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ANTI-ASIAN RACISM IS PREVAILING AMIDST THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: TWITTER IS TO BLAME

Recent events like NBA veteran [Jeremy Lin](#) being called the “coronavirus” on the basketball court, or the South Korean boy band [BTS](#) being compared to “a virus in need of a vaccine” by a German radio host, demonstrate the larger issue of anti-Asian racism that is rampant today. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, xenophobia and particularly Sinophobia are on the rise, as East Asians are being dehumanized and blamed for the virus. An enabler of these racist sentiments is Twitter.

Twitter has acted as a breeding ground for the “othering” of East Asians, and the company itself is doing little to curtail this issue. According to the [Washington Post](#), #ChineseVirus was used almost 130 000 times the day after former U.S. president Donald Trump wrote it in a tweet. While [Trump](#) later encouraged Americans to “protect our Asian American community,” the damage had already been done. Twitter then became the medium that continued to project and spread hateful messages, linked to hashtags such as #WuhanVirus, #ChinaVirus, and #KungFlu.

Studies on the usage of anti-Asian rhetoric on Twitter throughout the COVID-19 pandemic reveal the power of these discriminatory terms and the contagious effects of online hate speech. On March 8th, 2020, [Rep. Paul Gosar](#) tweeted that he had contracted the “Wuhan virus.” [One study](#) found that the effects of Gosar’s tweet led to a 650% increase in retweets of similar phrases on that day alone.¹ [Another study](#) published in May 2020 analyzed over 30 million COVID-related tweets made between January 15th 2020 and April 17th 2020, and identified 891 204 hate tweets directed at Asians in this timespan.² It was also found that 10.4% of the accounts tweeting these hateful messages were bots, and that they were 1.2 times more likely to share hateful content compared to actual Twitter users.

Violent attacks on East Asians are on the rise

This surge of hateful speech directed towards East Asians has been translated into action, as Asian Americans in particular, have been facing an increased number of violent attacks. From March 19th 2020 to December 5th 2020, [Stop AAPI Hate](#) recorded 2,808 incidents of hate crime and discriminatory acts on Asian American individuals across 47 states. 126 of these accounts involved Asian Americans over 60 years old. Stop AAPI also found that while Chinese people made up 40.7% of the recorded incidents of hate crimes, Korean, Vietnamese and Filipino individuals also made up 30.5% of the incidents. This indicates that all Asian Americans – regardless of their ethnicity or nationality – are being racially profiled and attacked. While it cannot be definitively stated that the hate speech on Twitter directly caused these violent attacks, there is no doubt that it contributed to the racist attitudes being shared amongst Americans. Some may argue that these

¹ Darling-Hammond et al., “After ‘The China Virus’ Went Viral: Racially Charged Coronavirus Coverage and Trends in Bias Against Asian Americans.” *Health Education & Behavior* 47, no. 6 (December 2020): 870–79.

² Ziems et al., “Racism Is a Virus: Anti-Asian Hate and Counterhate in Social Media during the COVID-19 Crisis.”

acts are solely attributed to COVID-19 and have not been worsened by online rhetoric. However, this could not be more untrue.

Words matter

Hateful tweets do not have to be directly derogatory to be considered hate speech; stigmatizing terminology is racist and dangerous. The labeling of COVID-19 as the “China Virus” singles out a specific group of people, dehumanizes them, and perpetuates “us vs. them” narratives throughout society. Even the [WHO](#) urged caution when using certain language to refer to the pandemic, as they declared how “stigma, is worse than the virus itself.” Coupled with blatant ignorance, this verbiage fuels the ongoing narrative that Chinese people (and subsequently any other Asian individual who “looks Chinese”) are to blame for the worldwide pandemic. The previously mentioned [study](#) surveying Americans has found that while the belief of Asian Americans as “perpetual foreigners” was most prominent around 2007, this sentiment rose significantly enough from March 8th to March 31st of this year to offset 3 years of prior declines.³ This statistic clearly conceptualizes the negative feelings held by non-Asian Americans towards East Asians amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. What hate speech and hurtful hashtags then do is create, reinforce, and instill divisive and racist sentiments, causing people to see Asian Americans, not as American, but as a foreign threat. These attitudes, demonstrated through hateful tweets and violent attacks, is severely damaging to Asian communities. An atmosphere of fear has been instilled in Asian families, thus resulting in negative psychological effects, as the fear of being attacked or harassed in the very country they call home becomes a reality.

Twitter’s policies are not working

In December 2020, [Twitter](#) expanded their rules against hateful conduct in order to “prohibit language that dehumanized people on the basis of race, ethnicity, or national origin.” However, the main issue with this hateful conduct policy is that it relies on users to report hateful tweets. [Twitter](#) does not screen or directly remove tweets that contain certain words or phrases. One simple search for “China Virus” or “Wuhan Virus” will generate multiple results containing hateful and ignorant tweets using these terms.

Twitter has an obligation to democracy to both promote free speech and also curtail hate speech, however there is a fine line between the two distinctions. There is no finite solution to curtailing hate speech and there are many debates surrounding who should be in charge of its regulation. On one side, in the hands of governments, there is potential for authoritarianism, as seen in [Singapore](#). However, others say that without government regulation, users will simply transfer their hateful speech from one platform to another, as seen with [Parler and Gab](#). Nevertheless, Twitter cannot simply wait around for a solution to be found. While it cannot be proven that hateful tweets are the root cause of the xenophobia in America, it can be definitively said that Twitter is an enabler for the kind of speech that allows racist attitudes to spread. In this digital age, hateful rhetoric can be instantly broadcasted with a single “like” or “retweet.” Whether it means censoring certain hashtags or encouraging more users to report hate speech, Twitter must be cognizant of current events, realize how they themselves contribute to the problem, and be proactive in their response to these violations of user policy. While Twitter may not be able to restrict all racist remarks made by individuals, it can minimize its spread, by removing bots and promoting messages that counter

³ Darling-Hammond et al., “After ‘The China Virus’ Went Viral: Racially Charged Coronavirus Coverage and Trends in Bias Against Asian Americans.”

hate. Simply put, Twitter is not taking anywhere near enough action to dispel hate speech against East Asians during the COVID-19 pandemic. Violent attacks on Asian Americans are increasing steadily, and meanwhile, Twitter sits back and continues to carry and allow hate speech and stigmatizing language on its platform. Asian Americans must be protected, and in this story, Twitter is not just a helpless by-stander, but an ignorant perpetrator and a villain.

References

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