#StopAsianHate: A content analysis of TikTok videos focused on racial discrimination against Asians and Asian Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This cross-sectional, descriptive study conducted in January 2022 reviewed 100 TikTok videos using the hashtag #StopAsianHate. Categoriesof Asian and Asian American (referred to hereafter as Asian) abuse/attack ($N = 57$) and awareness of Asian hate & hate crimes ($N = 52$) were observed in over 50% of videos. The following themes were of significance: Asian abuse/attack ($p = .0079$), awareness of Asian hate and hate crimes ($p < .0001$), somber tone/expression of sadness ($p = .0025$), stop Asian hate messages ($p = .0380$), media report of Asian hate crime ($p = .0004$), and mention of COVID/virus is hate $p = .0103$). Thus, the videos which raised awareness and specifically focused on abuse were more likely to be shared. TikTok is being used as a space for marginalized groups to raise consciousness on public health issues and injustices. These insights can potentially inform health communication efforts, cultural competency training, and targeted mental health support to address health equity and improve public health outcomes of Asian.

1. Introduction

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, increased incidences of racism, xenophobia, and violence have targeted Asians and Asian Americans (referred to hereafter as Asians) [1–3]. As a result, the deleterious effects in Asian populations include widening health disparities [4], school bullying [5], stigmatization [3,6], fair housing violations [6], labor and consumer discrimination [7] and mental health issues [3,8].

Anti-Asian sentiment has been exacerbated through social media [9]. The hashtags, #Chinesevirus and #Kungflu were among the many misnomers used to incite fear and racism against Asians in the early months of the pandemic [10,11]. The use of the aforementioned controversial terms evoked anger and negative emotions among social media users [12]. Its impact reverberated throughout the nation, demonstrating social media's power to perpetuate negativity [13] and psychological sequelae offline [14].

Researchers found that daily social media consumption contributed to the perception of Asians as a threat during the pandemic [6]. As Anti-Asian sentiment became more pervasive on social media [6,10], and feelings of insecurities and fears among Asians rose [15]. According to the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism, anti-Asian hate crimes increased 339% in one year (2020 to 2021) [16]. Despite these staggering

statistics, these numbers may be higher than documented cases, as Asian victims are significantly less likely to report hate incidents to police than non-Asian groups [17]. In such moments of hatred, the need for solidarity and advocacy is paramount and, in the case of anti-Asian hate, both have been noted [8].

While social media can serve as a tool to propagate hatred, it can simultaneously promote social support. Social media has also been used as a tool to mitigate and combat anti-Asian racial bias, stigma, and discrimination [1,5]. For instance, social media influencers within Asian communities have used photographs as a form of visual protest against Asian hate on social media platforms [19,20]. Further, the murder of six Asian Americans in an Atlanta spa in 2021 led to a community outcry, which resulted in increased support and advocacy expressed on social media [18]. The social movements condemning hate acts against Asians have been spearheaded mainly by Asians [18], yet the interconnectedness of racism and COVID-19 have given rise to shared experiences of racial trauma, intolerance, and solidarity [19,21].

Social media studies have analyzed perceptions of fear and anxiety against Asians that Facebook users harbor [6], the prevalence of anti and counter-hate speech tweets [22], and the profile and demographics of users who attract more engagement on Twitter [23].However, we did not identify any studies in the published literature that have examined the

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perceptions of TikTok users related to violence against Asians despite it being one of the fastest growing social media platforms. TikTok has one billion active monthly users worldwide and 100 million active users in the US, with 90% of users accessing the platform daily [24]. Thus, the goal of this study was to describe the content of 100 TikTok videos that used the hashtag #StopAsianHate.

2. Methods

A cross-sectional, descriptive study was conducted in January 2022 to examine the messaging that offers support and condemnation of Asian-hate on TikTok. At the time of study, #StopAsianHate and #StopAAPIHate were the most commonly used hashtags to address these sentiments. With 1.6B views, the hashtag #StopAsianHate was chosen over #StopAAPIHate (82.6 M view) for inclusion in this study.

Using TikTok's "discover" feature, the first 100 English language videos were selected after excluding 25 videos that were unrelated to #StopAsianHate. All videos were watched to collect performance metrics based on data, such as number of views, followers, overall user likes, comments, likes, and the number of times each video was shared. The following 11 themes were identified: expression of empathy, use of humor, awareness on Asian hate, positive Asian representation, stop hate message, somber tone/sadness, media reports, stereotypes or microaggressions, ways of fighting back, Asian attacks (i.e., physical and verbal), and mention of COVID or hate as a virus. All 100 videos were watched by a single reviewer (ETJ) for certain content categories. For inter-rater reliability, a random sample of 10 videos were watched for the same content by a second reviewer (CHB). The two reviewers agreed on all 110 datapoints collected resulting in a reliability score of $\kappa = 1$. MS Excel was used to record descriptive statistics and run independent one-tailed t-tests ($\alpha = 0.05$). This research study did not involve human subjects. Thus, William Paterson University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) determined that it did not require review.

3. Results

In total, the 100 videos included in this study garnered 274,638,200 views, 1,082,466 comments, and 60,749,500 likes. The average (standard deviation) number of views, comments, and likes were respectively as follows: 2,746,382 (3,799,211.75), 10,825 (15,892.62), 607,495 (668,476.58).

Table 1 shows the 11 different content categories considered when watching each video. This table also includes the number of videos that featured this content (N) along with the views, comments, and likes that videos with this content received. Percentages relative to the cumulative number of views, comments, and likes are also included for comparison.

There were only 2 content categories observed in a majority (>50%) of the videos. These were Asian abuse/attack ($N = 57$) and awareness of Asian hate & hate crimes ($N = 52$). Less than 10% of the sample featured

positive Asian representation ($N = 6$), used humor/Asian jokes ($N = 4$), or included expressions of empathy ($N = 2$).

For each video observed, the reviewer also noted the number of times it was shared. Overall, the 100 videos sampled were shared 2,812,839 times with an average (standard deviation) of 28,128 (37,390.68). Number of shares by content inclusion is also provided in Table 1.

For $N > 10$, independent one-tailed t-tests ($\alpha = 0.05$) were done to determine if a videos' inclusion of a predetermined content category affected its number of shares. These tests indicated that whether a video had or did not have the following content had a statistical effect on the number of times the video was shared: Asian abuse/attack ($p = .0079$), awareness of Asian hate and hate crimes ($p < .0001$), somber tone/expression of sadness ($p = .0025$), stop Asian hate messages ($p = .0380$), media report of Asian hate crime ($p = .0004$), and mention of COVID/virus is hate ($p = .0103$). Note that in all instances of statistical significance videos including the mentioned content were shared more (on average) than videos without the mentioned content. Table 2 summarizes these results.

4. Discussion

This study presents a snapshot of the pressing issues and concerns present in a sample of TikTok videos supporting the movement to stop Asian hate. Prevalent themes in this sample included sharing incidents of Asian abuse and emphasized the desire to spread awareness on hate crimes Asians continue to experience. Using social media to bring awareness to community cries of injustice is not isolated to Asians; it has served as a tool for political engagement, online activism, and a forum to raise consciousness about public health issues and social injustices for other marginalized groups [25,26]. Protest movements in the US and abroad have found wide-scale social and political participation through popular microblogging and content-sharing social media sites [26]. The sharing and documenting of collective experiences via social media not only promotes activism in online communities, but it helps facilitate offline communities to take action, build community, and engage in norm formation [27].

There was a great deal of interaction with these videos as measured by how often a video was shared. For example, in this sample videos which raised awareness or specifically focused on abuse were more likely to be shared. TikTok has become a repository to maintain and store the experiences of anti-Asian hate. Similarly, those admissions of hate and racialized discourse found a home on other social media platforms [11,12,14]. In fact, the sinophobic hashtags referencing COVID-19 may be the first "mass violence" attempt waged on an entire racial/ethnic group through social media. While the violence reported in the media could have harmful effects on Asians and other marginalized groups [28], social media has proven to be a powerful political outlet to spur action and diffuse negativity. In fact, He, Ziems, Soni et al. found that positive counter-speech messaging can interrupt echo chambers of hateful rhetoric on social media. Thus, the findings of this study support research that points out that social media can serve as a conduit to hateful rhetoric, but can also be a powerful form of social support [25,29].

Table 1
Observed content, views, comments, and likes of 100 TikTok Videos on #StopAsianHate.

	N 100	Views 274,638,200	% 100	Comments 1,082,466	% 100	Likes 60,749,500	% 100	Shares 2,812,839	% 100
Asian Abuse/ Attack (includes physical & verbal)	57	182,201,500	66.34%	745,955	68.91%	40,140,100	66.07%	2,046,545	72.76%
Awareness on Asian Hate & Hate crime	52	127,544,200	46.44%	741,248	68.48%	31,815,600	52.37%	2,280,688	81.08%
Somber Tone/ Expression of Sadness	44	133,973,300	48.78%	601,561	55.57%	30,258,300	49.81%	1,783,166	63.39%
Stop Hate Message	31	62,760,500	22.85%	293,465	27.11%	15,585,400	25.66%	1,172,891	41.70%
Media Report of Asian Hate Crime	25	48,536,000	17.67%	367,586	33.96%	14,155,200	23.30%	1,336,300	47.51%
Mention of COVID/Virus is Hate	22	66,710,100	24.29%	269,837	24.93%	15,615,500	25.70%	1,062,028	37.76%
Fight back/ Defend	22	50,143,700	18.26%	143,454	13.25%	10,169,400	16.74%	436,619	15.52%
Stereotype/ Microaggressions	20	53,161,900	19.36%	163,455	15.10%	11,505,000	18.94%	338,713	12.04%
Positive Asian Representation	6	17,752,300	6.46%	37,426	3.46%	3,489,700	5.74%	83,380	2.96%
Uses Humor/Asian Jokes	4	12,400,000	4.52%	22,491	2.08%	3,030,600	4.99%	45,394	1.61%
Expression of Empathy	2	28,000,000	10.20%	9484	0.88%	5,000,000	8.23%	22,775	0.81%

Table 2

Independent one-tailed t-test ($\alpha = 0.025$) results regarding number of shares and the inclusion of predetermined content. * indicates statistically significant results.

	N	Mean Shares	St Dev	*p*-value
Asian Abuse/ Attack (includes physical & verbal)	57	35,904.30	39,486.4861	0.0079*
Awareness on Asian Hate & Hate crimes	52	43,859.38	45,212.1354	0.0000*
Somber Tone/ Expression of Sadness	44	40,526.50	44,301.0462	0.0025*
Stop Hate Message	31	38,021.48	41,750.6778	0.0380
Media Report of Asian Hate Crime	25	53,851.28	43,175.6304	0.0004*
Mention of COVID/Virus is Hate	22	48,274.00	46,142.1462	0.0103*
Fight back/ Defend	22	19,846.32	28,191.4731	0.0814
Stereotype/ Microaggressions	20	16,935.65	29,056.2549	0.0676

Against the backdrop of Asian hate awareness being spread on TikTok via the #StopAsianHate, the research findings also indicate that less than 10% of videos sampled featured positive Asian representation. The lack of positive representation has long been an ire among Asians [30–32]. It exacerbates a history of exclusion and invisibility that further aggravates the stereotype of Asians as foreigners or threats to national security [33]. In the aftermath of COVID-19, there has been a rise in movements among community groups and activists for solutions in the form of comprehensive Asian American history in US classrooms that includes the contributions of Asians in the expansion of social and civil rights protection [33–35]. The value of inoculating the public with curricula that improve racial/ethnic disparities for Asians extends beyond the classroom. Health professionals are uniquely positioned to communicate information and offer support to Asians impacted by Anti-Asian messaging and who experience adverse health outcomes. Thus, as our society becomes increasingly culturally diverse, it is paramount that health professionals receive cultural competence training that highlights positive contributions made by Asians and accentuates the problems with potential stigmas.

Given that this was a cross-sectional study that extracted data from TikTok, this study has several limitations. First, it reflects one historical time point. Therefore, video content may shift over time. Also, the study design prevents the ability to generalize findings. Secondly, while an ethnically diverse group of users exist on TikTok [36], their views may not reflect the larger population of social media users. Lastly, the information analyzed was limited to video content promoted by the creators. Future research may consider collecting viewer comments to examine the subsequent interaction and dialogue that emerge. Nonetheless, this study offers/fills a gap in the literature and can prompt future research on an important topic, namely using social media to raise awareness about the need to reject Asian hate and to promote a narrative around not accepting anti-Asian rhetoric and behavior as normative.

5. Conclusion

This study supports existing evidence on the prevalence of Asian hate and its association with COVID-19. The challenges and trauma faced by the Asian community from the sinophabia experienced after the start of the pandemic have gained national attention. Through spreading awareness on TikTok, racial discrimination and abuse stories are amplified.

These timely results alert the health community to the impending racial trauma experienced by Asians. In addition, these insights can potentially inform health communication efforts, cultural competency training, and targeted mental health support to address health equity and improve public health outcomes for Asian Americans.

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Authors' contributions

ETJ, CHB and VJ conceptualized the study. ETJ collected the data, and JF conducted the data analysis. All authors contributed to the manuscript production.

Ethics approval

This research study did not involve human subjects. Thus, William Paterson University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) determined that it did not require review.

Declaration of Competing Interest

Not applicable.

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