

# Racism and Xenophobia Towards China and People with Chinese Ethnicity Following COVID-19: A Content Analysis of Replies to Donald Trump's Controversial Tweets

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## Abstract

This content analysis examined public reactions to Twitter posts made by Donald Trump referring to COVID-19 as the “Chinese Virus”. Fifty replies were open coded from which eight themes emerged: endangerment, stigmatization, xenophobia, accountability, accuracy, inferiority, visual promotion, and written promotion. The themes correspond to four meta-themes regarding China, its population, and people with Chinese ethnicity including: explicit opposition to racism towards China and its population, neither an opposition nor a promotion of racism, an implicit promotion of racism, and an explicit promotion of racism. The most prevalent theme addressed xenophobia and more specifically, an opposition to racism towards people with Chinese ethnicity. While most replies to Trump's Tweets demonstrated an opposition to xenophobia, 14 of the 50 Tweets analyzed explicitly promoted racism.

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## Introduction

A disease epidemic that crosses international boundaries and affects a large number of people is referred to as a global pandemic (Porta, 2008). While they trigger massive media attention and are generally a front-page topic, media outlets keep those who may not be directly impacted up to date and aware of the current circumstances. In the early 2000s, a rare respiratory disease named severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) surfaced in southern China. The mass media's representation of the SARS epidemic contributed to worldwide citizens exacerbating fears of contagion and racializing those fears by blaming the Chinese population (Stavro, 2014). Contemporary forms of racism have become more implicit and subtle in recent decades (Cui, 2013). Cui (2013) argued discrimination can be anything from negative comments regarding the foods Chinese Canadian youth are bringing to school, to the media discourse used when China or people with

Chinese ethnicity are discussed. These experiences affect the ways in which Chinese Canadians perceive themselves in relation to the dominant white population in Canada.

In early January 2020, health authorities in Wuhan, China reported a cluster of pneumonia cases from an unknown cause. On February 26<sup>th</sup>, cases began to drop in China but increase suddenly in Italy, Iran, and South Korea which led to the number of cases outside of China surpassing the number of cases within. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) was recognized as a global pandemic on March 11<sup>th</sup> with over a hundred thousand cases and four thousand deaths worldwide. As the disease continues to spread, news channels and media outlets have reported that those of Chinese and other Asian ethnicities have been facing physical and verbal abuse, racism, and marginalization.

Existing research has discovered discrimination and prejudice towards those of Chinese ethnicity after the SARS outbreak, but this study is focusing on whether history will repeat itself following the outbreak of COVID-19, our most recent pandemic. Specifically, this study examined 50 replies to two of Donald Trump's Tweets that sparked controversy as he referred to COVID-19 as the "Chinese Virus." The goal was to determine whether Twitter users were promoting or discouraging racism and xenophobia towards China and people with Chinese ethnicity after its originating coronavirus disease had been declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO).

## Method

On March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the president of the United States, Donald Trump, tweeted at 5:12 and 5:46 AM: "I will be having a news conference today to discuss very important news from the FDA concerning the Chinese Virus!" and "I always treated the Chinese Virus very seriously, and have done a very good job from the beginning, including my very early decision to close the "borders" from China – against the wishes of almost all. Many lives were saved. The Fake News new narrative is disgraceful & false," respectively. His first Tweet garnered over 30,000 replies while his second accumulated more than 100,000 replies.

Posts included in this study were replies to one of Trump's two Tweets on March 18<sup>th</sup> and focused their manner towards racial profiling or discrimination of people from China or Chinese Americans. Although both of Trump's Tweets amassed numerous replies, the majority of replies to both Tweets were more in response to Trump's political actions surrounding COVID-19 and dealt less promoting or discouraging racism and xenophobia towards people with Chinese ethnicity. The study's purposive sampling method excluded replies that were considered to express political opinions and only contained replies that were deemed relevant and capable of furthering the research focus.

## Results

Upon perusing 50 replies, each Tweet was analyzed a second time and was coded with a label to conceptualize the main idea of the Tweet. For example, endangerment, stigmatization, and xenophobia were

labels given to Tweets that essentially described Trump's use of "Chinese Virus" as endangering and stigmatizing Chinese Americans or as simply xenophobic and racist. For example, "... Calling it Chinese Virus endangers Chinese Americans," "... You are stigmatizing all Chinese people everywhere including our own Chinese-Americans," and "... He is pivoting towards xenophobia and racism to blame Chinese people" were content from the Tweets that fell into these three labels, respectively.

Accuracy was a label used to identify Tweets that believed "Chinese Virus" was a proper and suitable term to refer to COVID-19 (e.g., Lyme Disease originated in Old Lyme, United States and the Zika Virus originated in the Zika Forest of Uganda; therefore, COVID-19 could accurately be referred to as the China Virus due to China being its place of origin). Accountability was a label coded to represent Tweets that portrayed the belief that China should be held responsible for COVID-19 and should be held accountable for the deaths and the academic, professional, and economic harms that occurred as a result (e.g., "Holding Chinese Communist leadership accountable ... is not racist").

Other Tweets mentioned that those arguing Trump's use of "China Virus" as being racist were acting on the "race card" and this was a move for the intellectually weak when they are unable to counter a logical argument or factual data. Inferiority was the label used to classify these types of replies. Finally, the last two labels were visual promotion and written promotion. These two labels coded Tweets that were considered to promote racism and xenophobia either with the hashtag #ChinaLiedPeopleDied or by posting caricature photos depicting discrimination towards China.

Endangerment-, stigmatization-, and xenophobia-coded Tweets were classified as group one Tweets. These were a cluster that represented reactions that explicitly did not support any negative treatment and prejudice directed towards China and those with Chinese ethnicity. Accountability- and accuracy-coded Tweets were classified as group two Tweets and these were a cluster that represented the belief that responsibility and criticism should be directed towards China but did not portray any explicit hatred or cruelty in their expressions. Inferiority-coded Tweets were the only

label that belonged to group three. These were replies that held China responsible for COVID-19 and expressed minimal or implicit callousness and insensitivity. Finally, Tweets labelled as visual promotion or written promotion were replies classified in group four and these were a cluster that explicitly represented intolerance, racism, or unforgiving sentiments towards China and those of Chinese ethnicity.

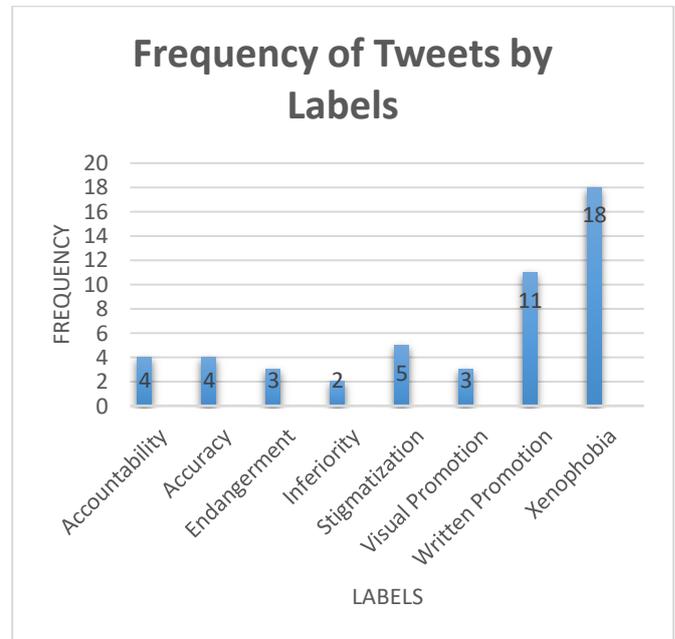
Each group number is also described by the attitude taken towards Trump’s use of the term “Chinese Virus.” Group One classifies the replies that explicit opposed racism towards China and people with Chinese ethnicity. Group Two is comprised of the replies that do not express promotion nor discouragement of racism but focuses on the China’s responsibility for COVID-19. Group Three consists of the replies that implicitly promote racism towards China and people with Chinese ethnicity. Lastly, Group Four includes the replies that explicitly promote racism towards China and people with Chinese ethnicity whether through visual or written content (see Table 1).

	Group One	Group Two	Group Three	Group Four
<b>Labels</b>	Endangerment	Accountability	Inferiority	Visual
<b>Coded to</b>				Promotion
<b>Replies</b>	Stigmatization	Accuracy		Written
				Promotion
	Xenophobia			
<b>Attitude</b>	Explicitly opposed	Do not express	Implicitly	Explicitly
<b>Taken</b>	racism towards	promotion nor	promotes racism	promotes racism
<b>Towards</b>	China and people	discouragement of	towards China	towards China
<b>Racism</b>	with Chinese	racism (focuses on	and people with	and people with
	ethnicity	China’s	Chinese	Chinese
		responsibility for	ethnicity	ethnicity
		COVID-19)		

**Table 1.** Racist attitudes towards China and people with Chinese ethnicity

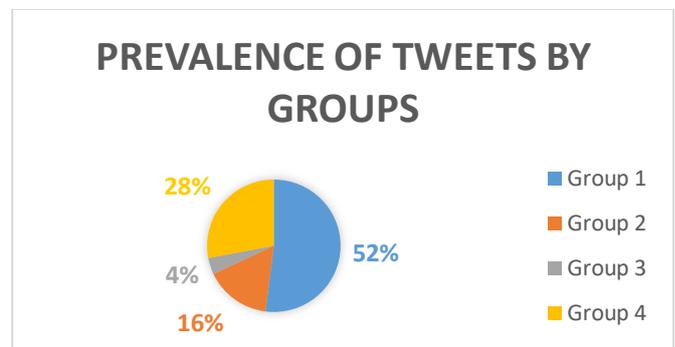
Three replies to Trump’s controversial Tweets were coded as endangerment, five as stigmatization, and 18 as xenophobic. Accountability and accuracy pertained to four Tweets each. Two were coded with the inferiority label and the visual promotion and written

promotion labels coded three and 11 replies, respectively. The largest category of responses depicted explicit opposition to racism towards China and people with Chinese ethnicity. Following the xenophobia label, many replies were deemed as written promotion of racism and xenophobia towards China and people with Chinese ethnicity as summarized in **Figure 1**.



**Figure 1.** Bar graph depicting the frequency of Tweets by the labels they were coded to.

Group One comprised the majority of Tweets with 26 demonstrating an opposition to racism. Group Four consisted of 14 Tweets denoting an explicit promotion of racism while Groups Two and Three made up eight and two Tweets, respectively. **Figure 2** displays and summarizes the prevalence of Tweets by each group.



**Figure 2.** Pie chart depicting the prevalence of Tweets by the Groups their coded labels corresponded to.

## Discussion

As previously noted, the most prevalent finding was an attitude that explicitly opposed racism towards people with Chinese ethnicity. Conversely, the second most prevalent attitude explicitly promoted racism towards China and its population. If we were to place the replies observed on a continuum with the explicit opposition to racism on the left side and the explicit promotion of racism on the right side, 80 percent of the Tweets analyzed would fall on one side or the other. The study finds that Trump's controversial Tweets provoked explicit reactions. Of two replies that were both coded with the xenophobia label, one received over four thousand retweets and 38 thousand likes while the other had over two thousand retweets and 27 thousand likes. A tweet coded with the written promotion label read: "Dear China ... you lied about it and cost lives ... #ChinaLiedPeopleDied." This Tweet had over two thousand retweets and over eight thousand likes. The difference in retweets and likes between the two Tweets coded with the xenophobia label and the one Tweet coded with the written promotion label mirror the findings of this study that concluded a higher response in favor of explicitly opposing racism towards China and people with Chinese ethnicity.

As Stavro (2014) previously found, mass media previously contributed to worldwide citizens exacerbating their fears of contagion and racializing them by holding China and people of Chinese ethnicity at fault for the SARS epidemic. This study has found that Trump's controversial Tweets regarding COVID-19 act as a form of mass media and has provoked the promotion of racism towards China and those of Chinese ethnicity mirroring Stavro's finding with the SARS outbreak. Cui (2013) argued that racism and discrimination have taken more implicit and subtle forms in recent decades. This study has found the opposite of Cui discovery. Replies to Trump's Tweets that fell into Group Four consisted of the use of the hashtag #ChinaLiedPeopleDied, photos of China's flag with the stars being replaced with virus molecules, and caricatures of planet earth with China's flag wrapped around as a face mask. These forms of written and visual promotion of racism were found to be more obvious and straightforward than subtle and discreet.

There are a few limitations to the present study. First off, it is based on a relatively small sample size (of 50 Tweets) that are not representative of all Tweets on this subject. It is also likely that not all Twitter users saw Trump's Tweets. Furthermore, there are many individuals who do not use Twitter and may have opinions that differ considerably from those examined in this study. Future research should include a larger sample size and examine other social media platforms.

## References

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## Appendix

