

Multiplex Anti-Asian Sentiment before and during the Pandemic: Introducing New Datasets from Twitter Mining

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Abstract COVID-19 has disproportionately threatened minority communities in the U.S, not only in health but also in societal impact. However, social scientists and policymakers lack critical data to capture the dynamics of the anti-Asian hate trend and evaluate its scale and scope. We introduce new datasets from Twitter related to anti-Asian hate sentiment before and during the pandemic. Relying on Twitter’s academic API, we retrieve hateful and counter-hate tweets from the Twitter Historical Database. To build contextual understanding and collect related racial cues, we also collect instances of heated arguments, often political, but not necessarily hateful, discussing Chinese issues. We then use the state-of-the-art hate speech classifiers to discern whether these tweets express hatred. These datasets can be used to study hate speech, general anti-Asian or Chinese sentiment, and hate linguistics by social scientists as well as to evaluate and build hate speech or sentiment analysis classifiers by computational scholars.

Keywords: Hate speech, Sinophobia, COVID19, Anti-Asian, Anti-China, Twitter mining

1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately threatened minority communities in the U.S. In particular, COVID-19 has brought sinophobia to the surface ([Croucher, Nguyen and Rahmani 2020](#)). Since the outbreak of COVID-19, there were over 4,000 hate incidents such as harassment and physical attacks reported to stopaapihate.org. The growing anti-Asian attacks have led to the recent passage of the anti-Asian Hate Crimes Bill by the U.S. House after the mass shootings in Atlanta. Despite the troublesome surging COVID-hate incidents and crimes targeting AAPI communities, *social scientists and policymakers lack critical data and quantitative measures to*

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capture the evolution of anti-AAPI trends in the U.S., and cannot evaluate the scale and scope of anti-AAPI hate incidents in the pandemic.

Recent scholarship has used social media data with machine learning techniques to track anti-Asian hate speech on social media platforms (Vidgen et al. 2020; Ziems et al. 2020; Jiang et al. 2020). For instance, Ziems et al. (2020) examined the evolution and spread of anti-Asian hate speech from 30 million tweets collected between January 15 and April 17, 2020. Cook, Huang and Xie (2021) classified over 297 million tweets about China or COVID-19 between January 2017 and June 2020 using a BERT model trained on 5000 labeled tweets and found that the awareness of COVID-19 has led to a sharp rise in anti-China sentiments in the U.S. Although these studies provide training data sets to build hate speech classifiers and offer some insights about the spread of anti-Asian hate at the early stage of the outbreak, little is known about the enduring evolution of anti-Asian hate or counter hate before and in the continuing pandemic.

In this paper, we report on trends and patterns of anti-Asian sentiments and hate speech on Twitter by introducing new datasets. Twitter has been one of the most salient battlegrounds, both propagating and fighting against misinformation, fake news, hatred, and xenophobia during the COVID-19 pandemic. We use computational tools with natural language processing and machine learning methods to detect hate speech from Twitter before and during the pandemic. Our data sets contain 63.35 million tweets, and they fall in several categories:

- COVID-related anti-AAPI tweets, including keywords like “chinavirus” or “kung-flu”,
- Non-COVID-related hate terms, such as “slant eye”, “chink”, etc,
- Counter-hate, including keywords like “stopasianhate” or “racismisvirus”,
- and discussions that concern Chinese politics, of which may not be hateful, but often attract hate tweeters such as discussions about Uyghers, Hong Kong protests, and about Xi Jinping.

These datasets provide a comprehensive portrait of the dynamics of anti-Asian hate sentiment spanning from 2007 to 2021. Thus, we are able to address important questions related to the evolution of anti-Asian hate sentiments over time.

2 Literature Review

In the past decade, computational scholars have made great efforts to detect hate speech on social media platforms (Davidson et al. 2017). Although there is no clear and formal definition of hate speech, scholars tend to define hate speech as language or speech “used to express hatred towards a targeted group or is intended to be derogatory, to humiliate, or to insult the members of the group” (Davidson et al. 2017). Anti-Asian hate speech, especially Sinophobia, has attracted numerous attention from both computer scientists and social scientists (Vidgen et al. 2020; Cook, Huang and Xie 2021; Lee 2021; Ziems et al. 2020). Anti-Asian hate speech could be understood as any speech that targets Asians and people of Asian descendants in a way that promotes hatred, violence, or social disorder.

Scapegoating immigrants in a public crisis is not unique to Asians during the COVID-19 pandemic, but has a long tradition in American history (Daniels et al. 2021). For instance, tuberculosis was called “the Jewish disease” in the 1890s and Italian immigrants were blamed for the 1916 polio epidemic. Chinese immigrants were blamed for the spread of smallpox in the later 1870s in San

Francisco and SARS in 2003 (Daniels et al. 2021). Now Asian immigrants, specifically Chinese immigrants, are scapegoated for the origin and spread of COVID-19. Since the pandemic, around 2 million Asian American adults have experienced some form of anti-Asian hate incident such as being beaten, spit on, and harassed based on AAPI Data reports (Lee 2021). Federal-level hate crime data also shows that anti-Asian hate crimes increased by 149% in 16 major cities while hate crimes, in general, decreased by 7%. When former President Trump singled out China as the origin of the pandemic and publically used derogatory terms such as “Chinese Virus” and “Kung Flu,” Asian Americans, particularly immigrants of Chinese descent, became the primary target of anti-Asian hate crimes (Lee 2021).

Anti-Asian bigotry, violence, and misogyny were ingrained in American history following the passage of the Page Act of 1875 and the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act which prohibited the importation of Chinese laborers and women. Asian Americans were often perceived as “disease, unsimilable aliens, and economic, cultural, and moral threats to a free White republic” (Lee 2021). Even today, Asian Americans, particularly women of Asian descendants, are still the victims of anti-Asian misogyny and hatred (e.g., the Atlanta mass shooting in March 2021).¹ Even before the COVID-19 outbreak, hate crimes against Asians increased 31% in 2016-2018 under the Trump administration (Lee 2021).

3 Data

To understand the anti-Asian hate sentiment before and in the pandemic, we use keywords related to COVID specific hate terms, general anti-Asian hate terms, anti-Chinese politics terms, and counter-hate terms to extract all relevant tweets from Twitter’s historical database. This allows us to obtain a holistic view of multiplex anti-China or Asian hate sentiment. Here we briefly describe how we built our datasets but you can get more information in the Appendix. Since online hate speech mainly targets China, we focus on these anti-China related keywords in the present study. In future works, we wish to extend this study to other Asian countries.

COVID-Specific Hate Data. We use keywords, such as ‘*chinese virus*’, ‘*china virus*’, ‘*wuhan virus*’, ‘*kungflu*’, and their variants, to extract all relevant tweets that target AAPI communities. We use Ziems et al.’s classifier to exclude all these tweets related to counter-hate.

General Anti-AAPI Hate Data. We use keywords, such as ‘*bamboo coon*’, ‘*chigger*’, ‘*chinese wetback*’, ‘*ching chong*’, ‘*chonky*’, ‘*chunky*’, ‘*slant eye*’, ‘*slopehead*’, ‘*bat eater*’, ‘*chink*’, ‘*ling ling*’, and ‘*commies*’ to extract all non-COVID19 related tweets that target AAPI communities. Some of the keywords can be used in a multitude of scenarios, in such cases we removed using a few filters to get the tweets that are just targeted towards the AAPI community.

Anti-Chinese Politics Data We use keywords and hashtags, such as ‘*BoycottChina*’, ‘*MakeChinaPay*’, ‘*StandWithHongKong*’, ‘*FreeTibet*’, ‘*FuckChina*’, ‘*CCP_is_terrorist*’, and ‘*Chinazi*’ to extract all tweets that target china politically.

¹<https://tinyurl.com/2p99d8rw>

Counter-Hate Data. We collect counter hate data from two sources. First, we use keywords related to counter hate terms, such as *Racisimivirus*, *StopAsianHate*, and *StopAAPIHate*. We then use Ziems et al’s classifier to extract those counter-hate tweets from the dataset compiled using hate terms.

Table 1 shows basic statistics for our four main datasets compiled using the Twitter academic API. Note that these datasets span across different time periods. Researchers can use these datasets for different purposes. For instance, we can use these datasets to test the following hypotheses related to the overall anti-Asian or Chinese hate sentiment in the COVID-19 pandemic or the persistence of anti-Asian sentiment.

Hypothesis 1. The overall anti-Asian hate sentiment should be consistent before and after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hypothesis 2. The pandemic threat has engendered the rise of COVID-19 specific hate sentiment on Twitter.

TABLE 1. Summary of Twitter Data (in millions)

	COVID-Hate	AAPIM-Hate	Anti-Chinese Politics	Counter-Hate
# of tweets	12.93	12.92	32.6	4.9
# of unique tweets	3.29	7.24	6.36	0.68
# of retweets	9.64	5.68	26.29	4.2
# of Twitter users	3.15	4.58	2.85	1.97
Time range	2019.12-2021.3	2008.1-2021.3	2019.12-2020.12	2019.12-2021.3

4 Results

Next, we report some major trends and patterns from our four main datasets. We start with COVID19-Specific hate data.

4.1 COVID-Specific Hate Data

In the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic, Twitter users used COVID-19 specific terms such as ‘*chinese virus*’, ‘*china virus*’, ‘*wuhan virus*’, and ‘*kungflu*’ to describe the novel coronavirus. On Feb 2020, WHO named the disease caused by the novel coronavirus as COVID-19, but still these racial slurs remained popular on Twitter, especially after for U.S. President Trump tweeted Chinese Virus multiple times in three consecutive days on Mid March, 2020:

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!
Mar 16, 2020

Cuomo wants “all states to be treated the same.” But all states aren’t the same. Some are being hit hard by the Chinese Virus, some are being hit practically not at all. New York is a very big “hotspot”, West Virginia has, thus far, zero cases. Andrew, keep politics out of it.... Mar 17, 2020

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! Mar 18, 2020

In Figure 1, the blue line shows the overall trend of tweets mentioning any COVID-19 racial slurs, peaking around mid-March after Trump tweeted Chinese Virus.

We also used state-of-the-art hate speech detection algorithms to classify whether these racial slurs count as hate speech. In general, all hate speech detectors have some degree of noise and subjectivity. For this reason, we provide our potential users with three sets of labels classified by Ziems et al. (2020), Davidson et al. (2017), and Vidgen et al. (2020), whose aggregated counts are shown in Figure 1. The strong consistency between Ziems classifier and Vidgen classifier suggests that classification noise does not overwhelm the observed signal. We also notice that the Davidson classifier is less likely to classify tweets as hate speech, possibly because it was initially trained on non-group-specific hate tweets.

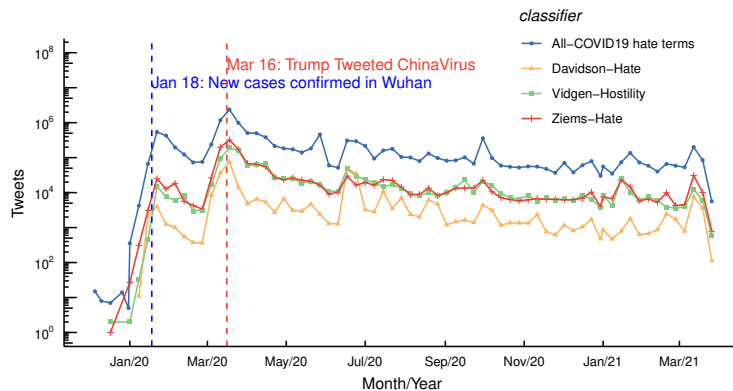


FIGURE 1. WEEKLY TREND OF COVID-19 HATE TERMS, AS CLASSIFIED BY THREE DIFFERENT HATE-SPEECH DETECTORS.

4.2 General Anti-AAPI Hate Data

While Figure 1 clearly shows an increase in COVID-19 hate tweets during the pandemic, it is unclear if this corresponds to an increase in hate or an increase in tweets about COVID. To provide a baseline, and to investigate anti-China or Asian hate sentiment before the COVID outbreak, for comparison, we built the general anti-AAPI hate data using these anti-Chinese or Asian hate terms.

Figure 2 shows the monthly trends of different anti-AAPI hate terms in our database. We believe that these numbers significantly underestimate the true number of abusive tweets actually used, since such slurs are easily identifiable and verifiable after reporting, and most likely were removed by Twitter long ago.

The top blue line in Figure 2 shows the number of tweets containing any of the general hate terms between Jan 2008 and March 2021. We see a rapid increase in tweets using anti-AAPI racial slurs from the founding of Twitter in 2007 to early 2013, and this growth may be attributed to the exponential growth of Twitter users at the same time. But after that, we see a decline pattern in the Obama administration before 2017. After Trump took over the Oval office, we see a clear increase

in these hateful tweets. This could be attributed to a worsening of the US-China relations due to a growing trade war, or sentiment against the Chinese government due to its role in Taiwan and Hong Kong issues. We also present isolated counts of the major general hate terms used by Twitter users, including “chink”, “coolie”, “sideways vagina”, “chinaman”, “chonk”, etc. One interesting pattern is that we see a huge increase in using Chunk or chonk after 2018.

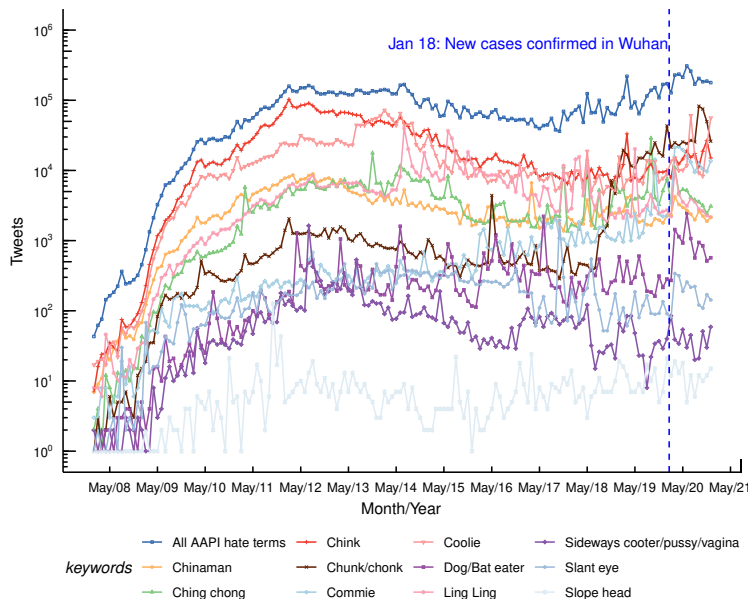


FIGURE 2. MONTHLY TREND FOR ANTI-AAPI HATE TERMS, AS CLASSIFIED BY THREE DIFFERENT HATE-SPEECH DETECTORS.

4.3 Anti-Chinese Politics Data

While the general anti-AAPI dataset establishes a much clearer and COVID-agnostic metric of Asian hate, it also has faults as 1) these tweets include many outdated slurs that may not dominate the hateful users’ vocabulary anymore, and 2) they are easy to detect by Twitter’s own anti-hate software, and easily verified and removed and are thus likely undercounted. We therefore investigate a third AAPI hate dataset which covers a much grayer area, targetting subject matter that attracts hate speech: controversial Chinese politics. Here, our goal is not so much to argue that discussing Chinese politics in a negative way is in itself hateful, but that hateful users tend to use these subjects as an outlet to propagate anti-Asian sentiment. This can be measured, for example, by establishing significant overlap between users who post with obvious anti-Asian slurs and users who post in this dataset.

Figure 3 shows the weekly trend of these anti-Chinese politics terms on Twitter from Jan 2019 to December 2020. We observe an increase in Tweets mentioning any anti-Chinese politics such as BoycottChina, MakeChinaPay, and Uyghur before the outbreak of COVID-19. But since then, the total number of anti-Chinese politics tweets bounced back and fluctuated in the early stage of the pandemic. We suspect Twitter users’ attention has shifted from anti-Chinese politics to these COVID-19 specific issues.

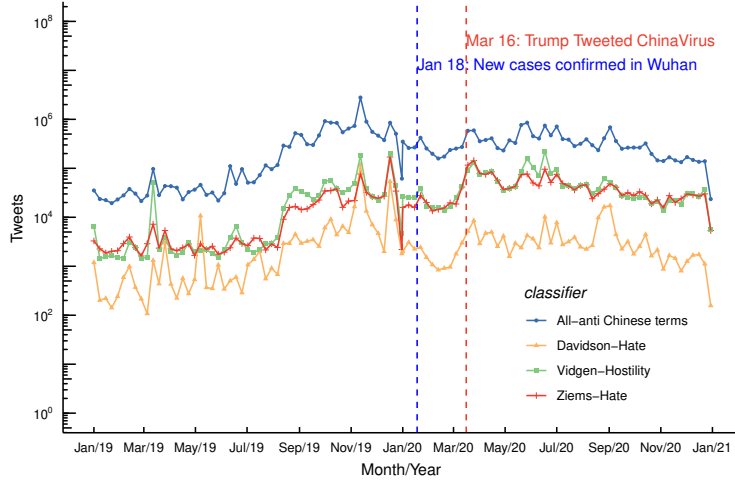


FIGURE 3. WEEKLY TREND OF ANTI-CHINESE POLITICS TWEETS, AS CLASSIFIED BY THREE DIFFERENT HATE-SPEECH DETECTORS.

4.4 COVID Counter-Hate Data

In addition to hate datasets, we also built a counter-hate dataset to assess the dynamics between pro- and anti-Chinese or Asian groups. Figure 4 shows the overall counter-hate weekly tweets after the outbreak of COVID-19.

Since the pandemic, we have seen a troublesome surge of anti-Asian attacks. This raises substantial concerns within the AAPI communities. We see a rapid increase in tweets that counter anti-AAPI hate speech such as RacismIsVirus and StopAAPIHate. The counter-hate tweets peaked after Trump tweets Chinese Virus on March and then declined. The StopAAPIHate movement took off after the early 2021 and peaked after the tragedy of Atlanta Spa Mass Shootings on March 16 2021. Our dataset provides unique author ids and conservation ids which allow researchers to assess the interaction among Twitter users.

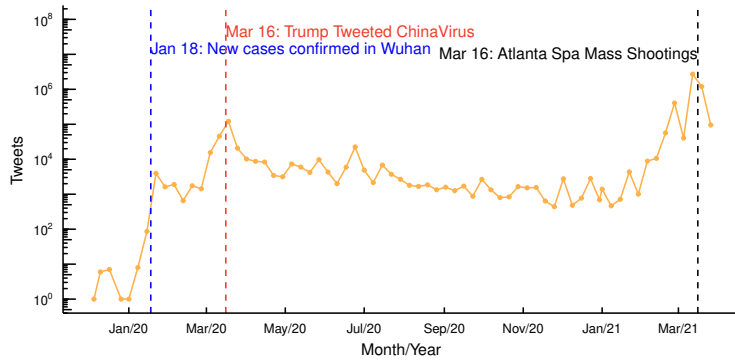


FIGURE 4. WEEKLY TREND OF COUNTER-HATE TWEETS

4.5 Hashtag Analysis

Here we provide some basic hashtag analysis in our four main datasets. What are the most popular hashtags in our datasets?

Figure 5 shows the hashtags used by Twitter users co-occurring with other keywords. Panel A shows that the most popular hashtags in anti-Chinese politics dataset are *#StandwithHongKong* and *#HongKong*. Panel B shows that the most popular hashtags used by counter hate users are related to *#StopAsianHate* and *#AsiansAreHuman*. Panel C shows that the most popular hashtags in COVID19-specific hate dataset are *#ChineseVirus*, *#CoronaVirus*, and *#WuhanVirus*. Panel D shows that the most popular hashtags used in general anti-AAPI hate dataset are *#boycottChina*, *#China*, and *#CCP*.

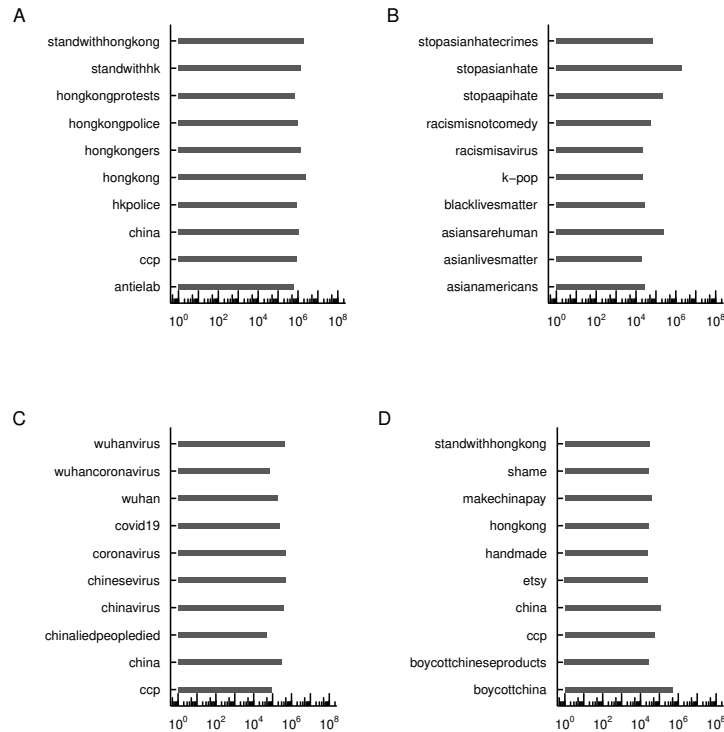


FIGURE 5. TOP HASHTAGS IN FOUR MAIN DATASETS. PANEL A: ANTI-CHINESE POLITICS; PANEL B: COUNTER HATE; PANEL C: COVID-SPECIFIC HATE; PANEL D: GENERAL ANTI-AAPI HATE.

4.6 Overlapping Analysis

We conduct an extra analysis to examine the overlapping between COVID-Hate and AAPI-Hate data as well as between COVID-Hate and anti-Chinese politics data. We suspect that Twitter users who expressed general anti-AAPI hate and anti-Chinese politics were also more likely to show COVID-specific hatred in the pandemic. For those who posted COVID-19 specific hate terms in the pandemic, there are 741,802 Twitter users from the general anti-AAPI hate dataset and

contributed 7.2 million tweets. These twitter users accounted for 23.57% of total users and 55.71% of total tweets in COVID-Hate dataset. There are also 864,287 Twitter users from anti-Chinese politics dataset overlapping with COVID specific hate data and contributed 7.86 million tweets. These twitter users accounted for 27.46% of total users and 60.77% of total tweets in COVID-Hate dataset. Figure 6 shows the monthly or weekly trends of these overlapping Twitter users.

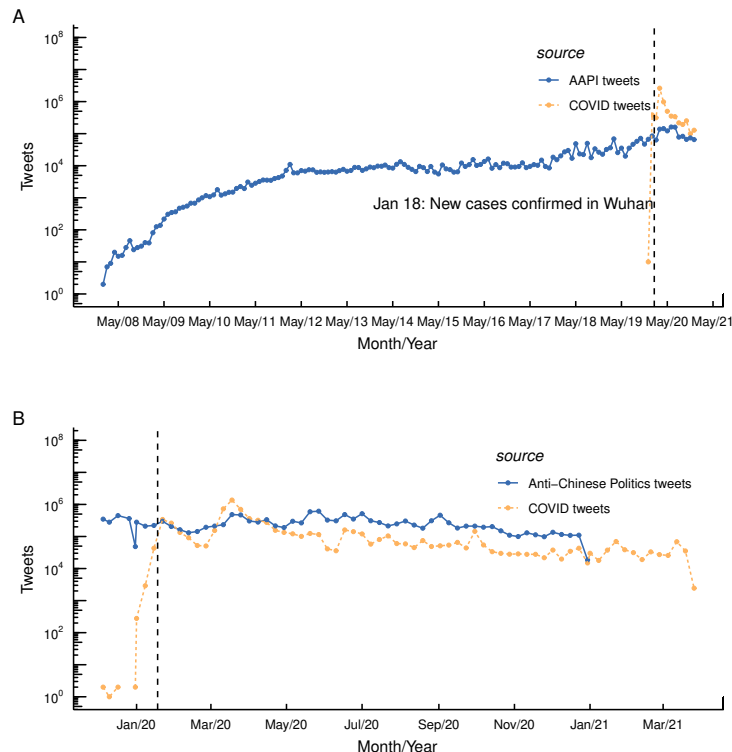


FIGURE 6. MONTHLY OR WEEKLY TREND OF OVERLAPPING TWITTER USERS. PANEL A: BETWEEN COVID-HATE AND AAPI-HATE; PANEL B: BETWEEN COVID-HATE AND ANTI-CHINESE POLITICS

5 Discussion

This paper introduces new datasets to study anti-Asian hate speech and sentiment on Twitter before and during the pandemic. We show that the overall anti-Chinese/Asian hate sentiment were consistent before and after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, but the pandemic threat has engendered the rise of COVID-19 specific hate sentiment on Twitter.

Hate speech online is a multiplex phenomenon. We built our datasets using keywords related to COVID-19 specific hate terms, general anti-AAPI hate terms, and anti-Chinese politics terms as well as counter hate terms. As shown in our main analysis, we demonstrate that we can use these datasets to illustrate the overall trends and patterns of anti-Asian hate speech online, and use aggregate statistics to demonstrate and describe the rise in anti-AAPI hate speech during the COVID era.

Researchers can also use these datasets to study questions of how Twitter users are radicalized by engaging into controversial conversations or what the linguistic features of hate speech on Twitter are. Researchers can also use the specific author ids and conversation ids to conduct conversation network analysis. Future users should be aware of possible underreporting due to many blatantly abusive tweets being already removed. Still, our novel datasets can contribute to research in the areas of computational social science, machine learning, and hate speech detection.

6 Code and Data Availability

Codes and aggregated data used to replicate main figures are available via <https://osf.io/xtw4c/>. Dis-aggregated and de-identified data are available for academic use upon request. You can email the corresponding author for the data sharing agreement form.

7 Appendix

Here we provide a detailed list of keywords and hashtags we used to extract all tweets.

COVID-Specific Hate Data. We use keywords, including *‘chinese virus’*, *‘china virus’*, *‘wuhan virus’*, *‘wuhan coronavirus’*, *‘kungflu’*, *‘china coronavirus’*, *‘chinese coronavirus’*, *‘chinavirus’*, *‘chinesevirus’*, *‘wuhanvirus’*, *‘Kung flu’*.

General Anti-AAPI Hate Data. *‘bamboo coon’*, *‘bamboo coons’*, *‘celestial’*, *‘celestials’*, *‘chigger’*, *‘chiggers’*, *‘chinese wetback’*, *‘chinese wetbacks’*, *‘ching chong’*, *‘ching chongs’*, *‘chinig’*, *‘chinigs’*, *‘chink a billies’*, *‘chink a billy’*, *‘chonkies’*, *‘chonky’*, *‘chunkies’*, *‘chunky’*, *‘coolie’*, *‘coolies’*, *‘side-ways cooter’*, *‘sideways cooters’*, *‘sideways pussies’*, *‘sideways pussy’*, *‘sideways vagina’*, *‘sideways vaginas’*, *‘slant eye’*, *‘slant eyes’*, *‘slopehead’*, *‘slopeheads’*, *‘aseng’*, *‘bat eater’*, *‘boycottchina’*, *‘chinadidthis’*, *‘chinaman’*, *‘chinamen’*, *‘chink’*, *‘chinky’*, *‘cokin’*, *‘dog eater’*, *‘fuckchina’*, *‘ling ling’*, *‘makechinapay’*, *‘niakoué’*, *‘pastel de flango’*, *‘slant-eye’*, *‘ting tong’*, *‘idiot chink’*, *‘chinky bat’*, *‘commie’*, *‘commies’*.

Anti-Chinese Politics Data. *‘BoycottChina’*, *‘MakeChinaPay’*, *‘BoycottChineseProducts’*, *‘boycottchina’*, *‘StandWithHongKong’*, *‘BoyCottChina’*, *‘Uyghur’*, *‘ReplaceIT’*, *‘BoycottMadeInChina’*, *‘FreeUyghur’*, *‘boycottChina’*, *‘antichinazi’*, *‘CCPChina’*, *‘BoycottChineseProduct’*, *‘FreeTibet’*, *‘FuckChina’*, *‘CCP_is_terrorist’*, *‘FreeHongKong’*, *‘StopChina’*, *‘BOYCOTTChina’*, *‘StandwithHK’*, *‘fuckchina’*, *‘Chinazi’*, *‘Tibet’*, *‘Genocide’*, *‘AnywherebutChina’*, *‘ABC_challenge’*, *‘Uyghurs’*, *‘China_is_terrorist’*, *‘HongKongers’*, *‘BOYCOTTCHINA’*, *‘XiJinping’*, *‘MadeInChina’*, *‘Boycottchina’*, *‘TakeDown-TheCCP’*, *‘AntiChinazi’*, *‘FreeHK’*, *‘ChineseProductsInDustbin’*, *‘SOSHK’*, *‘BoycottChineseApp’*, *‘FUCKCHINA’*, *‘SanctionChina’*, *‘RemoveChinaApps’*, *‘chinazism’*, *‘fuckchina’*, *‘SaveUygur’*, *‘Chinamustfall’*, *‘HKPoliceState’*, *‘HoldChinaAccountable’*, *‘StandWithHK’*, *‘Xitler’*, *‘CCPChina’*, *‘HongKong-Police’*, *‘Communist’*, *‘BoycottCh’*, *‘antitotalitarianism’*, *‘ChinaBacksTerror’*, *‘antiELAB’*, *‘FreedomHK’*, *‘TaiwanIsNotChina’*, *‘Hongkongprotest’*, *‘boycottchinaproducts’*, *‘fuckChina’*.

Counter-Hate Data. *‘Racisimivirus’*, *‘StopAsianHate’*, and *‘StopAAPIHate’*.

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