

Abstract

This study examined themes present in selected news articles which actively discussed anti-Asian racism and sentiment amid the COVID-19 pandemic. A content analysis was conducted on purposively sampled news articles from various media sources on the search engine, Google, under the “News” section. In total, 20 news articles were examined for how media framed the rise of anti-Asian racism and sentiment during the pandemic. Findings revealed little information on the rise and racialization of the COVID-19 outbreak, but there was a larger tie to the incidents of anti-Asian racism and sentiment and its relationship to the COVID-19 pandemic, the history of racism endemic to North American history, and recent remarks made by President Donald Trump, racializing COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus.”

Introduction

Background

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared the outbreak and spread of COVID-19 as a pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020). As a result, governments enacted measures in order to halt and prevent the spread of the virus. In Canada, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau urged citizens to maintain distance from one another (Jackson, 2020). Individuals all over the world practiced precautions in fear of the threat of the virus and its lethal outcomes. However, for some individuals, COVID-19 was not the only threat to their health and safety.

Disease and Anti-Asian Racism and Sentiment

For members of the Asian community, the COVID-19 pandemic induced racial discrimination, harassment, and violence against them. However, an “us vs. them” dichotomy has consistently been perpetuated in regard to disease and has resulted in similar treatment in the past (Harris, 2008; Muzzatti, 2005). The 2003 SARS outbreak elicited the same mistreatment of Asians internationally and demonstrated the stigma associated with the racialization of the virus, subjecting Asians to alienation by members of the public (Leung, 2008).

The Role of Media

Amid a public health crisis, the media becomes an integral source for answers during a time where it may seem like there are none. Although media’s primary purpose is to inform individuals, the way in which media frames how content is viewed and digested needs to be critically examined.

The Current Study

A content analysis was utilized to examine how digital media (i.e. news articles) frames the rise of anti-Asian racism and sentiment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Method

Sample & Sample Selection

The sample selection process began on April 1, 2020 and concluded on April 2, 2020, where the researcher collected 20 news articles from the search engine, Google, under the “News” section. The sampling procedure included the search for articles specifically containing discussion on anti-Asian racism and sentiment through the utilization of key words. For the data collection, the 10 most recent news articles were selected for both of the following search phrases: “racism and covid-19” and “racism and coronavirus.”

Inclusion & Exclusion Criteria

For each of the news articles selected, anti-Asian racism and sentiment (i.e. hate crimes) needed to constitute a substantial portion of the article as opposed to a peripheral segment. Articles that discussed other forms of racism were not included such as racism in regard to COVID-19 testing.

Coding & Coding Procedures

Each article was examined individually and assessed for the following:

- How the article articulated and explained the presence/rise of the pandemic (if included);
- If the article drew a conclusion between the anti-Asian racism and sentiment experienced during the pandemic and the larger pandemic itself;
- If the article racialized the virus through the inclusion of additional information, such as photos of Asian communities and locations;
- If the article included suggestions for coping or overcoming racial actions against the members of the community (via author of the article or individual(s) quoted in the article).



Results

Findings

Results illustrated little explanation outlining the presence and rise of the virus in most articles. Instead, much of the content focused on the link between anti-Asian racism and sentiment during the COVID-19 pandemic through the communication of racial actions (e.g. hate crimes), and/or the connection of racial actions to the larger contemporary context. Racialization of the virus either through words or images was mostly absent in the news articles examined other than in relation to suggestions for how to cope with or overcome instances of racial harassment or violence.

	YES	NO	NEUTRAL
Presence and Rise of Pandemic: Origin	7	13	-
Presence and Rise of Pandemic: Inclusion of a Case Tracker	2	18	-
Link Between Racism and Pandemic: Racial Action Reported	17	3	-
Linked Between Racism and Pandemic: Link to Pandemic	19	1	-
Racialization of the Virus: Words	0	16	4
Racialization of the Virus: Images	2	18	-
Efforts to Combat: Suggestions for Coping or Overcoming	4	16	-

Table 1: Results of the study consolidated by variables in categories

Conclusions

Casting Blame: Media Framing

In contrast to previous research, there was little to no mention of: the origin of the virus (as deriving from Wuhan); a case tracker; and negative connotations in the framing of the virus. A possible explanation is that the language surrounding COVID-19 could have already been present in the everyday lexicon, especially given that the public was made aware of it late last year. Initial articles and hyper-alarmist coverage of COVID-19 may have contributed to anti-Asian racism and sentiment which is only being discussed currently; so, the reporting of COVID-19 could have evolved.

Racialization of COVID-19

Racialization of the virus was never mentioned in text and seldom mentioned in images. In the instances of racialization via images, images of Chinatowns, for example, were included. Much of the content derived from a neutral standpoint. Although, much like the statement above, it can be hypothesized that racialization may still have occurred in the infancy of the outbreak and its communication to the public.

Growing Virus, Rising Hate Crimes

In many of the news articles, there was an emphasis on the link between the outbreak and spread of the virus in connection to the rising number of hate crimes committed against members of the Asian community (e.g. physical violence based on a belief that an Asian person is connected to COVID-19). In particular, suggestions were provided in order to cope with or overcome racial violence, which were recorded in the “Efforts to Combat” category.

Additional Themes: History of Racism & POTUS

It should also be noted that a few of the articles elaborated on the entrenched history of anti-Asian racism in both Canada and the United States as a recurring theme. Similarly, many of the articles pointedly linked U.S. President Donald Trump’s labelling of COVID-19 as a “Chinese virus” to current anti-Asian racism and sentiment.

‘Coughing while Asian’: living in fear as racism feeds off coronavirus panic



Photo Source: The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com>

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