$ , min = 18, max = 82), and more than 77% of participants completed a four-year college degree.

### **Procedures**

After informed consent, participants were randomly assigned to see a screenshot of the *Wall Street Journal* online website. The same screenshot delivered both treatments.<sup>1</sup> For the South Korea treatment, the screenshot featured either the full text of a news story explaining South Korea's success in managing the COVID-19 outbreak in comparison to the United States or a control condition with a similar full-text story in which South Korea was not mentioned. The control story detailed the state of the pandemic in the United States only. Both stories were purposely written by the researchers by combining real news articles from major outlets. The stimuli were of the same word length (646 words), each containing at least one

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<sup>1</sup> In the broader experimental design, study participants were randomly assigned to two different versions of the South Korea story, one comparing the country's COVID-19 outcomes to the United States, and the other comparing both outcomes and policies between the United States and South Korea (see Kim et al., 2022). For the purposes of this study, we decided to combine these two experimental conditions as a single, two-level factor because both stories mentioned South Korea and, therefore, could have similarly activated race-related constructs in people's minds. To check the similarity of these two versions of the South Korea story, we conducted a series of ANOVAs. We computed a two-level factor for the two different versions of the South Korea story, namely a story focusing only on outcomes and a story comparing both policies and outcomes. We used this two-level factor to test potential differences on our two outcomes of interest (i.e., Asian aversion and opposition to immigration). We did not find significant differences in Asian aversion between the outcome only story ( $M = 3.62$ ,  $SD = 2.27$ ) and the policy story ( $M = 3.88$ ,  $SD = 2.36$ ),  $F(1, 559) = 1.76$ ,  $p = 0.18$ . The results also show no significant difference in opposition to immigration between the outcome only story ( $M = 3.74$ ,  $SD = 1.86$ ) and the policy story ( $M = 3.70$ ,  $SD = 2.86$ ),  $F(1, 555) = 0.18$ ,  $p = 0.82$ . Nonsignificant differences between the two stories for both our outcomes of interest validate our choice to combine them into a single, two-level factor.

graph illustrating the trajectory of the spread of COVID-19 in the United States (and South Korea for the South Korea condition).

For the anti-Asian racism treatment, participants were randomly assigned to the presence or absence of a single headline within a "Related Articles" sidebar located on the right-hand side of the full-text story. The anti-Asian racism headline was "Police Search for Teen Who Attacked Asian Woman for Causing the Coronavirus" and reported an episode of violence occurring on March 29, 2020, against an Asian woman who was erroneously accused of causing the COVID-19 outbreak. This was a real news headline originally published by the *New York Post* on April 5, 2020 (Barone, 2020). The summary paragraph explained that New York City police were searching for a teenage girl accused of hitting an Asian woman in the head with an umbrella on an MTA bus in the Bronx while yelling that the woman had caused the coronavirus (Barone, 2020). In the no anti-Asian racism condition, participants were not exposed to this story, but they could still see a "Related Articles" sidebar on the right-hand side of the main full-text story containing other COVID-19 news headlines with related summary paragraphs. Following exposure to the stimulus page, participants were instructed to complete a short follow-up survey to assess various outcomes of interest.<sup>2</sup>

Because the layout of the screenshot was identical to a real *Wall Street Journal* article (with the addition of the "Related Articles" sidebar) and all properties of the stimulus presentation were held constant across conditions, we can likely attribute the differences observed between experimental conditions to the main treatment news story mentioning South Korea or not mentioning South Korea and the presence or absence of the anti-Asian racism story in the sidebar (see also manipulation checks with ANOVAs reported in footnote 1). For the South Korea treatment, we asked participants some questions about the COVID-19 policy performance in the United States and in South Korea. As explained above, our treatment group received the news story explaining how South Korea managed the COVID-19 emergency in the early period of the pandemic, while the control group saw a news story that showed the state and scale of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States without mentioning South Korea. The ANOVA results show that participants in the treatment group ( $M = 4.16$ ,  $SD = 1.85$ ) were more likely to believe that South Korea did a good job at reducing its outbreak than those in the control group ( $M = 3.75$ ,  $SD = 2.05$ ),  $F(1, 833) = 31.79$ ,  $p < .01$ , thus indicating that the intended experimental manipulation was successful. As for the anti-Asian racism story, we asked participants to click on one news headline of interest among those featured in the "Related Articles" sidebar using Qualtrics' heatmap

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<sup>2</sup> Note that Trump support was measured after exposure to the stimuli to prevent testing confounds from the pretest (Whitley & Kite, 2013), even though it bears the risk of confounding (Montgomery, Nyhan, & Torres, 2018). Participants were asked in the posttest, "Please indicate how warm you feel toward the following on a scale ranging from 0 (i.e., you have very cold or negative feelings) to 100 (i.e., you have very warm or positive feelings)." To make sure that our treatment did not influence Trump support, we conducted ANOVA tests. The results show that there were no significant differences in Trump support in the South Korea story exposure ( $M = 45.86$ ,  $SD = 35.26$ ) versus the control story ( $M = 48.60$ ,  $SD = 35.12$ ),  $F(1,846) = 1.13$ ,  $p = 0.29$ , and with the racism story ( $M = 44.48$ ,  $SD = 34.56$ ) versus without the racism story ( $M = 49.09$ ,  $SD = 35.78$ ),  $F(1,846) = 3.64$ ,  $p = 0.06$ . This means that the two factors did not influence the moderator.

function. Without clicking on one of the sidebar's headlines, participants were not allowed to move to the next section of the experiment. Thus, all participants included in our final sample likely read the anti-Asian racism headline in the sidebar if they were assigned to the anti-Asian racism condition. As an additional manipulation check, we also compared the number of clicks on the sidebar between the Asian story and the anti-Asian racism condition with chi-square. The results indicate that participants' clicking patterns did not differ between the two conditions,  $\chi^2(1, n = 848) = 2.75, p > .05$ .

### **Measures**

Our dependent variables are Asian aversion and opposition to immigration. We conceptualize Asian aversion as a behavioral response that links individuals of Asian heritage with COVID-19, which in turn may elicit fear-related constructs (e.g., concerns about disease) and prejudicial reactions such as anxiety, blame, and disgust (Ryan, 1971). We specifically focus on the tendency to physically avoid proximity to Asian-looking individuals. Thus, we operationalize Asian aversion ( $M = 3.70, SD = 2.29$ ) as a single item assessing respondents' likelihood of "avoid standing in line next to an Asian person at the grocery store." Responses ranged from "1," labeled as "not at all," to "7," labeled as "very likely." We acknowledge that multiple-item measures are usually preferred for reliability and validity purposes to measure latent variables, even though single-item measures could still be valid as they reduce measurement error (Bergkvist & Rossiter, 2007). We selected this item because physical distance is considered one of the major behavioral criteria in predicting race discrimination (Blanton et al., 2009). Also, at the time of the experiment, people did not have much chance to physically come in contact with others because of the risk-mitigating lockdown policies in place. Grocery stores were one of few places where people, especially strangers, came in contact during the pandemic. Given the unique situation of the pandemic and the validity of physical distance to predict race discrimination (Blanton et al., 2009), we chose to rely on the single-behavior variable as our main outcome.

We operationalized opposition to immigration ( $M = 3.80, SD = 1.84, \alpha = 0.96$ ) by averaging respondents' levels of agreement with seven closely related statements relative to perceptions of immigrants in the United States. This measure adopted items from a nine-item xenophobia scale originally developed by Van der Veer, Yakushko, Ommundsen, and Higler (2011). Participants were asked to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statements: "Immigration in this country is out of control"; "Immigrants cause increases in crime"; "Immigrants take jobs from people who are here already"; "Interacting with immigrants makes me uneasy"; "I worry that immigrants may spread unusual diseases"; "Immigrants are threatening the American way of life"; and "Immigrants cost U.S. taxpayers too much by using government services like medical services." This outcome was measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from "1," labeled as "strongly disagree," to "7," labeled as "strongly agree."

### **Results**

For each outcome variable, we estimated multiple linear regressions to predict the effects of the two types of news coverage. Each model included a two-level factor for whether the main article mentioned South Korea or not, a two-level anti-Asian racism news story factor (an anti-Asian racism story included in the sidebar, no anti-Asian racism story included in the sidebar), an interaction term for warm feelings for President Trump and the South Korea story as well as an interaction term for warm feelings toward President

Trump and the anti-Asian racism story. We included these two interaction terms because Trump was leading the nation when we conducted the experiment and often employed racist rhetoric to talk about COVID-19, including the infamous epithet “kung flu” that sparked media attention and backlash among audiences (Nakamura, 2020). We included nonhypothesized factors in our regression models for control purposes.<sup>2</sup> Note that the regression models were identical for all analyses except for the dependent variable.

H1 predicted that exposure to a news story mentioning an Asian country (H1a) and a news story mentioning anti-Asian racism (H1b) will increase Asian aversion. The regression model explains a significant portion of the variance, adjusted  $R^2 = 0.25$ ,  $F(5, 825) = 55.48$ ,  $p < .001$ . We find a significant relationship between Asian aversion and the anti-Asian racism story ( $\beta = 0.075$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The news story mentioning an Asian country did not significantly increase the outcome ( $\beta = 0.46$ ,  $p = ns$ ). These results support only H1b, indicating that the anti-Asian racism story triggers negative behavioral reactions toward Asians.

Our RQ asked whether exposure to a news story mentioning an Asian country (RQa) and a news story mentioning anti-Asian racism (RQb) will affect opposition to immigration. The regression model explains a significant portion of the variance, adjusted  $R^2 = 0.51$ ,  $F(5, 819) = 170.44$ ,  $p < .001$ . The analysis showed significant changes in opposition to immigration by the news story mentioning South Korea ( $\beta = -0.042$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and the anti-Asian racism story ( $\beta = 0.048$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The results show that the South Korea story decreased opposition to immigration whereas the anti-Asian racism story increased opposition to immigration.

H2 predicted that Trump support will moderate the effects of exposure to the South Korea story (H2a) and the anti-Asian racism story (H2b) on Asian aversion and opposition to immigration. The two regression models including interactions with Trump support explain a significant portion of the variance for Asian aversion (adjusted  $R^2 = 0.25$ ,  $F(7, 823) = 39.82$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and for opposition to immigration (adjusted  $R^2 = 0.51$ ,  $F(7, 823) = 122.48$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Trump support significantly moderated the effects of exposure to the South Korea story on opposition to immigration ( $\beta = 0.073$ ,  $p < .05$ ). However, Trump support did not significantly moderate the effects of exposure to the South Korea story on Asian aversion ( $\beta = 0.066$ ,  $p = ns$ ). Additionally, Trump support did not significantly moderate the effects of exposure to the anti-Asian racism story on Asian aversion ( $\beta = -0.001$ ,  $p = ns$ ) and on opposition to immigration ( $\beta = -0.023$ ,  $p = ns$ ). The results partially support H2. See Table 1 for a summary of results.

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<sup>2</sup> The two nonhypothesized factors included in our regression models for control purposes were a two-level fact-checking factor (which manipulated the presence or absence of a fact-checking headline in the “Related Articles” sidebar alongside the anti-Asian racism headline) and a two-level defense of journalism factor (which manipulated the presence or absence of a defense of journalism story in the same “Related Articles” sidebar). These factors were included in the original experimental design for other purposes (Kim et al., 2022).

**Table 1. Regression Results (Standardized Coefficients).**

	Asian aversion		Opposition to immigration	
Asian country news	0.046	0.048*	-0.042*	-0.038
Anti-Asian racism news	0.075**	0.074*	0.048*	0.044*
Interaction of Asian country news and Trump support	-	0.066	-	0.073*
Interaction of anti-Asian racism news and Trump support	-	-0.001	-	-0.023
Feelings toward President Trump	0.500***	0.446***	0.713***	0.653***
Intercept	3.648***	3.643***	4.028***	4.019***
Adjusted $R^2$	0.247	0.247	0.507	0.508
$n$	831	831	825	825

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

### Discussion and Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the effects of two kinds of news coverage related to race during the early stages of the COVID-19 crisis. We hypothesized competing mechanisms of news processing, with one relying on racial priming (Valentino, 1999) and the other on group threat (Blalock, 1967). Our results seem to suggest that racial cues in media coverage could be enough to activate a defensive mechanism aimed at protecting the ingroup against external threats. In line with past research on the effects of coverage of anti-Black racism (Santia et al., 2022), we found that exposure to an anti-Asian racism story spilled over to affect opposition to immigration. This spillover effect implies that the mere mention of racism could lead some individuals to pick up race cues and automatically produce a backlash effect on racial predispositions. However, we also found that news coverage mentioning South Korea decreased opposition to immigration and resulted in more positive attitudes toward Asians—which is consistent with the seemingly positive model minority perception of Asians when thinking about immigrants.

Besides racial priming and group threat, it is possible that other cognitions may be at work when processing race-related coverage, including the behavioral immune system—a psychological response that elicits feelings of disgust to protect individuals from germs and pathogens (Aaroe, Petersen, & Arceneaux, 2017; Kam, 2019). This study provides a first look at these dynamics in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, but future research is needed to clarify the psychological mechanisms used to process racialized news coverage in various forms and presentations, especially in times of crises.

Our results also indicate that Trump support moderated some of the effects—a finding that corroborates existing literature showing that political elites often shape public opinion by framing issues around certain social groups, such as welfare and African Americans (Mendelberg, 2001; Nelson & Kinder, 1996). Support for Trump moderated how participants perceived news mentioning South Korea in relation to immigration opposition, but not in relation to Asian aversion. Trump support also did not change the way

people interpreted the anti-Asian racism story for our outcomes of Asian aversion and opposition to immigration. The South Korea story may have triggered stronger reactions among individuals who felt warm toward Trump in comparison to the anti-Asian racism story, but we are unable to explain why this occurred. Future research should look closer into this dynamic to assert the role of Trump support.

The implications of our findings are potentially large. Given the outcomes we focus on and the two stories we use as our experimental treatments, our results exemplify how the topic of race came up early in the COVID-19 pandemic and the potential of these stories to fuel negative feelings toward Asians and immigrants. Most of the work in this area has documented the effects of racialized news about African American individuals (Mendelberg, 2001; Valentino, 1999). We add to this body of research by investigating the effects of news related to a less studied group in media research (i.e., Asians). There is a notable absence of Asian representation in U.S. media (Aoki & Takeda, 2011; Sun, Liberman, Butler, Lee, & Webb, 2015), and the sudden spike in news coverage of anti-Asian hate crimes may have been the first exposure many non-Asian Americans had to Asian-related news content. This opens new questions on how the media should cover sensitive topics related to race and racism amid the COVID-19 crisis.

It should be noted that the effect sizes observed in this study are small for our outcomes of interest, even though they are in the range of those found in previous experiments (Dixon & Azocar, 2007). It is possible that small effect sizes may be because of the specific design of the study and because the anti-Asian racism news story appeared in a "Related Articles" sidebar rather than the main body of the screenshot. Nevertheless, a large body of experimental evidence suggests the effectiveness of news headlines to grab readers' attention and maximize interest (Ecker, Lewandowsky, Chang, & Pillai, 2014). Mere exposure to headlines has been found to significantly affect information processing (Ecker et al., 2014), message credibility evaluations (Appelman & Sundar, 2016; Luo, Hancock, & Markowitz, 2020), and attitudes toward news delivery platforms (Bryanov, Watson, Pingree, & Santia, 2020). The implication of this is that news organizations and editors need to be careful when framing racism because headlines can be powerful. Covering racism can be tricky, and the media should adopt appropriate strategies to build a healthy discourse around this important issue (see also Kilgo, 2021).

Alternatively, the small effect sizes of this study may provide further evidence for a new era of minimal effects (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008) given dramatic changes in the media ecology. Future investigations should consider the magnitude of effects relative to the highly interactive, digital media world (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2013). The way in which media messages vary across situations, audiences, and media formats may affect how journalists, editors, and media practitioners cover the topic of race without triggering negative feelings.

This study should be contextualized according to several limitations. An important internal validity limitation is that the control condition we employ in our design could have resulted in a treatment confound. The control story we employ differed from the treatment story not only in whether an Asian country was mentioned (the intended treatment), but also in terms of whether the United States was compared with another country (the possible confound). The mere fact of comparing to any other country could perhaps produce priming and group threat responses similar to the intended treatment's theorized mechanisms. Future research should attempt to replicate these results with an additional control condition in which a

European country is compared with the United States. Also, our measures were limited by a single item for Asian aversion, which prevents assessing a broader range of attitudes that could arise when seeing news about Asians or other outgroups. We also did not collect data on individual idiosyncrasies, such as group attachment and group identity strength, which could affect how individuals process information perceived as threatening to their own group. In terms of external validity, using a convenience sample may hinder our ability to generalize our results. Replication with a different online sample (e.g., Prolific) or a representative sample is desirable to externally validate the results of our experiment.

Future research should build on these results by testing the effects of additional types of race-related news. Cueing race has important consequences for how people make sense of this topic. Similarly, future research should address whether frequency of coverage is the key ingredient when trying to detect the hypothesized effects, as shown by previous studies (e.g., Schemer, 2014). This study relied on a single-shot experiment that forced exposure to a particular stimulus. Repeated exposure to similar stimuli may better mimic the characteristics of modern media consumption and may help clarify whether seeing news about race ultimately accumulates into an effective response—as found in previous research (Santia et al., 2022). Nevertheless, our results represent the lower bound of stronger effects that would have otherwise occurred over time.

Future research should also test whether these results are contingent on specific media outlets. Recent research has found that conservative media outlets' use increases negative evaluations of outgroups, such as the BlackLivesMatter social movement (Kilgo & Mourão, 2019). We deliberately chose to use the *Wall Street Journal* website as the sole news source in our experiment because it is generally trusted among conservatives and Republicans; however, we are unable to establish whether using a more left-leaning source, such as the *New York Times*, would lead to similar outcomes (see e.g., Zhang & Trifiro, 2022). This limitation calls for further research on how different media outlets cover the topics of race and racism with resulting effects.

This study offers a unique theoretical contribution to existing research on media effects during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Future work is needed to replicate these findings in different experimental settings to further explore whether and under which conditions race-related coverage may trigger specific effects related to perceptions of outgroups, including Asian Americans.

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