Here Title

Alexander Herbel & Lennart Rösemeier

11 6 2020

Introduction

The outbreak of coronavirus has drastically changed our lives in several ways. Governments of most countries have implemented social distancing measures in order to fight the pandemic. In the course of the spread, the internet and especially social media has become a valuable means of acquiring information and reaching out to people around the globe. However, the internet is also known to be used for spreading fake news and conspiracy theories. Besides that, past reasearch has shown that pandemics entail waves of hate speech and racism against minorities. Indeed, this seems to show in the current situation. Several cases have been reported, documenting xenophobic behavior against people of Asian descent worldwide since coronavirus became a global crisis (). It is within this context that our attention is drawn towards the relationship between the spread of pandemics and xenophobia. In this paper we therefore attempt to investigate the emergence of xenophobic behavior on the social media platform Twitter.

Theoretical Framwork & Previous Literature

The term xenophobia is well established in the scientific literature. However, it has only a weak theoretical foundation. This is due to all the ambiguity of the term. Traditionally, xenos means both stranger and the guest in Greek words. Yet, the term is usually associated with hostility against strangers. In social psychology, xenophobia refers to a specific ingroup response that uses categorization in the form of stereotypes and prejudices. The literature concludes that xenophobia especially sparks when a social group feels threatened by an outgroup, which in turn leads to negative attitudes towards this outgroup.

Ever since, the existence of xenophobia has largely been explained by the competition for scarce resources. For instance, studies show that low GDP and large proportion of immigrants are strongly associated with xenophobic behavior in Europe. Prati & Petrantoni (2016) in their study on Ebola salience in Italy, find that prejudice toward African immigrants was positively related to salience and risk perception of Ebola. Similarly, dionne2015perceptions demonstrate that the Ebola outbreak in 2014, negatively affected prejudice against African immigrants in the USA.

Another branch of literature has focused on xenophobic activities on social media. Keum and Miller conclude that it is especially the anonymity of the internet, that fosters hate speech on the web. At the same time, it is well documented that a crisis can act as a main driver of xenophobic activity, leading to panic among people who are confronted with threats to their health and those of their peers. Within this frame, especially the mix of unexpected development of the pandemic and the possibilities of the internet, may lead people to engage in irrational decision making, which in turn leads to massive blame towards chinese and asian people in general.

Methods

To study the prevalence of xenophobia against asians and chinese, we collected data from Twitter via Pythons TwitterScraper. Since we are interested in the development of specific language and wordings towards people from asia, we decided to restrict tweets to English language which were created between November 1, 2019 and April 30, 2020. As hate speech against minorities is predominantly associated with insults, we decided to use common ethnic slurs such as chinazi and chingchong. Furthermore, to capture anti sentiments on a more general level, we additionally extracted tweets with the hashtags #chinaliedpeopledied and #chinesevirus. While the former is often used to blame china for the outbreak, the latter dates back to a tweet by US president Donald Trump in which he referred to the pandemic as a "Chinese Virus". We excluded repetitive Tweets as well as retweets, which leaves us with 37129 Tweets in the final dataset.

Our Analytic strategy is trivial. Since past research suggests that hate speech on social media exists and pandemics have shown associations with waves of xenophobia, we would expect a clear increase of racial slurs on twitter as well as the above mentioned hashtags, over the period of interest. However, from a methodological point of view, the endeavour of capturing xenophobia on Twitter is not self-evident. Searching for specific tweets on the world wide web raises several validity concerns, since multiple selection stages taking place. Hence, we provide an extended explanation in the discussion section. Furthermore, single search terms do not capture the whole context of a given tweet. For instance it might be the case that our search terms are also used in a positive context which would clearly bias our results. Thus, to circumvent this concern, we implement a sentiment analysis and show that indeed our dataset mostly comprises negative sentiments.

Results

Discussion & Conclusion