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'I'm not a virus': Asian hate in Donald Trump's rhetoric

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ABSTRACT

Since the start of Covid-19, anti-Asian sentiment spiked. From March 2020 to June 2021, there were a total of 9,081 self-reported incidents of hate across the United States (Stop AAPI Hate. (2021). https://stopaapihate.org/stop-aapi-hate-national-report-2/). As Covid-19 spread into the U.S., President Trump immediately blamed China by referring to the virus as the 'Chinese Virus' and used the hashtag #ChineseVirus on Twitter (Weise, E. 2021). Anti-Asian hashtags soared after Donald Trump first tied COVID-19 to China on Twitter. (*USA Today*. https://www.usatoday.com). Anti-Asian rhetoric expressed on Twitter grew after Trump's tweet about the 'Chinese virus,' and the number of Chinese and other Asian hate crimes grew exponentially. This study explores the rhetorical strategies that Trump utilized to create a sense of fear against the dangerous 'Other.' We use a rhetorical thematic analysis to analyze Trump's tweets that contain language such as 'Chinese virus' or 'Kung Flu.' Themes such as scapegoating, fear of the other, China bashing, and populist appeals were prevalent. Describing Chinese and other Asian bodies as 'spreaders' of diseases, reinforces the Yellow Peril and perpetual foreigner stereotypes. The study shows the importance of presidential rhetoric in influencing public opinion in the context of COVID-19 and Asian hate.

Introduction

Since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, expressions of anti-Asian sentiments have skyrocketed (Turton, 2021). As a result, racism and violence toward Asian and Chinese Americans have been well documented (Hswen et al., 2021; Kim & Tummala-Narra, 2022; Kurtzman, 2021; Man, 2020). From March 2020 to June 2021, there were a total of 9,081 self-reported incidents of hatred toward Asians across the United States (Stop AAPI Hate, 2021). Specifically, Dr. Russell Jeung finds, 'of 9,081 hate incident reports included in this report, 48.1% included at least one hateful statement regarding anti-China and/or anti-immigrant rhetoric' (Stop AAPI Hate, 2021, para. 16). Moreover, a recent study reveals that 'anti-Asian hate crimes have increased since the

start of the pandemic: 1 in 6 Asian American adults reported experiencing a hate crime in 2021, up from 1 in 8 in 2020' (Lee, 2022, para. 2). Hate crimes are defined as 'crimes in which the perpetrators acted based on a bias against the victim's race, color, religion, or national origin' (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2021, para. 2). However, many victims do not report their hate crimes which means the figures are probably higher than recorded (Pezzella et al., 2019). Asian Americans live in fear due to the unpredictability of when these crimes might occur (Arnold, 2021). According to the Pew Research Center, '32% of Asian adults say they have feared someone might threaten or physically attack them – a greater share than other racial or ethnic groups' (Ruiz et al., 2021, para. 1). The rise in xenophobia resulted in an increase in 'anxiety, depressive symptoms, and sleep problems among those who are targeted' (Abrams, 2021, para. 4). We also know that negative social media messages stemming from an influential source like the president can precipitate serious and significant mental health issues among minority groups (Hswen et al., 2020). To add to the problem, Sue et al. (2012) state that Asian Americans reluctantly seek mental health resources compared to other minority groups and whites. Some of the reasons for not utilizing these services are because of 'stigma, shame, and a lack of service providers who speak Asian languages' (Sue et al., 2012, p. 539). These barriers make it difficult for many Asian Americans to receive counseling and help during times of distress.

Alarmingly, much of the anti-Asian discourse has occurred directly as a response to a single, albeit highly influential, person. For this reason, we will argue that some messages and hashtags from President Trump's tweets serve as not only examples for how others can use Twitter for such anti-Asian rhetoric, but also how particular tweets from the president can be translated into physical mistreatment of Asians by Trump's Twitter followers (Hswen et al., 2021; Kurtzman, 2021; Lantz et al., 2023; Salcedo, 2021). By using a specialized R script when reading the original Trump tweets and their retweets in the Twitter archive, we will highlight specific rhetorical strategies deployed by President Trump when communicating his general anti-Asian – and anti-Chinese – messages.

Of course, anti-Asian rhetoric long pre-dates Trump's presidency, and he is not solely responsible for the violence and discrimination toward Asians. However, given his political power, social position and daily media exposure, Donald Trump's statements and discursive depictions about Asians at best legitimizes a climate of anti-Asian sentiment, and at worst actively endorses hatred and hostility toward Asians. Specifically, most of Trump's rhetoric directly targets China and Chinese people but also has implications for other communities of Asian descent. As Yang (2022) explains, 'when all members of a diverse race of people are viewed as one, one ethnic group's being targeted can mean any ethnic group's being targeted' (para. 28). The inability to differentiate between Asian cultures is one explanation for the offenders of hate crimes to target other Asian American victims who are not Chinese (Bowden, 2022).

The pandemic provided justification for many to use the virus to blame Chinese and other Asian communities, even though anti-Asian and anti-Chinese attacks and discourse have occurred ever since Asians began immigrating to the United States (Yeh et al., 2022). People have expressed their blame in several ways, including but not limited to racial slurs, physical assaults, and even killings. On 13 February 2022, Christina Yuna Lee, a Korean American, after walking home, was brutally stabbed in her China-town apartment (Brown, 2022). A witness, Eunhae Son, saw the man yelling, 'You

Asian [expletive]' and other racial slurs to Lee when following her to her apartment (Chao, 2022). She was later stabbed 40 times. A month before Lee's unfortunate death, Michelle Alyssa Go was pushed to her death in front of an oncoming subway train (Chavez, 2022). Although Go's death has not been ruled a hate crime, many Asian Americans across the nation were still affected by similar violent crimes because they were reminded of the violence that could be inflicted on them simply for their identity. These are just two of many examples of victims who were targeted for their Asian identities since the start of the pandemic (Lee & Yadav, 2020; Mandalaywala et al., 2021; Noel, 2020; Tabri et al., 2020). As we will argue in greater detail, many people were motivated to confront Chinese and other Asian communities because their president legitimized it. Unfortunately, as we know from other empirical studies conducted that explore the connections between social media and hate crimes, tweets and hashtags have been barometers to see if enough hate sentiment has occurred to spark physical violence; and, in some cases, the tweets and hashtags have even precipitated hate crimes since ideologically predisposed followers on social media may be triggered by particular words, phrases, or concepts (Hswen et al., 2021). Since President Trump had a platform and a large following, he led by example.

President Donald Trump played a considerable role in creating COVID panic by immediately blaming China. In fact, hate crimes against AAPI folks skyrocketed 145% following Trump's Asian-linking to the pandemic (Bowden, 2022). He did so by referring to the virus as the 'Chinese Virus' and used the hashtag #ChineseVirus on Twitter despite warnings from the WHO that references to the virus should not include attribution to geography, nationality, or ethnicity (Hswen et al., 2021; Salcedo, 2021; Weise, 2021). Trump's use of the hashtag prompted his followers to use the hashtag as well, and the number of Twitter users who used #ChineseVirus grew by 8,351% during 2020 (Hswen et al., 2021). Many followers used #ChineseVirus instead of #Covid19 to advocate 'killing Chinese people, bombing Chinese cities as well as racist attacks on all things Asian' (Weise, 2021, para. 9). Anti-Asian sentiments expressed on Twitter grew after Trump's tweet about the 'Chinese virus,' and many of the tweets and hashtags suggested violence (Hswen et al., 2021; Lantz et al., 2023).

Not only did Trump's use of social media influence the American public about the coronavirus, but traditional news media did as well. Holt et al. (2022) report how media framing of the virus, as originating from China and associated with Asians in general, has created common blame attribution to Asians. Holt et al. (2022) also argue that such media framing is probably, at least in part, the reason why the advocacy organization Stop AAPI chronicled more than 2,800 hate incidents directed at Asians in the United States in the single of year of 2020, including a nine-fold increase in New York City alone (Cabral, 2021). Moreover, Hswen et al. (2021) note an empirical study that reported a causal link between derogatory tweets and a rise in anti-Muslim hate crimes (Müller & Schwarz, 2020). The news media typically cover presidential news since it is considered newsworthy and information about the president's agenda is convenient to obtain (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2016). Given this dynamic, the combination of negative presidential comments – and the larger media reporting – create an overarching frame that connects the pandemic to Asians.

COVID-19 impacted many lives, and many individuals needed to adjust their way of living to adapt to the recent anti-virus policies, such as vaccine requirements and mask

wearing. As of July 2023, there have been over 107 million documented COVID-19 cases (Worldometer, 2023) and over 1.1 million deaths in the United States (CDC, 2023). To further highlight the significance of the pandemic, the World Health Organization (2023) reports that there have been nearly 800 million worldwide deaths. As a result, the United States implemented new social distancing procedures as well as invoking stay-at-home orders. Individuals had to abide by mask guidelines to suppress the spread of the coronavirus (CDC, 2020). Most Republicans were more comfortable than Democrats to carry on with their everyday activities despite the raging pandemic (Deane et al., 2021). Many Republicans were and are strongly opposed to the mask and vaccine mandates because they feel that they strip individual liberties (Graham, 2021). Consequently, many Americans were frustrated and outraged when social distancing policies were set in place as well as the COVID-19 lockdowns. Undoubtedly, Trump's remark about the 'Chinese virus' and 'Kung Flu' prompted many Americans to blame the Chinese and other Asian Americans for COVID-19. In the United States, nearly one in four people, including nearly half of Asian Americans, heard or witnessed others blaming Asians for COVID-19 (Page & Elbeshbishi, 2021).

Chinese and other Asians have often been associated with viruses; generally, immigrants have often been associated with diseases and germs since the inception of the country (Le et al., 2020; Markel & Stern, 2002). The association between Asians and the pandemic dates back to the Yellow Peril era when Chinese and other Asian immigrants were seen as a threat to the nation (Le et al., 2020). Around the turn of the twentieth century, Asian immigrants were scapegoats when trachoma was spreading across the United States (Ji-Hye, 2014). Ji-Hye (2014) mentions that even though trachoma was spread in unsanitary schools in New York, many individuals used the infection as a tool to discriminate against Asian immigrants. When the SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) crisis spread to Canada in 2003, Chinese Canadians faced harassment and alienation (Leung, 2008). The same can be observed with the coronavirus (Boontanataweepol, 2021). As Mallapragada (2021) notes, 'Asian Americans are being invested with the epidemiological properties associated with COVID-19 – infectious, contaminating the air around them, and contagious' (p. 283). When national panic arises, Asian bodies are typically seen as threats to the white body (Tessler et al., 2020).

Today the topic of anti-Asian animosity necessitates special concern because of the rhetoric of a president who capitalized on an existing surge of anti-foreigner attitudes. While some studies have examined Trump's anti-Asian discourse during the pandemic (An et al., 2021; Hswen et al., 2021; Kim & Kesari, 2021; Lantz et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2020), few have deployed a rhetorical analysis. As such, we are compelled to write this paper during this tragic time of Asian loathing:

> … the COVID-19 pandemic has brought with it a surge in anti-AAPI harassment and hate crimes, with some institutions estimating a 124% increase in hate crimes between 2020 and 2021, followed by an even steeper 339% increase between 2021 and 2022. (Gibson Dunn, 2023, para. 1)

We will explore Trump's anti-Asian rhetoric and how that has amplified the climate of hate that was already occurring. Although anti-Chinese perceptions already existed, Trump's presidency added to and exacerbated the atmosphere of hatred and fear toward Chinese and other Asian American communities. Hence, we will explore

important and relevant scholarly literature on this subject before analyzing key texts from Trump. Finally, we explore the textual significance of Trump's rhetoric – including the meaning of his rhetoric and potential impact – on the Chinese and other Asian American communities during a time of national uncertainty and despair.

Tracing the history of anti-Asian rhetoric in the U.S.

Now that we have a general background of this rhetorical crisis, we must note previous views and concerns about presidential communication, anti-Asian discourse, and Trump's rhetoric of hate so that we can deeply explore Trump's discourse as well as contrast his messaging from previous presidential rhetoric. The position of the president is considered of esteemed importance, and for this reason, there is extensive literature written about presidential rhetoric. The words that a president chooses to use are important because they shape public perceptions (Cohen, 1995), which is known as 'priming' (Druckman & Holmes, 2004). Consumers of media focus on a recent news story, and their judgment of the president's actions or behaviors influences how they perceive the president's performance (Malhotra & Krosnick, 2007). Priming can influence a president's image to the public, in part, when presidents focus on issues that result in heightened public salience. The course of action that a president uses to solve a national problem can also influence the public's perception and confidence about the president. Malhotra and Krosnick's (2007) study highlights how a president's rhetoric influences public approval and can garner support from voters. Additionally, the news media play a considerable role in how the public views the president by also reporting on those same issues.

To be clear, presidential rhetoric can influence popular attitudes about important social issues (Fisher et al., 2019; Oliver, 1998). Indeed, past presidents have characterized Asian Americans negatively, which, in turn, amplified anti-Asian sentiment across the nation. One example concerns Japanese Americans. Prior to the placement of Japanese Americans and other foreigners in internment camps, some military officials proposed removing all Japanese individuals from the West Coast. Lieutenant General John DeWitt and some of his staff members believed that around 20,000 individuals of Japanese descent were planning a Japanese invasion in San Francisco (Muller, 2021). As a result of perspectives like this, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 in 1942 that forced Japanese Americans into internment camps because they were viewed as a threat to national security. Although Italians and Germans were also interned during this time in the United States (Taylor, 2017; Tremoglie, 2022), the military specifically targeted the Japanese and displaced many from their homes. Consequently, the Japanese living in America were officially viewed as a risk to national security. Thus, it is not surprising that many racist citizens subsequently harassed Japanese Americans. In a similar situation since the 2020 election, questions by Congress and the American public surfaced concerning how to hold presidents accountable for their words (Scacco & Coe, 2021). Since the presidency holds significant influence, entities such as Congress, media platforms, and the public should hold the president even more accountable for their rhetoric.

The anti-Asian rhetoric displayed in stereotypes fuels the anti-Asian and anti-immigrant sentiments, such as the model minority myth and hatred of the mere existence of Asians in

the United States. Negative stereotypes may lead to bias and prejudice which can lead to discrimination such as hate crimes (Hswen et al., 2021; Kurtzman, 2021; Lee et al., 2007; Müller & Schwarz, 2020). Asian stereotypes began when an influx of Chinese immigrated to the United States for a better future. Chinese laborers started immigrating to the United States in 1865 to help build the railroad systems (Sunseri, 2015). During this time, many Chinese individuals were hired as laborers by the management of the Central Pacific Railroad (CPRR) due to a labor shortage in the West. However, at the time, many white laborers were under the impression that the Chinese immigrants were taking their jobs since management was able to pay them lower wages. This was just one of the reasons that fueled resentment toward the Chinese.

One of the acts that impacted Chinese history was the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. The Act prevented immigrants of Chinese descent from immigrating to the United States (Calavita, 2000). The act was the first federal immigration law that prevented a specific nationality from entering the nation. The Chinese immigrants who were already living in the United States faced constant discrimination as a result.

Not only were Chinese individuals discriminated against, but there were many anti-Japanese sentiments following World War II and during the U.S.-Japan trade wars in the 1980s. The discrimination toward Japanese Americans was known as 'Japan bashing,' in which Americans blamed Japanese Americans during heightened U.S.-Japan tensions (Iino, 1994). Since the typical American is unable to differentiate between the various Asian cultures, this led to the bigoted targeting toward other Asian Americans – not just the Japanese (Iino, 1994).

The 'Yellow Peril' stereotype was commonly used to 'describe Asian Americans as 'foreigner foreigners' who divert from U.S. dominant cultural norms, are economic competitors, and thereby undermine the white nation' (Kawai, 2005, p. 110). The stereotype highlights the western fear of Asians. When Asians originally immigrated to the United States *en masse*, white individuals felt threatened that the Asians would foster instability. Americans were worried that the immigrants would 'take away their jobs, threaten American democracy with anarchistic ideas, and endanger the nation's health' (Ji-Hye, 2014, pp. 573–574).

Asian Americans who immigrated to the United States were often referred to as the 'perpetual foreigner' (Huynh et al., 2011). This stereotype posits that Asian immigrants would never fully assimilate as 'Americans' because they would always be perceived as foreigners, which is also a discursive way of 'Otherizing' Asians to always linguistically demarcate them as something different, perhaps exotic, and not 'normal' or a 'typical' part of American culture (Azhar et al., 2021; Hai & Dong, 2019). Our argument here is not that Asians should assimilate or even that assimilation is a beneficial ideal. On the contrary, we are noting here how racists and folks engaging in the anti-Asian stereotype of the 'perpetual foreigner' are the people who find assimilation important, yet threatened by Asians who preserve their own cultures. Even when many Asian immigrants attempt to assimilate into western culture, they are still seen as foreigners because of their unique facial features, traditions, and culture (Hwang & Parrenas, 2021). For example, when Japanese Americans were trying to assimilate into the U.S. culture, the Los Angeles mayor Fletcher Bowron downplayed their assimilation and called it a ploy to try to fool white individuals (Wu, 2002). In 1942, Bowron declared in a speech that,

> The Japanese, because they are nonassimilable, because the aliens have been denied the right to own real property in California, because of the Alien Exclusion Act, because of the marked difference in appearance between Japanese and Caucasians, because of the generations of training and philosophy that make them Japanese and nothing else – all of these contributing factors set the Japanese apart as a race, regardless of how many generations may have been born in America. (Bowron, 1942, para. 40)

This reinforces the idea that members of mainstream culture believe that Asians are not able to assimilate into western culture, and citizens will continue to perceive them as a foreign Other.

Another popular stereotype that many Asian Americans face is the model minority stereotype. The model minority stereotype depicts all Asians as hardworking, successful, and intelligent (Lee & Joo, 2005). The stereotype pressures – and, as we will discuss later, interpellates – many Asian immigrants to assimilate into the white culture by suggesting that if one works hard, they will be prosperous (Hswen et al., 2021). Asian Americans are seen as the modern-day success story. In this way, the premise undergirding this myth reinforces, and is reinforced by, the idea of the American dream, which signifies an ideological framework to rationalize and legitimize the mistreatment of a racialized Other, as well as purposefully pitting different minority groups against each other (Lantz et al., 2023; Müller & Schwarz). The model minority myth was created by conservatives as propaganda to refute government assisted programs (Sakamoto et al., 2012). The conservatives used the model minority myth as an ideological tool to pit minorities against one another by claiming that other racialized groups can also overcome their challenges and achieve success much like the Asian immigrants (Yi & Museus, 2015). The model minority stereotype creates a standard which pressures other marginalized groups to meet. This forms a racial divide and hierarchy between different groups (Hswen et al., 2021; Yi et al., 2022). The model minority myth has been under scrutiny because it fails to account for the diversity within the Asian community. The idea that all Asians are hardworking creates pressure for Asians who do not meet those expectations, triggering deep mental anguish and even trauma (Cohut, 2020; McGowan & Lindgren, 2006). The negative implications of the model minority stereotype make it difficult for struggling Asian families from obtaining assistance from government programs. Asian Americans who endorse these stereotypes tend to face more psychological distress (Gupta et al., 2011). The model minority categorization remains a prominent stereotype of Asian Americans to the point where many Americans do not recognize the oppression and antagonism that exist. The stereotype masks the challenges and inequalities that Asian Americans face.

Trump's anti-Asian rhetoric

Trump was known as the 'Twitter president' because of his excessive use of Twitter to communicate to the public (Gitelman, 2021; Ingram, 2017). According to Bratslavsky et al., Twitter has been 'commodified and utilized by elites to advance their own political agendas, or more cynically, to exercise strategies to legitimate their power' (2020, p. 619). The same researchers use Trump as a prime example to highlight how he used Twitter for his political aspirations. However, a crucial problem is that most of the content that Trump tweeted contained misinformation and inaccuracies (Sabato et al., 2017). Not

only is the sheer volume of nearly 31,000 lies and false information disturbing (Kessler et al., 2021), but the qualitative and problematic differences of Trump's messages as compared to every other president are also extremely concerning (Pfiffner, 2019). An example was when Trump, without evidence, claimed that China intentionally created and then spread COVID-19 to damage the West. This is just one example, but it reveals how Trump employed hate rhetoric against minority groups.

Trump uses specific rhetoric to blame social problems on the 'imagined other,' such as women, black people, and other minority groups (Steudeman, 2018). Steudeman (2018) mentions Trump's populist rhetorical appeals 'as a legitimizing and galvanizing mechanism for xenophobia, ethnocentrism, and white nationalism' (p. 24). Trump's populist style treats his white voters as 'true Americans,' which necessarily means that non-white voters are not 'true' citizens. Thus, Trump's hate rhetoric tends to target individuals who are not male and not white. By targeting his attacks toward these specific groups, he refers to them as the instigators for American social problems and as threats to the United States (Wingard, 2018). When Trump capitalized upon these boundaries, he used the strategy of scapegoating to 'shift the responsibility for anything negative associated with himself or his administration' (Kreis, 2017, p. 615). By reinforcing the boundaries of the American identity, Trump created a distinction between a 'true' American and the dangerous 'Other.'

Trump's rhetoric toward minorities is problematic because it can fuel negative stereotypes, discrimination, racism, and even violence. Unfortunately, Trump engaged in many instances of racist rhetoric on Twitter. For example, one tweet argues that '81% of white homicide victims were killed by African Americans' (Anspach, 2021, p. 2699). This tweet is just one example of the many racially-motivated – and inaccurate – tweets that Trump posted during his presidency. The tweet caused other Twitter users and voters to view black Americans with negative stereotypes such as the myth that black people are generally violent criminals (Anspach, 2021). Many may engage in racist actions and practices due to the misinformation that Trump's racial tweets perpetuate.

Since Trump started referring to the coronavirus as the 'Chinese virus,' the 'dangerous dissemination of false information and anti-Chinese racism have spiked dramatically' (Gao & Liu, 2021, p. 262). Trump's rhetoric became the catalyst for the emergence of other tweets that blamed Chinese individuals for the start and spread of the coronavirus (Nguyen et al., 2020). Nguyen et al. (2020) conducted a mixed-methods study and uncovered that there was an increase in anti-Asian sentiments when COVID-19 started spreading in the United States. A series of racist tweets targeting not just Chinese individuals, but also individuals of other Asian groups, grew in popularity.

Gover et al. (2020) argue that the anti-Asian hate crimes contribute to the 'Othering' of Asians in the United States. Othering is used to mark those who are different (Weis, 1995). When people are seen as outsiders and do not belong, they are also perceived as a threat to national security (Grove & Zwi, 2006). The Orientalist depiction of Chinese and other Asians reinforces the Yellow Peril trope where people perceive the Chinese community as diseased and dirty. Some scholars already connect Asian Othering to COVID-19 (Nelkin & Gilman, 1988). As Lantz et al. (2023) note, '"Othering" is inherently facilitated by the placement of blame and responsibility on an outgroup which, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, is Asian people' (para. 12). Additionally, Gover et al. (2020) focus on the problematic rhetoric of referring to the coronavirus as

the 'Chinese virus' and discuss how it can be particularly harmful to tie a virus to an ethnicity. As they argue, 'Racial/ethnic inequality has been reproduced through the establishment of an "*us. vs. them*" modus operandi that relegates Asian Americans to the bottom of the social hierarchy' (p. 663, emphasis in original). This study is extremely valuable and sheds much needed insight into how certain rhetoric can be divisive and polarizing; however, this study and others do not focus on presidential – or Trumpian – anti-Asian discourse because that was not their objective. We believe that our project will add to the conversation about the impact of racialized rhetoric by focusing on the role of presidential communication in this particular context.

Despite the ongoing problems experienced by Asian Americans, they were rarely discussed during the 2020 presidential election. Nishime (2021) argues, 'To be left out of the election's visual vocabulary is to be neglected in the national imagination' (p. 458). Most of the Asian Americans' narratives were absent during the 2020 election. The news about COVID-19 deaths and everyday challenges largely ignored Asian American stories and experiences except when they were blamed (Nishime, 2021). The news media would use stories from other marginalized groups, but they generally did not include Asian American representation. As this demonstrates, Asian voices are constantly silenced or ignored in mainstream discourse.

With the widespread adoption of Twitter as a platform to spread information and influence, Trump was able to spread misinformation online without a filter. At one point before his account was blocked, Trump amassed over 80 million Twitter followers (Dixon, 2022). Many Twitter users trust social media more than traditional news media because they can obtain their news faster on the social networking sites compared to news media (Sabato et al., 2017). Furthermore, Twitter users believe they are receiving more accurate and authentic information on social media because they are retrieving the material directly from the source (Enli, 2017; Sclafani, 2018; Singer & Brooking, 2018; Zompetti, 2019). This is concerning because 'online social networks could spur social influence offline' (Jones et al., 2017, p. 2). Zompetti (2019) furthers this argument by mentioning that 'Trump used Twitter to construct a voice of "authenticity." The platform inimitably allows Trump to present himself with an authentic voice while simultaneously sounding as if he is also the authentic voice of the people' (p. 32).

As we have seen, since the 2016 election, the number of anti-Asian attacks is on the rise. However, limited research addresses the proliferation of anti-Asian violence in the United States when taking into account the pandemic and social media, and there is a lack of research focusing on Trump's anti-Asian rhetoric. Most of the research examines Trump's racist rhetoric toward minorities other than Asians. Furthermore, the current body of literature tends to not address how Trump's COVID-19 rhetoric amplified the harm toward Chinese and other Asian American populations. Presidents have authority and can influence a large group of people, which is why the office of the presidency is known to command the 'bully pulpit,' or the unique persuasive power of the presidency given the careful and frequent attention by the world's media (Miles, 2014). Therefore, the words that a president chooses to use are important and require careful investigation. By focusing specifically on Trump's rhetoric, we hope to uncover how his rhetoric legitimized expressions of anti-Asian hate.

Method of investigation

A rhetorical analysis is integral for this project because the topic touches on Trump's problematic rhetoric when addressing COVID-19. Current research in this area is scarce. By using a rhetorical analysis, we can begin to uncover how Trump's messages played a significant role in the expressions of anti-Asian sentiments during the COVID-19 period. Since there was a history of discrimination toward Asian immigrants, many were voiceless and could not express their social condition. In rhetorical studies, a specific approach that examines the relationship between power and the social relations of marginalized groups is called critical rhetoric (McKerrow 1989). Based on the notion that rhetoric can facilitate power as oppression as well as foster power as a liberatory force, critical rhetoric has been used to examine the rhetoric of marginalized groups (Stern & Denker, 2020). Because critical rhetoric reminds the critic that they are also part of the social relations impacted by rhetorical practices, the theoretical contributions of critical rhetoric also include connecting criticism to social justice praxis (Hess et al., 2020; Ono & Sloop, 1992). Recently, critical rhetoric has also been used to explore Trump's oppressive rhetoric (Dunn, 2020). Additionally, and for our purposes, critical rhetoric enables us to problematize the dynamics between hegemonic power and subaltern, marginalized groups (Briziarelli & Karikari, 2016; Cloud, 2020; Zompetti, 1997, 2012), As such, a critical rhetorical framework provides useful tools to investigate and interpret the hegemonic rhetoric about Asians in our current COVID-19 conjuncture.

The overarching concept of hegemony explains the power struggle that many marginalized groups endure. When Gramsci developed the concept of hegemony, he was referencing it in the context of class and cultural struggle. Hegemony is when 'the dominant group exercises throughout society and on the other hand to that of "direct domination" or command exercised through the State and "juridical" government' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 12). The dominant class has control and power over the subaltern. Subaltern groups can generally be defined as, figures 'of exclusion, representing the specular opposite of the citizen … the subaltern represents a lack of access to institutions of rights and obligations' (Thomas, 2018, p. 861). Subaltern groups are marginalized and powerless, so much so that the dominant group can control the narrative of the subaltern groups. As a result, ideologies are sustained using language (Althusser, 2001; Zompetti, 2012). However, language can also act as a tool for social change because of language's influence on how we think about ideas (Del Gandio, 2008). But, quite simply, language has consistently been used to sustain Asian Americans as a subaltern group. Hegemony, in the context of Asian Americans, is reinforced, if not constructed, by stereotypes. Rhetoric is used and mainstreamed by hegemonic groups 'to embolden members of the dominant group and to send the message that negative attitudes and behavior – including xenophobic attitudes, and even hate crimes – toward that group can be acted upon or committed without consequence' (Lantz et al., 2023). Specifically, Asian Americans have been disenfranchised during the pandemic, as Nishime (2021) reminds us that Asian American identities were largely silenced during the 2020 election. The silencing of many Asian American voices during the 2020 election and during COVID-19 highlights how Asian Americans are relegated to the subaltern terrain. The dominant group, that includes violent, racist Americans, creates and sustains an ideology

that Asians and Chinese Americans are 'dirty' and a threat to the health and safety of the nation.

A rhetorical analysis helps the critic to uncover the hidden meaning of texts. For this project, we use a thematic rhetorical analysis, which is useful to 'capture emerging themes' (Adam et al., 2005, p. 239). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), a thematic analysis follows six steps. The steps require familiarity with the data, the generation of initial codes, defining and naming of themes, a search for themes, a review of the themes, and a production of the report. A rhetorical critic can analyze a text using all six steps without labeling or demarcating each step, as the phases can overlap and reinforce each other. Additionally, the thematic analysis process is not intended to be linear; rather, the steps are more recursive, which means the critic can move from step to step as needed. Braun and Clarke (2006) also mention that the critic can uncover both semantic and latent themes. Semantic themes are explicit meanings derived from the text. On the other hand, latent themes are less obvious to the average reader. The critic would have to 'offer a deeper interpretation' of the text to uncover the latent themes, which a rhetorical analysis allows (Wigginton & Lee, 2014, p. 266). These themes are meant to 'articulate or describe a particular social phenomenon' (Aguinaldo, 2012, p. 769). The categories are meant to represent the text as a whole. Furthermore, a thematic analysis is unique and useful for this topic because 'no one really approaches political Twitter use from a thematic lens' (Zompetti, 2019, p. 33). Therefore, given its appropriateness and that virtually no one has examined Trump's tweets and other rhetoric in this manner, the use of thematic analysis seems particularly suited for this type of a project and given the gravity of discursive hatred, necessary.

The texts that we analyze include Trump's tweets when he discusses the coronavirus in conjunction with blaming Asians in general, and the Chinese in particular. Examining Trump's tweets will be useful when trying to ascertain how the messages function rhetorically as well as how they might be influential to Trump's Twitter followers (Gitelman, 2021; Ingram, 2017). Trump used other channels beyond Twitter to articulate his perspectives, such as his campaign announcement speech, and explorations into other venues and rhetorical means can be subjects for future research (Trump, 2015). These include presidential speeches which also garners significant media attention. Trump is an expert at gaining media coverage since political figures who are perceived as 'interesting' and newsworthy are more likely to be covered on the news (Lawrence & Boydstun, 2017). As we can see, Trump can successfully tap into the hybrid media system which consists of older media such as traditional news media as well as newer media, like Twitter (Chadwick, 2013). By doing so, this greatly benefits Trump since he can 'traverse the networks and logics of older and newer media to advance their values and interests' (Chadwick, 2013, p. 207). However, given Trump's moniker of being the 'Twitter president' and since hashtags 'have been shown to act as a predictor of the formation of hate groups and the occurrence of hate crimes,' we focus our analysis on Trump's anti-Asian tweets (Kurtzman, 2021, para. 6; see also Hswen et al., 2021). Our collection of his tweets begins on 16 March 2020, when Trump first tweeted #ChineseVirus, through 1 January 2022, which is the date we first began writing this piece (Salcedo, 2021). Since Trump's Twitter account was indefinitely banned, we use the Trump Twitter Archive, which is an online database containing his old tweets (Lomeli, 2021). Although his Twitter account has been reinstated, during the time of this analysis his tweets and Twitter account were

unavailable (Duffy & LeBlanc, 2022). We searched for terms that contain phrases including, 'China virus,' 'Chinese virus,' 'Wuhan virus,' 'Kung flu,' 'the Chinese flu,' 'the Chinese coronavirus,' 'the Wuhan coronavirus,' 'a foreign virus,' and 'plague from China.' These were the most common phrases he would use when referring to the coronavirus. We analyzed a range of tweets starting from 14 March 2020, to 3 January 2021. Additionally, we utilize an R script application (called RTweet) developed in our state-of-the-art Social Media Analytic Command Center (SMACC) that allows screen grabs of original tweets as well as retweets. The RTweet application is proprietary from our Director of Convergent Media, so we are precluded to disclose too much detail except to say it permits an aggregation of targeted keywords and phrases. As a result, we are able to search for the keywords/key phrases noted above that yield tweets containing the words/phrases in a specified date range. After using the RTweet application, we uncovered 60 unique instances when Trump used the terms to refer to the coronavirus, which do not include the amplification of such messages when retweeted by followers and then Trump's subsequent retweets of followers' posts. Since our project focuses on the meanings of Twitter messages, our reading of the messages merely identifies recurring themes or patterns within the tweets that emerge from the RTweet application.

Analysis

Given the dearth of scholarship concerning Trump's rhetorical techniques with the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, we will explore the themes in Trump's tweets that relate to COVID-19. It is not uncommon for a president to address a major crisis in a speech from the Oval Office or through some White House press releases. However, with Twitter, Trump communicated to the country in some cases as much as a thirty times per day (Bump, 2020). Since Trump spent a significant portion of time tweeting to his followers about the coronavirus, we focus our attention on the common themes that emerged from Trump's messages. The core themes that emerged during our investigation are scapegoating, fear of the other, China bashing, and populist appeals.

Scapegoating

When Trump discussed the harmful effects of COVID-19, he singled out the Chinese community and anyone who disagreed with him, which reinforced his unwillingness or inability to accept any personal responsibility for some of the detrimental impacts the virus placed on the nation. According to McClymond (2019), scapegoating 'requires a social system that is willing to substitute one living being on behalf of another, to redirect condemnation' (p. 6). Trump created many narratives of the 'Other' and bolstered an ideology that the 'Other' is dangerous and threatening to American ideals. As Rowland (2021) mentions, 'Trump's rhetoric created an us-versus-them dynamic that reinforced their sense of threatened identity' (pp. 25–26).

In every instance when Donald Trump tweeted about the 'Chinese virus,' he added the negative harm that COVID-19 created for American citizens. He mentioned the impact of the 'Chinese virus' on the airline industry, lives, and businesses in the United States. On 16 March 2020, Trump discussed the impact on the airline industry by stating, 'The United States will be powerfully supporting those industries, like airlines and others, that

are particularly affected by the Chinese Virus. We will be stronger than ever before!' (Trump, 2020a). On 18 March 2020, he blamed the 'Chinese virus' for the 'shutting down of hotels, bars and restaurants' (Trump, 2020b). By doing so, he attributed the decline of businesses and industries to the virus while not taking any responsibility himself as the leader of his nation. In the same tweet, he continued with, 'the onslaught of the Chinese Virus is not your fault! Will be stronger than ever' (Trump, 2020b). By using the word 'your,' he implied an 'us' versus 'them' framework (Barr et al., 2021). The 'us,' of course, refers to the American people, primarily his supporters, and the 'them' signifies Chinese people. Since Chinese and other Asian Americans are blamed for the issues that COVID-19 has caused, many lives were lost or damaged due to hate crimes. Trump reinforces the Othering by identifying 'who is in' and 'who is out' (Grove & Zwi, 2006). His rhetoric reinforces anti-foreigner sentiments by creating boundaries around who are 'true' Americans. In this way, Trump constructs specific ideological identities – in what Althusser (2001) calls 'interpellation' – that reinforces how groups are perceived ideologically. This is quite similar to Dunn's (2020) analysis of Trump's tweets that frame the president as a protagonist against threats to the Republic. Reactions by Trump's followers demonstrate the animus that results from such us versus them rhetoric, such as when Asian businesses were vandalized. The notorious example was the Atlanta-area spa shooting which killed eight civilians and six of them were Asian women (Ramachandran, 2021; Rev, 2021). Other small businesses have also been harassed. Another instance is when the Chinese American couple who own RiceBox, a Cantonese BBQ restaurant in downtown Los Angeles, consistently received prank calls (Fox, 2021). These prank calls would contain discriminatory messages such as 'Do you serve bats? Do you serve Covid?' (Fox, 2021, para. 6). These acts of discrimination and harassment have been the new reality for many Chinese and other Asian Americans.

Not only did Trump blame the 'Chinese virus' for domestic problems related to the virus, but he also used the harmful rhetoric to discuss the spread of the coronavirus internationally. This began on 16 November 2020, when Trump tweeted, 'European Countries are sadly getting clobbered by the China Virus' (Trump, 2020p). On 18 December 2020, he said, 'Europe and other parts of the World being hit hard by the China Virus – Germany, France, Spain and Italy, in particular. The vaccines are on their way!!!' (Trump, 2020q). A day later, on 19 December 2020, he said, 'the entire WORLD is being badly hurt by the China Virus' (Trump, 2020r). By using words such as 'clobbered,' 'hit hard,' and 'badly hurt' in association with the 'China virus,' Trump anthropomorphized the virus and portrayed the virus in a very menacing manner. Moreover, Trump reiterated how China and Chinese people are to blame for the spread of the virus. By blaming Chinese and other Asian Americans, Trump is reinforcing the Yellow Peril stereotype by perpetuating the notion that Asians are carriers of diseases and the perpetual foreigner stereotype, which Otherizes and interpellates Asians as they are depicted as threatening to American citizens and culture (Stop AAPI Hate, 2020b). In this way, Trump is also discursively reinforcing the perception that Asians are part of the subaltern that need to continuously be checked by the hegemony.

Trump and many Republicans took less precautionary measures such as 'avoiding large gatherings, social distancing, and donning facial coverings,' which 'appears to have impacted the trajectory of the spread of COVID-19 in places with a larger

number of Republicans' (Morris, 2021, p. 2428). In fact, Trump called COVID-19 the 'Democrats' new hoax' and downplayed the severity of the virus (Egan, 2020). Trump has a history of not trusting science and scientists. Hetherington and Ladd (2020) note, 'he has gutted scientific expertise and administrative capacity in the executive branch, most notably failing to fill hundreds of vacancies in the Centers for Disease Control itself and disbanding the National Security Council's taskforce on pandemics' (para. 3). When the death rates kept increasing, Trump had a simple solution which was to blame the Chinese and other Asian communities. In doing so, he pointed out to his followers that their interests and values were upheld and protected by his leadership.

McClymond (2019) mentions that the strategy of scapegoating must be beneficial for both the individual engaging with the act as well as for the community (or, in Trump's case, his supporters). When it comes to the coronavirus, Trump is protecting his own self-image as well as shifting the burden of the virus onto the Chinese community. By scapegoating, Trump is able to:

> shift guilt (and the socio-political "taint" that accompanies potential criminal action) that might land on his shoulders onto others. He casts these figures as scoundrels (or even criminals) and directs public attention away from his own unethical actions to other peoples' behavior, effectively avoiding any personal social and political cost. These scapegoats pay a public price as a result of Trump's behavior, suffering public distancing or professional exile. When this is done effectively, the president remains legally blameless and unimpeded by social "taint". (McClymond, 2019, p. 7)

By placing blame on one community, Trump showed his followers that he is one for 'the people' and has his followers' best interests at the forefront of his agenda.

While Trump scapegoated the Chinese community, he seemed to not take any of the responsibilities for the spread of COVID-19 unless it was positive news for the United States. For example, he gave himself the credit for the COVID-19 vaccine, when in reality he initially opposed its development. On 24 December 2020, he tweeted, 'More than one million Americans have already received the China Virus Vaccine, a record pace!' (Trump, 2020s). Another example occurs on 18 September 2020, when Trump compared his handling of the virus to Biden's handling of the swine flu by saying, '"Biden FAILED BADLY with the Swine Flu. It was the Gang That Couldn't Shoot Straight" He didn't have a clue. We have done an incredible job with the much tougher China Virus!' (Trump, 2020o). In this example, Trump boasted his accomplishments while also highlighting that Biden 'failed' – a simultaneous boast and put-down.

On 18 March 2020, he said,

> 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! (Trump, 2020c)

On 20 July 2020, Trump noted,

> We are United in our effort to defeat the Invisible China Virus, and many people say that it is Patriotic to wear a face mask when you can't socially distance. There is nobody more Patriotic than me, your favorite President! (Trump, 2020h)

Relatedly, Trump pronounced in his arrogant rhetorical style on a Fox News interview that he would give himself an A + for his handling of the virus (Cillizza, 2020). When COVID-19 was spreading at an alarming rate across the globe, Trump consistently compared the severity of the virus to that of a flu (Shabad, 2020). Despite the fact that Trump neglected the gravity of the coronavirus, he still managed to praise himself for the work that he and his administration did against the virus. In simple terms, Trump's demeanor online is one where he consistently praises himself. Kreis (2017) notes,

> His particular communication style and his use of a participatory web platform as a major tool of communication further index how he views himself in relation to the people: the leader who, on the one hand, returned sovereignty to the people and, on the other hand, protects the nation and homeland from the dangerous "Other." (p. 615)

By constantly tweeting about the positive actions that he has taken as president, Trump revealed how he prioritized the interests of his followers (Ross & Rivers, 2018). Trump was strategic in showing his base that he was their savior and would uphold American ideals and protect America against the dangerous 'Other.' By scapegoating Chinese and other Asians, Trump avoided the blame for the negative effects from the coronavirus while simultaneously maintaining and reaffirming the narrative that Chinese and other Asians are 'filled' with diseases.

The theme of scapegoating can be identified in both historical cases and contemporary situations such as COVID-19. As mentioned previously, Asian immigrants were the ones to blame with trachoma spreading rapidly in New York (Ji-Hye, 2014). During the SARS epidemic, Asian Americans were disproportionately feared and stigmatized (Leung, 2008; Person et al., 2004). Despite the classification of Asians as model minorities, Asian Americans continue to be a stigmatized group within the United States.

Fear of the other

During COVID-19, several negative stereotypes emerged against Chinese and other Asian Americans. Many of these stereotypes may result in microaggressions, discrimination and hate crimes. However, Trump's rhetoric made things much, much worse for Asian Americans who feared the backlash from bigoted Americans. As mentioned previously, many Asian businesses were targeted and vandalized (Ramachandran, 2021). Sadly, an Asian-identifying author named Choi (2021) reflected on her own experience: 'When I did take a walk with my family, I was hyper-conscious of keeping our distance, seeking to stay well over six feet away if possible, fearing that others would assume we might be infectious because we were Asian' (p. 235). This is just one example of many that highlight how some Asian Americans might feel because of the increase in expressions of anti-Asian sentiments.

Trump used fear appeals in his tweets to create a sense of panic and fear against Chinese Americans and China. Dillard et al. (1996) define fear appeals as those highlighting 'the noxious consequences that will befall message recipients if they fail to adopt the recommendations of the source' (p. 44). Fear appeals are notoriously used in elections and by politicians to influence the opinions of individuals. Fear appeals work most effectively when 'the message depicted relatively high amounts of fear, included an efficacy message, and stressed susceptibility and severity elated to the concerns being addressed'

(Tannenbaum et al., 2015, p. 1196). Tannenbaum et al. (2015) discuss how, to be effective, recipients of fear appeals should perceive high amounts of fear in the message; the authors emphasize 'that it reflects a property of the message's content, rather than the subjective state of fear that message recipients experience' (p. 1180).

When analyzing a series of Trump's tweets, we searched for fear appeal components as described by Tannenbaum et al. (2015) to interpret how influential we believe Trump's fear appeals were in attempting to persuade his audience about the severity of the 'China virus.' The first tweet that we examine occurs on 18 March 2020, when he said:

> I only signed the Defense Production Act to combat the Chinese Virus should we need to invoke it in a worst case scenario in the future. Hopefully there will be no need, but we are all in this TOGETHER! (Trump, 2020d)

To provide some context, the Defense Production Act 'allows federal agencies to require companies to prioritize government contracts for medical supplies to address national emergencies, like COVID-19' (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2021). When COVID-19 was initially spreading, there was a shortage in protective medical equipment and supplies to address the outbreak.

First, the message that Trump constructed contains a high level of fear because of the phrase 'worst case scenario.' With these specific words, the coronavirus could potentially be more disastrous and harmful than anticipated. It also implies that Trump has already prepared for the worst. Secondly, Trump tried to reassure his followers with an efficacy claim that they are not alone and will be unified during this time. It is important to note that when Trump says 'we' that he is just referring to his supporters. Kimura (2021) says, 'the use of *you* and *we* indicate the collective sense of people who are not Chinese (i.e. we) through the act of hate against Chinese/Asian people (i.e. you)' (p. 141). The same *you* and *we* logic can be applied in this message because when Trump refers to 'we,' he is tailoring the message to his American followers. Lastly, the message stresses the susceptibility and severity of the issue because of the signing of the Defense Production Act. The signing of the act symbolizes the gravity of the issue because the Act was an acknowledgement that the United States was ill-prepared and lacked sufficient medical supplies to combat the coronavirus.

In the next tweet, Trump used the term 'the plague from China' when he referred to the coronavirus. On 13 May 2020, he mentioned:

> As I have said for a long time, dealing with China is a very expensive thing to do. We just made a great Trade Deal, the ink was barely dry, and the World was hit by the Plague from China. 100 Trade Deals wouldn't make up the difference – and all those innocent lives lost! (Trump, 2020e)

Trump frequently tweeted about how the United States is great and will remain powerful (Rowland, 2021). In this tweet, Trump referred to the coronavirus as the 'plague from China' when he emphasized that the virus came from China. According to the World Health Organization (2022), a plague 'is an infectious disease caused by *Yersinia pestis* bacteria, usually found in small mammals and their fleas' (para. 1). Because of suspicions and conspiracy theories, many believed that the coronavirus originated in Wuhan, China because Chinese people ate bat soup. However, no evidence supports the bat soup claim; it is just a rumor (Nunez, 2020). This is one of the reasons why the CDC and the WHO

have used the term COVID-19, coronavirus, and pandemic to refer to the virus. Trump, however, still insisted on using 'plague from China' to spread misinformation on his Twitter account. Those who view Asians as disease carriers are threatened by Asian bodies and fear for the wellbeing of the nation (Tessler et al., 2020). In this way, Trump is attempting to evoke fear in his followers toward the Chinese and other Asian Americans.

In the next series of tweets, Trump discussed how the coronavirus has spread internationally by saying: 'Big China Virus breakouts all over the World, including nations which were thought to have done a great job. The Fake News doesn't report this. USA will be stronger than ever before, and soon!' (Trump, 2020i); 'European Countries are sadly getting clobbered by the China Virus' (Trump, 2020p); 'Europe and other parts of the World being hit hard by the China Virus – Germany, France, Spain and Italy, in particular' (Trump, 2020q); 'The entire WORLD is being badly hurt by the China Virus … ' (Trump, 2020r). By using the word 'big' when referring to the coronavirus, Trump highlighted the seriousness of the issue. These fear appeals show that the coronavirus has spread quickly, and the scope of its transmission has spread to countries all over the world.

As mentioned before, Trump consistently attacked those who disagreed with him, especially Democrats. Trump's tweet blamed former Governor Cuomo for his handling of the coronavirus: 'Governor Andrew Cuomo of New York has the worst record on death and China Virus. 11,000 people alone died in Nursing Homes because of his incompetence!' (Trump, 2020j). On the same day, Trump tweeted again about his sentiments against Cuomo:

> @NYGovCuomo should get his puppet New York prosecutors, who have been illegally after me and my family for years, to investigate his incompetent handling of the China Virus, and all of the deaths caused by this incompetence. It is at minimum a Nursing Home Scandal – 11,000 DEAD! (Trump, 2020k)

Although these tweets were intended to blame Cuomo, Trump still managed to invoke fear of China within the message. As Rowland (2021) says, 'He [Trump] increasingly manifested the persona of a strongman, often making strident attacks on his opponents, labeling them un-American in an attempt to delegitimize their criticism and create hate' (p. 118). By attacking former Governor Cuomo's handling of the coronavirus, Trump can delegitimize Cuomo's competency as a leader; thereby, if Cuomo decided to attack Trump's handling of the virus, he would already have a credibility deficit. While this example specifically attacks the competence of former Governor Cuomo, Trump was notorious for using this rhetorical strategy to make himself look better and for creating another opportunity to blame China. After all, according to Burke (1965), scapegoating is a way to purge guilt or deflect responsibility by blaming others. Moreover, this technique is a way for Trump to reinforce the positive image of the hegemony by simultaneously blaming subaltern groups for the consequences of the virus.

In these examples, Trump appealed to the fears of his followers. Trump referred to Chinese bodies as the 'Other,' which reinforces the Yellow Peril and perpetual foreigner stereotypes (Stop AAPI Hate, 2020b). By depicting Chinese and other Asian Americans as the 'Other,' Trump dehumanized Asian bodies 'as not just the virus itself and/or a carrier of the virus, but also as a weapon that will kill people' (Kimura, 2021, p. 141). When certain groups are dehumanized, they are often 'the most common targets of

harmful behavior' (Fincher et al., 2017, p. 290). The use of fear appeals as a rhetorical strategy fosters this negative dynamic. Particularly in the COVID-19 context, 'Fear leads to the desire to understand and control situations. From this we see a surge of prejudice and discrimination, prescribing an "otherness" to disease to feel protects and ascribing blame to justify prejudiced rhetoric' (Coates, 2020, para. 2–4). This hate discourse, emanating from the so-called leader of the free world, perpetuates the discrimination and hate crimes that many Chinese and other Asian Americans have had and continue to face.

China bashing

One main theme throughout Trump's tweets is how he consistently blames China. Blaming and scapegoating China, while related, are distinct from the fear appeals we just analyzed. This distinction is important to note since fear appeals and blaming can be used in isolation and either, by themselves, can be rhetorically problematic. But, in terms of scapegoating China, Trump contributed to and helped encourage a menacing anti-Chinese culture. Trump made it a point to ensure everyone knew the virus originated from China. For example, on 25 May 2020, Trump tweeted, 'Great reviews on our handling of COVID-19, sometimes referred to as the China Virus' (Trump, 2020f). Another example is on 13 May 2020, when Trump said:

> As I have said for a long time, dealing with China is a very expensive thing to do. We just made a great Trade Deal, the ink was barely dry, and the World was hit by the Plague from China. 100 Trade Deals wouldn't make up the difference – and all those innocent lives lost! (Trump, 2020e)

Similarly, on 7 September 2020, Trump reported that, '[we are] starting to get VERY high marks in our handling of the Coronavirus (China Virus), especially when compared to other countries and areas of the world' (Trump, 2020l). Many narratives exist about the origin of COVID-19, but Trump, of course, emphasized how China was ground zero for the coronavirus outbreak (Felter, 2021; McKeever, 2021). Additionally, Trump connected China to the innocent lives that had been lost. Meanwhile, he does not take any of the blame for his leadership (or lack thereof) when the coronavirus spread to the United States.

Among his tweets, Trump frequently used 'China virus' and 'Chinese virus' in replace of COVID-19. By placing the name 'China' and 'Chinese' before the word 'virus,' he wanted to remind his followers about the true 'enemy.' In very explicit ways, Trump associated the coronavirus with Chinese ethnicity. However, Dr. Mike Ryan, the executive director of the World Health Organization health emergencies program, mentions that 'viruses know no borders and they don't care about your ethnicity or the color of your skin or how much money you have in the bank' (Yeung et al., 2020, para. 8). There is a difference between linking a virus to a country and blaming an entire ethnicity. Trump was purposeful when using 'China virus' and 'Chinese virus' to blame all of the Chinese people. And, even if Trump was not intentional, it is reasonable to believe that most of his followers associated Chinese people with the virus, as demonstrated by the increase in expressions of anti-Asian sentiments across the United States (Stop AAPI Hate, 2021).

As we know, the President influences others by merely occupying the Oval Office; the president's inherent ability to command attention in a relatively unfettered way is commonly referenced as the presidential 'bully pulpit' (Elving, 2017; Miles, 2014). Undoubtedly, Trump's bully pulpit influenced many of his supporters to use scapegoating rhetoric. In fact, when the new Omicron variant emerged, Senator Ted Cruz and Donald Trump Jr. heavily criticized the World Health Organization (WHO) for skipping the Greek letter, *Xi* (Roche, 2021). Xi is in reference to the name of Chinese President, Xi Jinping (Roche, 2021). In a tweet, Donald Trump Jr. stated, 'As far as I'm concerned the original will always be the Xi variant' (Trump Jr., 2021). Similarly, Senator Cruz retweeted a message about the Greek letter *Xi* by saying, 'If the WHO is this scared of the Chinese Communist Party, how can they be trusted to call them out the next time they're trying to cover up a catastrophic global pandemic?' (Cruz, 2021). Through these tweets, Trump Jr. and Senator Cruz attempt to connect COVID-19 to China through the similarity between the Greek Letter *Xi* and the Chinese President's name, Xi Jinping.

The WHO suggests that when naming a disease, it should 'consist of generic descriptive terms, based on the symptoms that the disease causes … and more specific descriptive terms when robust information is available on how the disease manifests, who it affects, its severity or seasonality' (Davies & Lindmeier, 2015, para. 5). Dr. Keiji Fukuda from the WHO mentions the importance of naming diseases, since

> disease names really do matter to the people who are directly affected. We've seen certain disease names provoke a backlash against members of particular religious or ethnic communities, create unjustified barriers to travel, commerce and trade, and trigger needless slaughtering of food animals. This can have serious consequences for peoples' lives and livelihoods. (qtd. in Davies & Lindmeier, 2015, para. 2)

For this reason, the WHO deliberately used 'COVID-19' to refer to the new virus and Omnicron as the new variant. On this precise point, Hswen et al. (2021) analyze the types and frequency of tweets that immediately followed Trump's pejorative tweet that called the pandemic the 'Chinese virus.' Trump's stereotyped labeling perpetuated massive anti-Chinese sentiment, thereby showing how a single name in a single tweet can perpetuate harmful stereotypes:

> Our research on 1.2 million hashtags buttresses their recommendation by showing that the hashtag #chinesevirus is connected to more anti-Asian hashtags than #covid19. Approximately 1 in 5 hashtags with #covid19 were anti-Asian, whereas half of the hashtags with #chinesevirus were anti-Asian. In the week beginning 9 March 2020, the hashtag #covid19 was more prevalent than #chinesevirus. Also, the number of anti-Asian hashtags associated with these phrases was relatively low and stable. However, the president's tweet on March 16 coincided with several major changes. First, there was a massive increase in the volume of tweets for both the #covid19 and #chinesevirus groups and in the number of users. Both hashtags together climbed from about 53,000 to 1.2 million in the period studied. (Hswen et al., 2021, p. 960)

In this way, Trump's anti-China rhetoric contributed to the racism and discrimination that many Chinese and other Asian Americans face. Unfortunately, the Hswen et al. (2020) study is highly descriptive in terms of *what* happened, but our analysis complements their work by noting *how* Trump's tweets were problematic. As a result of the

hate toward China, many Chinese and other Asian bodies are dehumanized when some citizens characterize them as spreaders of diseases and germs.

Populist appeals

Trump frequently used populist rhetorical appeals with his tweets. The positive tweets are primarily about Trump's leadership and accomplishments (Rowland, 2021). One example related to the coronavirus occurred on 25 May 2020, when Trump said:

> Great reviews on our handling of Covid 19, sometimes referred to as the China Virus. Ventilators, Testing, Medical Supply Distribution, we made a lot of Governors look very good – And got no credit for so doing. Most importantly, we helped a lot of great people! (Trump, 2020f)

In this example, Trump showed that he is working for Americans. When he said that he made many governors 'look very good,' he delegitimized their leadership and their handling of the pandemic while he took credit for any successful actions. According to this logic, they would not have progressed without him. In this example, he praised himself like a savior that the United States needs during this crisis:

> A couple of months later, on 8 July 2020, Trump said: Economy and Jobs are growing MUCH faster than anyone (except me!) expected. Job growth is biggest in history. China Virus Mortality Rate is among the LOWEST of any country. Shaping up for a good third quarter, and a great next year! NASDAQ at new record high, 401 k's way up!!! (Trump, 2020g)

Trump's rhetoric depicted himself as a hero in defending his nation and the interests of his supporters. Although Trump boasted about how the mortality rate in the United States was the lowest, the CDC actually states that between June 27 and July 11, deaths related to COVID-19, influenza, and pneumonia increased for the first time since mid-April (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Trump manipulated Americans by providing inaccurate information in an attempt to make it seem like the mortality rates were low under his leadership. Similarly, on 8 September 2020, he tweeted how he positively handled the coronavirus:

> My Campaign spent a lot of money up front in order to compensate for the false reporting and Fake News concerning our handling of the China Virus. Now they see the GREAT job we have done, and we have 3 times more than we had 4 years ago … (Trump, 2020m)

On the same day, Trump continued to boast:

> Because of the China Virus, my Campaign, which has raised a lot of money, was forced to spend in order to counter the Fake News reporting about the way we handled it (China Ban, etc.). We did, and are doing, a GREAT job, and have a lot of money left over, much more than 2016 … (Trump, 2020n)

On 29 December 2020, Trump discussed the need for American citizens to receive more in their stimulus checks. He tweeted '$2000 for our great people, not $600! They have suffered enough from the China Virus!!!' (Trump, 2020t). With this, Trump used populist rhetoric since he was tweeting against the powerful elites, such as Democrats and the mainstream media. In this way, Trump characterized himself as an authentic president who speaks for the average citizen and even the (non-Asian) subaltern. However,

throughout these series of tweets, Trump did not provide any policy solutions. Instead, Trump promised to his supporters that the United States will maintain its global hegemony and will be better than China. Furthermore, populist rhetoric also 'feeds on the traumas of the people' (Galito, 2018, p. 57). As such, Trump attempted to appear like a benevolent hegemon as he advocated for the common citizen. By presenting himself as a 'charismatic outsider' and recognizing their pain, trauma, and grievances, Trump was able to solidify his relationship with supporters (Rowland, 2019).

Another important finding is how the Twitter platform facilitated the President's rhetorical incivility. Ott (2017) explains how the informal and depersonalized nature of the platform encourages incivility. First, Twitter is informal because users tend to not use proper language and grammar (Ott, 2017). Secondly, Twitter is depersonalized, which means that it 'is much easier to say something nasty about someone when they are not physically present' (p. 62). In Trump's tweets, he was able to invoke fear appeals in a relatively succinct and attention-grabbing manner. He discussed the racialized 'Other' and how they were the problem that America was facing. In other words, one of the reasons that he was able to invoke fear about the dangerous 'Other' was because of Twitter's depersonalized nature.

Furthermore, Trump uses simple language that is easy to understand. In fact, some analysts find that Trump speaks at a fourth-grade level, which allows him to connect with a broad range of constituents (Burleigh, 2018). He tailors his language and messages so that he does not have any difficulty when communicating his points. Ott (2017) mentions, 'Trump's lexicon is simple and repetitive, relying heavily on monosyllabic words such as "good," "bad," and "sad"' (p. 64). Since his followers are 'low-information voters,' he uses basic and easy-to-understand language. By using pedestrian language that is simple and accessible, Trump was able to communicate to a wider group of people and garnered more support (Kayam, 2018). The success of Trump's messages reveals his use of colloquial language which, in turn, allows his messages to be accessible for many groups. Simply put, the common citizen perceived that he was speaking directly to them when they receive one of his tweets, mainly because they perceive that his messages are high in authenticity. Trump's success 'implies that the public today appreciates straightforwardness and the use of simple, or even colloquial, language' (Kayam, 2018, p. 86). The use of unsophisticated language is a factor in Trump's overall success in boosting his influence and gaining loyal followers.

Overall, Trump was strategic in how he used Twitter to spread his messages. He used Twitter to 'displace blame onto dangerous Others, attack his political opponents and the media, and brag about what most experts thought was a failed response' (Rowland, 2021, p. 135). For these reasons, Trump's tweets were successful in promoting a fear of the dangerous 'Other' while portraying him as the triumphant leader who will protect his followers and save the nation.

Conclusion

We acknowledge the many general studies in rhetoric, political communication, and racial discourse that precede our work. In fact, it is their significant contributions to our field that helped stimulate our own interest in this issue. As such, we sincerely hope our project will be seen as adding to this larger conversation by examining a

particular form of rhetoric (a tweet) with pejorative meanings that was driven by a uniquely influential rhetor (the president). In this paper, we identified major themes that emerge from Trump's tweets that relate to China and COVID-19. The common themes that were apparent in his tweets were scapegoating, fear of the other, China bashing and populist appeals. When the coronavirus was spreading in the United States and causing many people to become ill or die, Trump refused to accept blame or responsibility for his mishandling of the coronavirus. Instead, he blamed it on China as well as Chinese and other Asians. Hence, Trump's followers remained supportive of their president and expressed their frustration with Asian communities.

The themes of fear appeals, scapegoating, China bashing, and populist appeals overlap with one another. For this reason, Trump's rhetoric had multiple implications. By using 'China virus' and 'Kung Flu,' Trump can blame and scapegoat China as well as Chinese Americans. In so doing, he relieved the burden from himself and used populist rhetoric to show that he was the 'president of the people.' As a result, it helped embolden him to his audience and heightened the connection with, and loyalty from, his followers. Therefore, when he uses populist rhetoric, the messages helped enhance his persuasive appeal to his followers. This shows that Trump's anti-Asian hate messages resonated with his supporters and may be more persuasive than we originally thought.

Overall, there was a lack of support from the government to the point where Chinese and other Asian American communities had to rely on one another for support. For example, one coalition called Stop AAPI Hate was formed in March 2020, and their purpose is to 'track and respond to incidents of hate, violence, harassment, discrimination, shunning, and child bullying against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in the United States' (Stop AAPI Hate, 2020a, para. 1). When President Biden came into office, he signed the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act which addressed the ongoing hate crimes and violence toward Asian Americans (Sprunt, 2021). In contrast, Trump did not implement any practical solutions when he was president. After he delivered the speech on March 2020, he continued to use anti-Asian rhetoric when addressing the coronavirus.

The hate crimes toward Chinese and other Asian bodies disproves the model minority myth and reaffirms the Yellow Peril and perpetual foreigner stereotypes. The model minority myth assumes that all Asian Americans do not face racism and/or discrimination. However, as we have explored, many Asian Americans live in intense fear because of a president who has capitalized on existing expressions of anti-Asian sentiments. These stereotypes highlight the differences between Asians compared to their white counterparts. COVID-19 gave former President Trump, along with his followers, an excuse to attack Asian individuals. Our analysis reveals how Trump weaponized rhetoric to promote such violence. More specifically, we believe our study shows a correlative connection between Trump's rhetoric and the ensuing violence against Asian Americans. As a result, it is clear that America is nowhere close to achieving equality, despite any previous progressive gains that have been secured. Ethnicity and race play a very significant role in determining who is 'American' and who is perceived as threats. Many Chinese and other Asian Americans continue to be despised and are not considered equal to white Americans although many have already assimilated into the dominant American culture.

Unfortunately, stereotypes and otherizing Asians in the United States are not new, nor are stigmatizing testaments from the American government – through speeches, acts of

legislation, or other means; Trump's recent articulations just happen to be new iterations of an age-old practice of minimizing and dehumanizing entire groups of people who are different than 'native' Americans. Additionally, the model minority myth is commonly used against both Asians and other racial groups in order to pit the minority groups against one another. When it comes to racism, many of these identity groups focus more on differences, rather than similarities (Nguyen, 2020). This means that we are not focusing on a common enemy, which incites hate and racism against minority groups to maintain hegemony. The positioning of Asian people in relation to other identity groups in the United States is complex and dates back to the concept of racial triangulation (Kim, 1999). Asian Americans will still be ostracized by white people while also seen as more superior than black Americans. The complexity with the positioning of these identity groups promotes white privilege and supremacy since many white people are able to create these ideologies and narratives.

It is also important to note that presidential rhetoric plays a significant role in shaping public opinion. The rhetorical impact of Trump's anti-Asian rhetoric inspired others in his orbit to use it as well. For example, Trump's Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, referred to the coronavirus as the 'Wuhan virus' in 'vilifying the country where it originated' (Landler, 2020, para. 7). Hence, Trump's voice was powerful and influenced many others to also use the same rhetorical strategies to blame China.

Finally, the last reason and, arguably the most important reason, for studying this material is because many do not believe 'China virus' and 'Kung flu' are racist terms. Instead, the justification for many Republicans or conservatives is that their president is only using the terms because the virus came from China. Even Mastio (2020), from the *USA Today*, claims that 'Wuhan virus' and 'China virus' are not racist. Mastio's argument is that focusing on the 'racism' of these terms takes away from the more 'serious' dehumanization against immigrants and black people. However, we argue that we can advocate for multiple marginalized groups. These arguments delegitimize the experience of Asian Americans especially the victims of these violent hate crimes. News articles such as the one from the *USA Today* are one of the reasons that many Chinese and other Asian Americans do not report hate crimes. Yam (2021) mentions that some of the reasons Asians fail to report crimes include the fear of retaliation and the fear of bringing unwanted attention to themselves. Many of the victims do not wish to cause more burdens on their family, so they choose to remain silent about their experiences. We sincerely hope that as a result of this paper and conversations like it, we can see the rhetorical strategies that were used to show that these terms helped create a climate which amplified anti-Asian sentiments and violence.

This manuscript is also important because there is a lack of research surrounding Asian American experiences, especially since their identity is often used to justify discrimination and hatred. Asian American voices and experiences are rarely expressed in scholarly literature and research. Nishime (2021) mentions that due to the absence of Asian American experiences in the 2020 presidential election, there needs to be more done to add to the Asian American narrative. Although the purpose of this project does not provide space to discuss Asian voices and the ongoing hate incidents, future research should expand on capturing the Asian American experiences. There are current research articles that interview Asian Americans to capture their experiences regarding their racial identity in the United States (Museus & Park, 2015; Young et al.,

2021, 2022). There needs to be more research that documents these lived experiences to uncover how Asian Americans are furthering antiracist efforts. The work here points to the need for, and importance of, ongoing research to address Asian Americans. Asian Americans are often called the 'invisible minorities' because they do not receive the same attention in U.S. culture and academic studies as other minorities (Jo, 2004). Due to the invisibility of Asian Americans, anti-Asian racism often goes unnoticed and denied (Kao, 2021). Anti-Asian racism observed in Trump's rhetoric is not new or unique. Instead, it reflects a long-standing history of racism and discrimination. Through our research, we see that Trump's COVID-19 rhetoric in his tweets is simply another justification to further discriminate against Chinese and other Asian Americans. For this reason, anti-Asian racism needs more research attention. If we do not conduct this sort of research, if we perpetuate Asian stereotypes without problematizing them, if we cease continued conversations about the Asian experience in America, then we not only seriously risk continued ignorance, but we also provide an unchecked path for on-going discrimination and violence. Nishime (2021) argues that we need to write about the Asian American perspective, but we also must discuss how 'we [Asian Americans] are absent from U.S. history and public political culture' (p. 462). By doing so, we are one step closer to creating a world that is inclusive of all identities.

The terms such as 'China virus,' 'Chinese virus,' 'Wuhan virus,' and 'Kung flu' are racist and violent. The purpose of this paper is to uncover that racism against Asian Americans still exists and is often caused or encouraged by rhetorical tropes. The rhetoric of the president – the most esteemed position in America – matters and should not be used to scapegoat entire groups. We hope that by studying and writing about Asian American violence there will be more literature about the Asian American experiences. The rise in Asian hate crimes has inspired many to take action. An author from the *Washington Post*, Marian Chia-Ming Liu (2022), discussed how she reclaimed her Chinese name by dropping her American one. When Asians immigrate to the United States, they often feel that they must assimilate into the American culture by using western names. Additionally, Liu now uses the correct pronunciation of her last name instead of the 'Americanized' version of it (Liu, 2022). The symbolic action of reclaiming an Asian name shows that she is empowered and proud to be Asian. Liu's example shows just one of many ways to advocate for our community and work to better the world. It is up to us to work together to dismantle white supremacy and work on creating a world that is equal and fair for all.

Disclosure statement

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