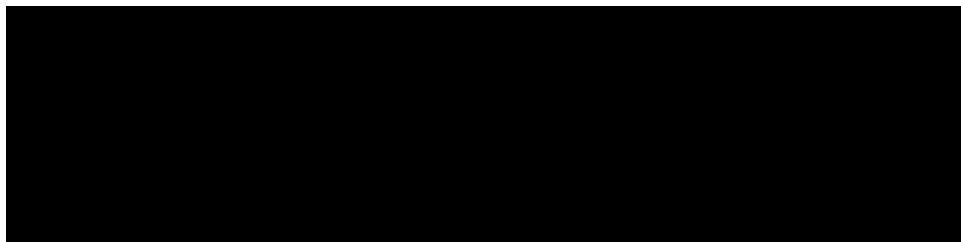


**Fighting Racism in The Digital Era: A Psychological Perspective on Systemic Cyber-  
Racism and Possible Solutions**

Xiaohe Chen



Beijing Royal School

Beiqijia Town, Changping District, Beijing, China



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### **Abstract**

The digital era has qualitatively transformed how racist activities take place in society. The Internet allows nearly four billion people to engage beyond geographical and social barriers through multiple online channels. However, this also allows many users to display their racist beliefs regardless of regional limits. With the unexpected outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, China, where the virus originated, has been discriminated against and vilified worldwide. This Sinophobic trend has negatively affected Chinese people's physical and psychological well-being. As a result, it is critical to address the question of why individuals engage in cyber-racism. This article tries to account for incidences of cyber-racism during the pandemic by employing the psychological concepts of respondent conditioning and the online disinhibition effect. It also discusses the possible mechanisms underlying people's racist attitudes and beliefs, explicitly focusing on the Bias of Crowds model, which stipulates that implicit bias is a systemic problem rather than a problem of individual thinking. This paper then discusses how the psychological concept of operant conditioning can be employed to provide a potential solution for cyber-racism.

*Keywords:* cyber-racism, COVID-19, anti-Chinese, implicit bias, online disinhibition, the bias of crowds model

## **Fighting Racism in The Digital Era: A Psychological Perspective on Systemic Cyber-Racism and Possible Solutions**

As I woke up on December 17, 2021 and reached for my cell phone to check my social media feeds, a tweet grabbed my attention: Jessy Kelly had remarked on his T.V. show that "we need a military full of Type-A men who want to sit on a throne of Chinese skulls."

Unsurprisingly, this statement aroused Chinese indignation, amounting to a haunting testimony to the current state of cyber-racism.

As social media has taken over the socio-political settings, the medium in which people interpret and engage with racism has shifted (Eschmann, 2019). With around 995 million tweets regarding race – or 2.1 million tweets every day on average (Anderson, 2016)– the Internet allows over four billion users to interact across regional borders through various channels (World Internet, 2018). Racist practices, either new or old, are becoming more prevalent on these channels. As a result, cyber-racism has evolved into a systemic issue that cannot be overlooked.

What is cyber-racism exactly? As Bliuc et al. defined, cyber-racism is "any form of communication via electronic or digital media by groups or individuals which seeks to denigrate or discriminate against individuals (by denying equal rights, freedom, and opportunities) or groups because of their race or ethnicity" (Bliuc et al., 2018, p.5). Granted, cyberspace has become an integral medium for collecting information and engaging in social interaction, notably in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, however, the Internet is being used to spread hazardous and inappropriate content, such as conspiracy theories and hate speech directed at specific ethnic groups, particularly Chinese people, because COVID-19 is believed to have begun in China.

### **How Does Cyber-Racism Affect Chinese?**

Since March 2020, when the World Health Organization (2020) proclaimed the Coronavirus outbreak to be a pandemic, racist activities, especially Sinophobia (an unfavorable attitude toward China and Chinese people), have escalated substantially online (Edara, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). Hate speech, unreliable news, racial slurs, verbal abuse, and other factors encouraged people to act on their anti-Chinese ideas, resulting in a spike in xenophobic incidents (Edara, 2020). Many in the public media, including former U.S. President Donald Trump, have drawn attention to the fact that COVID-19 originated in Wuhan, China, leading many U.S. citizens to label the virus "Chinese Virus" and to believe that the Chinese were to blame for the pandemic, further exacerbating xenophobic sentiments (Wang et al., 2020).

These events have had psychological and physical consequences for Chinese citizens living overseas. Psychologically, they are more likely to undergo collective trauma and are afraid of being bodily or emotionally attacked because of their appearances and nationalities (Edara, 2020). As a result, many Chinese people are increasingly concerned about dealing with racist situations, leading to mental disorders, subclinical stress responses, and subsequent behavioral problems (Edara, 2020; Misra et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). Physically, people who appeared to be Asian also risked increasing danger. An old man was beaten with an iron bar in California. An Asian family, including a two-year-old and a six-year-old, was killed in a store in Texas (Edara, 2020). These incidents indicate that the racist remarks and hashtags have seriously affected Chinese people's health outcomes ranging from mental health to life expectancies.

### **Why Do People Engage in Cyber-Racism?**

Cyber-racism is primarily comprised of two components: racism and cyberbullying. How do people become racist? Matsuda et al. (2020) argue racism could be developed through respondent conditioning. "When a neutral stimulus (N.S.) is paired with an unconditioned

stimulus (UCS) and becomes a conditioned stimulus (C.S.), which elicits a conditioned response (C.R.)" (Matsuda et al., 2020, p.337). In the case of Sinophobia sparked by the pandemic, China (N.S.) is combined with the sudden outbreak of COVID-19 (UCS), which originated in China, to create a C.S. (i.e., China), and fear (C.R.) is elicited. Even if the Chinese were not carriers of the virus, a consequential incident involving a Chinese might trigger racial sentiments such as "Chinese virus" or "Kung-flu" (Wang et al., 2020).

However, why does this phenomenon persist, even as individuals in the Post-Civil Rights Era have begun to avoid making racist sentiments offline (Pollock, 2004)? Much of the blame may be attributed to the widespread use of social media, as the digital age has allowed racism to become increasingly visible, frequent, and blatant on the Internet (Keum & Miller, 2017; Eschmann, 2019; Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021).

The online disinhibition effect, which refers to the phenomenon that people always "loosen up, feel less restrained, and express themselves more openly" online (Suler, 2004, p.1), might explain the persistent or even amplified cyberbullying. Suler (2004) highlights dissociative anonymity as a critical component in increasing online disinhibition. Since social media's anonymous nature allows users to differentiate their online identities from reality, individuals can evade accountability for expressed hostility or other deviant conduct, almost as if "superego constraints" and moral cognitive processes have been momentarily blocked from the online ego (Suler, 2004). In other words, people lack a sense of responsibility for their behaviors online, believing that their actions have no real-world ramifications. For example, most people do not choose to pose a physical threat to Chinese people in real life because they believe they will be legally and morally sanctioned. Still, when people have access to virtual identities online, they

are more likely to make anti-Chinese statements because of the assumption that they will not be severely punished and can escape their sense of responsibility.

### **How Do People Form a Cyber-Racist Mindset?**

As an increasing emphasis is devoted to racism and xenophobia during the pandemic, researchers are seeking explanations for it. Implicit bias, which is the favorable or unfavorable unconscious mental connections that social groupings generate (Payne & Hannay, 2021), is one of the most common contributing factors researchers use to address systemic racism and prejudice.

Payne et al. (2017) used The Bias of Crowds model to provide a context-dependent, systemic reinterpretation of implicit bias. The model pointed out that implicit bias does not exist only in individual thinking but also evolves with the social structure and context. That is, bias is built on flexible social categories, thoughts, evaluations, and stereotypes. The accessibility of information in memory corresponds to significant patterns in a person's surroundings (Anderson & Schooler, 1991). For example, the frequency with which a word appears impacts how easy that word may be retrieved. The frequency with which two words appear together determines the likelihood that one will come to mind when the other is mentioned.

Similarly, individuals have more access to biased conceptions about different social groups under different social settings. Consider the example of the increasing Sinophobia brought by COVID-19. People are more exposed to claims on many public media platforms like "Chinese being the vectors of the virus" or "Chinese bringing the virus into our nation" in the context of the pandemic. Once the terms or traits have been connected and categorized, the preconceptions and biases that classify them are triggered. Individuals wish to avoid infection by stigmatizing COVID-19 sufferers and whoever else could be associated with the virus's origins

as a social group, therefore transferring their fear of the uncertainty onto it (Roberto et al., 2020). Therefore, there was the most apparent prejudice towards the Chinese. People are subjected to a multitude of information about a topic when it becomes the focus of society, either directly or indirectly, reinforcing their current biases or establishing new ones.

### **How Could We Fight Cyber-Racism in The Digital Era?**

The sudden COVID-19 outbreak has shifted people's social engagement online, exacerbating the division between ethnic groups, with Chinese people particularly confronted with racism around the world. Therefore, establishing effective policies and regulations governing racist content and reducing the systemic racist problem become a renewed urgency for society.

Social organizations and social media corporations (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, etc.) need to define racist content precisely. The problem that social media sites confront is that there is no clear definition of what constitutes racist content. As a result, racism is never explicitly acknowledged or defined in online venues (Siapera & Viejo-Otero, 2021). A precise definition or set of criteria can help better classify and remove racist content from the platform. Limiting users' frequency of exposure to these terms can, in turn, reduce the possibility of individuals developing implicit bias, hence minimizing cyber-racism.

Positive reinforcement and negative punishment can modify users' online behaviors using Operant Conditioning. B.F. Skinner proposed that all human behaviors are generated from reinforcement and punishment. Positive reinforcement adds a desirable stimulus to increase the likelihood of a specific behavior. For example, users who actively report racist content or post content related to racial equity should be rewarded. Corporations could provide more exposure or increase the number of views and likes.

On the other hand, negative punishment removes a pleasurable stimulus to decrease the likelihood of an unfavorable behavior. For example, users who post racist content will be blocked. Utilizing operant conditioning can help reduce racist content in cyberspace and encourage netizens to promote equality.

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