

How Social Media can Propagate Misinformation about COVID-19 and Promote Stigma, Online Hate, and Trauma: A Qualitative Analysis of Twitter Postings

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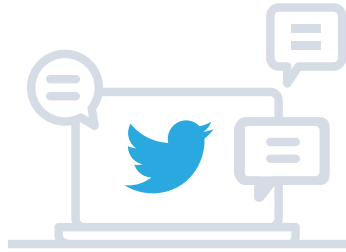
Abstract

In addition to the mental and physical health challenges the COVID-19 pandemic has directly introduced, a rise in misinformation related to COVID-19 has emerged, promoting increased expressions of stigma, discrimination, and racism against people of East Asian descent, an understudied group in mental health research. These negative social media messages have had tangible outcomes for these individuals including an increase in micro-aggressions, threats to safety, and verbal and physical assaults. From a total of over 600 million tweets gathered from Twitter repositories we randomly selected a total of 4,000 tweets using COVID-19 and stigma-related hashtags and systematically analyzed them using thematic coding to identify emergent themes. Five primary themes that emerged included: (1) blaming and assigning responsibility, (2) reactivated historical stereotypes, (3) criticism of China's oppressive government, (4) political commentaries critical of the Chinese Communist Party, and (5) unspecified direct insults to East Asian community members. Substantial evidence was found for these tweets expressing both group labeling and responsibility: e.g., "Chinese virus" and "bat-eating Chinese". In addition, we found examples of the communication of peril: "People are dropping like flies in Wuhan". Misinformation towards this virus has the potential to directly interfere with public health policy responses targeted towards the pandemic such as hesitancy towards the vaccines but can also have indirect consequences towards stigmatized and marginalized populations such as individuals of East Asian descent. Social media platforms can act as a venue for the widespread dissemination of stigma and stereotypes toward this marginalized group which can promote fear and online hate and intensifies negative stereotypes and discrimination which can translate into violence and hate crimes. Moreover, increased trauma-related distress and sequelae can emerge following these potentially traumatic events and influence a survivor's sense of self. We discuss some preventative, culturally responsive, and trauma-informed interventions to respond to these outcomes.

Background

- Individuals of Asian descent were stereotyped as the "yellow peril" in the 19th century. They were considered dishonest and diseased invaders who posed cultural, economic and political threats to society (Del Visco, 2019).
- In the 1960s the "model minority" stereotype associated Asian individuals with positive traits such as being hardworking and obedient. This minimizes their experiences of racial discrimination. Regardless of their success they are considered "model minorities" and are never fully assimilated into society (Li & Nicholson, 2021).
- Expressions of COVID-19-related stigma, discrimination, and racism against people of East Asian descent on social media platforms and in communities have been associated with increased micro-aggressions, threats to safety, and verbal and physical assaults (Gover et al., 2020).
- These stigmatizing experiences have been associated with increased stress, depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress (Saw et al., 2021)

Methods



600 million tweets posted in 2020 were extracted from three available datasets

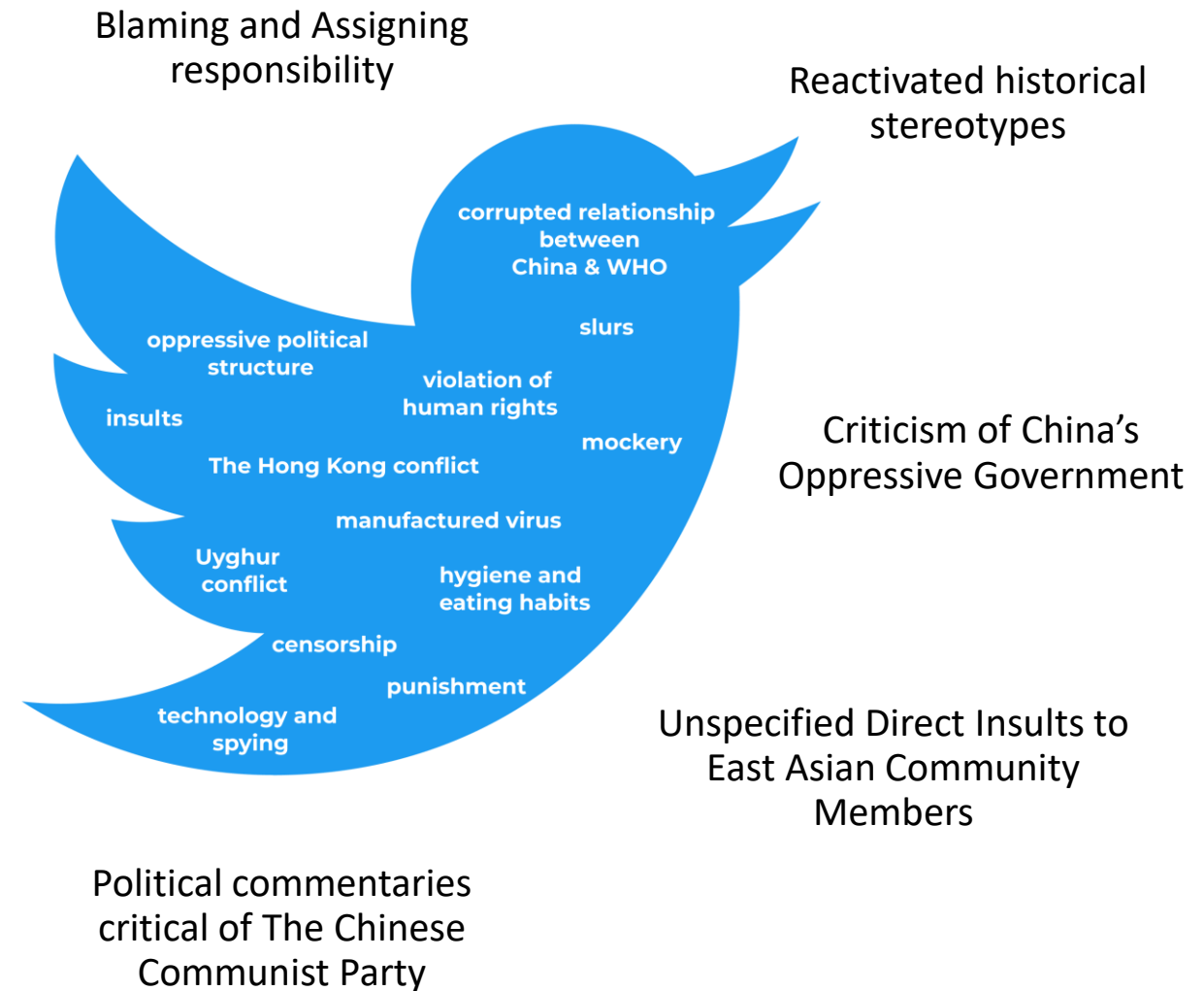


62 COVID-19-related potentially stigmatizing hashtags were used to extract 4000 tweets




Tweets were systematically analyzed using thematic coding to identify emergent themes


Five Main Themes & Subthemes



Examples of Stigmatizing Tweets

Analyses revealed communication of the yellow peril stereotype, group labelling using derogatory terms, stereotypical inferences in relation to COVID-19 and assigning responsibility for COVID-19

 Things China has: concentration camps, an epidemic spreading by the thousands daily, dictatorship, communism, dangerous air pollution. I'll take the common flu. #F*** China

 Stop eating vermin you filthy bastards #WuhanSARS #WuhanCoronavirus #ChinesePneumonia

 Yes, we need #BoycottChina and let western companies leave #China And #USA Government must keep to press #China and take action to against #China fake news #AnywherebutChina #YouTubeExplainThis #antichinazi

 F***ing #chinazi . No conscience.

Interventions for Stigmatizing Messages



Counter-hate messages may help combat stigma (Lyu et al., 2021; Ziems et al., 2020)

#IAmNotAVirus
#StopAsianHate

Reporting hate crimes online can help reduce racial trauma (Saw et al., 2021).



Micro-interventions through behavioural rehearsal and psychoeducation (Litam, 2020)

Making the “invisible ‘microaggression’ visible ‘to the perpetrator’

Disarming the microaggression e.g., using exclamations to respond to posts: “Ouch!”

Educating the Offender

Active social media engagement e.g., posting and commenting, may benefit one’s well-being by increasing perceived social support and create a sense of solidarity (Corrigan et al., 2012; Yang et al., 2020).



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