Community Diversity Climate Impact on the Well-Being of Asian Americans Amid Anti-Asian Sentiment During the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Role of Two-Way Symmetrical Communication by Local Governments

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Integrating the literature from public relations, community psychology, and minority stress theory, this study proposes and tests a model that describes the mechanism by which local governments' two-way symmetrical communication practices may affect local Asian Americans' experiences amid anti-Asian sentiment during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of an online survey of 400 Asian Americans living in the United States indicated that local governments' two-way symmetrical communication practices with respect to diversity acceptance helped establish a community diversity climate. Such a perception lowered the target group's perceived stigma consciousness and fear of discrimination, which are the two main proximal stressors affecting minority members' emotions and well-being. Theoretical and practical implications on public relations and governmental communication are discussed.

Keywords: governmental communication, community diversity climate, minority stress theory, two-way symmetrical communication

The 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19), a virus thought to originate in China, resulted in approximately 18 million cases and 3.8 million deaths worldwide as of June 24, 2020 (World Health Organization, 2021). As the virus swept the globe, xenophobia and acts of violence and racism against people of/with East Asian descent/appearance surged drastically in the United States (E. Liu, 2020). Such discrimination, as a result of the disease outbreak, contributed to fear within this ethnic group of being socially marginalized and stigmatized (Dhanani & Franz, 2020). As a result of the recent troubling pattern of racial discrimination/violence against different minority groups in the United States and subsequent advocacy movements, such as Black Lives Matter, the U.S. society called on local governments to improve racial equity and social justice in communities (Government Alliance on Race and Equity, 2021). While an increasing number of local governments continue to engage the public in conversations to address such social problems, the effectiveness of their efforts remains unclear.

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Date submitted: 2022-01-24

Although the role of the government in combating different forms of discrimination and promoting diversity was documented in prior research (e.g., Bussat & Soleymani, 2015), most studies focused on governmental efforts at the national or federal level but overlooked the local level. As local communities have been recognized as important social resources for racial minorities in combating and coping with discrimination (e.g., Noh & Kaspar, 2003), this study examines the role of local governments and their public relations practices in addressing racism and discrimination, particularly, in the context of anti-Asian sentiment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Diversity has been a focal research concept in public relations studies. While one line of research has explored the experiences and perspectives of minority professionals in the public relations industry (e.g., Pompper, 2004), other studies have focused on the role of public relations in championing diversity in organizations (Brunner, 2008; Mundy, 2015). However, the question of how public relations practices can "incorporate diversity initiatives into the communication function of organizations" (Brunner, 2008, p. 166) remains underexplored (Mundy, 2015). Scholars believed that public relations practices should help maintain a civil society by fostering relationships among social actors and equipping the community with greater capacity and resources (Taylor, 2009). Building on scholars' call to explore public relations best practices to convey diversity to key publics and serve communities (Uysal, 2013), this study investigates the role of governments' two-way symmetrical communication, which is a crucial function of excellent public relations practices (Grunig, 1992), in shaping the life experiences of people of color in times of racism and discrimination. Being labeled as the most ethical form of communication, two-way symmetrical communication creates and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and its publics in an honest, transparent, and participative manner (Grunig, 1989). Although the benefits of such ethical communication practice have been widely acknowledged in public relations literature (Kim & Ni, 2010; Wilcox, Cameron, & Reber, 2015), the value of this communication strategy in addressing social injustice issues at the local government level is worthy of further exploration and discussion.

Integrating the literature on public relations, community psychology, and minority stress theory, this study unpacks the underlying mechanism driving the effectiveness of perceived two-way symmetrical communication from local governments, as perceived by racial/ethnic minority group members, in helping foster a sense of community diversity climate, which is particularly salient to the lives of the members of such groups. Specifically, we theorize that perceived two-way symmetrical communication of local governments enhances local Asian Americans' perceived community diversity climate, which further reduces these minority individuals' two main stress sources (i.e., stigma consciousness and fear of discrimination) and ultimately alleviates these stress sources' negative influence on their sense of well-being.

To provide empirical support for our conceptual framework, we conducted an online survey among 400 Asian Americans living in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic, when racial bias and discrimination against Asian Americans were growing exponentially (Stop AAPI Hate, n.d.). The results of our survey advance the public relations literature by presenting a convincing case for local governments to adopt two-way symmetrical communication to combat racial discrimination against Asian Americans, who are an understudied racial/ethnic minority group. By infusing public relations insights into the community psychology literature and minority stress theory, we also introduce novel concepts to psychology and

minority stress scholars, thereby highlighting the power of perceived ethical and strategic governmental communication in shaping Asian Americans' psychological experiences in response to anti-Asian bias and racism during the current pandemic. The findings of this study will provide important guidelines on how local governments can use respectful conversations to foster community acceptance of diversity and eventually create positive life experiences for people of color in local communities.

Literature Review

Discrimination Against Asian Americans During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Being scapegoated, marginalized, and stereotyped as dirty, disease-ridden, and forever foreigners are not new to Asian Americans during public health crises (Eichelberger, 2007; M. Liu, 2020). Racism against and xenophobia toward Asian Americans are prevalent in the history of the United States, from the 1900 quarantine of San Francisco's Chinatown owing to public fear of the bubonic plague to the 2003 outbreak of the severe acute respiratory syndrome, also known as SARS, epidemic, which was associated with Chinese Americans (Wang, Gee, Bahiru, Yang, & Hsu, 2020). During the current global pandemic, xenophobia toward Asian Americans spread and worsened, as many people, including government leaders, in and outside the United States called the COVID-19 virus the "Chinese virus" or "kung-flu" (Wang et al., 2020). For example, across different online platforms, thousands of posts with #WuhanVirus or #KungFlu fueled anti-Asian sentiment (Nguyen et al., 2020). Increasing anti-Asian rhetoric and acts have also been reported offline, ranging from racist hate speeches and rants to criminal acts against Asian Americans, such as the horrific murder of a family in Texas, the fatal attack on an 84-year-old man in San Francisco, and a brutal stabbing in New York (Wang et al., 2020). More than 2,808 incidents of discrimination against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders were reported between March 19 and December 31, 2020, by Stop AAPI Hate, an organization created at the start of the pandemic to combat racial violence (Wang et al., 2020).

Thus, Asian Americans are forced to not only cope with the direct physical harm and psychological stressors caused by the COVID-19 outbreak but also confront the "racism pandemic," which is detrimental to their mental well-being. Race-based stigma and discrimination during infectious disease outbreaks were reported as critical triggers of mental health problems (Misra, Le, Goldmann, & Yang, 2020). According to health research on previous infectious disease outbreaks, mental disorders, and stress responses, such as fear, depression, anxiety, and sleep disturbances, may endure beyond merely a few months (e.g., Jeong et al., 2016). Anticipation of future discrimination episodes may further impact Asian Americans' well-being negatively as such anticipation can generate increased anxiety and fear when members of this racial minority group reenter the job market or return to school during/after the pandemic (Misra et al., 2020). Therefore, understanding how to reduce race-based stigma and COVID-related stressors is crucial to ensure the mental well-being of Asian Americans.

Public Relations and Diversity: Local Governmental Communication

Rapid changes in demographic, cultural, and population patterns in communities pressed the U.S. government, particularly, at the local level, to adopt initiatives and programs promoting and

managing diversity (Nishishiba, 2012). In contrast to the federal government, local governments play a unique role in establishing community cohesion, combating racism, and encouraging the victims of racial discrimination to report such matters to authorities (Nelson, 2015). Along with the recent troubling pattern of racial devaluation in the country and subsequent advocacy uprisings, such as the Black Lives Matter and Stop Asian Hate movements, an increasing number of advocacy groups called out local governments to establish effective communication to improve racial equity and social justice in communities (Government Alliance on Race and Equity, 2021). Effective governmental communication is essential in times of uncertainty and crisis (Longstaff & Yang, 2008) as it can help secure public trust in institutions and encourage the public adoption of necessary behaviors to decrease risks (Quinn et al., 2013). However, in communicating with publics during a crisis, not only "what" is communicated (e.g., the message content) but also "how" it is communicated matter (Larson & Heymann, 2010). During a crisis, those in charge of communication must pay attention to the message content and "how" it is delivered (Lee & Li, 2021). To answer such a question, a growing body of research attempted to adopt strategic communication management approaches from public relations scholarship and examined their effectiveness in governmental communication contexts.

For example, Grunig and Jaatinen (1999) suggested that the two-way symmetrical model, which is a communication approach that emphasizes the importance of honesty, openness, transparency, and participation, should be adopted for strategic management in governments. Governments that promote and practice this communication strategy are likely to increase citizens' knowledge of government processes, improve their trust in institutions, and foster beneficial government-citizen relationships, which result in positive citizen behaviors (Kim & Shim, 2020). Specifically, for citizens, the local government is considered an important source of information, a potential public dialogue platform, and a channel for expression and cooperation to attain cohesion, particularly when facing risks and uncertainties (Heath, Bradshaw, & Lee, 2002). The principle of mutual understanding requires local governments to equip citizens with the ability to express their concerns, provide feedback, and participate in the decision-making processes (Kim & Cho, 2019). Building on existing research, this study aims to explore how such a public relations function may help local governments effectively convey the value of diversity in communities.

Governmental Communication and Perceived Community Diversity Climate

Perceived community diversity climate, which is a concept postulated by community psychology scholars based on the notion of sense of belonging, is defined as the

> perception of similarity to others, an acknowledged interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them, and the feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure. (Sarason, 1974, p. 157)

Such perception is shaped by "the extent to which an individual perceives his or her geographical community values diversity and is acceptable of racial and ethnic differences" (Singh & Selvarajan, 2013, p. 260).

The community has long been acknowledged as a significant component of people's lives as it is closely related to the pursuit of equal and just social structures and relationships, quality of life, and personal well-being (Mannarini & Salvatore, 2019). The community is also considered an important social resource for racial/ethnic minorities for combating and coping with discrimination (e.g., Noh & Kaspar, 2003). In the United States, which is a country that has seen record immigration, numerous communities are experiencing unprecedented racial and ethnic diversity in neighborhoods (Townley, Kloos, Green, & Franco, 2011). Such changing population patterns can strengthen communities but introduce challenges in how to effectively manage diversity to enhance the collective well-being of community residents (Mannarini & Salvatore, 2019). Given the important role of such perceptions in communities, research has attempted to provide insights for understanding how perceived diversity climate may emerge and be shaped.

Prior research has found that certain individual, contextual, and organizational characteristics can serve as antecedents of perceived diversity climate. This study considers the strategic communication of public relations by local governments as an essential but understudied contextual factor that may affect the publics' perceptions of diversity climate in communities. In public relations research, scholars have argued that symmetrical communication can be a means to foster a positive culture and climate in communities. The open communication and information exchange magnified in this strategy help reduce asymmetry and conflicts between governments and publics, deliver certain beliefs that are central to their mission and values, create a sense of community, and encourage public engagement with the community (Kim & Cho, 2019). Publics often perceive organizations with a two-way symmetrical communication system as friendly, supportive, empathic, and reassuring (Men & Sung, 2022). Such communication practices help foster pride among publics for being part of a group that gells (Men & Yue, 2019).

Moreover, two-way symmetrical communication that facilitates reciprocity, participation, and tolerance for disagreement also provides more opportunities and greater platforms for minority members to share their perspectives and inform policy making, which advances the acceptance of diversity in the community (Okour, 2022). The literature regarding the public sector in public relations research has strongly advocated for public participation and engagement through sharing decision-making power with the citizens (Yudarwati & Gregory, 2022). The participative experiences in the decision-making processes that help create awareness about diversity in the community may lead to beliefs of multiculturalism and community cohesion among minority members (Taylor, 2000). Such sincere and open communication in a reciprocal manner may also help establish a climate in which cultural differences and diversity are respected and valued (e.g., Hofhuis, Van Der Rijt, & Vlug, 2016). On the basis of this line of research, we assumed that involving Asian Americans in any attempts to help their situation during the pandemic would make them feel that the community values diversity and accepts differences. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1:   *Asian Americans' perception of local governments' two-way symmetrical communication with regard to diversity acceptance during the COVID-19 pandemic is positively related to their perception of community diversity climate.*

Perceived Community Diversity Climate and Minority Stress

Positive outcomes of diversity climate have been well-demonstrated. In community psychology literature, perceived diversity climate has been found to predict how and why individuals become attached to their communities (Chavis & Pretty, 1999). Namely, a minority member's willingness to stay and connect with the community may depend on racial/ethnic similarity/diversity to a community as well as the perceived overall community diversity climate (Ragins, Gonzalez, Ehrhardt, & Singh, 2012). To further explore the impacts of perceived diversity climate on Asian Americans' sense of well-being in the context of anti-Asian sentiment during COVID-19, this study incorporated the minority stress theory.

Racial and ethnic minority group members in the United States have long been subject to stress from racism and discrimination (Bernal, Trimble, Burlew, & Leong, 2003). To effectively understand how such behaviors adversely affect the mental health of such individuals, scholars drew on the minority stress theory, which was first developed to explain sexual minority members' mental health conditions (e.g., Meyer, 1995; Szymanski & Sung, 2010) then subsequently employed to explore racial/ethnic minorities' experiences of racism and discrimination (e.g., Wu, Qian, & Wilkes, 2021). The theory posits that discriminatory attitudes and acts often create "a hostile and stressful social environment," and such social stressors may lead to mental health issues among minority group members (Harrell, 2000; Meyer, 2003, p. 674). According to the theory, such stressors can be distal or proximal (Meyer, 2003). Distal stressors refer to events that occur to a person externally owing to his/her minority identity and status, such as discrimination, whereas proximal stressors refer to feelings internalized by an individual, such as fear of discrimination owing to stigma consciousness. Existing research drawing on the minority stress theory in the context of anti-Asian sentiment during the COVID-19 pandemic focused on the impact of distal stressors (Wu et al., 2021) but overlooked the importance of proximal stressors. To address this research gap, the current study examines how perceived community diversity climate can shape two proximal stressors, namely, stigma consciousness and fear of discrimination, affecting Asian Americans' well-being in the face of COVID-19-related discrimination.

Stigma consciousness describes "the extent to which members of stereotyped groups believe that their stereotyped status permeates interactions with members of the out-group, or, in the extent to which they believe they live in a 'stereotyping' world" (Pinel, 2002, p. 179). In racial/ethnic minority populations, stigma consciousness refers to their sensitivity to societal disapproval of their characteristics or beliefs owing to their racial/ethnic background, leading to awareness or expectation of being stigmatized by others (Pinel, 1999). Although minority individuals may or may not have actual experiences with identity-related stigma or discrimination (i.e., distal stressors), they may have a general concern about and be conscious of such a stigma existing in society. This concern refers to stigma consciousness and is a type of proximal stressor among minority populations (Meyer, 2003). Fear of discrimination is another proximal stressor highlighted in the minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003), which describes a minority individual's anticipation of rejection. These two proximal stress processes were found to cause anxiety, which may ultimately lead to negative mental health outcomes (Feinstein, Goldfried, & Davila, 2012).

While considerable research based on the minority stress theory was conducted to examine the consequences of proximal stressors, scholars also began to explore factors that may shape minority

members' proximal stress processes. Among the numerous factors, contextual cues signaling diversity acceptance were acknowledged as crucial influencers in reducing minority individuals' proximal stress, specifically, their subjective internalization of negative incidents. Scholars suggested that social attitudes promoting acceptance and discouraging stigma can effectively reduce individuals' expectations and/or fear of discrimination, whereas negative environments often manifest such internalized emotions (Herek, 2009). Thus, creating a context or an environment that advocates tolerance and inclusivity is important. Based on this notion, we assume that community diversity climate can reduce minorities' stigma consciousness and fear of discrimination. Thus, we propose the following hypotheses:

H2: *Asian Americans' perception of community diversity climate is negatively related to their stigma consciousness during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

H3: *Asian Americans' perception of community diversity climate is negatively related to their fear of discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

Although stigma consciousness and fear of discrimination are considered proximal stressors for minority individuals, the minority stress theory posits that minorities with considerable stigma consciousness tend to fear discrimination against themselves and members of their social group (Ong, Cerrada, Lee, & Williams, 2017) and become highly aware of race-/ethnicity-related discriminatory acts (Major & O'Brien, 2005). To verify this assumption in the context of anti-Asian sentiment during the COVID-19 pandemic, we propose the following hypothesis:

H4: *Asian Americans' perceived stigma consciousness is positively related to their fear of discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

Minority Stress and Well-Being

As mentioned previously, the growing number of studies examining Asian Americans' mental health conditions during the COVID-19 outbreak focused merely on the impact of distal stressors, such as actual and perceived discrimination experiences (Cheah et al., 2020; Cheng, 2020). The minority stress theory states that proximal stressors are also significant sources of stress among minority populations (Meyer, 2003) and may be salient to minority stress and anxiety (Ramirez & Paz Galupo, 2019). Stigma consciousness and fear of discrimination, which are two main types of proximal stressors, are closely linked with a wide range of detrimental outcomes in minority populations, including worry, stress, distress, and negative psychological well-being (Ong et al., 2017). Based on the minority stress theory and related research, we propose that Asian Americans' perceived stigma consciousness and fear of discrimination will affect their sense of well-being in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

H5: *Asian Americans' perceived stigma consciousness is positively related to their sense of negative well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

H6: *Asian Americans' fear of discrimination is positively related to their sense of negative well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

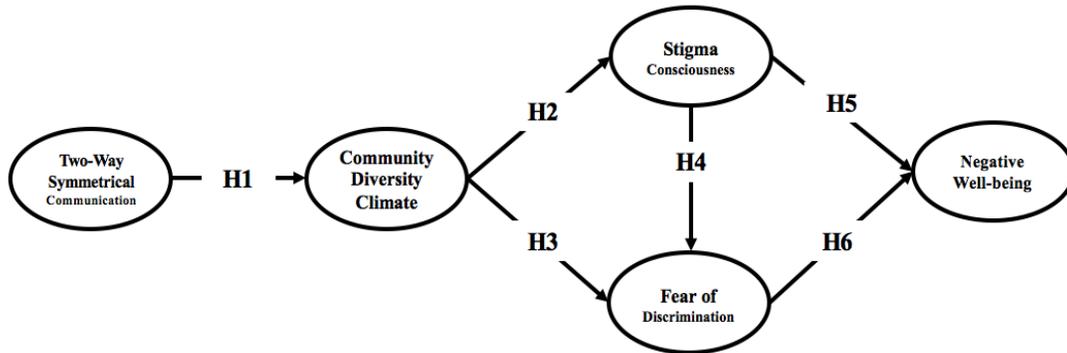Figure 1 depicts the conceptual model for this study.

Figure 1. The conceptual model of the study.

Method

Sampling and Participants

To examine the hypotheses, the researchers conducted an online survey via Qualtrics in July 2020. Asian Americans living in the United States were recruited through Dynata, a premier global market research company that offered access to 1.5 million panel participants in the United States through its patented sampling platform. To obtain qualified participants who were representative of the target population, the researchers adopted random stratified sampling such that approximately equal proportions of gender and age groups were obtained among the sampled participants.

A final sample size of 400 Asian American participants was achieved after data cleaning (e.g., filtering out disqualified participants whose demographic information did not match that of the survey population and deleting responses that failed attention checks). Participants in the final sample reported their regions of origin as Mainland China ($n = 142$), Japan ($n = 74$), Hong Kong ($n = 64$), South Korea ($n = 41$), Taiwan ($n = 40$), and other areas in East Asia such as Vietnam, Thailand, and so on ($n = 39$). On average, they had been living in the United States for 30 years ($SD = 13$). Their average age was 46 years ($SD = 16$). About half of these participants ($n = 191$) were female. Many of the participants had a bachelor's degree ($n = 178$) or higher ($n = 129$) and had an annual income of $60,000 or higher ($n = 287$).

Measures

All items used in the current study were adopted from previous literature. A 7-point Likert scale was used for all items, ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree. All measurement items are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Measurement Items.

Constructs	Items	Standardized Factor Loadings
Two-way symmetrical communication	*Please tell us your perceptions about the communication practices and information delivery regarding the issue of diversity and inclusion during COVID-19 by your local government (i.e., town, county, district, and city).*	
	Two-way communication here refers to your local governments' communication efforts on delivering information regarding the importance of diversity and inclusion in the community, listening to your concerns as a minority member during the pandemic, and providing opportunities for you to express opinions and participate in policy-making processes that advance diversity and inclusion in the community. Please answer the following questions regarding your perceptions about your local governments' attempts to help Asian Americans' situations during the pandemic.	
	Most communication regarding this issue between my local government and its citizens can be said to be two-way communication.	.892*
	My local government encourages differences of opinion regarding this issue.	.894*
	The purpose of communication regarding this issue is to help my local government to be responsive to the problems of its citizens.	.857*
	My local government encourages its citizens to express differences of opinion regarding this issue.	.903*
	The citizens are usually informed about major changes in policy regarding this issue by my local government before they take place.	.891*
	The citizens are not afraid to speak up regarding this issue to my local government.	.768*
Community diversity climate	*During the COVID-19 pandemic,*	
	My community welcomes people of different races and ethnicities.	.847*
	Racial and ethnic diversity are tolerated in my community.	.748*
	People of different races and ethnicities would want to move to my community.	.808*

	My community fosters a positive climate for people of different races and ethnicities.	.886*
	My community is a model for valuing racial and ethnic diversity.	.824*
Stigma consciousness	*During the COVID-19 pandemic,*	
	Stereotypes about people of my race/ethnicity do not affect me personally. ®	.721*
	I never worry that my behaviors will be viewed as stereotypical of my race/ethnicity. ®	.718*
	When interacting with non-Asians, I feel like they interpret all my behaviors in terms of the fact that I am an Asian.	.672*
	Most people do not judge Asians on the basis of their race/ethnicity. ®	.701*
	I almost never think about the fact that I am Asian when I interact with people. ®	.767*
Fear of discrimination	*During the COVID-19 pandemic, in your day-to-day life, how often have you worried that the following things may happen to you because you are Asian?*	
	Being treated with less courtesy than other people.	.908*
	Being treated with less respect than other people.	.928*
	Receiving poorer service than other people at restaurants or stores.	.918*
	People acting as if they are afraid of you.	.891*
	People acting as if they're better than you are.	.895*
	Being called names or insulted.	.885*
	Being threatened or harassed.	.915*
	Being made fun of and picked on.	.916*
	Being followed around in stores.	.894*
Negative well-being	*As an Asian living in the United States, during the COVID-19 pandemic, I feel*	
	Angry/irritated/annoyed	.746*
	Sad/downhearted/unhappy	.774*
	Scared/fearful/afraid	.897*
	Nervous/anxious/worried	.907*

*Note. * = p < .001.*

Two-Way Symmetrical Communication

Items that measured symmetrical communication asked participants to evaluate their local governments' "communication practices and information delivery about the issue of diversity acceptance during the COVID-19 pandemic." The variable was measured using six items adapted from Dozier, Grunig,

and Grunig (1995; α = .95), such as "The purpose of communication regarding this issue is to help my local government to be responsive to the problems of its citizens."

Perceived Community Diversity

Perceived community diversity was measured by five items adapted from Ragins and colleagues (2012; α = .91). Participants were asked to indicate their perceptions about their current community (i.e., the town, city, or suburb that was their primary place of residence) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Exampled items included "racial and ethnic diversity are tolerated in my community."

Stigma Consciousness

Stigma consciousness was measured by five items from Pinel (1999; α = .84). The measured items were contextualized "during the COVID-19." Exampled items included "when interacting with non-Asians, I feel like they interpret all my behaviors in terms of the fact that I am an Asian."

Fear of Discrimination

Fear of discrimination was measured by nine items adopted from Earls, Brooks-Gunn, Raudenbush, and Sampson (2002; α = .98). The measured items were contextualized "during the COVID-19 pandemic." Participants were asked to indicate *their worries* regarding multiple events, such as being threatened or harassed and being made fun of and picked on, that could happen to them in their day-to-day life because they were Asian.

Negative Well-Being

Negative well-being was measured using four items from Kristensen, Hannerz, Høgh, and Borg (2005; α = .82). The measured items were situated "during the COVID-19 pandemic." Exampled item included "As an Asian living in the United States, during the COVID-19 pandemic, I feel angry/irritated/annoyed."

Covariates

Individuals' demographic characteristics, including age, gender, and education level were included as covariates to control for possible confounding factors.

Data Analysis

First, the reliability of the measurement items for all constructs used in this study was tested using Cronbach's alpha. Next, a two-stage procedure of structural equation modeling approach (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988), using the Mplus program, was employed to test the hypotheses suggested in this study. Specifically, the measurement model was first evaluated through a confirmatory factor analysis, followed by an assessment of the structural model. The following model fit indices from Hu and Bentler (1998) were

employed: The root mean square error of approximation < .08; the comparative fit index > .90; the Tucker-Lewis index > .90, and the standardized root mean square residual < .90. Figure 2 shows the results of the final model.
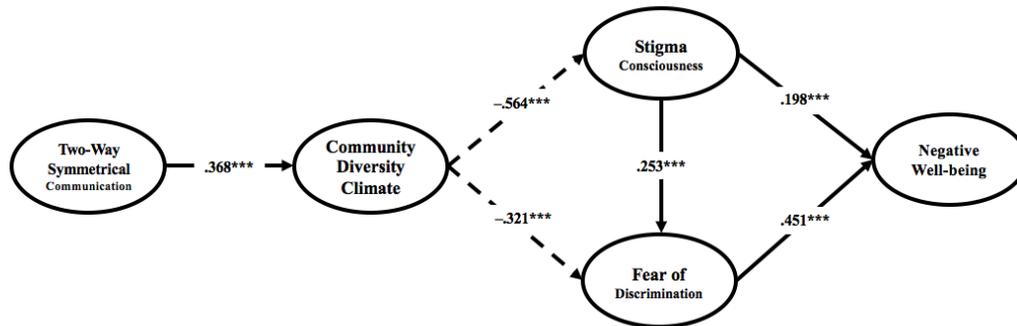

Figure 2. Results of the final model.
*Note. ***$p < .001$. All path coefficients are standardized. Dotted lines represent negative associations.*

H1 suggests that local governments' two-way symmetrical communication practices with regard to diversity acceptance during the COVID-19 pandemic can positively predict Asian Americans' perception of community diversity climate. A significant positive relationship was found between the two factors, thereby indicating that two-way communication practices by local governments were positively related to Asian Americans' perceived community diversity climate during the COVID-19 pandemic ($b = .368$, $p < .001$). Thus, H1 was supported.

H2 posits that Asian Americans' perception of community diversity climate will negatively predict their stigma consciousness during the COVID-19 pandemic. A significant negative relationship was found between the two factors, thereby indicating that Asian Americans' perceived community diversity climate was negatively related to their stigma consciousness during the COVID-19 pandemic ($b = -.564$, $p < .001$). Thus, H2 was supported.

H3 proposes that Asian Americans' perception of community diversity climate will negatively predict their fear of discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic. A significant negative relationship was found between the two factors, thereby indicating that Asian Americans' perceived community diversity climate was negatively related to their fear of discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic ($b = -.321$, $p < .001$). Thus, H3 was supported.

H4 states that Asian Americans' stigma consciousness will positively predict their fear of discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic. A significant positive relationship was found between the two factors, thereby indicating that Asian Americans' stigma consciousness was positively related to their fear of discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic ($b = .253$, $p < .001$). Thus, H4 was supported.

H5 suggests that Asian Americans' stigma consciousness will positively predict their negative emotional well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. A significant positive relationship was found between the two factors, thereby indicating that Asian Americans' stigma consciousness was positively related to their negative emotional well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic (b = .198, p < .001). Thus, H5 was supported.

H6 expresses that Asian Americans' fear of discrimination will positively predict their negative emotional well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. A significant positive relationship was found between the two factors, thereby indicating that Asian Americans' fear of discrimination was positively related to their negative emotional well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic (b = .451, p < .001). Thus, H6 was supported.

Discussion

Integrating the public relations and community psychology literature and minority stress theory, this study proposed and tested a model explaining the role of two-way symmetrical communication practices by local governments in shaping Asian Americans' perceived community diversity climate and well-being in the context of anti-Asian sentiment during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of an online survey of Asian Americans living in the United States indicated that Asian Americans' perception of local governments' two-way symmetrical communication practices positively influenced their perception of community diversity climate. Such a perception lowered the target group's perceived stigma consciousness and fear of discrimination, which are the two main proximal stressors affecting minority members' emotions and well-being. These findings highlighted the crucial role of local governments and their communication strategy planning regarding the issue of diversity acceptance in helping racial/ethnic minority members address racism-related problems and in generating positive community outcomes. The theoretical and practical implications of this study are discussed below.

Theoretical Implications

The current study contributes to the public relations, community psychology, and minority stress literature in several ways. First, drawing on such literature, this study provides an underlying mechanism picturing Asian Americans' experiences in dealing with anti-Asian sentiment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, this study seeks to explore the important role of public relations in creating a healthy community in terms of the issue of diversity acceptance. In addition, this study presents empirical evidence explaining how perceived two-way symmetrical communication by local governments can serve as facilitators to form a perception of community diversity climate among minority members through public relations practices. Although community building is widely assumed to be an essential public relations function, a research gap exists between what public relations can do and how it can nurture a community (Kim & Cho, 2019). The findings of this study support the assumption of the strategic management perspective in building a community (Grunig, 1992) by demonstrating that perceived two-way symmetrical communication between local governments and minority residents plays an important role in shaping the latter's sense of community climate focusing on diversity acceptance as well as on their stress process in their daily lives.

Second, this study advances public relations scholarship by extending the application of the two-way symmetrical communication model to the community-building and racial-discrimination context. Although the two-way symmetrical communication model describes an effective governmental communication practice, it was overlooked and underused in favor of simple communication tactics, such as one-way communication (Grunig & Jaatinen, 1999; Liu & Horsley, 2007). However, this study empirically demonstrates the value of government public relations, particularly, local governments, in fostering racial minority publics' community diversity perception, which in turn can help them overcome social stress derived from their racial identity and promote their overall well-being. Such findings contribute to public relations research by showing how two-way symmetrical communication strategies can champion organizations' diversity acceptance, particularly, in times of racism and discrimination.

Third, this study contributes to diversity research in public relations. Managing diversity as a social responsibility has long been highlighted as a crucial function of public relations strategic management (Hon & Brunner, 2000). Focusing on the discrimination experiences of underrepresented minority groups, particularly, Asian Americans in the United States, the current study emphasizes the role of the government as a strategic communicator in fostering community diversity. The findings also shed light on the public relations literature to confront emerging and existing racism issues proactively through communication efforts and convey diversity to minority publics. Furthermore, in terms of diversity, the current study reaffirms the beneficial outcomes of perceived diversity climate, highlighting its role in helping reduce minority group members' proximal stressors (i.e., stigma consciousness and fear of discrimination) that can lead to their sense of negative well-being.

Fourth, as this study is situated in the context of anti-Asian sentiment during the COVID-19 pandemic, it also extends knowledge on the role of minority members' proximal stressors in affecting their psychological well-being in the face of such issues. As mentioned previously, recent studies employing the minority stress theory to explain Asian Americans' stress processes during the COVID-19 pandemic focused specifically on distal stressors, such as actual discrimination incidents or perceived discrimination experiences (e.g., Wu et al., 2021), but overlooked proximal stressors. Considering proximal stressors equally important, our study suggests that these are crucial predictors of Asian Americans' well-being. Specifically, our study finds that stigma consciousness and fear of discrimination significantly predict minority stress, which concurs with the original minority stress theory developed by Meyer (2003).

In summary, though the importance and benefits of two-way symmetrical communication are recognized in public relations research (e.g., Grunig, 1992), the applicability of this communication strategy in the context of racial discrimination in the local government–community domain remains underexplored. Thus, this study expands existing research and provides a comprehensive understanding of the significant influence of two-way symmetrical communication strategies in the context of anti-minority sentiment.

Practical Implications

This study also provides important practical implications for local governments and communication professionals on how to communicate effectively with local residents to address anti-minority sentiment stress. Our findings indicate that a community climate of diversity acceptance plays a significant role for

minorities and in their experiences in dealing with racism and discrimination. Thus, how to foster such a perception in a community has become an important question for local governments. According to the results of our study, perceived community diversity climate can be nurtured through two-way symmetrical communication. Communication between local governments and their publics to change existing prejudiced or stigmatizing attitudes should be two-way, open, responsive, and centered on publics. For example, local governments can hold recurring meetings and conversations with their publics regardless of their race or ethnicity to understand their feelings and opinions amid anti-minority sentiment. Practitioners can also design and implement ongoing and cumulative diversity initiatives and programs targeting racial minorities to engage them in conversations and increase their sense of belonging, which can help balance the interests of the government, minority publics, and society. Such events can create a platform for not only identified minority individuals to voice their concerns and feedback, which may pinpoint potential/actual racism issues in the community, but also the entire community to learn tolerance and acceptance, which may help reduce the stigma attached to minority groups and their stereotypes. Specifically, as anti-Asian discrimination is closely linked with public fears of COVID-19, with regard to pandemic communication, we suggest local governments deliver information about the virus and its direct public health consequences and create conversations by considering how such a crisis can develop biases based on race, ethnicity, and nationality.

Limitations and Future Studies

While this study provides important theoretical and practical insights into the role of local governmental communication in combating racial inequity, it has several limitations that can be addressed in future research. First, to enhance the external validity of our results, we adopted a cross-sectional survey design. However, this design limited our confidence in concluding causality among the examined variables. Future research can use longitudinal surveys and other causal designs to increase the internal validity of our conclusions. Second, following the existing literature on two-way symmetric communication and community diversity climate (e.g., Dozier et al., 1995; Ragins et al., 2012), we used a survey method to collect perceptual data on these two factors, along with stigma consciousness, fear of discrimination, and well-being among Asian Americans. Future research can use methods such as field observation to gain factual or behavioral data on our key variables such as two-way symmetric communication and community diversity climate to triangulate our results. Third, apart from racial minorities' perceptions of governmental communication, other factors, such as their trust or distrust in government authorities and social support received from government officials or community members, may play an important role in shaping their experiences in dealing with racial stigma and discrimination. We recommend future research to expand our model by incorporating such factors to attain a holistic understanding of the antecedents of racial minorities' well-being. Moreover, this study primarily focused on the aspect of diversity but overlooked the importance of inclusion. As a line of research has attempted to understand the functions of public relations in facilitating a sense of inclusion and belonging among publics (e.g., Kim & Cho, 2019), future research should take this concept into account and investigate how governmental communication may affect such perceptions among minority citizens.

Fourth, as this study is situated in the context of anti-Asian sentiment during the COVID-19 pandemic, the generalizability of the findings may be limited. Given that this issue differs from other types of racial injustice problems, future research can apply the proposed model to other racism-related contexts

to verify its applicability. Finally, though the four models of excellent public relations practices, including symmetrical communication, are commonly examined and appreciated in the discipline, scholars have attempted to update the approaches by introducing dialogic communication, thereby highlighting the importance of relational interaction between two parties (Kent & Theunissen, 2016). Future research can explore dialogic governmental communication, which is a dialogue and relation approach, to identify how such a practice can advance governments' symmetrical communication efforts in addressing racial injustice and diversity issues.

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