The impact of COVID-19-related anti-Asian discrimination on sexual communication and relationships among Asian individuals in the United States

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Abstract
Asian individuals in the United States have experienced heightened racial discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may reduce positive relationship processes and damage intimate relationships, including their sexual behaviors and quality. Guided by the chilling effect and Interpersonal Exchange Model of Sexual Satisfaction, this study explores how COVID-19-related anti-Asian discrimination moderates the relationships between sexual relationship power, sexual self-disclosure, and sexual satisfaction. Results (N = 294 partnered Asian adults) showed that as racial discrimination increased, the positive relationship between sexual relationship power and sexual self-disclosure decreased. As people experienced more racial discrimination, the positive effects of sexual self-disclosure on sexual satisfaction also decreased. Sexual power positively predicted sexual satisfaction via sexual communication, only when COVID-19-related discrimination was low or moderate. This study demonstrates how racial discrimination interacts with relational factors to predict Asian individuals’ sexual communication and, in turn, sexual satisfaction. More public attention and efforts should be devoted to combating anti-Asian discrimination during the pandemic and beyond.

Keywords
Sexual relationship power, sexual self-disclosure, sexual satisfaction, Asian, discrimination, COVID-19

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly affected people’s behaviors and interpersonal experiences, including sexual behaviors and relationships (G. Li et al., 2020b; Rodrigues & Lehmiller, 2022). Emerging research has documented significant changes in people’s sexual desire, frequency of sexual intercourse, and specific sexual activities across the globe (Cocci et al., 2020; Jacob et al., 2020; Lehmiller et al., 2021; W. Li et al., 2020a; Yuksel & Ozgor, 2020). While many results remain contradictory (see Döring, 2020; Pascoal et al., 2021 for reviews), a consistent finding is the decrease in sexual satisfaction (W. Li et al., 2020a; Yuksel & Ozgor, 2020). Sexual self-disclosure, or communicating sexual likes and dislikes with a sexual partner, is instrumental for sexual satisfaction (MacNeil & Byers, 2009; Rehman et al., 2011). However, few studies have examined sexual communication between romantic couples amid the pandemic, not to mention the experiences of Asian individuals who have been largely ignored in sexual communication research and have experienced heightened discrimination.

Scholarly research and media coverage have reported a dramatic increase in anti-Asian racism and xenophobia in the United States during the pandemic (Yu et al., 2020). According to a March 2020 national survey, about 42% of respondents engaged in at least one discriminatory behavior towards Asian people (Dhanani & Franz, 2020). The Stop AAPI Hate Report also received a surge of reports of verbal harassment, shunning, and physical assaults towards Asian people from 3795 to 6603 in March 2021 (Jeung et al., 2021), the same month that six Asian women were shot and killed in Atlanta, Georgia. Increased anti-Asian discrimination has been associated with heightened psychological distress (S. W. Pan et al., 2021a), depression (S. Pan et al., 2021b), post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms (Hahm et al., 2021a), and general mental health disorders for Asian individuals (Wu et al., 2021), all of which can affect people’s sexual experiences (Brotto et al., 2022).

Clearly, the COVID-19 pandemic has largely affected people’s sexual experiences worldwide. As Asian individuals in the United States continue to experience heightened racial discrimination, their sexual life may be even more vulnerable. Thus, this study aims to explore the sexual communication and satisfaction of Asian individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, guided by the chilling effect and Interpersonal Exchange Model of Sexual Satisfaction (IEMSS), we examine how relational characteristics (sexual relationship power) predict partnered Asian individuals’ sexual communication (sexual self-disclosure), which in turn predicts their sexual satisfaction. We also explore how experiences of COVID-19-related anti-Asian discrimination may moderate the relationships among sexual relationship power, sexual self-disclosure, and sexual satisfaction.

COVID-19-related anti-asian discrimination and sexual experiences

Racism against Asian groups and scapegoating of Asian individuals as “disease carriers” are not new but have happened multiple times throughout American history (Gover et al., 2020). Since the COVID-19 crisis began, Asian individuals have experienced surges in
overt racism, such as dehumanizing racial slurs, verbal harassment, shunning, spitting, workplace discrimination, and physical violence (Hahm et al., 2021a, 2021). The most notable COVID-19-related anti-Asian discrimination has stemmed from the former United States president, who publicly referred to COVID-19 as “Wuhan Virus,” “Chinese virus,” and “Kung flu” (Croucher et al., 2020). Personal health concerns, coupled with other factors such as economic anxiety, fear of foreigners, general xenophobia, and institutional bigoted rhetoric and exclusionary policies, have all contributed to the increase in anti-Asian hate crimes during the pandemic (Gover et al., 2020; S. W. Pan et al., 2021a).

Emerging research has examined the impact of COVID-19-related discrimination on Asian individuals in the United States. For instance, Asian young adults’ perceived racial discrimination is positively associated with their psychological distress, depressive, anxiety, somatic, and post-traumatic stress disorders symptoms (Chia-Chen Chen et al., 2014; Hahm et al., 2021a). In U.S. Asian families, racial discrimination experienced by parents and youth are related to their poorer mental health (Cheah et al., 2020). Indeed, Asian individuals are about twice as likely as their White counterparties to report having encountered instances of COVID-19-related discrimination, which partially explains the disproportionate mental health impact of the pandemic on Asian people (Wu et al., 2021). Overall, the COVID-19-related discrimination can contribute to lower self-worth, internalized stigma, and worsened health outcomes among Asian individuals (Hahm et al., 2021a).

During the pandemic, COVID-19-related stressors, enduring individual vulnerabilities (e.g., attachment insecurity, history of trauma), and pre-existing contextual vulnerabilities (e.g., social class, minority status) jointly increase harmful dyadic relationship processes (e.g., withdrawal, hostility), which in turn damage couples’ relationship quality (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). For U.S. Asian individuals, COVID-19-related racial discrimination is a function of the pandemic impact and individual and contextual vulnerabilities. Those discrimination experiences may cause anxiety, stress, and insecurity that promote withholding sensitive conversations, such as communication about sexual preferences, which undermines people’s sexual satisfaction. Thus, COVID-19-related discrimination is one of the crucial factors to understand Asian people’s sexual experiences. An examination of how anti-Asian discrimination affects people’s sexual experiences adds to our knowledge of the adverse impacts of racism on people’s relational experiences. The results will also support the urgency to combat COVID-19-related anti-Asian discrimination and suggest strategies to improve people of colors’ sexual experiences during the crisis and beyond.

**Sexual relationship power predicting sexual self-disclosure**

Relational power, or the ability to influence and control a relational partner’s behaviors and outcomes, is a fundamental interpersonal factor that affects relational communication behaviors (Dunbar, 2004), including sexual communication between partners (Alvarez & Villarruel, 2015; Li & Samp, 2019b). In the context of sexual encounters, sexual relationship power is the amount of control people have over their sexual relationships and
sexual decision-making (Pulerwitz et al., 2000). Across cultures, individuals with higher sexual relationship power are more open to talking about condom use and discussing sexual health with their partners (Alvarez & Villarruel, 2015; Li & Samp, 2019b; Luft et al., 2019). Likewise, powerful individuals may also be more likely to disclose their sexual preferences.

According to the chilling effect, when people perceive more power over their partners, they are less likely to avoid relational conflicts or withhold sensitive conversations. This is because powerful individuals are less worried about possible negative responses from their powerless partners. Powerful people also have fewer concerns about adverse personal and relational outcomes resulting from talking about sensitive issues, such as self-image damage and relationship termination (Cloven & Roloff, 1993; Roloff & Cloven, 1990; Samp & Solomon, 2001). Similarly, given the face-threatening and taboo nature of sexual self-disclosure, especially in Asian culture (Tang et al., 2013), overpowered partners may feel more confident and less concerned about voicing their sexual likes and dislikes. Thus, we predict that:

**H1a.** Sexual relationship power is positively associated with sexual self-disclosure.

Experiences of COVID-19-related discrimination, however, may diminish the positive impact of sexual relationship power on sexual self-disclosure. According to Dunbar (2004), while relational power may encourage and facilitate people to voice their opinions, public displays of relational power can damage relationships with partners. The COVID-19 pandemic has made it extremely difficult to connect with others and maintain interpersonal relationships (Merolla et al., 2021). People may have more concerns about their relationships than their individual sexual preferences. In other words, as Asian individuals experience heightened racial discrimination, they may worry that their use of relational power to communicate their sexual preferences could harm their romantic relationships and thus, are less likely to take advantage of their power. Moreover, experiences of racial discrimination can damage people’s self-worth, lowering their confidence in engaging in sensitive conversations. Taken together, as people experience increased COVID-19-related discrimination, the positive effects of sexual relationship power on sexual communication may decrease.

**H1b.** As COVID-related anti-Asian discrimination increases, the positive association between sexual relationship power and sexual self-disclosure decreases.

**Sexual self-disclosure predicting sexual satisfaction**

Sexual satisfaction is a global appraisal of one’s sex life. Numerous studies have shown that greater sexual self-disclosure is associated with higher sexual satisfaction in romantic relationships (Byers & Demmons, 1999; MacNeil & Byers, 2005, 2009). The Interpersonal Exchange Model of Sexual Satisfaction (IEMSS; Byers & Demmons, 1999; MacNeil & Byers, 2009) proposes two pathways accounting for the positive disclosure-satisfaction relationship. First, disclosure of sexual likes and dislikes helps partners
understand and enact their sexual preferences, which results in greater sexual satisfaction. Second, sexual self-disclosure enhances intimacy and emotional closeness between partners, increasing their relationship satisfaction. Greater relationship satisfaction, in turn, predicts higher sexual satisfaction (Byers, 1999). MacNeil and Byers (2009) further labeled the two pathways as instrumental and expressive, respectively. While few existing studies explicitly focused on Asian individuals, theoretically, these pathways should apply equally to all romantic relationships (MacNeil & Byers, 2009). Thus, we predict that:

**H2a.** Sexual self-disclosure is positively associated with sexual satisfaction.

Few studies have examined the impact of racial discrimination on Asian individuals’ sexual communication and satisfaction. However, prior research has explored how racial discrimination promotes risky sexual behaviors and negatively affects couple functioning, which may provide insights into how COVID-19-related discrimination may moderate the association between sexual self-disclosure and sexual satisfaction.

Specifically, much research has indicated that reports of more racial discrimination are related to increased sexual risk among heterosexual African American individuals (Hicks & Kogan, 2019; Reed et al., 2013), Asian and Pacific Islander men who have sex with men (MSM; Wilson & Yoshikawa, 2004; Yoshikawa et al., 2004), and Latino MSM (Díaz et al., 2001; Mizuno et al., 2012). Roberts et al. (2012) proposed that racial discrimination leads to risky sexual behaviors through negative affect (e.g., depression and anxiety), affiliation with deviant peers, and positive attitudes towards risky sex. In the current context, experiences of COVID-19-related discrimination have increased people’s negative affect (Hahm et al., 2021a; Wu et al., 2021), which may promote more risky behaviors, such as unprotected sex and sex with multiple partners together. Indeed, Lehmiller et al. (2021) observed more diverse and novel sexual behaviors during the pandemic, including risky sex. Thus, even though people may openly share their sexual preference with their partners, they may feel regret, guilt, or worry after engaging in those behaviors, contributing to lower sexual satisfaction.

In addition, racial discrimination has been negatively associated with relationship functioning among African American couples (Lavner et al., 2018). Recent studies showed that the COVID-19 pandemic has lower romantic partners’ relationship satisfaction through increased relational conflicts (Luetke et al., 2020), lower relationship functioning (Williamson, 2020), and unfair division of household labor (Waddell et al., 2021). Therefore, although sexual self-disclosure may promote sexual satisfaction, the decreased relationship satisfaction due to the pandemic may hinder the positive effects of sexual communication on satisfaction. Together, we hypothesize that COVID-19-related discrimination negatively moderates the relationship between sexual self-disclosure and sexual satisfaction.

**H2b.** As COVID-related anti-Asian discrimination increases, the positive association between sexual self-disclosure and sexual satisfaction decreases.
Sexual relationship power predicting sexual satisfaction

Previous studies have observed the impact of relational power on relational outcomes. The results, however, remain inconsistent. For instance, Bentley et al. (2007) indicated that under-powered men reported higher relationship satisfaction than their over-powered counterparts. In contrast, other studies found that a balance of power between partners is associated with better emotional well-being, greater relationship satisfaction, and higher sexual desire (Aida & Falbo, 1991; Brezsnayak & Wisman, 2004; Drigotas et al., 1999). In addition, couples with a balance of power reported the highest relationship quality (Conroy et al., 2016; Gray-Little & Burks, 1983), including sexual fulfillment. Smith (2021) also revealed that power balance mediates the positive relationship between sexual and relational satisfaction. Thus, similar levels of power between partners may predict higher sexual satisfaction.

However, other studies showed that personal sense of power positively predicts sexual fulfillment and general relationship quality in heterosexual relationships (Körner & Schütz, 2021). In the context of mixed-orientation relationships, relational power is also positively associated with relationship satisfaction (Li & Samp, 2021b). In a study of rural Chinese married couples, wives who scored higher on sexual relationship power are more satisfied with their sexual life than those with lower power (Lau et al., 2006). These studies suggest that higher sexual relationship power, rather than balanced power, may predict higher sexual satisfaction. During the COVID-19 pandemic, racial discrimination experienced by Asian individuals likely affects their sense of relational power and sexual life. Yet, the specific effects remain understudied. Given the inconsistent past results and lack of theoretical guidance, we ask the following research questions.

RQ1a. How is sexual relationship power associated with sexual satisfaction?

RQ1b. How does COVID-related anti-Asian discrimination moderate the association between sexual relationship power and sexual satisfaction?

Figure 1 visualized the conceptual model, including hypotheses and research questions.

Method

Participants

Participants (N = 294) were self-identified Asian adults residing in the United States who were in a romantic relationship. About 65.65% were men and 34.35% were women. Participants did not report other gender identities. The average age was 36.51 years (SD = 11.61, range: 18-64). Most participants (84.01%) were born in the U.S. Participants were from all 50 states and Washington, D.C., with the top three states being California (20.07%), Texas (15.31%), and New York (9.86%). Nearly 88.78% of participants were in a heterosexual relationship. About 69.39% of respondents were in a relationship with another Asian individual, with the remainder being in a mixed-race relationship. On
average, participants had been with their romantic partners for 95.49 months ($SD = 95.34$, range: 3-485).

**Recruitment and procedures**

This study is part of a larger project examining the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on people’s relational and sexual experiences. We utilized Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk, www.Mturk.com) to recruit and compensate participants. MTurk is an efficient and valid platform to recruit hard-to-reach populations (Smith et al., 2015). Given the topic- and time-sensitivity of this project, it was also appropriate to recruit respondents via MTurk. A recruitment post on MTurk defined eligibility, including (a) being 18 years or older, (b) being in a romantic relationship for at least three months, (c) having lived with romantic partners in the past three months, (d) having been sexually active with romantic partners in the past three months, and (e) currently residing in the U.S. The recruitment post was only visible and accessible to individuals who had a valid U.S. I.P. address. Participants followed a link on MTurk to access an online screening survey that further verified their eligibility. Eligible respondents were then automatically directed to the survey.

Data were collected between May and June 2020. The survey was in English. Participants typed in their romantic partners’ initials or nickname to ensure that they had a specific target in mind. Respondents reported their sexual relationship power, sexual self-disclosure, sexual satisfaction, and demographic information. If participants self-reported as Asian, they also answered questions regarding their experiences of COVID-19-related anti-Asian discrimination. The survey took on average 12 minutes to complete. Two attention check questions ensured data quality. Participants were compensated with $2.00 for their time. The Institutional Review Board at the leading author’s affiliated institution approved the research protocol.
Measures

Unless otherwise noted, Likert-type scales were administrated on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). All variables ranged from 1 to 5.

Sexual relationship power. We utilized the Sexual Relationship Power Scale (SRPS; Pulerwitz et al., 2000) to measure interpersonal power within sexual relationships. The 23-item SRPS contained two subscales. The 5-point (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree), 15-item Relationship Control subscale assessed the degree to which a person emotionally depended on their sexual partners (e.g., “I am more committed to our relationship than my partner is,” \( \alpha = .84 \)). The 3-point (1 = your partner, 2 = both of you equally, 3 = you), 8-item Decision-Making Dominance (DMD) subscale measured participants’ perceived ability to influence sexual decision-making in their relationships (e.g., “Who usually has more say about whether you have sex?” \( \alpha = .77 \)). Following Pulerwitz et al.’s (2000) procedure, the DMD scale was rescored to a 5-point scale. The two subscales were then averaged to form a composite measure of sexual relationship power. Higher scores indicated higher levels of perceived sexual relationship power (\( M = 3.36, SD = 1.18 \)).

Sexual self-disclosure. The Sexual Self-Disclosure Questionnaire (Byers & Demmons, 1999) indexed the breadth and depth of participants’ self-disclosure of sexual likes and dislikes to their partners. The stem, “How much have you told your partner about...” was followed by six items that asked about self-disclosure of likes with regards to kissing, sexual touching, intercourse, receiving oral sex, giving oral sex, and sexual variety, and another six items inquiring self-disclosure of dislikes about the same sexual activities. The scale had good reliability (\( \alpha = .81 \)). Items were averaged, with higher numbers indicating higher degrees of sexual self-disclosure (\( M = 3.47, SD = 0.93 \)).

Sexual satisfaction. The Global Measure of Sexual Satisfaction (Lawrance & Byers, 1998) assessed people’s satisfaction with their sexual life. On five 5-point bipolar scales (good-bad, pleasant-unpleasant, positive-negative, satisfying-unsatisfying, and valuable-worthless), participants responded to the questions, “Overall, how would you describe your sexual relationship with your partner?” The scale had good reliability (\( \alpha = .92 \)). Items were averaged, with higher scores indicating greater sexual satisfaction (\( M = 3.63, SD = 0.89 \)).

COVID-19-related anti-asian discrimination. We adopted a scale developed by Hahm et al., 2021a to assess participants’ experiences of COVID-19-related racial discrimination. Participants responded to seven items (e.g., “I have received a comment about Chinese/Asian people being the source of the virus,” “I have been physically assaulted because of my race/ethnicity due to COVID-19”). The scale had good reliability (\( \alpha = .73 \)). Items were averaged, with higher numbers indicating more experiences of COVID-19-related anti-Asian discrimination (\( M = 2.61, SD = 0.95 \)).
Results

Preliminary analyses

Independent samples t-tests compare variable means as a function of participants’ gender (men vs. women), country of origin (U.S.-born vs. other country-born), and relationship types (same-race vs. mixed-race, and heterosexual vs same-sex). Results showed that compared to women ($M = 3.12, SD = 1.39$), men ($M = 3.48, SD = 1.04$) reported higher levels of sexual relationship power, $t(159) = 2.31, p = .022$. Those born in the U.S. ($M = 3.43, SD = 1.13$) also reported higher sexual relationship power than participants born in other countries ($M = 2.97, SD = 1.35$), $t(59) = 2.21, p = .031$.

In addition, participants who were in a same-race relationship ($M = 3.19, SD = 1.27$) reported lower sexual relationship power than those who were in a mixed-race relationship ($M = 3.73, SD = 0.85$), $t(246) = 4.24, p < .001$. Respondents who were in a relationship with another Asian individual ($M = 2.76, SD = 1.04$) also experienced higher COVID-19-related discrimination than those in a mixed-race relationship ($M = 2.27, SD = 0.62$), $t(266) = 4.98, p < .001$. Moreover, those in a heterosexual relationship reported lower racial discrimination ($M = 2.28, SD = 0.91$) than participants in a same-sex relationship ($M = 2.65, SD = 0.95$), $t(41) = 2.17, p = .036$. No other significant mean differences were observed.

Bivariate correlations examined correlations between study variables and relationship length. Results (see Table 1) indicated that sexual relationship power was positively correlated with sexual self-disclosure and sexual satisfaction, and negatively correlated with COVID-19-related discrimination. There was a positive correlation between sexual self-disclosure and sexual satisfaction, and a negative correlation between sexual self-disclosure and relationship length. In addition, sexual satisfaction was negatively related to COVID-19-related discrimination and relationship length. Based on the preliminary analysis results, we controlled for participants’ relationship types (same-race vs. mixed-race and heterosexual vs. same-sex) and relationship length in subsequent analyses.

Table 1. Bivariate correlations between study variables and relationship length (N = 294).

|                  | 1    | 2    | 3    | 4    |
|------------------|------|------|------|------|
| 1. Sexual relationship power |      |      |      |      |
| 2. Sexual self-disclosure | **.19** |      |      |      |
| 3. Sexual satisfaction | **.32** | **.29** |      |      |
| 4. COVID-19-related anti-Asian discrimination | -.40** | -.08 | -.45*** |      |
| 5. Relational length | -.01 | -.15** | -.12* | .07 |

Note. Degree of freedom = 294. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.
Substantive analyses

We used Hayes’ PROCESS Macro V.3.5.3. model 59 (Hayes, 2018) to test the hypotheses (see Figure 1). Sexual relationship power was entered as the independent variable, sexual self-disclosure as the mediator, sexual satisfaction as the outcome variable, and COVID-19-related discrimination as the moderator. Relationship types (same-race vs. mixed-race and heterosexual vs. same-sex) and relationship length were covariates. Results (see Table 2) indicated that sexual relationship power positively predicted sexual self-disclosure. Higher sexual self-disclosure was associated with greater sexual satisfaction. Thus, H1a and H2a were supported. To answer RQ1a, there was no significant relationship between sexual relationship power and sexual satisfaction.

COVID-19-related discrimination negatively moderated the positive relationship between sexual relationship power and sexual self-disclosure. Specifically, as COVID-19-related discrimination increased, the positive effects of sexual relationship power on sexual self-disclosure decreased (see Figure 2). H1b was supported. COVID-19-related discrimination also negatively moderated the positive relationship between sexual self-disclosure and sexual satisfaction. Specifically, as COVID-19-related discrimination increased, the positive effects of sexual self-disclosure on sexual satisfaction decreased (see Figure 3). To answer RQ1b, COVID-19-related discrimination did not moderate the relationship between sexual relationship power and sexual satisfaction.

Post hoc conditional indirect effect analyses showed that sexual relationship power positively predicted sexual satisfaction via sexual communication when COVID-19-related discrimination was low (discrimination is 1 SD below mean [1.67]: Effect = 0.141, SE = 0.051, 95% CI: [0.056, 0.256]) and moderate (discrimination is mean [2.33]: Effect

| Table 2. Process model results (N = 294). |
|----------------|----------------|---------------|-----------|-----------|
| Path analysis | B      | SE  | p       | LL       | UL       |
| Predicting sexual SD |       |     |         |          |          |
| Power → sexual SD | 0.503  | 0.124 | <.001  | 0.259  | 0.748   |
| Discrimination → sexual SD | 0.392  | 0.138 | .005   | 0.121  | 0.663   |
| Power × discrimination → sexual SD | −0.125 | 0.040 | .002   | −0.204 | −0.046 |
| Predicting satisfaction |       |     |         |          |          |
| Power → satisfaction | 0.007  | 0.104 | .951   | −0.199 | 0.212   |
| Sexual SD → satisfaction | 0.837  | 0.133 | <.001  | 0.575  | 1.099   |
| Discrimination → satisfaction | 0.328  | 0.185 | .077   | −0.036 | 0.692   |
| Power × discrimination → satisfaction | 0.028  | 0.033 | .409   | −0.038 | 0.093   |
| Sexual SD × Dis. → satisfaction | −0.216 | 0.043 | <.001  | −0.301 | −0.129 |

Note. Power = Sexual relationship power, Sexual SD = Sexual self-disclosure, Discrimination = COVID-19-related anti-Asian discrimination, Satisfaction = Sexual satisfaction. Power × Discrimination = The interaction between sexual relationship power and COVID-19-related anti-Asian discrimination, Sexual SD × Discrimination = The interaction between sexual self-disclosure and COVID-19-related anti-Asian discrimination.
When experiencing high COVID-19-related discrimination (discrimination is 1 SD above mean [3.37]), the indirect effect of sexual relationship power on sexual satisfaction via sexual communication was not significant (Effect = 0.002, SE = 0.009, 95% CI: [-0.012, 0.026]).

Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly affected people’s behaviors and relationships, including their sexual behaviors and life. With the surges of racial discrimination amid the pandemic, Asian individuals in the United States are more vulnerable to the adverse impact of the pandemic on their sexual experiences. This study serves as one of the first projects that explicitly focus on Asian individuals’ sexual communication and relationships, and examine how COVID-19-related anti-Asian discrimination alters the relationships between sexual relationship power, sexual self-disclosure, and sexual satisfaction among partnered Asian people. Overall, as people experienced more racial discrimination, the positive effects of sexual relationship power on sexual self-disclosure, and the positive effects of sexual self-disclosure on sexual satisfaction decreased. This section explains our results, discusses practical implication, and suggests directions for future studies.

Our results indicated differences in sexual relationship power as a function of participants’ gender (men vs. women), country of origin (U.S.-born vs. other country-born), and relationship types (same-race vs. mixed-race). First, consistent with prior studies (Bruhin, 2003; Felmlee, 1994; Sprecher & Felmlee, 1997), our study found that male
participants reported higher levels of sexual relationship power than female respondents. This may be because persistent gender-based power imbalance in society allows men to have more power over decision-making in various areas, including sexual decision-making (Connell, 1987). In addition, we also found that participants born in the United States reported higher sexual relationship power than those born in other countries. Similarly, Li & Samp, 2019a observed that partnered U.S. individuals indicate higher relational power than their Chinese counterparts, partially because U.S. individuals are less committed to and less emotionally attached to their partners, which grants them relational power (Cloven & Roloff, 1993). Moreover, the principle of being reserved in Asian culture and the lack of training on overt expressions of power (Epstein et al., 2005) may also contribute to the difference, and explain why those in same-race relationships (both partners are Asian) reported lower sexual relationship power than those in mixed-race relationships in the current study.

Experiences of COVID-19-related anti-Asian discrimination also differed as a function of relationship types. Specifically, those in same-sex relationships reported higher racial discrimination than those in mixed-sex relationships. From the perspective of intersectionality (Collins & Bilge, 2020), the interconnected nature of social categorizations, such as race and sexual orientation, creates overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. In other words, Asian individuals in a same-sex relationship likely experience unique forms of discrimination due to their dual minority status, experiencing racial discrimination within sexual minority groups and from White heterosexual groups. Furthermore, Asian couples experienced higher COVID-19-related discrimination than interracial couples. This may be because both Asian partners are subject to racial discrimination amid the pandemic, amplifying each person’s discriminatory experiences. Future studies should explore to what extent interracial relationships...
may mitigate or amplify the adverse impact of COVID-19-related discrimination on Asian individuals.

In line with our hypotheses, sexual relationship power positively predicted sexual self-disclosure, which in turn predicts sexual satisfaction. The results support the chilling effect (Cloven & Roloff, 1993) and the Interpersonal Exchange Model of Sexual Satisfaction (MacNeil & Byers, 2009) among Asian individuals and in the context of sexual communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, although sexual relationship power was positively correlated with sexual satisfaction, regression analyses found no association between the two variables. Post hoc analysis revealed that sexual relationship power was not negatively curvilinearly related to sexual satisfaction, either. That is, neither higher sexual relationship power nor a balance of power was not associated with sexual satisfaction. Although much research has focused on the impact of relational power on relational outcomes, the results, at least in the context of sexual relationships, remain inconclusive. We encourage future studies to explore the role of power on sexual outcomes in various, more specific relational contexts.

Another notable result of this study is the moderation role of COVID-19-related discrimination on the relationships between sexual power, communication, and satisfaction. We found that the positive effects of sexual relationship power on sexual satisfaction via sexual self-disclosure was significant only when experienced racial discrimination was low or moderate. The results add to a growing number of studies focusing on the adverse impact of the pandemic on personal relationships (Li & Samp, 2021a; Luetke et al., 2020; Randall et al., 2021). In addition, Pietromonaco and Overall (2021) theorized that the COVID-19 pandemic reduces constructive dyadic relationship processes, such as withdrawal and hostility. Our results demonstrated the pandemic and related stressors also affect individuals’ sexual relationship processes and outcomes. Among the Asian community, prior research has documented the adverse personal consequences of COVID-19-related discrimination (Chia-Chen Chen et al., 2014; Hahm et al., 2021a). The current study complements those studies by illustrating how racial discrimination also adversely impacts Asian individuals’ relational, communication, and sexual experiences.

**Practical implications**

Our results suggest practical guidelines that assist Asian individuals in bettering their sexual life during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. First, while Asian cultures and individuals are more inclined to reserve their relational power in close relationships (Epstein et al., 2005; Li & Samp, 2019a), this study indicated that higher sexual relationship power predicted greater sexual satisfaction via more sexual self-disclosure. Sexual self-disclosure is often a taboo in Asian cultures, and sexual relationship power promotes such conversations. Thus, we suggest powerful individuals take advantage of their influences to initiate and facilitate the challenging talks. Moreover, as people experience heightened COVID-19-related anti-Asian discrimination, they may feel less confident and more worried about engaging in difficult conversations like sexual self-disclosure, especially when they perceive less control over their romantic relationships. In
this case, powerful individuals are encouraged to create a safe space and invite their under-powered partners to share their sexual preferences.

Second, we recommend Asian individuals openly share their sexual likes and dislikes to promote a better sexual life. Numerous studies using predominately White samples have shown a positive relationship between sexual self-disclosure and sexual satisfaction (Byers & Demmons, 1999; MacNeil & Byers, 2005, 2009). This study revealed that for Asian individuals, higher degrees of sexual self-disclosure are also related to greater sexual satisfaction. In addition, the pandemic and related stressors have motivated people to engage in more diverse sexual behaviors (Lehmiller et al., 2021). Communication about those novel sexual activities is even more important to promote mutual understandings, give sexual consent, and avoid unwanted sexual actions. Therefore, open self-disclosure of sexual likes and dislikes is valuable and highly encouraged for Asian individuals during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. To better serve the Asian community, more relational and sexual interventions should focus on increasing their communication efficacy and skills to voice their sexual preferences openly and comfortably.

This study also illustrates the importance of reducing anti-Asian discrimination during large-scale social crises and beyond. Racism against the Asian community and scapegoating of Asian individuals as “disease carriers” have persisted throughout American history, and continued to adversely affect the well-being of Asian people (Gover et al., 2020). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, this study provides additional evidence of how racial discrimination can damage positive relationship processes and harm intimate relationships. Clearly, decreasing COVID-19-related anti-Asian discrimination is critical. However, a content analysis of U.S. state governments’ COVID-19 homepage revealed that only six (13%) states have general anti-stigma messages and resources. By May 2020, no state had specific information to address racial discrimination towards Asian people on their websites (Yang et al., 2021). Therefore, we call for more public attention and efforts to combat anti-Asian discrimination and meet the needs of the Asian community.

Limitations, future directions, and conclusion

This study has several limitations. First, we only focused on COVID-19-related anti-Asian discrimination and left other pandemic-related stressors, such as the perceived threat of COVID-19, a diagnosis of COVID-19, experiences of COVID-19 like symptoms, and residing in areas with more COVID-19 cases, to future research. The COVID-19 pandemic is also an ongoing crisis. This study only captures a small window of the crisis and thus, reflects people’s experiences from that period only. For participants who were in a mixed-race relationship, we did not specify the race and ethnicity of their romantic partners. Future studies should recruit a more diverse sample of interracial couples to examine the impact of the pandemic on their communication practices and relational experiences. In addition, although we recruited participants who were born in and outside of the United States, the survey was administered in English. The results may not represent those who are not fluent in English. Moreover, the data is also retrospective.
Responses may be biased due to social desirability and memory failure. Finally, only Asian adults residing in the United States were included, which limits the generalization of the results.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic adversely affects Asian individuals’ sexual communication and relationships. As individuals experienced more racial discrimination during the pandemic, the positive effects of sexual relationship power on sexual self-disclosure decreased. Moreover, COVID-19-related anti-Asian discrimination also diminished the positive impact of sexual self-disclosure on sexual satisfaction. This study supports the tenet of the chilling effect and the Interpersonal Exchange Model of Sexual Satisfaction among Asian individuals. The results also add to emerging research on the negative impact of the pandemic on personal relationships, especially among the Asian community. As we continue combating the COVID-19 pandemic, Asian individuals are encouraged to utilize their interpersonal influences to initiate and facilitate open conversations about sexual preferences with their romantic partners. More public attention and efforts should be devoted to reducing anti-Asian discrimination and meeting the unique needs of Asian individuals during the pandemic and beyond.

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**Non-Blinded open research statement**

As part of IARR’s encouragement of open research practices, the authors have provided the following information: This research was not pre-registered. The data used in the research are not available. The materials used in the research are available via email (liya@tcnj.edu).

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