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Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society

Title

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Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 45(45)

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Publication Date

2023

Peer reviewed

What's new in a name? Chinese people's perception of the renaming of COVID-19

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Abstract

Following the abandonment of the three-year strict zero-COVID strategy in China, the National Health Commission of China announced the renaming of COVID-19 in Chinese from "MMM" (novel coronavirus pneumonia, NCP) to "MMM" (novel coronavirus infection, NCI) in December, 2022, which may help to reduce people's fear of COVID-19. We investigated whether the name change affected Chinese people's (N=1256) perception of COVID immediately after the announcement. The results showed that when directly asked about the difference between the two names, about 65% of the individuals perceived NCP as a more serious threat to health and more frightening than NCI. However, when the questions were posed indirectly, the effect of renaming interacted with individuals' personal and indirect COVID experience. This study thus provides insight into the role of language in shaping people's perception, particularly its interaction with people's bodily and knowledge/social experience.