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Abstract

During the pandemic period, xenophobic and racist hate speech against migrant communities seeped in everyday online and offline conversations, yet its connection to the wider communicative context of crisis communication has been scarcely investigated so far. Hence, while the morbidity and mortality rates of the COVID-19 virus seem to have subsided, the ways in which COVID-19 risks and measures were communicated and appraised still call for our attention as they illuminate how alternative discursive paths contributed to social division and/or solidarity (see e.g., Muñoz Martínez, 2021; Nguyet Erni & Striphas, 2022; Wodak, 2022).

Keeping in mind that the COVID-19 pandemic was and remains so overwhelming because it refers to a series of superimposed social, cultural, political crises, the article attempts to investigate whether it is possible to conceptualize hate speech as a predictable maladaptive reaction to linguistic and discursive discrimination and inequality in the communication of risk (Russo, 2020; Russo & Grasso, 2022). It provides findings on the appraisal of COVID-19 news-based risk communication discourse by Twitter users based in the United Kingdom during the period 1 March 2020-15 March 2020. More specifically, it focuses on maladaptive responses such as hate speech towards migrant communities and individuals with some specific findings on sinophobia. In order to investigate the affect and discrimination nexus which lies at the basis of racist and xenophobic hate speech, it adopts a combined Corpus-based Critical Discourse Studies and Appraisal Linguistics Approach to Social Media (Baker, 2006; KhosraviNik, 2014, 2017; Martin & White, 2005; Partington, 1998; Thomson & White, 2008; Zappavigna, 2012, 2018). The analysis is therefore narrowed from bulk data retrieval to identify the lexical and grammatical resources used to express attitude oriented to affect and associates the findings on affect with the analysis of the representation of social actors from a Critical Discourse point of view (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001; van Leeuwen, 1996; Wodak et al., 1999).

Key words: hate speech, COVID-19 discourse, crisis discourse, risk discourse, Sinophobia

1. Introduction

Recent studies have recognised the multidimensional nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, refusing to accept it solely as a public health crisis and highlighting its varied experience and inequality (Bezruchka, 2023; Navarro & Hernandez, 2022; Ryan & Nanda, 2022). While its morbidity and mortality rate seem to have subsided, the struggle for 'signification' inherent in the communication and appraisal of COVID-19 risks and measures still calls for our attention as it illuminates how alternative discursive paths may have

contributed to social division and/or solidarity during the unfolding of the crisis and in its aftermath. Alongside the biomedical crisis, multifarious and disorienting discourses informed the recontextualization of the scientific and political debate in news and social media, amounting to a so-called ‘epidemic of signification’ or ‘panic-pandemic’ (see e.g., Muñoz Martínez, 2021; Nguyet Erni & Striphas, 2022; Yang et al., 2021). Hence, as we reflect upon what happened, it is important to revisit how the ‘crisis’ was communicated and how its communication affected the interpretation of events and everyday social relations (Gill & Lennon, 2022; Venuleo et al., 2020; Wodak, 2022).

During the pandemic the recontextualization of political discourse and science-informed risk communication in online news discourse was influenced by ‘crisis management’ with the dual aim of legitimizing public policy decisions under conditions of severe peril and time pressure and persuading the lay public to swiftly adopt risk-prevention measures. News-based risk communication arguably shifted its core function from informative to persuasive in order to increase broad social mobilization around a common goal and to enable the construal of a united and cohesive group-identity against the common enemy (Chilton, 2004). Governments had to persuade citizens to follow proposed measures, some of which implied severe restrictions of human rights, such as freedom of movement, and therefore different legitimation and persuasion strategies were employed to create society-wide consensus that such measures were necessary (Wodak, 2022). COVID-19 proved to be a scenario where health and social dimensions were embedded recursively within each other: the evolution of the health situation depended on how society managed the lockdown, abided to measures and so on.

Strategies of legitimation in the communication of policy measures involved classical strategies such as the expression of rationalisation, moral judgement, mythopoesis, yet in many cases negative emotional rhetorical strategies based on negative affects, such as fear and anxiety appeals, were employed (Cap, 2017; Chilton, 2004; Gill & Lennon, 2022; Wodak, 2015). The latter are a well-known characteristic of crisis communication and should not be defined as unprecedented or sporadic – as they are often considered a ‘good means to a good end’ in the management of health crises. Yet fear and anxiety appeals also fuelled the verbal expression of in-group idealization and the activation of solidarity networks, and on the other side ‘bordering’ and negative other-presentation, blaming, scapegoating, and attacking the moral character of individuals or out-groups (Venuleo et al., 2020). During the pandemic, the latter were arguably most visible in hate speech against migrant individuals and communities fiercely expressed from a protected and sometimes anonymous position in digitally networked communication technologies such as Twitter (Nguyet Erni & Striphas, 2022; Russo, 2020). Xenophobic and racist hate speech against migrants seeped in everyday online and offline conversation, yet its connection to the wider communicative context of crisis communication has been scarcely investigated so far. Keeping in mind that the COVID-19 pandemic was and remains so overwhelming because it refers to a series of superimposed social, cultural, political crises, the article attempts to investigate whether it is possible to conceptualise hate speech as a predictable maladaptive reaction to linguistic and discursive discrimination and inequality in the communication of risk in crisis contexts (Lipsy, 2020; Russo, 2020; Russo & Grasso, 2022; Wodak, 2022).

Since the communication of risk in online news discourse was far from being stable and univocal, the analysis of the sharing and commenting on news-based risk communication by online social media users during the pandemic may provide an insightful window into how discursive strategies of crisis communication were appraised. Numerous studies have tried to track hate speech during the pandemic on social networking sites (e.g., Breazu & Machin, 2022; Uyheng et al., 2022; Vergani et al., 2022), yet the correlation between COVID-19 news-based risk communication and virulent forms of online hate speech has not been explored. Hence, the article tries to fill a gap in recent research by investigating whether specific discursive and rhetorical strategies in news-based risk communication may be considered a predictable trigger of hate speech and/or solidarity. It provides findings on the appraisal of COVID-19 news-based risk communication discourse by Twitter users based in the United Kingdom during the period 1 March 2020-15 March 2020. More specifically, it focuses on maladaptive responses such as hate speech towards migrant communities and individuals. In order to investigate the affect and discrimination nexus which lies at the basis of racist and xenophobic hate speech, it adopts a combined Corpus-based Critical Discourse and Appraisal Linguistics Approach to Social Media (KhosraviNik, 2014, 2017; Zappavigna, 2012, 2018). It combines Corpus Linguistics methodological tools with the analysis of context and discourse structural evaluation through qualitative assessments of online news and social media discourse (Baker, 2006; Martin & White, 2005; Partington, 1998; Thomson & White, 2008; Zappavigna, 2012). The analysis is therefore narrowed from bulk data retrieval to identify the lexical and grammatical resources used to express attitude oriented to affect and associates the findings on affect with the analysis of the representation of social actors from a Critical Discourse point of view (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001; van Leeuwen, 1996; Wodak et al., 1999).

2. Background: Migration Discourse, Affect and Online Hate in Times of Crisis

From a Critical Discourse Studies viewpoint, social media platforms such as Twitter may provide a terrain for the investigation of how lay people appraise news regarding migration articulating their opinions according to deep-rooted presuppositions, cultural stereotypes and ideological inferences ingrained in discourse (van Dijk, 2016).

News discourse has offered a fertile ground for combined Critical Discourse and Corpus Linguistics analyses of migration discourse. Keyword searches, concordance and collocational analysis have been used as entry points for the analysis of the most frequent and salient linguistic and discursive features employed in broadsheet and tabloids to represent migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in large corpora (Baker, 2006; Baker & McEnery, 2005; Baker et al., 2008; Taylor, 2014). The latter have built on seminal work in the field of Critical Discourse Studies focusing on the representation of migrants as social actors and discriminatory linguistic expressions in order to take into account the frequency of language patterns, the level of the text, the relation between different texts and discourses, the context in which texts are produced and the wider historical and political context (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). They therefore situate the qualitative analysis of a wide range of linguistic and discursive

strategies within a wider analytical framework which includes extra-linguistic social/sociological variables, and situational frames. Based on the premise that the power of news media discourse lies in the repetition and incremental effect of discourse, they have provided numerous tools and findings for the critical understanding and analysis of migration discourse in different genres.

The repetitive nature of language realisations and discursive strategies has been so pervasive in the representation of individual migrants and migrant communities that they may be considered a consequence of the professional culture of journalism in which 'the formation of news events, and the formation of news values is a reciprocal, dialectical process in which stereotypes are the currency of negotiation' (van Dijk, 1988, p. 17). Indeed, news reporters engage in dialogue with prior reports in the same sphere (i.e., with those who have previously taken a stand with respect to an issue) and it may be argued that they draw upon familiar images and language patterns to construct a discursive framework of alignment and rapport through which readers may be engaged (Martin & White, 2005). The selection or enhancement of news through editing of certain events and social actors depends on how they meet news values criteria, e.g. prominent social actors are selected for their identity, while non-elite news actors enter the news if something negative or unexpected happens to them (Bell, 1991; Bell & Garrett, 1998). Pushing this line of inquiry further, Critical Discourse Analysts claim that certain events (such as crises and disasters) satisfy news values more than others. In particular, van Dijk (1988, p. 113) recognized the social and discursive dimensions of news values distinguishing between news values referred to the economic conditions of news production (including constraints such as budgets, sales/subscriptions), the newsgathering production process (deadlines, sections, accessibility of sources) and cognitive constraints (Novelty, Recency, Presupposition, Consonance, Relevance, Deviance and Negativity, Proximity). The dire consequence is that the latter arguably involve an established category of human interest (e.g. worrying about risks, imagined enemies, etc.), but also an appetite created by news media. In this light 'news values are the preferences of the expected audience' (Richardson, 2007, p. 182). Therefore, the semiotic and linguistic devices that construct newsworthiness are conventionalised and the result of journalistic practice over decades. As Bednarek and Caple note 'newsworthiness is not inherent in events but established through language and image' (Bednarek & Caple, 2012, p. 44; see also Bednarek, 2006).

Although its actual reception by readers was not tested, the impact of the repetitive and cumulative nature of stereotypical and discriminatory representations of migrants was first theorised by Teun van Dijk, who in his popular work on news and social cognition argued that people rely heavily on media accounts for their knowledge, beliefs and opinions, which in turn form socially shared knowledge and limited interpretative repertoires (1988, 1996). Recent studies have used social media data to study people's opinions as they allow a greater opportunity for ideas and often unfiltered thoughts to be available in the public sphere (Bouvier, 2017, p. 5; Christopherson, 2007). The limited length of social media posts would seem to limit the possibility of investigating what they believe and feel through appraisal analysis (Martin & White, 2005). However, as Zappavigna argues, twitterers express their feelings and attitudes, negotiate relationships, and adopt stances directly in the 'body' of a post or through semiotic resources that are specific to social media, as in the case of forms of 're-posting', such as retweeting, and social tagging

practices, such as hashtags (2017, p. 441). Hence, the appraisal approach is particularly useful for this study, as the massive amount of data emanating from Twitter is informative of the users' emotions towards specific news (Zappavigna, 2018). As Zappavigna notes, appraisal 'couples with ideation' and therefore people share values and form ambient communities in relation to crisis communication, risks and so on (Zappavigna, 2018, p. 122-125). Moreover, hashtags have developed important interpersonal functions associated with the expression of attitudinal stance and increased emotive denotative power (Zappavigna, 2012, 2018). Hashtag meta-evaluation has a prosodic resonance, it extends across the whole text rather than a single constituent unit. Hence, Twitter discourse may be analysed in terms of the introduction and management of voices to whom these values are attributed through categories of engagement (Martin & White, 2005; Zappavigna, 2012, 2018). Through hashtags and reference to other users via symbols such as @, it allows external voices to be managed within the discourse and speakers to align or dis-align themselves with these voices, endorsing or disendorsing what other people say.

As Bednarek et al. (2022, p. 1) recently put it, Twitter is particularly well suited for the analysis of public sentiment as it enables users to draw attention to, and interact with communities as crises are unfolding, thus functioning as a collective space where discourses can be represented, legitimised, and made part of larger issues of social significance. Social media platforms such as Twitter may indeed provide an ideal and immediate window into how people appraise policy measures and risk communication. Lay-users briefly comment on policy measures and risk communication in online news to circulate information, but they do it to share their opinion and their understanding of risks. In this manner, social media users contribute to the legitimation and delegitimation of news-based risk communication discourse and to social mobilization in favour or against around a common vision of crisis management (Chilton, 2004). As they connect through common hashtags and retweet, they construct 'shared visions' of risk values and outcomes (i.e., the meaning assigned to risks as social constructs and the desired visions about the outcomes and future developments of policy measures and science) drawing for instance on the metaphoric construal of an enemy entity posing an imminent and unprecedented threat (in our case COVID-19 epidemics, contagion etc.) (Garzone, 2021; Semino, 2021). Yet as they are greatly interested in persuading other users to align with their vision, they also amplify the force and intensity of discourses of risk communication in crisis contexts through the expression of negative affects such as fear and anxiety.

According to Witte (1992), risk communication resorts to three types of fear appeals which are diversely appraised by people: perceived efficacy, perceived threat, and fear. In the case of perceived efficacy, threat is perceived as moderate or high, fear is evoked and the receiver is ready to appraise the efficacy of the suggested actions, while 'the fear originally evoked by the personally relevant and significant threat becomes intensified when individuals believe they are unable to effectively deter the threat. Thus, they become motivated to cope with their fear (defensive motivation) by engaging in maladaptive responses (e.g., denial, distrust, etc.)' (Witte, 1992, p. 338). Moreover, as Gill and Lennon (2022, p. 23) note, COVID-19 risk communication was mostly characterised by fear appeals and information campaigns which arguably incited a semiotic 'civil war between those who can

comply with COVID-19 policy (who are celebrated as moral paragons) against those who cannot (labelled daring and uncaring)'.

Following this line of thought fear appeals and discrimination within news-based risk communication may instigate hate speech towards affected populations and as numerous studies have found these may at times be fiercely expressed in online communication which has the advantage of enabling people to express intolerant views towards a feared subject from a protected and sometimes anonymous position (Balirano & Hughes, 2020; KhosraviNik & Esposito, 2018). Hate speech refers to expressions that incite harm (particularly discrimination, hostility, or violence) towards a particular target on the basis of the target's identification with a certain social or demographic group. It may include speech that advocates, threatens, or encourages violent acts. Hate speech can also include expressions that foster a climate of prejudice and intolerance, on the assumption that such a climate may fuel targeted discrimination, hostility, and violence (UNESCO, 2015).

Although Twitter forbids users to publish or post direct, specific threats of violence against others (Twitter, 2023), hate speech towards specific social groups who are viewed as minorities and/or vulnerable on the basis of their religion, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation still appears on the site either as an overt or covert hate speech (Awan, 2014; Ben-David & Matamoros-Fernandez, 2016; Yamaguchi, 2013). In recent years, there has been a keen interest in identifying and extracting opinions and emotions from text, in order to provide tools for information analysts in government, commercial and political domains seeking to track attitudes and feelings in the news and online forums (Wiebe et al., 2005). However, such work has mostly been limited to posts made by members of online hate groups and in radical forums at the document or sentence level (Burnap & Williams, 2015; Djuric et al., 2015; Gitari et al., 2015), and no studies have examined how news-based risk communication is evaluated and whether it may incite hate speech against social, ethnic, sexual or gender minority groups on social media.

3. Corpus Design and Method

The COVID-19 pandemic emerged in the city of Wuhan (China) in December 2019 and spread globally in a very short time. The health crisis began to affect the domestic and foreign political decision-making processes of countries with heavy consequences for the economy and heavy restrictions for citizens in regard to gatherings, mobility, movement during the first months of 2020. The corpus (n. tokens 336,667) was designed by selecting tweets with the query terms covid*/corona virus + risk* during the period 1 March 2020-15 March 2020. The period was chosen as The World Health Organization declared the outbreak a pandemic in March 2020.

The data were collected through data scraping with Python, with the libraries 'twint' (<https://pypi.org/project/twint/>) and 'pandas' (<https://pypi.org/project/pandas/>). All duplicate tweets were removed (when 2 tweets were 100% equal to each other, just the first occurrence was preserved) and all files were UTF-8 encoded to avoid problems with special characters (such as emojis). In addition, metadata regarding time, user ID, number of followers, links to micromedia, small-scale multimedia and hyperlinks were collected. Subsequently, tweets with hyperlinks referring to online news media

were considered, and relevant news reports were collected in the news reports section of the corpus.

Corpus	Total n.	Tokens n.
Tweets	15441	597531
News Reports	155	333500

Table 1. Size of the corpus

The first stage of the analysis involved a corpus-based examination of the Twitter corpus. The analysis was carried out by firstly taking into consideration the corpus through the aid of *AntConc*, a concordancer developed by Laurence Anthony (2011) to explore the frequency, statistical significance, context of specific lexical items and terms, phrases, lexical bundles and multiword units referring to expression of affect in comparison with the reference corpus, the NOW Corpus by Mark Davies, a corpus specifically compiled to represent a comprehensive picture of online news media outlets. The analysis further considered the significantly salient terms in the corpus, their co-text, and relevant co-occurrences (Baker, 2006). Hashtags and mentions were also examined to draw information on the interpersonal bonds built among users by means of attitudinal stance and emotive language to understand how twitterers aligned or dis-aligned themselves with other platform interlocutors while endorsing or disendorsing the opinion of others (Zappavigna, 2012, 2018). Subsequently, the search was narrowed to combine the appraisal lexicogrammatical features with a corpus-assisted Critical Social Media Discourse Analysis (Baker, 2006; Martin & White, 2005; Unger et al., 2016). More specifically, this final stage of the analysis focused on how users reacted to news-based risk communication regarding the epidemic in terms of affect and solidarity related to the representation of migrant individuals and communities.

Hence the analysis took into account the following levels of analysis: frequency and statistical significance, the level of the text, the relation between different tweets and news reports, the context in which tweets were produced and the wider historical and political context.

4. Results and Discussion: Affect and Racial Discrimination in the Appraisal of News-based Risk Communication on Twitter

Despite instances of positively evaluated items within the corpus under analysis, their cumulative effect resulted in the overall negative appraisal of risk in the corpus. Further investigation was needed to single out the linguistic realizations and context of appraisal in the corpus (Halliday, 1979; Martin & White, 2005). Hence, the search was narrowed from bulk data retrieval to qualitative analysis to combine a corpus-assisted appraisal and social media critical discourse analysis (Unger et al., 2016; Baker, 2006; Martin & White, 2005; Zappavigna, 2012, 2017, 2018).

Linguistic realisations of affect	n.
Concern*	289
Fear*	279
Anxi*	169
Hate*	149
Sad*	47
Alarm*	35
Satisf*	25
Desper*	24
Angr*	23
Worr*	22
Unsatisf*	20

Table 2. Most frequent lexico-grammatical choices for the expression of emotion in *Wordlist*

The analysis revealed the concomitant use of several language resources employed to express emotional attitude. The linguistic realization of affect may in fact take many forms, which comprise the modification of participants (affect as a quality), affective mental and behavioural processes (affect as a process), modal adjuncts (affect as comment), and grammatical metaphors (e.g. nominalisations of qualities and processes) (Martin & White, 2005, p. 42). They may be related to emotional behaviour, such as *restless* and *twitching*, or to the internal labelling of psychological, mental or relational processes, such as *uneasy* or *happy with* (Benítez-Castro & Hidalgo-Tenorio, 2019). Moreover, lexico-grammatical choices for the expression of emotion must be graded according to the depth of feeling along semantic topologies encompassing both the surge of behaviour and disposition (Martin & White, 2005, p. 50). These major sets were used as an annotation scheme to automatically tag the corpus with the built-in scheme in the UAM CorpusTool (O'Donnell, 2008). It confirmed that in the corpus linguistic realisations of affects related to in/security, such as concern, worry, fear, and anxiety, were the most frequent.

The analysis then proceeded with an analysis of the coupling of affects with collocates. The corpus was analysed to ascertain collocates by frequency ranking (5 L and 5 R span) and content words were selected in Table 3. The strongest collocates unsurprisingly indicate that the spread of the virus caused feelings of insecurity. Numerous occurrences pointed to terms related to health-related risks (e.g. *pathogens*), to the risk-prevention measures (e.g. *distancing*, *quarantine*) and to the perception of the pandemic as a threatening experience (e.g. *threat*).

*Fear** further unveiled a strong preference for terms referring to movement and mobility and to specific in-groups (e.g. UK, people, we, us, our) and out-groups (Asian, Wuhan). Deictics such as *we* and toponyms used as metonymies and/or personifications such as U.K. and China also indicated a strong preference for the representation of in-groups and out-groups, rather than individuals or the expression of personal identity. An indication of relationalising tendencies (Wodak, 2022) during the pandemic is also given by terms referring to the discourses of movement, borders and frontlines, security and protection. On the other side, concern and anxiety also refer to risk and

threat, but respectively solidarity regarding different personifications and social actors (Italy, Hispanics, friends) and personal wellbeing (me, mental health).

Concern*	Collocate	Fear*	Collocate	Anxi*	Collocate
https	99	https	77	threat	23
risks	81	threat	34	emotion	6
health	70	pandemic	26	me	6
threat	66	movement	23	isolation	5
risk	43	lines	19	cope	4
pathogens	33	front	19	stress	4
knowledge	30	wuhan	17	spreads	4
hunger	15	uk	16	hope	4
friends	14	outbreak	15	increase	4
hispanics	14	we	13	uncertain	4
invulnerable	12	quarantine	10	normal	4
italys	10	distancing	9	mentalwellbeing	3
festival	8	stay	7	healthcareheroes	3
english	8	asian	7	whirlwind	2

Table 3. Concern*, Fear* and Anxi* collocates by frequency ranking

As already found in Zappavigna (2012), the social importance of information sharing influences the content of tweets and therefore the marker identifying hyperlinks (i.e. http) was the first collocate for concern and fear. This not only confirms previous studies that the sharing of information/URLs is one of the most common motivations in the use of Twitter, but points to the most frequent feelings expressed in the evaluation of news-based risk communication (Zappavigna, 2012). Hence, the analysis further focused on the correlation between the tweets and news sources. As shortened links are very common, shortened URLs were expanded referring to obtain the actual domains.

The analysis found that hate speech was unsurprisingly more frequent in connection to low-credibility news sources (Kai-Cheng et. al., 2020), and that in the tweets that shared high-credibility sources hate speech was connected to the ways in which social actors were represented in news-based risk communication¹.

Nomination strategies had a strong impact on how readers understood and judged news about individuals and/or groups of people (van Leeuwen 1996, p. 46). In numerous cases, hate speech was connected to risk in the presence of specific nomination and predicational strategies, to fear appeals and to moralising tendencies.

In the news reports, migrants are generally referred to collectively and are therefore an anonymous and generic category (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 81), yet social actors are also linguistically inscribed with certain qualities through the use of predicational strategies (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, p. 47). They are characterized by quantification and statistics. As in previous findings on aggregation in the representation of migrants and refugees in media discourse (Baker, 2006), numbers are utilised to give the impression of objective research

and scientific credibility, where, in fact, no specific sources for the figures are mentioned. In example 1, migrants are defined as subjects *at risk*, yet their identification as a risk for the community is implicitly invoked in use of the negative qualonym *undocumented*, the use of exaggerated aggregation (*a million*), the negative speculative construction of their numbers and uncertainty generated by the absence of evidence about their abode (*Nobody knows exactly how many of these migrants are currently in the UK; Home Office does not have comprehensive records of their whereabouts*). Hence, twitter users responded with the widespread use of hate speech and positive and negative classes of concepts were built up around participants creating an overt opposition between the in-group (*British people*) and the out-group (*migrants*):

- (1) Approximately a million undocumented migrants living under the radar in the UK could be at risk not only of contracting Covid-19 but also of starvation because of the crisis created by the pandemic, charities have warned.

Nobody knows exactly how many of these migrants are currently in the UK, as the Home Office does not have comprehensive records of their whereabouts. This group includes asylum seekers whose claims the Home Office has rejected but who are fearful of returning to their home countries and temporary workers whose visas have expired.

@user One Million Undocumented Migrants Could Go Hungry, Say Charities Tough fkin shit. If you sneak into a Country illegally you're not entitled to the same privileges
 @user My heart bleeds for them NOT The only thing that would concern me is crime rate going through the roof.
 @user Tough shit! Should have stayed at home and not come to europe!!
 @user So they should if they came here illegally.
 @user Why wait until it is all over Send them back asap
 @user It will be chaotic to deal with the virus and with hungry people. Think in advance on how to prevent that. Some persons are getting guns, I guess they have thought of that already
 @user There will be food riots and looting then
 @user Don't you mean illegal?
 @user So what's the difference between undocumented and illegal!!!
 @user You misspelled *illegal*
 @user Million undocumented migrants could go hungry, say charities - The Guardian. Is "undocumented" Guardian-speak for "illegal"?
 @user the mosques should take Muslim illegals in u never hear of Muslim countries giving them a home or benefits or actually helping why because they want to flood Christian countries with their crap

Similarly, in example 2, the reporter implicitly identifies migrants as a health risk but twitter users focused on the negative qualonym *illegal* and the disendorsement of the process as *inevitable* through quotation marks:

- (2) Illegal migrants with coronavirus 'inevitably entering UK'.

Border officials warn people coming to the country illegally are not being routinely tested or put in quarantine. Illegal migrants could carry coronavirus into the UK even when commercial flights are all but grounded,

because they are not being routinely tested or put into quarantine, according to the union for border officials

@user Illegal migrants with coronavirus 'inevitably entering UK'. This is mad & putting even more Brits in danger. Now more than ever we must defend our borders rt

@user That statement cannot be accurate

@user Words fail me. 'They cannot be detained against their will' They're illegal, breaking the law! They are a risk to British Citizens. What the hell is happening to this country? Illegal migrants with coronavirus 'inevitably entering UK'

@user This kind of news makes me very anxious. Illegal migrants with coronavirus 'inevitably entering UK'

Instead, in the case of another article (example 3), the reporter used the pre-modifier *vulnerable* to define immigration detainees and displayed a stronger tendency towards the construction of an out-group placed in affected/patient positions, and the reiteration of a pattern of transitivity generally used in conjunction with the *topos* of victimisation and to the discursive construction of a humanitarian stance. In this case, the news report was met by twitter users with outrage and solidarity towards the affected detainees.

- (3) Vulnerable immigration detainees at risk of dying if they contract Covid-19 are to be placed in solitary confinement for at least three months, according to a leaked letter from the Home Office contractor G4S. The detainees, who have either committed no crime or completed a prison sentence for a crime already committed, are facing the same 'shielding' protocol as those serving a prison sentence with health conditions that put them at risk, the Guardian understands.

@user SEVEN days to show symptoms - not 3 months!!! Our cruelty knows no bounds.

@user this is inhumane and degrading treatment of people who are VULNERABLE and/or ILL. WTF.

@user Actually existing barbarism in this country. Empty the detention centres

@user [unbelievable! Shame!]

@user Fucking hell.

(Revealed: at-risk immigration detainees 'to be put in solitary confinement'
The Guardian, 15/03/2020)

Even more so, in example 4, the UNHCR press release disrupts the definition of migrants as the *vulnerable* outgroup by using an inclusive *we* and points to the moral duty of human rights protection towards migrants who are at *heightened risk*,

- (4) The rights and health of refugees, migrants and stateless must be protected in COVID-19 response.

In the face of the COVID-19 crisis, we are all vulnerable. The virus has shown that it does not discriminate – but many refugees, those forcibly displaced, the stateless and migrants are at heightened risk.
<https://unhcr.org/news/press/2020/3/5e836f164/rights-health-refugees-migrants-stateless-must-protected-covid-19-response.html>

@user It is such an extra layer of disaster for these poor people #refugees #covid19

@user In the face of the COVID-19 crisis, we are all vulnerable. The rights and health of refugees, migrants and stateless must be protected in COVID-19 response. Read a joint statement by UNHCR, IOM, OHCHR and WHO - <https://bit.ly/34a77fP>

@user The Republic of Cyprus must allow access to asylum now! What can we claim rights under the UN charter and violate them? UNHCR - The rights and health of refugees, migrants and stateless must be protected in COVID-19 response <https://unhcr.org/news/press/2020/3/5e836f164/rights-health-refugees-migrants-stateless-must-protected-covid-19-response.html>

@user Is anybody listening? UNHCR - The rights and health of refugees, migrants and stateless must be protected in COVID-19 response <https://unhcr.org/news/press/2020/3/5e836f164/rights-health-refugees-migrants-stateless-must-protected-covid-19-response.html>

@user So proud of my country right now Our government & national health service is doing such a great job to contain the coronavirus and... It is also now giving migrants asylum seekers citizenship rights so they can get access to health care

The moralising appeal is met favourably by twitter users and may perhaps be regarded as a more effective strategy in risk communication discourse.

As aforementioned, in the corpus, migrants are usually treated as collective anonymous groups. Yet, the analysis also led to a further finding related to another frequent collocate of the affects *fear** and *concern**, the collocates *risk* and *threat* were in fact coupled with hate speech and calls for border closure against Chinese people or individuals. In the following examples, quantification (e.g. *growing*) inspires users to raise of questions about ‘conspiracy theories’ (Demata et al. 2022):

- (5) A growing number of Chinese immigrants are coming without papers, often taking journeys through several countries and modes of transport and using social media as their guide.

@user The whole world knows the border is open. #BorderCrisis

@user We have stopped over 300 chinese trying to illegally cross our border. We don't know how many escaped detection. Because of the health risk of chinese spreading covid 19, shouldn't we close the southern border?

@user And yet, once again, our government risks lives by not testing Chinese arrivals. Coupled with the lack of testing of illegal migrants you might almost think it was deliberate. #Covid

In the Twitter corpus, Chinese people are depicted and associated with risk through metaphors, such as catastrophes, natural disasters, and dangers, which are consistent with previous findings on racist and xenophobic discourse (Baldwin, 2013; Baker, 2006; van Dijk, 1988, 1991, 1993, 1996; Wodak 2001, 2008). In numerous cases, they are merged by way of cumulative associations with natural calamities of great magnitude and in need of urgent control and management by the nation. In example 6, the user sought legitimization for hate speech by proposing to neutralize *threat*:

- (6) #Covid_19 is a #catastrophe that constitutes a bigger external #threat to mankind's survival than any foe!! #ChinaMustPay for this! #ChineseVirus #ChinaLiedPeopleDied #StayHomeStaySafe #XijipingVirus #ChineseBioterrorism #coronavirus #pandemic <https://t.co/PNEx6u7fjC>:

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a surge in Sinophobia targeting Asian and Asian diasporic communities and individuals through hate speech and widespread discursive as well as physical forms of discrimination and conspiracy theories (Gao, 2022; Schumann & Moore, 2022; Viladrich, 2021; Horton, 2020; Demata et al., 2022). Moreover, it gave way to pernicious and insidious forms of racism based on the discursive conflation of race and health, i.e. the association of Chinese people and coronavirus as in well-known past stereotyping practices of associating particular racialised groups with diseases (White & Crandall, 2017).

According to numerous scholars, the surge of sinophobic hate speech was not caused solely by the association between the Chinese population and the coronavirus. It was arguably fed by past political and cultural differences such as communism, international trade and human rights issues, and increasing political tensions between Western countries and China, such as the U.S. and China due to trade wars. Sinophobia most certainly spiralled when Trump's administration expressed an open distrust in Chinese science, sparking concern and the expression of anger and fear of uncertainty (Shi, 2020; Lee, 2022). Within this context, the spread of false narratives in our information environment can have acutely negative repercussions on social media appraisal of news and resulted in a narrative battle (Jaworski & Qiaoan, 2022) as in example 7:

- (7) @user should understand that calling #Covid_19 #WuhanVirus is NOT an issue of racism. It's a matter of FACT, especially when now Communist China is spreading fake news and propaganda to defame other countries and shift its responsibility for causing #CoronavirusPandemic. <https://t.co/2WlwjHRFNC>

Hashtags also confirmed the use of twitter as a conveyor of risk communication based on affective communing (Zappavigna, 2018). In terms of frequency and keyness, they confirmed the salient topics of tweets (see Table 4) with users mostly communing on risk communication about updates and coverage on the epidemic (*#coronaviruspandemic, #coronavirusoutbreak, #coronaoutbreak, #coronavirusupdates, #coronavirusupdate*) and risk prevention as in the case of the spreading of information on measures to avoid the spread of the contagion (*#socialdistancing, #coronalockdown, #mentalhealth, #hydroxychloroquine, #immunocompromised*). Yet they were also used to align with users interested in specific 'local' virtual communities (*#coronavirusuk, #ukcoronavirus, #coronavirususa*) and to persuade other users through calls to follow the measures to avoid contagion (*#staysafe, #stayathomeandstaysafe, #flattenthecurve, #detentionaction*). In other cases they were used to invoke positive or negative evaluation and share values (*#coronapocalypse, #chinesevirus, #fakenews, #unhumanrights, #wuhanvirus*).

Rank	Frequency	Keyness	Hashtag
9	10975	10.449.564	coronavirus
757	77	64.555	coronaviruspandemic
766	66	62.840	coronavirusoutbreak
783	74	61.777	coronaoutbreak
891	64	52.544	coronavirusupdates
912	62	50.703	socialdistancing
1045	52	41.530	coronavirusupdate
1057	51	40.617	borisjohnson
1058	42	39.989	coronalockdown
1346	38	28.821	coronapocalypse
1352	30	28.564	publichealth
1525	24	22.851	detentionaction
1567	23	21.899	flattenthecurve
1598	30	21.670	chinesevirus
1599	22	20.947	dailyoundnfury
1638	29	20.785	coronavirustruth
1685	20	19.042	coronavirusuk
1687	20	19.042	fakenews
1692	20	19.042	mentalhealth
1759	26	18.143	hydroxychloroquine
1760	26	18.143	immunocompromised
1840	18	17.138	stayathomeandstaysafe
1841	18	17.138	ukcoronavirus
1970	23	15.527	coronavirususa
2038	15	14.282	staysafe
2040	15	14.282	unhumanrights
2095	21	13.800	coronaviruslockdown
2112	14	13.330	wuhanvirus

Table 4. Hashtags in the corpus

The analysis hence focused on the hashtags *#chinesevirus* and *#wuhanvirus* with the help of the concordance tool to consider the co-text. In the case of the hashtag *#ChineseVirus*, it uncovered that hate speech mostly proceeded prosodically through the juxtaposition of other hashtags which served as intensifiers of hate speech (*#ChinaLiedAndPeopleDied*, *#ChinaMustPay*, *#BatSoup*, *#WuhanVirus*, *#XijipingVirus* *#ChineseBioterrorism*). For instance, in examples 8 and 9, the tweet does not explicitly inscribe hate speech, but it implicitly invokes and amplifies it through the use of other hashtags creating a potential bond with the ambient audience:

- (8) *#Covid_19* is a *#catastrophe* that constitutes a bigger external *#threat* to mankind's survival than any foe!! *#ChinaMustPay* for this! *#ChineseVirus* *#ChinaLiedPeopleDied* *#StayHomeStaySafe* *#XijipingVirus* *#ChineseBioterrorism* *#coronavirus* *#pandemic* <https://t.co/PNEx6u7fjC>
- (9) *#WuhanCoronaVirus* *#CoronaVirus* *#ChinaVirus* *#COVID19* *#BatSoup* *#ChineseVirus* *#IncompetentFools* Nancy Pelosi Dismissed Coronavirus Threat in February Chinatown Visit <https://t.co/kyTIAFdhVK> via @BreitbartNews

5. Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic may be regarded as a critical moment of intense discursive antagonism, during which individuals and communities discussed and interrogated themselves on the meaning and interpretation of events, but also on their shared values and identities. In many cases, it amounted to the emotional amplification of differences between a discursively constructed in-group and out-group, resulting in overt and covert xenophobic and racist hate speech towards minority groups. Online newspapers became an important outlet of risk communication as they participated in the 'recontextualisation' of risk science and policies (Bondi et al., 2015). At the same time, they played an important role in shaping public opinion and policymaking as they informed the public about the political debate concerning risk assessments, planning and policies (Rohrmann, 2004; Alharbi, 2014). The article specifically considered how twitter users appraised news-based risk communication about COVID-19 during the first two weeks of March 2020.

Numerous studies have recently used Twitter data to investigate public sentiments in relation to international political relations and its recent use as a conveyor of conspiracy theories, mis- and disinformation, and fake news about the pandemic (e.g., Demata et al., 2022; Vergani et al., 2022). Yet scarce if null attention has been devoted to the investigation of how Twitter users respond to news-based risk communication and specific discursive representations of migrants and specific communities.

The analysis found that the correlation between the discursive representation of migrants and fear appeals in news discourse triggered a wave of hate speech against migrants. Yet available previous studies often do not consider this correlation in for instance detailed analyses of public sentiment towards migrants. In this regard, innovative data sources and methodologies would provide valuable complementary insights for policymakers. News-based risk communication often resorts to fear appeals and to the representation of groups of people since news reporters tend to focus on the social contexts and participant roles in science, such as conflicts, problems and developments, and the relevance of scientific knowledge in the everyday lives of citizens rather than on scientific information (Calsamiglia & van Dijk, 2004). Through personification and strategies of involvement, news reporters express inner states, attitudes and feelings or degrees of emotional interest and engagement, which aim to engage readers both emotionally and cognitively. These are opposed to strategies of detachment, which are realized to encode distance. Hence, denominations of people are inscribed with evaluative attributions of negative and positive traits in the linguistic form of implicit or explicit predicates with different degrees of intensification (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, p. 47). As a consequence, twitter users sharing their opinions on news-based risk communication may align alongside or against specific groups (van Dijk, 1993).

In the twitter corpus, ideological squaring was frequent and was achieved through the use of deictics and referential choices which created opposites to justify maladaptive responses such as hate speech towards affected populations. In particular, the deictical pronoun 'we' was used to establish a collective national voice and borders. Close examination uncovered hate speech based on preservation of the in-group, closure and discrimination towards two out-groups, i.e. Chinese people and migrants. It also found that hate speech occurred in conjunction with specific strategies of representation of these

groups in the news source that was shared by the twitter user. In the case of nomination strategies involving a humanitarian stance (e.g., ‘vulnerable migrants’), twitter users empathized with migrants. Yet as migrants themselves have advocated on numerous occasions, it implies the representation of migrants as helpless and powerless victims requiring salvation. The latter representations have been particularly contested by the very groups who are identified as migrants: they have often reclaimed their role as positive agents of change and have stressed their concerns over the loss of agency and self-determination related to forced migration and refugee status. This is a particularly strategic call since, as Chouliaraki (2006) notes, the type of action that the sufferer plays out bears an effect on the spectator’s own orientation to the sufferer. The representation of distant suffering and victims of epidemics through the spectacles of news media does not always result in the creation of a global public with a sense of social responsibility nor orients the spectator towards certain options for action on the suffering and to the connect with the spectacle of suffering (2006, p. 154-155). According to Chouliaraki, it largely depends on the agency of the sufferer, the semiotic choice of inactivity annihilates the sufferer, depriving her/him of ‘corporeal and psychological qualities and removes her from the existential order to which the spectator belongs’ (2006, p. 170). The right to self-representation and to one’s own voice may indeed be one of the few repositories of humanity. The silence and absence of self-narratives impacts on the representation of Chinese people and migrants just as much as the other- verbal and visual representations.

The article discussed findings related to the combination of fear appeals and specific representations of migrants which triggered negative/positive appraisal and adaptive/maladaptive responses, such as hate speech and solidarity. Therefore, it aimed to further research on how news-based risk communication may increase/decrease hate and solidarity speech in the hope of spreading awareness on the importance of discourse and communication strategies in epidemic crises.

Notes

1. For a discussion of the role and classification of low- and high-credibility sources during the pandemic see Kai-Cheng et. al. (2020).

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