

How Right-Wing Extremism Uses the COVID-19 Pandemic: Focusing on Anti-Asian Rhetoric

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided an opportunity for right-wing extremism to legitimize its claims and promote anti-Asian rhetoric. This has led to an increase in hate crimes against Asian and Asian descendants in the US, UK, and Canada. Online platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, 4Chan, and Telegram have been used to spread disinformation and conspiracy theories and frame the crisis to promote the agenda of building a “white ethnostate.” Civil society and experts have expressed concerns that this anti-Asian rhetoric will normalize right-wing extremist ideology and increase its social legitimacy. It is important to understand that this rhetoric is being used to promote extremist ideology and recruit more members and that further research is needed to prevent further tragedies. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a multidimensional impact on Asians, and it is crucial to not overlook the growing anti-Asian sentiments in both online and offline spaces and to research the connection between right-wing extremist groups and radicalized individuals in order to tackle their harmful activities.

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Introduction

On March 16, 2021, a card company released caricatures illustrating the seven members of BTS Korean singers as bloodied and bruised, with teeth missing, which was supposed to resemble a whack-a-mole game.¹

On March 16, 2021, a white man killed eight people, including six women of Asian descent, in Atlanta, United States. The tragedy stirred outrage and fear in Asian-American communities.

In one day, two incidents occurred that portrayed aggression towards the Asian community ranging from micro-aggression to hate crime. Although racist attacks and verbal insults towards Asian are not new, hostile attitudes, violence, and hate crimes against Chinese and Asian communities have significantly risen during the pandemic (Alba, 2021). The pandemic has been caused by Coronavirus Disease 2019 (hereafter COVID-19), which emerged in Wuhan, China, in late 2019 and spread around the globe. Due to its first detection in China, some extremist groups use this opportunity to blame Chinese and Asians as the cause of the problem and promote hate towards them. As one of them, right-wing extremists have exploited the pandemic as an opportunity to spread hatred towards Asians and promote white supremacy.

¹ Later, fans and citizens demanded a sincere apology, but a company only withdrew the release, and announced that the company “understand consumers who are upset about the portrayal.” To see whole story and the caricatures, check Ryu (2021).

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This phenomenon was a concern for civil society and international organizations due to the harmful social impact of COVID-19. For instance, the UN Secretary-General announced² that white supremacy and neo-Nazi movements are becoming a transnational threat and have exploited the coronavirus pandemic to boost their support. In this context, analyzing how the COVID-19 pandemic was used in normalizing and promoting anti-Asian rhetoric by right-wing extremists can be essential to address the social impacts of COVID-19.

It is worth noticing that not only right-wing extremists have used the COVID-19 pandemic to reclaim their propaganda's legitimacy. Various extremist groups spread misinformation for their political or religious goals.³ For instance, Jihadists have claimed the pandemic was God's punishment to the Chinese due to their oppression of Muslim Uighurs in Xinjiang. Nonetheless, the exploitation of Covid-19 by right-wing extremism deserves more attention due to its significance in stimulating transnational hate towards Asian descendants and immigrants.

Thus, the paper aims to analyze how right-wing extremism has exploited the COVID-19 pandemic for anti-Chinese and anti-Asian propaganda purposes. Focusing on anti-Asian sentiments of right-wing extremism propaganda during the pandemic would provide a more profound understanding of the impact of COVID-19. There are debates among scholars on how to define right-wing extremism due to its variance of the ideological spectrum from anti-globalism and anti-governmental to misogyny and xenophobia. Therefore, in this paper, right-wing extremism refers to far-right or racially and ethnically motivated groups and individuals who encourage extreme ideology and sometimes join violent acts, such as white supremacists, neo-Nazis, and neo-Fascists.

Asia covers a large geographic area, so the term anti-Asian can confuse. To avoid this confusion, the paper will use anti-Asian to refer anti-Chinese and anti-East Asians and their descendants, primarily referring to Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese. While verifying and limiting the scope of right-wing extremist activities is complex, the paper focuses only on three English-speaking multinational states. The United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada were selected because they have relatively well-researched right-wing extremist activities and their impacts on stimulating anti-Asian sentiments and violence during COVID-19.

This study can be significant in illustrating the current practice of right-wing extremism. By focusing on the impact of COVID-19, the research can provide a general picture of the increasing anti-Asian rhetoric during the pandemic, which led to more hate crimes towards Asian descendants and immigrants. Furthermore, the paper can be expanded in analyzing the relationship between COVID-19 and extremism. Moreover, the study deals with essential issues such as anti-Asian sentiments in the West. Even though there is a long history of anti-Asian sentiments like whitewashing⁴ and the Yellow Peril⁵ stereotype, hate towards Asians was relatively less researched. The pandemic was a wake-up call to the Asian community in the West that the "model minority" is a myth and that they can be exploited and attacked when the society is in chaos and danger.

² On May 8, 2020, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said that "the pandemic continues to unleash a tsunami of hate and xenophobia, scapegoating and scare-mongering" and urged governments to "act now to strengthen the immunity of our societies against the virus of hate."

³ To see Jihadist, left-wing and other extremist usage of the COVID-19 pandemic, *see* (Commission for Countering Extremism, 2020).

⁴ Refers to a casting practice in the film industry in which white actors are cast in non-white roles. For instance, the role of Japanese cyborg Motoko Kusanagi in *Ghost in the Shell*, was acted by Scarlett Johansson.

⁵ The Yellow Peril is an old, visual imaginary fears from a belief that East Asian would threaten white Western power. It was deliberately used to colonize Asian countries and oppress the immigrants.

Literature Review

Recent studies⁶ have documented how right-wing extremists have used the COVID-19 pandemic to make their own narratives and agenda (Comerford & Davey, 2020; Marone, 2020, 2021; McNeil-Wilson, 2020; Meleagrou-Hitchens & Crawford, 2020; White, 2020). Right-wing extremists have spread conspiracies such as claiming that 5G telecommunication technology would be the actual cause of the Coronavirus disease to legitimize their stance as anti-authority and anti-liberal (Meleagrou-Hitchens & Crawford, 2020) and accused minority communities of being responsible for the infection; mainly people of Chinese or Asian origin, but also Jews, Muslims and other minority groups, and migrants (McNeil-Wilson, 2020). Especially blaming other groups reflects the historical practice of “othering” that has existed over time linking infectious diseases to xenophobic sentiments (White, 2020).

Comerford and Davey (2020) analyzed that extremist groups use the global crisis as an opportunity to legitimize their propaganda. It is because extremism arises from a perception of “us versus them” and is rooted in a crisis-solution construct (Berger, 2018). It can also be shown in far-right extremism, which exploits the current pandemic as an opportunity to promote their radical, supremacist, and often violent solution as a “simple” solution for the crisis (Marone, 2020).

However, the linkage between COVID-19 and violent extremism should be analyzed as a complicated process, often chaotic interaction between macro, meso, and micro-level (Marone, 2021). *Figure 1* illustrates this complex interaction between the COVID-19 pandemic (macro-level), extremist organizations (meso-level), and individual experiences (micro-level). The diagram shows the non-linear, complex interactions that generally indicate the correlation between the pandemic crisis, individual radicalization, and rising violent extremism. It is vital to notice that the activities of extremist organizations provide ideological justification at an individual level. Then, ideological justification led to individual radicalization. Later, radicalized individuals and extremist activities can be linked in a way, such as via recruitment, support, and online mobilization.

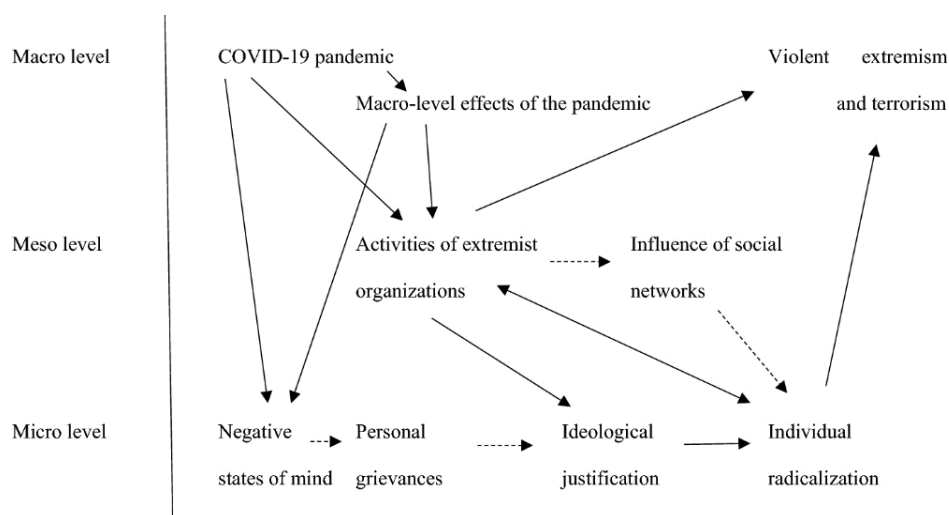


Figure 1. A stylized framework of the impact of COVID-19 on violent extremism and terrorism based on the interplay among the macro (societal), meso (group), and micro (individual) levels of analysis.

Note: From “Hate in the time of coronavirus: Exploring the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on violent extremism and terrorism in the West,” by F. Marone, 2021.

Applying this part of the diagram to anti-Asian sentiments by right-wing extremism can be helpful. Anti-Asian sentiments of right-wing extremists have provided the “justification” of Asian hate to individuals that stimulate individual radicalizations and later increase right-wing extremist

⁶ To see more updated research, check International Network for Hate Studies (2022).

legitimacy and social support. Finally, joint violence and terrorism towards Asians appeared by both individuals and extremist organizations. The framework showing the vicious cycle explains why anti-Asian sentiments and violence are growing transnationally.

Methodology

The methodology used in this article is a hybrid of several techniques. First, articles from credible news sources were gathered and analyzed to understand better how right-wing extremists have used the COVID-19 pandemic to advance their agenda and spread anti-Asian rhetoric. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and during the COVID-19 pandemic, people in the US, UK, and Canada, used hateful language on the social media platforms like Twitter. Therefore, the article also employed text mining techniques in order to find out how people used certain tactics and words in spreading Anti-Asian rhetoric in the COVID-19 context.

Text mining techniques were used to collect and analyze tweets about right-wing extremism and the COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to gathering articles from credible news sources. This was done to gain a more nuanced understanding of the language and messaging employed by right-wing extremists in relation to the pandemic, as well as how it affects Asian communities. The tweets were carefully chosen based on their topic and content relevance, ensuring that only tweets relevant to the research question were included in the analysis. Text mining tools were used to extract specific information from tweets, such as keywords, hashtags, and mentions of particular individuals or groups, and to gain insights into the data's underlying themes and patterns. The tweets were then thoroughly examined, with an emphasis on identifying key language patterns, common themes, and recurring ideas and messages. During the pandemic, this analysis helped to uncover the strategies and tactics used by right-wing extremists to spread anti-Asian rhetoric and advance their agenda.

Finally, the information and news gathered from the articles and tweets were analyzed and synthesized to form the foundation of the article. Identifying patterns, themes, and key points in the data, as well as fact-checking and verifying the accuracy of the information presented, were all part of this analysis. Since the characteristic of social media remains as anonymous, it was hard to realize the findings of Twitter text mining were only from certain members of extreme groups. In this sense, the paper relied on insights from articles and news in going beyond the tendency findings to discover patterns of right-wing extremist tactics in using the COVID-19

Overall, the methodology used in this article was a mixture of primary trend research via Twitter text mining with a qualitative study based on articles and news. It aimed to thoroughly understand how right-wing extremists have used the COVID-19 pandemic to advance their agenda and spread anti-Asian rhetoric.

Framing the Pandemic to Promote Anti-Asian Hate

Right-wing extremism has exploited the COVID-19 pandemic since its initial stage. In this phase, framing was essential to divide who was the victim and who was responsible for the infection. As mentioned above, extremism is based on the strict division between "us and them." Therefore, in their rhetoric, the In-group was positioned as the "victims, while others were blamed for the crisis. In the case of right-wing extremism, this division was mainly by ethnicity as "white VS other."⁷

⁷ This division can be shown better in the *Boogaloo* movement, based on a belief that race war will emerge in a time of crisis. The belief emerged from *The Great Replacement* and *the white genocide*, two far-right conspiracy theories claiming that the white race is being directly and deliberately endangered, which are popular among right-wing extremists.

This separation and framing were widely spread, especially in the early pandemic. It is because there was a lack of firm knowledge, which makes the public vulnerable in dealing with misinformation and disinformation. Moreover, the pandemic has generated not only a health crisis but also social and economic grievances. So that the situation motivated individuals to seek “solutions” to overcome it; in this context, it can be concluded that the early pandemic was a fertile environment for the right-wing extremist narrative, which offers a vivid and straightforward “solution” as blaming Chinese and Asian. Therefore, right-wing extremists could use this opportunity to link COVID-19 to their political goals. In this part, the tactics of right-wing extremists will be analyzed into two categories: 1) labeling and 2) conspiracies.

Labeling

The labeling was about categorizing COVID-19 as Chinese-related. The COVID-19 virus was initially called the “Wuhan-virus” in the early pandemic, named after the first city where the virus was detected. World Health Organization (hereafter WHO) warned that the terminology could stigmatize certain regions or nations and set the official name for the virus as SARS-CoV-2 and the disease name as COVID-19 on February 11, 2020. However, despite the WHO announcement, several terminologies have been used in social media. Right-wing extremist groups used the term “Chinese Virus,” “Kung-flu,” “China virus,” “Chinese plague,” “Corona-chan,” “the CCP (the Chinese Communist Party) virus,” etc. The usage of these terminologies has generated a strong image association between China or Chinese and to COVID-19 virus.

For example, right-wing slogans and saying are also detected in Trump’s administration. Trump himself and Trump’s administration targeted many groups during his presidential period (Stevenson, 2019). Moreover, Trump publicly used “China Virus” and “Chinese Virus” in his tweets on March 16-18, 2020, and when he tweeted about COVID-19 along the line of words such as “China,” “Chinese,” “Chinas,” as seen in Figure 2 of A.

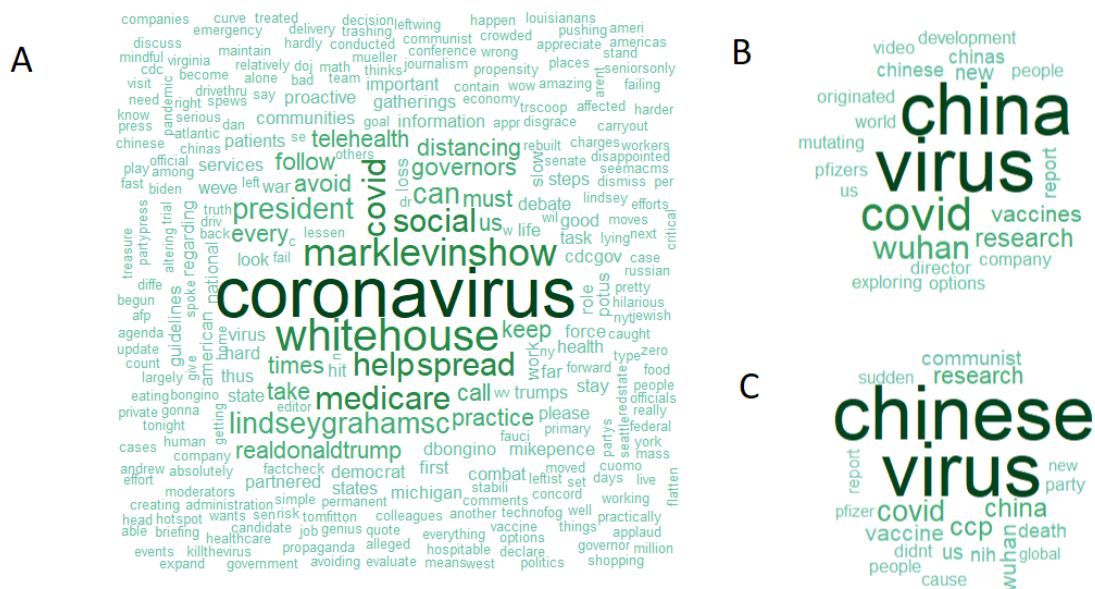


Figure 2. Word Clouds.

Source: Author’s own calculation.

Note 1: A- Trump’s Tweets between the 16th and 18th of March 2020. B and C- Tweets contain “China Virus” and “Chinese Virus” and other words that people use in the same tweets.

Note 2: The word cloud is created using Text Mining techniques in R studio.

Moreover, after Trump used “China Virus” and “Chinese Virus” in his tweets on Twitter, people, predominantly right-wing supporters, used “China Virus” and “Chinese Virus” to describe

COVID-19 and the situation related to COVID-19, as seen in *Figure 2* of B and C. These findings prove that such terminology promoted anti-Asian bias and exclusion (Little, 2020).

Figure 3 shows the usage of hashtags in English tweets during the early time of the COVID-19 outbreak. Clearly, the hashtag “coronavirus” has been chiefly used while the “wuhan” hashtag was used second mainly until the moment that WTO declared COVID-19 as the official name of the disease. It is crucial to notice that although the usage of the tag “wuhan” did not disappear, instead, it has been steadily used to describe and frame the pandemic.

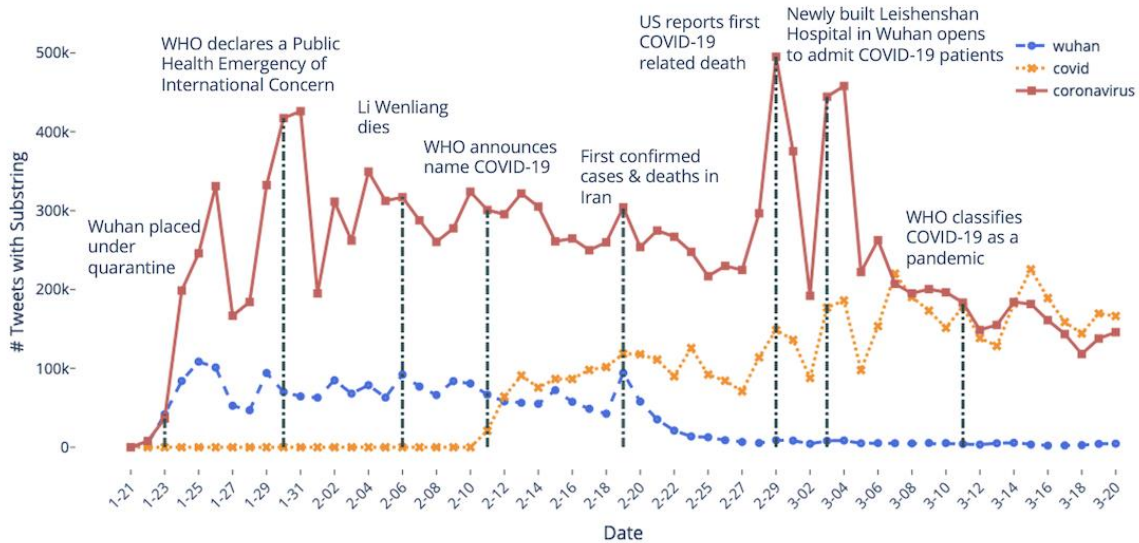


Figure 3. Usage of hashtags containing the substrings “Wuhan,” “covid,” and “coronavirus” over time. *Note:* From “Tracking Social Media Discourse About the COVID-19 Pandemic: Development of a Public Coronavirus Twitter Data Set” by Chen et al., 2020

Increasing anti-Asian terminologies are clearly shown in *Figure 4*. Two graphs illustrate the numbers of posts in (a) 4Chan, which is named /pop/ and (b) Twitter have increased after the pandemic.

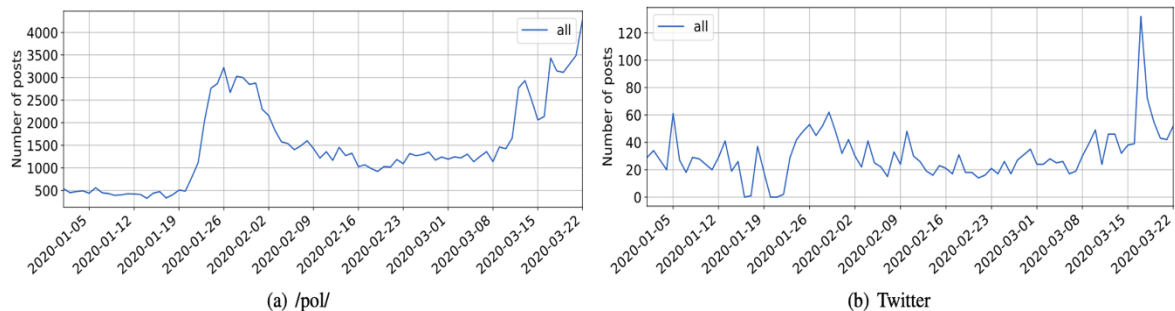


Figure 4. Mentions of Sinophobic racial slurs on 4chan (/pol/) and Twitter during the early pandemic (from January 1, 2020, to March 22, 2020).

Note: From “Go eat a bat, Chang!: An Early Look on the Emergence of Sinophobic Behavior on Web Communities in the Face of COVID-19” by Schild et al., 2020.

This trend shows that right-wing political leaders’ usage of framing terms has significantly led to the growth of other anti-Asian terminologies among the public. In the case of the United States, President Donald Trump uses the word “Chinese virus,” and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo uses the “Wuhan virus.” As can be seen from *Figure 4*, the usage of Sinophobic terms increased after the usage of terms by Trump and Pompeo in mid-March. In this phase, it can be concluded that right-wing politicians and individuals deliberately used race-based terms to frame and emphasize that “the virus originated from China.” The framing terminologies are firstly adopted by right-wing communities and create negative and hostile emotions towards ‘the Other’ group, and later it leads to the development of the manipulative rhetoric justifying the hate towards a certain minority.

Conspiracy theories

While setting terms has an impact on subconsciously relating Chinese to the virus, the whole narrative based on speculations has been spread fast online. This spread of conspiracies was even more harmful, leading to public disinformation, stronger stigmatization, and mistrust towards the authorities. Experts have analyzed this situation “Infodemics” and considered it a severe threat to the pandemic (World Health Organization, 7-8 April 2020). However, some right-wing politicians and media may have encouraged those conspiracy theories to gain more legitimacy. For instance, US Republican senator Tom Cotton was famous for framing these speculations as legit hypotheses on Twitter (Figure 5).



Figure 5. United States Senator Tom Cotton’s Tweets showing the list of speculations regarding the source of the COVID-19 virus (@SenTomCotton, 2020).

Among these, the three most popular conspiracy theories were selected for analysis; 1) The virus escaped from a lab, 2) the virus was a Chinese bioweapon, and 3) infected people were imported to threaten the white population. The main narratives of each conspiracy are briefly summarized (*C1 to C3*).

C1: The virus escaped from a Chinese lab

Wuhan has a virology institute where researchers have been studying bat coronaviruses. One of these researchers, Shi Zhengli, expressed a concern that COVID-19 can be escaped from a lab. However, it was found later that the COVID-19 virus did not match any of the virus samples from the lab. The conspiracy believers perceived this was an attempt by the Chinese government to hide their responsibility and believed the virus was leaked from the lab.

C2: The virus is a Chinese bioweapon

This theory even goes further and argues that the Chinese government made the COVID-19 virus. It claims that the virus was engineered in a nearby laboratory and then released, either deliberately or accidentally. The main evidence supporting this claim is that China’s only maximum Biosafety lab is also located in Wuhan. Conservative media has repeatedly highlighted the connection, despite experts saying that there is absolutely no scientific evidence that the virus is artificial (The Washington Post, 2020).

C3: Infected immigrants using this opportunity to threaten white communities

The theory claims that minority groups are deliberately spreading the virus to attack white communities. It is a radical “us vs them” narrative. The theory implies that minority communities are taking advantage of the crisis to riot and commit crimes (Comerford & Davey, 2020). Different from the other two speculations, in a sense, the theory does not deal with the source of the virus but claims that immigrants are a direct threat to the white population.

These three conspiracy theories do not have any scientific evidence and can be easily debunked. Experts try to combat the spread of conspiracies to prevent harmful consequences. However, it is difficult since conspiracy theories move from one platform to another, such as from 4Chan⁸ to Twitter. The seeding conspiracy theory was organized by online communities and carried by individuals. Due to this decentralized characteristic, finding the initial source and actors is hard. Despite its weak evidence and unknown authorship, the conspiracies effectively spread among people via social media.

According to a survey among US citizens (Pew Research Center, 2020a), nearly three-in-10 Americans believe that COVID-19 was made in a lab. It is phenomenal that 23 percent of Americans think the virus was made and intentionally released by the Chinese government (C2). This theory gained mainstream coverage after Tom Cotton amplified theories about the Wuhan Institute of Virology “is linked to Beijing’s covert bio-weapons program.” Unverified social media accounts carried these speculations to government officials and other known figures, which led to so-called “Infodemics,” which disturbed the entire information ecosystem (Bandeira et al., 2021).

Both labeling and conspiracy strategies significantly show the image of Asians or Chinese by right-wing extremists as the “others” who are mainly responsible for the whole pandemic crisis. Labeling terminologies and conspiracies linking the COVID-19 virus to Asians were effective in making Asians who “deserve” blame for the pandemic situation. Thus, two tactics have a function of framing COVID-19 as “made by” or “fault by” Chinese and Asian. This narrative of right-wing extremism has strengthened their “legitimacy” to hate “others.”

Characteristics and Impacts of Activities

It is significant to notice that both tactics were online-based. Since the COVID-19 pandemic made outdoor gatherings difficult, propaganda and conspiracy spreading have mainly happened in social media. Websites and social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and others were used to spread memes and conspiracy theories, while Telegram, an encrypted messaging app, is primarily used by right-wing extremists in communication among them. Members of white supremacists discuss the tactics and strategies via Telegram while publicly using anti-China sentiment to promote their cause. However, the usage of Telegram cannot be considered as the impact of COVID-19. Anti-government activists and terrorists have preferred Telegram because the platform is hard to be censored by authorities.

The correlation between social isolation and individual radicalization led to the right-wing extremist online tactic being successful. As people are mostly at home, they spend much more time online than usual. It increased the potential impact of disinformation and extremist propaganda. There was a modest positive correlation between change in white supremacist search volume and time spent under “stay at home” in the United States (Moonshot, 2020a) and searches for violent far-right extremist content and time spent under lockdown in Canada (Moonshot, 2020b). Moreover, people during the pandemic have nerve and feelings of uncertainty, especially regarding the future, which could make violent extremist narratives more appealing.

⁸ 4chan is an image board that allows the anonymous posting of information. one of the sub-communities as the Politically Incorrect board (/pol/) is known, simply because it is for the discussion of world events.

The online narrative led to an actual increase of offline harm and violence towards Asians in all three countries; the US (Pew Research Center, 2020b; Zhou, 2020), the UK (Grierson, 2020; Schumann, 2021), and Canada (Kong et al., 2021). In particular, Anti-Asian hate crimes increased by 146 percent in the US (Center for the Study of Hate & Extremism, 2021).

According to the Stop AAPI Hate Reporting Center, Asians have experienced Verbal harassment, deliberate avoidance, physical harm, civil rights violations, and online harassment from the workplace, public, and school. The report shows that rhetoric is not harmless; instead, it brings actual harm to people. Two reported incidents were retrieved to show how anti-Asian hate impact individuals from the Stop AAPI Hate report (Jeung et al., 2021):

There was graffiti in front of a supermarket that said, "CHINA OFF MY FACE." It was written quite large for pedestrians to read as they walked by. (Astoria, NY)

Two white, middle-aged men, who have been my neighbors for over fifteen years, approached me threateningly on the street, pulled down the corners of their eyes and said, "Go back to Wuhan, b*tch and take the virus with you!" When I called them vile, they then called me a "Thai wh*re" and threatened to beat up my husband. (West Vancouver, Canada)

Both cases show that Asians have experienced hostile attitudes from society due to increased anti-Asian sentiments during the pandemic. Thus, it is clear that this anti-Asian rhetoric spread by right-wing extremists has already impacted radicalized individuals and mobilized them to cause actual harm in the real world.

Conclusion

Right-wing extremism has used the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to legitimize its claims using uncertainty and fear among people. Anti-Asian rhetoric by right-wing extremism has impacted risen hate crimes towards Asian and Asian descendants in all three countries: the US, the UK, and Canada. It was shown that online social media, web communities, and the encrypted messaging app were essential in framing the crisis and spreading their conspiracies and communication.

Due to COVID-19, the anti-Chinese and anti-Asian discourses was framed and distributed via an online platform such as Twitter, Facebook, 4Chan, and Telegram. The purpose of stimulating Asian hate by right-wing extremists is linked to their optimal goal of destroying society and building the "white ethnostate."

Civil society and experts have already expressed concerns that this anti-Asian rhetoric could normalize the right-wing extremist ideology and increase their social legitimacy. Right-wing extremist groups and individuals have perceived the COVID-19 crisis to dismantle multicultural and liberal society by promoting disinformation and conspiracy theories to enhance their anti-immigrant or anti-government agendas. Thus, Anti-Asian rhetoric by right-wing extremists during the pandemic should be understood as an attempt to promote extremist ideology and recruit more members. Anti-Asian rhetoric for promoting right-wing extremist ideology should be researched more to prevent further tragedies.

Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has not only impacted Chinese and Asians, and the findings should not be exaggerated as making Chinese and Asians "the victim." However, it is worth noticing that for Asians, the pandemic brought multidimensional burdens.

It is clear that the global society should not overlook the growing anti-Asian sentiments online and offline, and further research about the connection between right-wing extremist groups and radicalized individuals is crucial to tackling their propaganda and harmful activities.

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