Title: Social Cost with No Political Gain: The “Chinese Virus” Effect

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Abstract
Naming a contagious disease, such as COVID-19, by the geographic locality where the disease originates or starts, for example, Wuhan or China, may stigmatize specific ethnic groups related to that locality, and such stigmatizing behavior will further lead to legitimized discrimination, prejudice, and group conflicts. However, as the construction of social stigma relates closely to group identities, creating xenophobia through stigmatizing out-group members may increase in-group solidarity, which can be taken as a political strategy for the government to avoid the blame from citizens. In this study, we experimentally examine: (1) whether labeling COVID-19 as “Chinese Virus” will result in increased stigmatization and xenophobia against Chinese immigrants; (2) whether the “Chinese Virus” label will reduce people’s perceived blameworthiness of the federal government. Our results (N=1,200) show that about 16% of participants located in the U.S. indicated xenophobia against Chinese immigrants, and perceived blameworthiness of the federal government was polarized as expected. Further, although stigmatization was not significantly triggered by the “Chinese Virus” label in the full sample, we do find statistically significant treatment effects in multiple political and demographic subgroups (21.47% increase in Democrats, 16.73% in Liberals, and 19.93% in Whites, no effect in conservatives and Republicans while the stigmatization remains at higher levels than other groups). Meanwhile, our list experiment strategy detected no social desirability bias when measuring xenophobia, suggesting that stigmatizing Chinese immigrants was not suppressed by current social norms. However, increased stigmatization did not lead to the reduce of blameworthiness of the federal government in handling the current pandemic.

Data description
Data was collected through an online survey experiment involving subjects recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk).

JEL codes for the project
C90, D91, Z13

Keywords
Social stigma, discrimination, xenophobia, political psychology

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