

## ***“South Asians don’t count as Asian”: Using Reddit to Explore Discussions of Anti-Asian Racism within the South Asian Diaspora***

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In 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted people across the world like no other disease of its kind. The origins of the virus were identified to be from Wuhan, China, which led to East Asians becoming the targets of racist attacks and discrimination. “Other” Asian subgroups such as South Asians and Southeast Asians have also experienced hate crimes targeted toward them (CCNCTO, “Another Year: Anti-Asian Racism Across Canada Two Years Into the COVID-19 Pandemic.” 2022). Yet, their voices have largely been missing from conversations on anti-Asian racism. Using thematic analysis, I explore how South Asians construct their positionality within conversations of anti-Asian racism. I examine the use of terms such as “anti-Asian,” “Asian racism,” “racism,” “hate crime,” and “discrimination” in 209 posts and 20,388 comments between 2020 and 2022 within r/ABCDesis, a Reddit community formed by and for the South Asian diaspora, primarily residing in the United States, and Canada. Findings suggest that while most members have personally not been impacted by anti-Asian racism, they are wary of being the next target. Redditors expressed the need for greater solidarity with East Asians and POC’s, and yet demonstrate how ethnic ambiguity and complex intergroup relations can pose difficulties when expressing positionality within discussions of anti-Asian racism.

### **Introduction**

In 2019, news about an infectious disease caused by the SARS-COV-2 virus, also known as COVID-19, rapidly spread throughout the globe. The origins of the virus were identified to be from Wuhan, China, a revelation that resulted in a surge of racially motivated hate crimes targeting “Asians,” people who originate from East, South, and Southeast Asia (US Census Bureau 2022). The growing anti-Asian sentiment was most apparent within North America, where politicians and other notable figures often referred to COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus” and “the Kung Flu” (Walker and Daniel Anders 2022). Such language contributed to increased incidents of hate crimes against Asian Americans as well as the legitimization and increased use of such terms within social media and news outlets (Hswen et al. 2021). According to a national survey by AAPI Data and Momentive in 2022, one in six Asian American adults reported being the victim of a hate crime (Vinh 2022). Similar incidents of anti-Asian discrimination were also seen in Canada, where there was a three hundred and one percent increase in police-reported hate crimes against East and Southeast Asians during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021), in comparison with the previous year (Wang and Moreau 2022).

While East Asians have had to bear the brunt of these racist experiences, other Asian subgroups such as South Asians (people from countries like India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives) (Shankar and Srikanth 1998) have also

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experienced a rise in hate crimes targeted toward them, with a 47 percent increase in hate crimes between 2019 and 2020 (Wang and Moreau 2022). Yet, the voices of these “other” Asians have often been missing from conversations on anti-Asian racism.<sup>1</sup>

In Canada and the United States, East Asians, South Asians, and Southeast Asians are all formally considered Asian (Tran, Jennifer, and Paul 2005; United States Census Bureau 2022). Nonetheless, the differential impact of discrimination and racism on various Asian subgroups, due to their distinct socioeconomic and cultural contexts, has frequently been disregarded within scholarly discourse.

This article stems from questions and concerns of how “other” Asians, in particular South Asians, perceive and experience incidents of anti-Asian racism, and how they situate themselves within discourses of anti-Asian racism. In doing so, it focuses on three main questions: (1) How is anti-Asian racism understood by South Asians? (2) How do South Asians respond to incidents of anti-Asian racism during the COVID-19 pandemic within the North American context? and (3) How might South Asians construct their positionality as allies, victims, etc. within conversations of anti-Asian racism?

The rise of anti-Asian hate crimes during the pandemic meant that lockdown restrictions had severely restricted spaces that people used to interact and share their thoughts with one another. Consequently, digital platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit became essential spaces for discussions on racism and discrimination during the pandemic. Even after lockdown restrictions had been lifted, these digital spaces have been pivotal for users to share their experiences, thoughts, and concerns. This research will explore discussions of anti-Asian racism among South Asians using one such platform: Reddit. Through content analysis of Reddit posts within r/ABCDesis, a Reddit community used by the South Asian diaspora primarily residing in the United States, and Canada, I examine the use of terms such as “anti-Asian,” “Asian racism,” “discrimination,” and “hate crimes” in 209 posts and 20,388 comments between 2020 and 2022. Through this approach, I explore how South Asians come to understand anti-Asian racism within the North American context and how they establish their positionality within such discussions.

This article begins with a historical overview of anti-Asian racism within North America, with a look into how Asians have navigated and responded to exclusionary policies and practices. I will then briefly discuss the intergroup dynamics between South, East, and Southeast Asians to explore how such dynamics can contribute to South Asian perceptions toward anti-Asian racism. This will be followed by a discussion of the conceptual frameworks used to conduct this research (yellow peril, model minority myth, desicrit, and panethnicity). The findings from this study will be discussed in the form of four key themes: (1) *Us versus Them: anti-Asian racism as an East Asian phenomenon*, (2) *Hegemonic Stereotypes: Model Minorities and Soft Targets*, (3) *Intra-group, Panethnic, and BIPOC solidarity*, and (4) *(South) Asian? Navigating Diverse Identities*. This article ends with a discussion on the limitations in the research, as well as future directions when considering the role of “other Asians” within discourses of anti-Asian racism.

## **Mapping the History of Asian Immigration and Racism within North America**

### ***Anti-Asian Racism in the United States***

Anti-Asian policies and practices in the United States can be traced back to the early 1900s. Chinese immigrants, one of the first Asian immigrants to arrive in the United States,

came as temporary laborers in the 1850s and worked in mining, railroad development, and agriculture (Asia Society 2023; Lee 1983). However, they experienced hostility as locals saw them as “alien” and competition to the local labor force (Arnold, Minocha, and Fawcett 1987). Such sentiments led to legislation such as the Page Law of 1875 and the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which were the first ever race-based legislations implemented to restrict immigration, and effectively halted Chinese immigration in the mid-to-late 1800s (Arnold, Minocha, and Fawcett 1987; Chen 2015).

Restrictions on Chinese immigration meant that immigration from other Asian regions like Japan, Korea, and India increased in the 1880s (Lee 2007). To avoid similar treatment, Japanese immigrants disassociated themselves from their Chinese counterparts by adopting Western practices and affirming American criticisms against the Chinese (Ichioka 1988). However with time, they too faced restrictions with the 1907 Gentlemen’s Agreement (Asia Society 2023). South Asian Indians, Koreans, and Filipinos also encountered immigration barriers and discriminatory laws through laws such as the Immigration act of 1924, the development of the “Pacific Barred Zone,” and in the case of Filipinos; the Tydings–Mcduffe Act that not only gave them independence from the United States but also imposed immigration quotas. In addition to restrictive immigration laws, Asian immigrants were also not eligible to become naturalized citizens and were subjected to discriminatory taxes, property, and miscegenation laws (Ancheta 2006).

Although early Asian immigrants came from different countries and cultures, they all were victims of geographically targeted exclusionary legislation that restricted their presence within the United States.

Anti-Asian sentiment heightened during World War II, particularly after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Chinese, Korean, and Filipino immigrants avoided being misidentified as Japanese by wearing ethnic clothing and buttons that stated their ethnicity; another act of dissociation by Asian immigrants but this time it was to dissociate themselves from the Japanese (Le Espiritu 1992).

The post-war era brought a shift toward racial equality. The United States modified immigration and citizenship laws in order to forge alliances with “third-world” countries against the Soviet Union (Hsu 2015). This, with the development of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, brought political and ideological shifts regarding cultural and racial diversity (Hsu 2015). The McCarran–Walter Act of 1952 lifted previous immigration regulations impacting Asians, and established new immigration quotas for Asian countries (Wong 1986). The Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 abolished race and nation-based barriers to immigration, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 banned discrimination on the basis of race, gender, religion, and nationality (Ancheta 2006). These changes led to growing numbers of Asian immigrants in the United States as well as the immigration of other Asian groups, including refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos (Wong 1986).

The post-1965 era also saw the rise of the Asian American movement. Prior to 1960, pan-Asian collectiveness faced challenges due to lack of shared language, smaller immigrant populations, residential segregation, and old national rivalries (Le Espiritu 1992). This in addition to the strategies of dissociation mentioned previously, worked to drive distinctions between Asian subgroups in the face of anti-Asian racism. However, greater social interaction between Asian subgroups and events such as the Black Power Movement led Asian Americans to develop their own Yellow Power Movement to challenge systemic racism and assert their cultural and racial distinctions (Ogbar 2001). The movement was later

transformed into the Asian American movement, to better include groups such as Filipinos who identified as “Brown” and not “Yellow” (Rabaya 1971). The term “Asian American” was coined by college students of Asian ancestry and was used to refer to all Americans with Asian descent (Le Espiritu 1992). The increased use of this panethnic term represents the development of shared solidarity among Asian subgroups. However, incidents such as the Ku Klux Klan Attacks in 1975, the murder of Vincent Chin in 1982, and recent events such as the 2021 Atlanta area shootings highlight the persistence of anti-Asian racism despite policy changes (Stanford Libraries, n.d.).

### *Anti-Asian Racism in Canada*

Similar to the United States, Chinese immigrants were some of the first Asians to arrive in Canada (particularly within British Columbia) and were seen as a temporary solution for labor shortages in the country (Lee 1983). However, their increasing presence and low labor costs fueled fear of competition and anti-Asian sentiment. Labor organizations such as the Workingman Protective Association and the Vancouver Asiatic Exclusion League demanded restrictive immigration policies, at times leading to violent protests such as the 1907 incident in Chinatown and Japantown (Anderson 1991). Responding to growing anti-Asian attitudes, the Canadian government enacted the Chinese Immigration Act in 1882, which introduced head taxes for Chinese immigrants and later banned Chinese immigration in 1992 (CCNCTO 2022; Holland 2007).

The ban of Chinese immigration led to the arrival of other Asian immigrants, such as Japanese immigrants between 1877 and 1928. During World War II, Japanese Canadians were displaced and sent to internment camps due to being seen as threats to national security, which has had lasting impacts on their community (Government of Canada 2023; Marsh 2012).

South Asian immigration to Canada occurred in the early 1900s and were primarily Punjabi, Sikh immigrants from Hong Kong who settled in British Columbia and worked in agriculture, railroad development, and lumber mills (Rahim 2014). They faced discrimination despite being British subjects and were subjected to the Continuous Journey Regulation in 1908, which created barriers to their immigration (Pirbhai 2015). On April 4, 1914, The Komagata Maru, a Japanese steamship chartered by Punjabi immigrants, sailed to Canada after having satisfied the conditions of immigration policies at the time, but were still not allowed to dock in Canada and were ordered to return after 2 months of tense confrontation, thus exemplifying the challenges faced by early South Asian immigrants (Roy and Sahoo 2016). Restrictive immigration policies were not the only issue as Asian immigrants were also denied voting rights in federal and provincial elections (Li 2011).

The post-WWII era brought economic growth (and demand for labor) as well as more positive attitudes toward different racial groups (Dirks 2006). Changes were made to immigration policies in the 1960s, with the implementation of merit-based criteria (education, training and skills) in 1962, and elimination of race bias in immigration decisions in 1967 (Holland 2007; Kurian 1991). These changes also led to the arrival of Southeast Asians, who fled their countries in the mid-to-late 1900s due to the Vietnam war. Notably, differences in socioeconomic status between Southeast Asian immigrants who arrived as refugees when compared to the East and South Asian immigrants who were entering Canada through the merit system, contributed to differential experiences of immigration and settlement among different Asian subgroups (Government of Canada 2023).

The easing of restrictions in the post-war era meant Asian immigrants were increasingly participating in political, economic, and social realms of society. Their increased presence and greater interaction with other Asians led to recognition of shared struggles. This coupled with the development of the Asian American movement in the United States, resulted in the beginnings of Asian Canadian political consciousness in the 1970s (Li 2011).

Thus, anti-Asian racism within the United States and Canada first emerged in the form of restrictive immigration policies. While such practices appeared to be country-specific, as time progressed all countries within Asia were impacted by these restrictions. Asian immigrants have responded to such regulations by identifying alternate pathways of migration, practices of dissociation from targeted Asian subgroups, and the development of Asian collective movements. The latter two of these strategies are particularly relevant for this study as it aims to explore how South Asians in particular respond to anti-Asian racism and whether any similarities can be drawn to previous responses of anti-Asian racism and the current context.

### Asian Versus South Asian Identity

Exploration into South Asian responses to anti-Asian racism requires an analysis into the dynamics between South, East, and Southeast Asians within North America, and South Asian perspectives on Asian identity. While immigrants from East, South, and Southeast Asia have all experienced forms of racism in the United States and Canada, discussions of “anti-Asian racism” often focus on the experiences of East Asians. Lee and Zhou (2004) suggest that there are often unspoken divides between East Asians and South and Southeast Asians. Phenotypical and cultural distinctions contribute to tensions between Asian subgroups, hindering Asian identification (Lee and Zhou 2004). Many South Asians do not identify as Asian due to perceived racial differences, and concerns of their issues being left unaddressed when they are “lumped in” with other Asian groups (Day 2008). Shankar and Srikanth (1998) suggest that “while the term *Asian American* has many definitions based on “consciousness” or “felt identity,” the *Asian American* label typically only includes groups from East and Southeast Asia” (3). Consequently, many South Asians do not consider themselves to be Asian American and do not feel as if they belong within discussions of Asian American identity (Kibria 1998).

Instead, some choose to identify as South Asian, a region that is met with both cultural and political divides, with its boundaries not clearly defined (Iwanek 2021). In Canada, the recognition of South Asian identity within legislation (in particular the census) occurred after successful collective mobilization by activist organizations and members of South Asian groups who raised awareness toward shared experiences of discrimination during the mid-1970s and 1980s (Ashutosh 2014). However, experiences of discrimination and hate crimes did not always lead to the promotion of a shared South Asian identity. After 9/11 many South Asians attempted to distinguish themselves from Arabs, who were the primary targets of hate crimes and discrimination (Poolokasingham et al. 2014), such practices of dissociation have been seen in early instances of Asian racism as well. For those who feel excluded under the “Asian” label, terms such as South Asian allow for Asian subgroups to develop their own collectivities and share experiences unique to them. Yet, the diversity within the South Asian label should not be overlooked either as it can impact feelings of identification with this term. Through discussions of anti-Asian racism within r/ABCDesis (a subreddit page on the social media platform Reddit), I explore how South Asians perceive

anti-Asian racism, who they believe are impacted by it, and how they situate themselves within these discussions.

### Conceptual Framework

This research is informed by four key conceptual frameworks: yellow peril, the model minority myth, DesiCrit, and panethnicity, which are used to understand how South Asians perceive and respond to anti-Asian racism. Yellow peril and the model minority myth are conceptual frameworks that reflect stereotypes that have particularly targeted Asians. The use of these conceptual frameworks as points of analysis allows for an examination into whether such stereotypes also impact South Asians and if so, how may this impact their understanding of anti-Asian racism and positionality within such discourses? Moreover, concepts such as panethnicity and DesiCrit are used to explore the complex relations and inter-group dynamics, which impact South Asians and their connections to other Asians and Asian-related issues. Using these four conceptual frameworks together allows for a comprehensive understanding of how South Asians understand and navigate anti-Asian racism.

#### *Yellow Peril*

Yellow Peril, a term believed to have originated from German Kaiser Wilhelm II, refers to the fear of Asians as cultural, economic, and political threats to the white race and Western culture (Thompson 1978). Asian Americans were viewed as “perpetual foreigners” incapable of acculturating to Western norms (Lee and Hoang 2020). Fears of yellow peril led to the development of exclusionary policies and practices in the United States and Canada like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Immigration Act of 1924 (Horse 2021; Jack-Davies 2020). The yellow peril stereotype also associated Asians with diseases, justifying discriminatory practices used against them like quarantine and medical check-ups during events such as the bubonic plague (Lee and Hoang 2020). Similar to the COVID-19 pandemic, news of the first SARS case in Canada coming from someone from Hong Kong increased animosity toward East Asians and Southeast Asians (Leung 2004). This research explores whether South Asians make reference to notions of yellow peril and whether such discussions perpetuate intra-racism or position South Asians as allies who may also experience the impacts of yellow peril.

#### *Model Minority Myth*

Unlike the “Yellow Peril,” the model minority stereotype is often considered a “positive stereotype.”<sup>2</sup> Coined by William Peterson in 1966, it originally described how Japanese culture emphasizes hard work as a means to overcome discrimination and achieve success in the United States (Kasinitz et al. 2011). The term has since been broadened to encompass Asians in general, suggesting that some racial and ethnic minorities have achieved economic success through education, family stability, income, and low crime rates (Holland 2007). However, focusing solely on their success may promote a color-blind ideology,<sup>3</sup> overlooking decades of discriminatory policies and practices (Kawai 2005). Moreover, the model minority stereotype has been used to deny institutional racism and counter claims made by social movements such as the Black Power Movement (Osajima 2000).

Asians in mainstream media are often either represented as yellow peril or model minorities, and consequently, their representation can be seen as a conflation of these two stereotypes (Kawai 2005). The interrelation of both stereotypes contributes to “racial



triangulation” where the model minority stereotype makes them appear to be more successful than other racial minority groups such as African Americans, yet the “yellow peril” embodies “foreignness,” which maintains Asians as inferior to white people (Kawai 2005). This research explores the role of the model minority stereotype in discussions of anti-Asian racism among South Asians, investigating whether they see themselves as victims and exploring perceived similarities and differences in experiences from other Asians.

### *DesiCrit*

“DesiCrit” coined by Harpalani (2013) merges “Desi” (referring to South Asians) with critical race theory as an analytic tool. It emphasizes race consciousness and awareness of racially ambiguous characterizations and identity. DesiCrit conceptualizes South Asians as racially ambiguous individuals who have both asserted and ascribed racial labels. In the United States, South Asians have historically been classified as “white” and then considered black. For instance, after the Fourteenth Amendment, some foreign-born Indian immigrants claimed “North Indian Aryan” descent to be classified as Caucasian and receive citizenship. However, in the case of the United States versus Bhagat Singh Thind, the court ruled that though Indians could be classified as “Caucasian” they were not considered “white” by common standards, resulting in denied naturalization and citizenship rights (Chakravorty, Devesh, and Nirvirkar 2016). Thus, while South Asian immigrants were formally classified as white, they were not given the privileges of being white, resulting in experiences of racial confusion. Using DesiCrit, this research explores how South Asians navigate their racial identities and its impact on their perceptions of anti-Asian racism.

### *Panethnicity*

Asian Americans and Asian Canadians originate from over 24 different origin countries with unique histories and cultures, yet through processes of racial group formation they have become a panethnic group (Le Espiritu 1992; Omi and Winant 1993). Panethnicity emerged after the 1960s civil rights movement (Le Espiritu 1992). Migration from non-European countries to both Canada and the United States led to the increased presence of visible minority groups. Factors such as intragroup interaction and common experiences of segregation and discrimination promoted pan-Asian collective action and helped create the Asian American movement and the rise of panethnic unity after World War II (Le Espiritu 1992). Panethnic identification often compliments rather than replaces single ethnic identities; they evolve through processes of negotiation between subgroup distinctions and intragroup solidarity.

However, panethnic identities can also be problematic because they can contribute to misunderstandings regarding the diversity within the Asian population. “Asian” identity is often oversimplified in mainstream media, neglecting ethnic and cultural distinctions and perpetuating myths such as the model minority stereotype. Such generalizations can deter people from embracing panethnic identities. Using a panethnic lens will allow for insight into how South Asians perceive differences between Asian subgroups and their sense of belonging to Asian identity; both of which can shape perceptions of anti-Asian racism.

## Methodology

### *Reddit*

For this study, I analyzed Reddit user posts between 2020 and 2022 within r/ABCDesis. The r/ABCDesis subreddit is a community of approximately 70,000 users from South Asia residing mainly in the United States, Canada, and Britain. Reddit provides a platform for anonymous new-sharing, allowing users to share experiences without revealing personal details (Haythornthwaite et al. 2018; Reddit 2023). The format of the platform also allows discussions within smaller subreddits that unite users based on a common topic, in this case by their South Asian identity.

The r/ABCDesis subreddit aims to create a sense of community among members of the South Asian diaspora. As the name of this subreddit suggests (“American Born” Confused Desis), the community is tailored primarily toward those born in the United States and Canada. However, the page also states that the subreddit is “for ALL people of South Asian heritage who have migrated away from South Asia, no matter how many generations ago”(r/ABCDesis n.d.).

While there are other subreddits tailored to the South Asian diaspora, such as r/SouthAsiansAbroad, r/SouthAsianAncestry, their memberships are significantly lower compared to r/ABCDesis, which currently has approximately 70,000 members. Other subreddits focus on specific South Asian subgroups (e.g., r/Bangladesh, r/India, r/Pakistan) but for this research, the broader focus on the perceptions of South Asians led to the selection of r/ABCDesis. Overall, this subreddit was chosen because of its large membership relative to other subreddits and its primarily North American focus.

Posts and comments on the r/ABCDesis subreddit are publicly available. Upon review of this project by the York University Office of Research Ethics, this study was classified by the ethics review board as research that is not subject to institutional review board jurisdiction. To maintain anonymity, usernames and irrelevant identifiers were removed.

To conduct this research, the key words “anti-Asian” and “Asian racism” were used to find posts that discussed views and experiences of Asian racism. Testing of other terms such as “Asian hate” and “AAPI” did not result in additional relevant posts. Since the focus of the research was on the dialogue associated with “Asian” racism, terms based on nationality and ethnicity such as, “Indian” were not deemed relevant. To further the analysis, key words such as “racism,” “discrimination,” “hate crimes,” and “prejudice” were used without the “Asian” qualifier to determine whether there were any additional relevant posts that could be included. A total of 529 posts and 30,981 comments were obtained using this method of search. Using specific keywords through a purposive sampling approach allowed for a more specific analysis into discussions focusing particularly on anti-Asian racism. The analysis was limited to the original posts and comments made between the period of 2020 and 2022 when the COVID-19 pandemic was most prevalent and was a factor in the growing cases of anti-Asian racism within North America.<sup>4</sup> Posts that appeared in multiple keyword searches were counted once and placed in the keyword category where they appeared first. Posts that did not address the topic of Asian racism included opinions of those who stated they were not South Asian, or were focusing on contexts outside of North America (e.g., the U.K, Australia, New Zealand), were removed from the analysis.<sup>5</sup> Posts that did not have comments were also removed because the focus was on examining discussions and posts without comments did not reflect interactions between members of the subreddit.



In total, 209 posts and 20,388 comments were selected based on the above selection criteria. Posts were organized in a table adapted from Birzniece (2020), which included the key word, post number, date of the post, and the number of comments for each post. Screenshots of the selected posts and discussion threads were saved using NCapture, a web extension that captures webpage content and converts it into PDFs for analysis into NVivo, a qualitative software for coding. The posts and comments were then analyzed using thematic analysis.

### ***Thematic Analysis***

Thematic analysis is a versatile qualitative approach that can be applied to a wide variety of research questions and can be conducted using various ontological frameworks (Terry et al. 2017). Due to the specificity of this research (looking at South Asian perceptions of anti-Asian racism during the COVID-19 pandemic) and the four conceptual frameworks, I intended to use (yellow peril, model minority, panethnicity and DesiCrit), employing thematic analysis with a deductive approach (using existing theoretical or conceptual frameworks to develop an initial set of codes) allowed for the codes to be shaped by the conceptual frameworks. This focused approach was also useful considering the large amount of data that were being analyzed. Semantic and latent coding approaches were also used. Semantic coding captures explicit meanings (keywords that are identified in the data itself), and latent coding involves the coding of implicit meanings that are not explicitly stated, using both approaches helped capture different meanings within the posts (Terry et al. 2017).

For this research, I used the Terry et al.'s (2017) version of thematic analysis, which consists of six phases of analysis; familiarization with the data, generating codes, constructing themes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The conceptual frameworks used in this study (yellow peril, model minority, panethnicity, and DesiCrit) were used as initial points of interests when coding the data. Posts and comments that highlighted characteristics of these concepts either explicitly or implicitly were coded. For example, comments or posts that discussed South Asian solidarity toward East Asian racism was coded as "panethnic solidarity," these data points were then distinguished from other forms of solidarity also exhibited within the posts and comments, thus leading to the development of codes like "intra-group solidarity" and "BIPOC solidarity." For any new codes that were created, previously coded posts and comments were reviewed and re-coded if needed to ensure consistency of coding practices. Through this approach, 21 codes were developed (see Table A1 in Appendix). These codes were then grouped together drawing from the conceptual frameworks and commonalities in characteristics to construct themes. The following themes emerged from the analysis; (1) *Us versus Them: anti-Asian racism as an East Asian phenomenon*; (2) *Hegemonic stereotypes: Model Minorities and Soft Targets*; (3) *Intra-group, Panethnic and BIPOC solidarity*; (4) *(South) Asian? Navigating Diverse Identities*.

## **Results**

### ***Us Versus Them: Anti-Asian Racism as an East Asian Phenomenon***

During the COVID-19 pandemic, discussions on r/ABCDesis highlighted that East Asians were the primary targets of anti-Asian racism. The attention on China as the origin

of the virus lead to a perception that individuals of East Asian descent were facing more discrimination. As one Redditor stated “it does appear the people that are being targeted in this case are people that outwardly look East Asian – and although this could include some desi people who do pass as East Asian, I doubt that most desi people specifically are feeling/need to feel unsafe/targeted.” Another Redditor expressed a similar sentiment saying, “If the COVID-19 pandemic had originated in SA [South Asia] you can bet we would be on the receiving end of a lot of hate and aggression.” However, this is not to say that South Asians believe they have not been impacted by anti-Asian racism. Some expressed concerns about a potential shift in anti-Asian racism that could also impact South Asians. One Redditor emphasized the need for solidarity, stating:

...We have so much in common with other Asians as an immigrant community. Rather than an attitude of “Well that’s an East Asian problem”, we should have the attitude of “I remember what it was like after 9/11 and I don’t want that to happen to East/Southeast Asians during COVID”. Or ever.

Similarities between South Asian and other Asian groups were seen as reasons why people should in turn extend their support toward East Asians during this time. While it is unclear which similarities the Redditor is referring to (cultural similarities, similar immigrant experiences, experiences of racism, etc.), the perceived similarities in this context, along with historical examples of how South Asians have faced racism and discrimination through misrepresentation in the past, can lead to fear of being the next possible target.

The concept of yellow peril was useful in understanding why some South Asians believe anti-Asian racism during the pandemic is particularly targeted toward some Asian subgroups (like East Asians) and not others. Historical constructions of yellow peril that see East Asians as vectors of disease, continue to operate within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. As one Redditor stated “My parents hate China and by extension Chinese people because 1, border tensions back in India, the whole COVID situation with my dad saying if Chinese people didn’t eat bats and other crap, that it wouldn’t have happened...” While the Redditor did not say whether they agreed with their father on these views, it is clear that people (including South Asians) blame Chinese people and their cultural practices for the origins and spread of the virus. However, spreading of the virus was also attributed to South Asians in some cases, as demonstrated in the following quote:

Here in Canada, desis have been affected heavily. Covid rates have been high in desi majority areas like Brampton, surrey, and northeast Calgary. This is mostly because they work more manufacturing jobs and such, jobs where u can’t really work from home. Some people began blaming the desi community for spreading covid or not taking it seriously. Desis and immigrants in general are also more likely to live in multigenerational homes, resulting in more spread among family members.

South Asians themselves faced negative stereotypes, with comments linking aspects of their lifestyle, such as multigenerational living and employment in the manufacturing sector, to the spread of COVID-19. These discussions highlight the role of yellow peril in perpetuating harmful stereotypes toward both East Asians and South Asians. In both cases, cultural aspects such as dietary preferences (eating bats) or living style (living in multigenerational families) are identified as the cause behind the spread. These “causes” can then work to justify the blame placed on particular Asian groups and their subsequent experiences of anti-Asian hate. Overall, while data shows that South Asians and other Asians have been targeted in incidents of anti-Asian racism, members of the r/ABCDesis community perceive

it primarily impacting East Asians, but with an awareness that such incidents could extend to South Asians as well.

### ***Hegemonic Stereotypes: Model Minorities and Soft Targets***

Discussions of anti-Asian racism within the subreddit also included a number of posts and comments that demonstrated how racism targeted toward Asians is often overlooked because they are seen as model minorities and “soft-targets.” Redditors acknowledged that Asians tend to have better economic and educational backgrounds compared to other racial groups. Some attributed this success to cultural norms, which prioritize education and career, with one member saying “It’s not really a myth. We are the highest earning ethnic group and imo [in my opinion] part of this just has to do with our culture.” Others expressed how Asian American success is a result of immigration policies that attracted particular groups of Asian immigrants:

Asian Americans are considered “model minorities” for a very good reason. Unlike groups such as black Americans and Latino Americans, AAs [Asian Americans] came to America as a result of meritocratic programs such as H1B... This does not preclude the existence of less successful or underachieving AAs.

While Redditors did not deny their relative privilege when compared to other racialized minorities, they also stressed the need to dispel the idea that all Asians are universally successful. They cautioned against problems that can arise from perpetuating such ideas, especially in terms of experiences of racism and discrimination. As one Redditor put it “Asian voices are often dismissed and their complaints about discrimination are viewed as trivial and oftentimes pushed aside as if Asians can’t face racism because we are viewed as the ‘model minority’”. When comparing their experiences of racism to that of other racial groups, another Redditor said the following:

...The worst part of being a “model minority” is that racism against you gets overlooked because the community as a whole is doing “well”. I want to be very clear that I’m not taking away from communities who have it worse—they definitely do. But then it’s almost like gaslighting yourself by saying that just because others have it worse then you shouldn’t fight for your right to be treated fairly.

These comments demonstrate that South Asians are aware of not only the model minority myth but also how it works to undermine experiences of racism and discrimination, especially when compared to other racial groups, such as African Americans. Consequently, members expressed limitations in the ways in which they could call out the racism that they experienced because it was different from the systemic institutionalized racism that other racialized minorities (such as African Americans) have experienced.

The model minority myth can also contribute to other problematic stereotypes, like those that portray Asians as passive victims. Comments such as, “asian americans (Desis included) are seen as soft target, and many kinds of racism are normalized because we’re a ‘model minority’ and ‘not oppressed’.” and “In America people think south Asians are privileged, that’s why they won’t defend you,” suggests that the myth downplays the severity of racism toward Asians, making it seem less serious. Additionally, it hinders support from other ethnic and racial groups, as expressed by a Redditor who noted:

Racism against South Asians is nothing new but Tik Tok has definitely amplified and “normalized” it. But what I’ve recently noticed (and what frustrates me the most) is how nobody comes to defend us. You mentioned Black and Latino racism, but even East Asians, Southeast Asians, and Arab Americans get more

sympathy than us. I have yet to see any assertive effort in the media or in general to call out racism towards South Asians. It feels as if we are the most disposable ethnic diaspora group in the world—culturally speaking. If the coronavirus originated in India I GUARANTEE you we would not be defended and supported as much as East Asians have been after an increase in hate crimes/racism towards them following the pandemic.

Comments such as this express how racism against South Asians has particularly been normalized and dismissed when compared to other racial groups. This was echoed by a similar quote which stated “I think at this point the only way this will be fixed is if some big tragedy or hate crime against South Asians happens. Then people might be a bit more sensitive.” Suggesting that more covert forms of discrimination do not receive the same level of recognition and support, especially in the case of South Asians. Overall, the model minority myth works to undermine the experiences of racism and discrimination experienced by Asians including South Asians. Members of r/ABCDesis state it also works to portray them as “soft targets” because their supposed privilege prevents their experiences from gaining attention and receiving support from other ethnic and racial groups.

### ***Intra-group, Panethnic and BIPOC Solidarity***

Shared experiences of racism and discrimination can work to foster a sense of solidarity among ethnic and racial groups and people of color more broadly. However, not all members of r/ABCDesis are optimistic about the potential for solidarity that can work to address common challenges without ignoring internal differences. As was seen in the data, redditors questioned the prospects of intragroup solidarity, panethnic solidarity and BIPOC solidarity.

***Intragroup Solidarity.*** The members of the r/ABCDesis believe in the importance of intragroup solidarity (solidarity among South Asians), to raise awareness of the issues associated with their subgroup. For example, one Redditor mentioned, “The next time a wave of hate starts towards South Asians, as a group we should be ready and have an organization. That requires leaders.” This quote suggests that some South Asians may feel unprepared to deal with racism that could target South Asians. Given recent events, members recognized the importance of intragroup solidarity and support for the development of political and community organizations that can help protect their rights and interests. Moreover, some felt that their particular experiences of racism are different from other Asian groups and thus emphasize the importance of intragroup solidarity. This sentiment was seen in the following quote:

The racists attack SAs [South Asians] because they know that the SAs won't fight back. They know that they can get away with it without any consequences. No one will help us since we don't matter to anyone. We're on our own in this issue. So we better do something than sit around and keep complaining. Since complaining won't solve any issue. We have to get down to business to deal with this issue from its roots.

The Redditor suggests that South Asians are in a vulnerable position because they do not have support from other groups. Discussions around the importance of intragroup solidarity are also often prompted by comments like “Until we start respecting ourselves and each other, we can't expect anyone else to respect us,” suggesting South Asians still need to address racism/discrimination within the community before being able to gain support from other ethnic and racial groups.

However, many Redditors are aware that developing intragroup solidarity is difficult at times. Comments like, “I also in general don't know how much Desis would stand up for

another Desi they don't personally know" and "We just don't have the unity in our community. Half of us will actually join in the racism against our own..." demonstrate a lack of confidence in the potential for intragroup solidarity. This can be partly attributed to the diversity of the South Asian diaspora, which also encompasses with it tensions based on nationality and religion. As one Redditor states "I would think if Desis put aside their linguistic/regional/religious differences and came together, there would be a strong solidarity among us and we can represent Desi culture in a more positive light." Thus, internal tensions and differences may create challenges for fostering intragroup solidarity, yet many acknowledge its importance, especially when addressing racism.

***Panethnic Solidarity.*** Some community members also discussed the benefits of panethnic solidarity (in this case Asian solidarity). This was especially the case when members mentioned how South Asian issues often do not get enough recognition. One Redditor suggested "...I'd rather see a serious advocacy group that backs up both Asians and Indians. Individually our community is pretty small. However we have a lot of shared interests and the racism manifests itself in similar ways/stereotypes." In this sense, panethnic solidarity can allow for solidarity especially when individual ethnic groups do not have the power and resources to mobilize. However, there are concerns about joining panethnic movements, which were echoed by comments like "I think a pan Asian advocacy group would be good but most of the time South Asians get drowned out in general Asian groups and as much as I don't care what they think whites and others like to deny us our Asianness because they only see East Asians as Asians." This ties into broader discussions of whether South Asians believe they are included in discussions of "Asian" experiences. Thus, although some community members see the benefit of joining in solidarity with other Asians, concerns regarding whether the interests of South Asians can be addressed through such endeavors can create skepticism regarding the feasibility and success of such approaches.

***BIPOC Solidarity.*** Some community members also suggested standing in solidarity with BIPOC's (black, Indigenous and People of Color). While Asian solidarity was met with some skepticism, BIPOC solidarity was mostly met with apprehension. As one Redditor stated, "POC Movements" do not give a damn about us and I have had to deal with racism from all of them. Do not get me wrong there are some really great non-desi people out there who are not racist, of all races but it is the political movements that are race based that I detest." As such, experiences of racism from the other people of color can deter intentions of solidarity and raise concerns about the issues of one's particular ethnic group being addressed within larger collective struggles. This lack of representation within POC movements was also expressed by another Redditor who said

Other minority communities have different issues & stereotypes and don't support us because of it. As other posters have shared, try actually going to a "minority rights" centered event and see if they do anything other than mock and belittle desis. The economic "privilege" and educational background that desis have leads them to dislike us and you are naive if you can't recognize that. They won't support us.

Stereotypes like the model minority myth can make the issues associated with South Asians appear less important because they are seen as more economically privileged than other racial groups and can subsequently impact feelings of solidarity across racial groups. Thus, while South Asians have faced racist and discriminatory practices like other racial and

ethnic groups, their perceived privilege can work to undermine their experiences and leave them feeling unrepresented within discussions of BIPOC solidarity.

### *(South) Asian?: Navigating Diverse Identities*

Perceptions of anti-Asian racism can also be impacted by a lack of clear racial or ethnic identity. As one Redditor suggests, “As an Indian-American (Punjabi/Gujarati), I am constantly misidentified for an ethnicity that I am not apart of, i.e, Middle Eastern or Hispanic, which really isn’t a badge of honor for me, as I have had to bear the brunt of discrimination directed towards them.” Such instances not only lead to personal experiences of discrimination but also can create feelings of resentment toward the groups they are mistaken for, hindering efforts of collective solidarity.

In the context of anti-Asian racism during the COVID pandemic, some members expressed a belief that they were not being specifically targeted, as demonstrated by comments like “. . .It’s huge against East Asians right now, but definitely not us. Although we are all Asians, we do not look the same as them.” This lack of perceived threat might be linked to a broader disconnection from Asian identity, as exhibited by another Redditor who stated “I don’t consider myself “Asian” in the way Americans use the word Asian. So this has no relevancy to me,” demonstrating reduced fears of being targeted due to a lack of identification with Asian identity.

DesiCrit provides a framework for understanding how South Asians navigate feelings of detachment from issues related to anti-Asian racism, while still identifying as Asian. It emphasizes that South Asians possess racially ambiguous identities with both ascribed and asserted elements. Consequently, they employ various racial, national, and ethnic identities, leading to a diverse spectrum of self-representations. While some South Asians identify strongly as “Asian,” they are cognizant that this may not align with how others perceive them, contributing to a reduced fear of being targeted. However, this awareness also brings the realization that perceptions can change, and the historical misrepresentation of South Asians as Arabs post-9/11 raises concerns about the potential recurrence of such misunderstandings based on their ambiguous identities. Fear of becoming the next targets continues to persist, as some participants expressed concern that, regardless of the current situation, South Asians could face hate crimes in the future, “My understanding is that the point of speaking out against these hate crimes for most of the people doing it is to speak out against hate crimes just in general. In my eyes, even if we Desis are not the victims of hate crimes right now, we already have been, and we will be again.” Such views regarding Asian identity along with their varied experiences of anti-Asian racism not only shape their individual perceptions and fears, but also impacts their willingness to support and address anti-Asian racism.

### **Limitations and Conclusion**

While this research highlights important findings into South Asian perceptions of anti-Asian racism, it is crucial to acknowledge several limitations associated with this study. Firstly, selecting r/ABCDesis as the subreddit for analysis, introduced constraints as the subreddit is tailored primarily toward second generation South Asian immigrants. Due to a lack of detailed demographic information, it is unclear how many of the members are 1st, 1.5, 2nd or later generation immigrants. Future research would benefit from an exploration into perceptions of anti-Asian racism across different generations of South Asian immigrants.



Furthermore, the research was situated in the North American context and focused on the dynamic between East Asian and South Asians. Lack of demographic data prevented an in-depth exploration into divergent experiences within the United States and Canada, which could be addressed through a more localized approach in future work. Moreover, looking at experiences outside of the North American context and exploring dynamics between South Asians and other racial groups such as African Americans will provide insight into how these findings compare when considering different geographical contexts and intergroup relations. In addition, relying on Reddit posts and comments as the primary data source results in limitations in capturing the intricacies and nuances associated with an individual's experiences and views. Moreover, by conducting thematic analysis, the data was coded based on subjective interpretations of the data. Incorporating qualitative interviews in future research would allow for a more in-depth insight into the multi-faceted nature of South Asian perceptions and experiences of anti-Asian racism.

In conclusion, this research aimed to explore South Asian perceptions of anti-Asian racism within Canada and the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic through a thematic analysis of Reddit posts and comments in r/ABCDesis from 2020 to 2022. The findings revealed that perceptions of racism were heavily influenced by historical constructions, such as the yellow peril stereotype. South Asians appeared to be aware of such constructions as they saw East Asians as the primary targets of COVID-19-related hate, but at times also expressed concerns about the potential shift of this focus toward South Asians. While South Asians believed they were not particularly targeted in incidents of anti-Asian racism during the pandemic, discussions of stereotypes like yellow peril and the model minority myth demonstrated that both East Asians and South Asians were impacted by these negative stereotypes. In particular, the concept of yellow peril perpetuated negative stereotypes towards both East and South Asians, attributing the spread of the virus to cultural practices. Similarly, discussions on the model minority myth highlighted how South Asians felt their experiences of racism were overlooked and normalized mainly due to their relative economic success. Many believed this myth also hindered support from other ethnic and racial groups and portrayed Asians, particularly South Asians as "soft targets" for racism.

While there was recognition of the importance of solidarity among South Asians, internal differences based on linguistic, regional, and religious diversity posed challenges to collective efforts. Some South Asians saw themselves as allies and encouraged support for East Asians during the pandemic. Panethnic solidarity in particular was seen as beneficial but was met with skepticism by some due to concerns about the visibility and representation of South Asian issues. Moreover, members expressed even greater apprehension toward engaging in BIPOC solidarity. The findings also highlighted the impact of racial and ethnic ambiguity, as many South Asians felt misidentified and detached from the broader Asian identity. This sense of detachment, as well as the racial and ethnic ambiguity of South Asian identities influenced their willingness to identify as Asian and their perceptions as targets of anti-Asian racism.

Overall, based on discussions on the r/ABCDesis subreddit, many South Asians see anti-Asian racism during the pandemic as primarily impacting East Asians. While many redditors denounced the acts of Asian hate and encouraged support for East Asians during this time, there was skepticism regarding whether such sentiments would bring about change to the current situation. Their varying experiences and complex relations with other Asian groups and as well as with their own identities can make it difficult for them to assert their

positionality within discussions of anti-Asian racism. At times they are a part of the discussion and seen expressing their support, while at others they attempt to dissociate and maintain their distance, citing this as an issue that does not impact them. In particular, their identities as “South” Asians puts them in a unique position which can at times result in shared experiences of racism, encouraging solidarity across racial and ethnic lines, but can also create situations in which they feel excluded and detached from discussions around racism due to cultural, economic, phenotypical factors that may lead to differential experiences from their East and Southeast Asian counterparts. In summary, findings from this research highlight the need for nuanced discussions on solidarity, as internal differences and varied perceptions of identity significantly shape responses to and experiences of racism.

### Conflict of Interest

Monisha is the sole author of this manuscript and there is no conflict of interest to disclose.

### Data Availability Statement

Research data are not shared.

### ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup>Here I define anti-Asian racism as discrimination toward any Asian subgroup or Asians more broadly based on their ethnic background, cultural practices, or physical appearance.

<sup>2</sup>Some suggest that the model minority stereotype helped turn around negative stereotypes of Asians and helped depict them as attractive immigrants that will help contribute to the economy of host nations (Cheng and Yang 2000).

<sup>3</sup>Such ideologies work to ignore the structural impacts of racialization and associate adversities to individual factors, thereby allowing for racialization to continue to take place without challenge (Chang 2001).

<sup>4</sup>While COVID-19 first emerged in 2019, the first reported case of COVID-19 in North America was in 2020 (Taylor 2021). Since this study focuses on the experiences of Asians in North America, the data was restricted to 2020–2022.

<sup>5</sup>Identifiers such as ethnicity and nationality were used to screen posts and ensure they met the selection criteria.

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## Appendix

**Table A1 Themes and Respective Codes**

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*Theme 1: Us versus them: anti-Asian racism as an East Asian Phenomena*

Internal Racism

Internal differences

Asian differences

Differential experiences of racism

*Theme 2: Intragroup, panethnic and BIPOC solidarity*

Internal perspective

Panethnic solidarity

Intragroup solidarity

BIPOC solidarity

*Theme 3: (South) Asian? Navigating diverse identities*

Self-perception

Assimilation

Physical features

Racial ambiguity

Asian belonging

Asian similarities

*All other codes*

Reclaiming identities

Immigrant perspective

Hegemonic stereotypes

Homogeneity

Generational differences

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