

**ARTICLE**

# Dehumanization through humour and conspiracies in online hate towards Chinese people during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Academy of Finland, Grant/Award Number: 295923 and 33219

**Abstract**

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been widespread conversations about the origins of the virus and who to blame for it. This article focuses on the online hate directed at Chinese and Asian people during the pandemic. Taking a critical discursive psychological approach, we analysed seven online threads related to COVID-19 and China from two Finnish websites (Suomi24 and Ylilauta) and one US (8kun) site. We identified three discursive trends associated with dehumanising Chinese populations: ‘monstrous Chinese’, ‘immoral Chinese’ and ‘China as a threat’, which created different forms of dehumanisation on a continuum from harsher dehumanisation to milder depersonalisation. The animalistic metaphors, coarse language, humorous frames and conspiracy beliefs worked to rhetorically justify the dehumanisation of Chinese individuals, making it more acceptable to portray them as a homogeneous and inhumane mass of people that deserves to be attacked. This study contributes to the field of discursive research on dehumanisation by deepening our knowledge of the specific features of Sinophobic hate speech.

**KEYWORDS**

conspiracies, COVID-19, critical discursive psychology, dehumanisation, humour, multimodality, online hate, Sinophobia

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## INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of COVID-19 has led to increased prejudice and discrimination against diverse groups of people, especially Chinese and Asian individuals (Wen et al., 2020) and other vulnerable minorities and immigrants (Bieber, 2020). In particular, many Chinese and Asian people have suffered various forms of discrimination, including physical attacks, verbal harassment and vandalism (Jeung et al., 2021). Sinophobia and hostility against Asians have also surged on social media (Schild et al., 2020). In the media sphere, COVID-19 has been called the ‘Chinese flu’ or ‘kung flu’, attributing the blame to China and its people. In this discourse, the Chinese have been portrayed as uncivilized, barbaric others and have been attacked and mocked for their ‘unhygienic’ or ‘immoral’ eating practices (Zhang, 2020). For example, images and videos of Chinese or other Asian individuals eating insects, snakes or mice have started to circulate on social media (Palmer, 2020). This article draws from social psychological and discursive research on dehumanization and online hatred to explore the forms of the dehumanization of Chinese people that emerged on social media platforms after the outbreak of COVID-19. In doing so, we contribute to the current knowledge on the consequences of COVID-19 in the discursive dehumanization of Chinese and Asian populations and extend the discursive research on dehumanization to encompass humour and conspiracies.

### Hate against the Chinese

Sinophobia has historical roots dating back to the First Opium War (1839–1842) and to negative portrayals of ancient China and Chinese people as uncivilized and inferior second-class citizens and cheap labour (Lovell, 2015; Saxton, 1971). For example, Renshaw (2016), who explores Sinophobia in late-19th- and early-20th-century Britain, notes that, besides portraying the Chinese minority as an economic and social threat to the domestic workforces, they were also associated with foreign diseases and dirtiness. By that time, the Sinophobic rhetoric depicted the Chinese as being addicted to opium and gambling; further, within this discourse, Chinese men were portrayed as being dangerous and were accused of distributing opium-laced sweets and gifts to young girls before seducing them. Ever since, Chinese people have been given humiliating descriptions such as ‘yellow peril’ and ‘sick man of Asia’ (Tchen & Yeats, 2014). When the coronavirus was first identified in the Chinese city of Wuhan in December 2019 and the pandemic started to spread globally, China became the target of blame for the same.

Historically, the occurrence of a pandemic is followed by xenophobia. Deadly outbreaks cause people to look for others to blame, especially out-groups with different religions, nationalities and ethnicities (Muzzatti, 2005). This is in line with previous social psychological research on pandemics, which suggests that Othering is a key part of symbolic coping. In this process, those among the first infected by an epidemic become the Others who are blamed for the pandemic and are believed to be at risk because of their dirty practices or immoral behaviour or are accused of intentionally spreading the disease (Joffe, 1999; Washer, 2006). At the start of the COVID-19 outbreak, blame and hate were directed towards Wuhan citizens; but as the pandemic spread, the discrimination extended to first cover all Chinese individuals, then all Asian-looking people and, finally, anyone considered outsiders in society (such as Africans in Guangzhou; Xu et al., 2021). Li and Nicholson (2021) explore how anger against China expanded to the broader Asian-American population with the emergence of COVID-19. Focusing on the different forms of othering practices, stereotypes of Asians and the roles of politicians and media in activating anti-Asian hatred, they argue that race is still the dominant criterion for the categorization of Asians in the United States, who are treated as ‘forever foreigners’. Schild et al. (2020) revealed a shift towards blaming Chinese people for COVID-19 and the increasing emergence of novel Sinophobic terms, such as ‘virus’ and ‘chink’, appearing more frequently alongside the word ‘Chinese’.

Previous work in the field of social and discursive psychology has elaborated the discursive mechanisms of online hatred (see Cervone et al., 2021 for a review). By hate speech, we mean demeaning, threatening or stigmatizing expressions that are often based on intolerance and hatred and targeted at

a certain person or group of people based on their gender, sexual orientation, ethnic background or race (Knuutila et al., 2019). Breazu and Machin (2019) connected the online portrayals of the Roma as criminal, dirty, illiterate, immoral and lazy to extreme racism and sexual violence. Furthermore, addressing the hatred towards a group's ideology has become a more acceptable rhetorical device to ensure that such hatred remains within the acceptable limits of critique. For example, hatred against Islam as an ideology is seen as more acceptable than targeting individual Muslims, justifying hate in the name of morality and rationality (Burke, 2018; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016; Verkuyten, 2013). Derogatory language is used to maintain a status hierarchy, strengthen prejudices, the norms and cohesion of the in-group and legitimize violence towards out-groups (Cervone et al., 2021). The justification of collective hate may require more complex rhetorical work, such as conspiratorial and humorous discourse. This makes discursive approaches suitable for analysing hate speech and the rhetorical and ideological patterns that legitimize the expression of hate (Billig, 2002; Cervone et al., 2021; Tileagă, 2016). In line with the work of Tileagă (2016), we see discourse analysis as a useful approach for uncovering the ways in which hate speech is constructed, reproduced and legitimized in and through discursive actions and draw on the ideologically, culturally and politically formed repository of shared knowledge. As Tileagă and Stokoe (2015) outline, since its inception in the late 80s and early 90s, discursive psychology (DP) has developed along two main trajectories – one that leans more on the traditions of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, and another that represents itself as a ‘critical’ approach to DP that is more closely aligned with post-structuralism and the analysis of conversational detail using wider cultural-historical contexts. Through the synthetic macro- and micro-oriented approach of critical discursive psychology (CDP), with its analytic tools that are particularly well suited to study (online) articulations of hate and derogation in their social and political contexts, this study expands our knowledge of the specific features of Sinophobia in relation to other forms of contemporary hate speech. To the best of our knowledge, no previous CDP studies have focused specifically on the (post-pandemic) Sinophobic online discourse.

## Dehumanizing through humour and conspiracies

Denying that an individual or social group is fully human is the ultimate expression of out-group hatred and prejudice. Dehumanization is used to justify the harsh and inhumane treatment of out-group members during intergroup conflicts, leading to discrimination, violence and – in extreme situations – genocide.

In social psychology, the two main approaches to dehumanization are the *infrahumanization* theory proposed by Leyens et al. (2000) and the two-dimensional model of humanness developed by Haslam (2006). According to Leyens et al. (2000), dehumanization occurs in intergroup contexts when people attribute more uniquely human emotions, that is, secondary emotions (e.g., shame or compassion), to their own ingroup than to others. Haslam's (2006) theory, however, suggests that there are two kinds of dehumanization: *mechanistic* (denying others' human nature by likening them to automata or machines) and *animalistic* (denying uniquely human attributes such as language, refined emotions, morality and higher cognition to others by representing them as animalistic). Animalistic dehumanization views others as coarse, uncultured beings driven by instinct and lacking moral sensibility, while mechanistic dehumanization views others as passive objects deprived of the agency whose behaviour is reactive rather than initiated by personal will (Haslam, 2006). In discourse, dehumanization takes the form of extreme language expressed through animal or object metaphors and derogatory slurs (Cervone et al., 2021). In the present study, we adopt Tileaga's (2007) view on depersonalization (depriving someone of human characteristics or individuality), delegitimization (outcasting the out-group outside the moral order as a violator of pivotal social norms) and dehumanization (depicting the Other as less than human) as flexible discursive processes occurring on a continuum from the mildest to the most extreme.

Dehumanization discourse is emotion-laden and occurs in ethnic jokes and hate speech (Billig, 2001, 2002). When jokes about a specific group are repeated and shared, they can turn the stereotypes into

essential characteristics of these groups. Dehumanizing jokes may, with time and exposure, affect the way these groups are viewed, such as resulting in them being seen as sub-human. The jokes can even celebrate violence, with the victims' suffering being seen as enjoyable (Billig, 2001). Derogatory humour and ridicule are connected to the construction of social hierarchies and inequalities. Jokes that depict racial and ethnic out-groups as stupid and inferior using animal or object metaphors and derogatory slurs are associated with the maintenance of a racial hierarchy and can facilitate social bonding practices among in-group members (Billig, 2005; Hodson & MacInnis, 2016; Weaver, 2011). Hodson and MacInnis (2016) proposed that derogatory humour operates in tandem with dehumanization and system justification, thus legitimizing social groups as acceptable targets for derogation.

This combination can have serious negative intergroup consequences, including discrimination, denial of rights and even violence. For example, a previous study among US police officers demonstrated the relationship between the dehumanization of Black people as apes and racially disparate police violence towards Black children in real-world settings (Goff et al., 2014). More often, humour and dehumanizing practices get entangled in everyday discourse in mundane ways. Humour can provide a tool for denying and mitigating accusations of racism (Augoustinos & Every, 2007; Van Dijk, 1993), which enables the framing of overt hostility as 'just a joke' (Billig, 2001; Sakki & Martikainen, 2021). Derogatory humour can also serve to entertain the masses while masking hateful messages (Billig, 2001; Malmqvist, 2015; Sakki & Martikainen, 2021; Schwarzenegger & Wagner, 2018).

Yet another important characteristic in the context of COVID-19 is the relationship between dehumanizing discourse and conspiracies. Van Prooijen and Douglas (2017) suggested that, in times of crisis, vulnerable groups have a tendency to search for someone to blame for the situation. Besides those in power, minority groups with negative stereotypes are often used as scapegoats (Douglas et al., 2017). Studies suggest that the number of conspiracy theories has increased due to the pandemic (van Bavel et al., 2020; Imhoff & Lamberty, 2020), and these beliefs are associated with the dehumanization of the Asian and Chinese populations. For instance, Markowitz et al. (2021) found that dehumanization was less associated with objective numeracy and more with conspiracy beliefs regarding the virus. The conspiracy belief most strongly associated with dehumanization was the idea that every new disease comes from China. This is in line with many COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs that portray the virus as a Chinese bioweapon (van Bavel et al., 2020; Zannettou et al., 2020). This belief corresponds with the mechanistic dehumanization and techno-Orientalist view of Asian countries having the ability to build such weapons and common Asian folk being used as tools to spread the virus. These conspiracy theories and stereotypes about Asian people dehumanized them and may lead to more anti-Asian rhetoric and possibly violent outbursts (Sang, 2020). COVID-19 conspiracies have been linked to increased anger and paranoia (Jolley & Paterson, 2020), othering and racialization (Li & Nicholson, 2021) and physical attacks on ethnic Asian people (van Bavel et al., 2020; Center for the Study of Hate & Extremism, 2021).

To summarize, the previous discursive research on prejudice and hate speech suggests that dehumanization operates as a discursive process that can be flexibly used and combined with humoristic and conspiracist language to legitimize ideologically and morally bounded social practices and boundaries between 'us' and 'them'. In the subsequent sections, we will discuss how these discursive processes are deployed in online Sinophobic discourse in the COVID-19 context.

## The present study

We approached online hatred against the Chinese during the COVID-19 pandemic via the online platforms of two Western countries: the United States and Finland. Although the two countries share certain common Western values of democracy, individualism and equality, there are also many demographic, historical and political differences in their relationships with China. Americans of Chinese descent, including those with partial Chinese ancestry, constitute 1.6% of the total US population (US Census Bureau, 2019); in Finland, this number is 0.2% (Statistics Finland, 2020). In recent years, competition, conflict and tension have increasingly affected the relationship between the United States and

China. Moreover, the racist discourse has different historical roots in the two countries. Racism against various ethnic or minority groups has existed in the United States since the colonial era and is based on a history of slavery and oppression (Fredrickson, 2005). In contrast, although racism towards the Roma and Sami has a long history in Finland, racism emerged in the public discourse of the country only after the 1990s following the arrival of groups of refugees and asylum seekers mostly from Vietnam and Somalia. Recently, racism and discrimination have become mainstream on social media and in the everyday experiences of ethnic minorities in Finland after the success of the populist Finns Party in the last three national elections and the refugee crisis of 2015 (Pantti et al., 2019; Puuronen, 2011).

The duration of this study was March to May 2020. The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic in March 2020. Subsequently, the first travel bans and stay-at-home orders were issued in the United States and Finland. The daily rise in infected cases caused concern in both countries.

Whilst the US context is interesting in and by itself, we chose to include in this study a country with a less heated relationship with China. Although we do not intend to compare the online discourses between the two countries, the examination of both United States and European sites allows us to obtain a better picture of Western online hatred towards the Chinese during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## METHODS

The websites chosen for the research were 8kun, Ylilauta and Suomi24 because of their popularity and active user bases and because they attract users who want to remain anonymous and express their opinions freely. Ylilauta is the Finnish version of the infamous English-language-based imageboard 4chan and hosts societal and political conversations that often contain comments that incite racism and violence. According to a recent report investigating artificial intelligence in the recognition of hate speech in Finnish online environments (Kettunen & Paukkeri, 2021), Ylilauta was by far the most significant platform for hate speech, and words such as ‘Muslim’, ‘Islam’, ‘nigger’, ‘gay’, ‘tolerant’ (*Fin*: *suvakki*), ‘police’ and ‘whore’ were among the most used vocabulary. Ylilauta is said to have a monthly average of 1.5 million visitors, of which most are Finnish speakers. 8kun, similar to 4chan and Ylilauta, also has imageboards. These boards are mainly used to share memes or discuss popular culture. However, since the forum is only loosely moderated and has a wide international user base, it has become a medium for far-right nationalists and white supremacists (Gonzalez, 2019). The forum contributes to the far-right, white-supremacist online subculture, which is reflected, among other things, by the appearance of typical words such as ‘white’, ‘black’, ‘jew’, ‘nigger’ and ‘race’ (Baele et al., 2021). The two websites, Ylilauta and 8kun, share a bigoted orientation towards minorities, women and non-white people and have a very low degree of moderation. Our third forum, Suomi24, shares with the other two the feature of anonymous participation, but it differs in terms of its topics and threads, which are wider and more varied, and because it is intended for all Finns (Vaahensalo, 2021). Suomi24 was Finland's most visited online discussion forum at the time, with over 1.3 million weekly visitors, most of whom visited the website from Finland. Although it is an open platform and based on low-threshold participation, it is characterized by a large amount of offensive and racial speech (Vaahensalo, 2021).

The material for this paper consists of seven online threads related to the COVID-19 pandemic and China (see Appendix 1). Dozens of threads were combed through to choose the ones that were most suitable for this study. With regard to the inclusion criteria, we selected threads that were longer and richer; in other words, they contained more comments and explicit derogatory speech. The board that we investigated on 8kun was called ‘Politics, News, Debate’, which, at the time of collecting the material, contained numerous conversations related to the pandemic and China. The topics of the two threads chosen from 8kun were anti-Chinese propaganda and discussions about the Chinese in a derogatory and genocidal manner. On Ylilauta, the conversation topics were information regarding China's situation and news related to Finland ordering low-quality hospital equipment from China. On

Suomi24, we searched for threads under the sub-section ‘what is going on around the world’ (‘Maailman Menoa’) of the ‘society’ category using terms such as ‘COVID-19’, ‘coronavirus’, ‘China’ and ‘Chinese’. The topics of the three threads chosen from Suomi24 were about blaming China for the spreading of the virus, boycotting Chinese products and talking about how Chinese people use the news to cover up their involvement (see the full list of thread topics in the Appendix 1).

The seven online threads related to COVID-19 and China consisted of 1018 comments. The analytical approach of this study was based on previous work in multimodal CDP (Edley, 2001; Pettersson & Sakki, 2020; Potter, 1996; Sakki & Martikainen, 2021; Wetherell, 1998), which analyses the historical, social and political contexts of discourse by focusing on micro-level details supplemented with a macro-level layer of analysis (Pettersson & Sakki, 2017; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016). In other words, it examines what is being said, how it is being said and for what purposes. Traditionally, CDP has predominantly focused on verbal discourse; but here, to grasp the multimodal ways in which Sinophobic discourse is constructed and used by the commentators, we also employ a multimodal discourse analytic approach (Kress, 2012; Machin, 2016) to study how various semiotic resources (language, images, emojis, etc.) are utilized in interactions to articulate hate and derogation related to Chinese people. According to Kilby and Lennon (2021) and Pettersson and Sakki (2020), a multimodal discourse analysis aligns with the ambitions of CDP, as they both consider the social and political implications of meaning constructed through the multiple discursive modalities.

Our analysis began with reading the material several times to identify patterns, that is, the consistency and variability within and between accounts in the material (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). The patterns we aimed to identify were how the writers discussed, described and evaluated China and Chinese people. We were particularly interested in how the social categories ‘Chinese’, ‘Asians’, ‘Westerns’, ‘oriental’ and ‘American’ – as well as other ethnic, cultural and political categories – were constructed. After the first round of analyses, we identified 130 hate comments explicitly related to the COVID-19 pandemic and China/Chinese people.

To explore the type of the discourse, we focused on rhetorical devices that communicated hatred against the Chinese, such as explicit expressions of opinions and emotions, employment of slurs, category entitlements, metaphorical language, rhetorical questions and different exaggeration strategies (e.g., listing, uppercase letters and exclamation marks; Potter, 1996). In addition to analysing discursive patterns, we paid attention to their functions as well. Functions refer to the possible results or outcomes that language can have regardless of whether they are intentional (Potter & Wetherell, 1988), and they cannot be understood without recognizing the immediate (e.g., online conversation) and broader (e.g., the emergence of COVID-19 in Spring 2020) contexts in which the discourse occurs. Like in CDP, it is also important in multimodal discourse analyses to show how discourses function to shape social practices in the interest of the dominant ideology and power relations (Machin, 2016). In addition to focusing on the rhetorical devices used in the discourse, we also considered how different kinds of semiotic resources were deployed to re-contextualize these social practices. This recontextualization is a multimodal strategy where divergent, often incongruent and controversial semiotic resources modify each other's meanings (Liu & O'Halloran, 2009) through a process of abstraction, addition, substitution and deletion (Machin, 2013).

We followed the ethical guidelines for the use of online material stipulated by the Finnish National Board of Research and those recommended by the Internet Researchers (Franzke et al., 2020): all the posts were anonymous, and no screennames were given. All the online platforms analysed here are public forums, and anybody can freely access them. Further, the nature of the commentaries suggested that they were meant for wider audiences. Before proceeding, readers should note that some of the content reproduced from the three online platforms is extremely offensive. We are aware that even the critical analysis of hate speech may be seen as an action that leads to its reproduction and recirculation (Philips, 2018). However, we consider it necessary to reproduce some of the languages as used to identify and unpack the subtle ways in which the Sinophobic discourse is constructed, legitimized, normalized and mobilized on social media platforms (also see Billig, 2001). Our focus was not on individual posts or the posters behind the comments but on the shared patterns of the different types of hate rhetoric seen on these sites. The extracts selected were the ones we considered typical and illustrative of the material.

TABLE 1 Three dehumanizing discourses and their functions

Discourse	Monstrous Chinese	Immoral Chinese	China as a threat
Form	Hatred/rage (e.g., hyperbola, coarse words) and dehumanizing categorizations (e.g., metaphoric animalistic labels and slurs)	Disgust (e.g., food), humour (e.g., memes/visuals) and delegitimizing and dehumanizing categorizations (e.g., slurs)	Anger (e.g., coarse words), depersonalizing categorizations (e.g., communist system/dictatorship), conspiracies and dehumanizing and delegitimizing categorizations (e.g., slurs)
Function	Fostering white supremacy, mobilizing violence and trolling	Ridiculing, amusement, stereotyping, derogating and moralizing	Scapegoating, spreading conspiracies and strengthening political views

We analysed the original language of the material (Finnish or English) to capture its idiomatic nuances before translating the Finnish extracts into English. As a result, we paid special attention to retaining idiomatic expressions and subtle meanings as much as possible.

## Analysis

We identified three discourses related to dehumanization across the entire dataset – monstrous Chinese, immoral Chinese and China as a threat – illustrating a continuum from harsher to milder forms of dehumanizing practices (Tileagă, 2007). The three discourses are often intermingled in the online commentaries. However, for the sake of clarity, we present them under separate headings in the analyses below. Table 1 summarizes the three discourses and their functions.

### Monstrous Chinese

This discourse expressed overt racism and dehumanizing verbal attacks against Chinese people, who were represented as monsters that needed to be eliminated. Dehumanization was highlighted in commentaries with various animal metaphors. Animalistic dehumanization is often seen in representations of ethnic groups, immigrants, criminals and the disabled, and it is frequently accompanied by the use of explicit animal labels, such as vermin, beasts, apes and cockroaches (Cervone et al., 2021; Haslam, 2006). Many commentators adapted old metaphors to the COVID-19 context by blending them with Chinese-related slurs, such as Chinksects and Chinkroaches. In addition, many dehumanizing metaphors and slurs drew from the ethnic attributes of the Chinese and Asian populations.

Extract 1 (Ylilauta 6)

1 Chinese are a mixture of a fish and an insect. No use expecting anything humane.

Extract 2 (Ylilauta 7)

1 Chinese do not have a soul.

In Extract 1, the commentator explicitly stated their rationale for using animal labels to characterize Chinese people as less than human. Extract 2, in contrast, constructs mechanistic dehumanization by portraying the Chinese as lacking a soul and, thus, human feelings, empathy and care for other people. These two portrayals of the Chinese dominated the online discussions. Metaphoric language, derogatory slurs and humiliation also characterized this discourse:

Extract 3 (8kun 2)

1 Here's hoping, among other things, normalfags realize how fucking retarded it was to put  
2 all their eggs in the Chinese basket. It was only because of that which led China to become

3	an economic power, they have no innovation of their own and they only offer the world a
4	billion copy-paste chinksects who will manufacture shit for a bowl of rice a day. From that,
5	they blatantly stole ideas, which the chink government actively encouraged, generated
6	money in their own internal economy, and then used that revenue as purchasing power to
7	embed their dirty tendrils into businesses and institutions the world over. It's only by
8	breaking the dependence on chink money that China will lose all the power that it has,
9	because it has nothing else. No innovation, and no manufacturing, as people now fathom
10	the massive consequences when everything is 'Made in China'.

In Extract 3, the commentator employed vivid metaphoric language to derogate Chinese people and criticize and warn about the consequences of letting China become a global power. Besides portraying the Chinese as less than humans, the comment echoes the third discourse of China as a threat, which is discussed later. Extract 3 illustrates the ways in which different forms of discursive dehumanization may co-exist and reinforce each other within one account. With references to 'billion copy-paste chinksects' (Line 4) and 'made in China' (Line 10), the commentator equated Chinese individuals to mechanistic automata (Haslam, 2006), which discursively depersonalizes them as a homogenous mass of people (Tileagă, 2007). This statement that Chinese people are just copies of each other and the comparison of them to mass-produced products from China appeared in many online commentaries. On one hand, the metaphoric phrasing that the Chinese 'embed their dirty tendrils into businesses' (Line 7) implies questionable attempts to gain power and, thus, delegitimizes and portrays Chinese people as norm breakers (Tileagă, 2007), while, on the other hand, it suggests that they are not humans but monsters.

In the monstrous Chinese discourse, animalistic dehumanization was often intertwined with the ideals of white supremacy. This was expressed by juxtaposing Oriental and Western cultures. Asian people were portrayed as the enemy and a threat and as lacking empathy and intelligence. These commentaries expressing white supremacy drew from the racial imagery of the Chinese as savage and uncivilized beings who plan to invade the West to gain control of the whole world, resembling the discursive mechanisms found in previous studies on anti-Semitic and anti-Islamist rhetoric (Sakki & Pettersson, 2016; Wodak, 2015). The white supremacy discourse is clear in the following commentary:

Extract 4 (8kun 2)

► **Anonymous** 03/18/20 (Wed) 12:33:22 ID: 09d679 No.75700 >>75702  
 File (hide): ca1a1171ec8b9f8-.png (373.31 KB, 636x481, 636:481, bittenfeld\_on\_kikeotomies.png)



FUCK CHINKS  
 FUCK KIKES  
 FUCK NIGGERS  
 FUCK SPICS  
 FUCK MUDSLIMES  
 FUCK POOS  
 GLORY TO WHITES

If you can't bring yourself to say all this, you're an anti-white traitor that will be the first to hang on DotR.

Disclaimer: this post and the subject matter and contents thereof - text, media, or otherwise - do not necessarily reflect the views of the 8kun administration.

The glorification of white supremacy was contrasted with derogatory slurs against many ethnic and religious minorities. Listing, the use of all caps and the repetition of coarse language underscored this contrast and constructed a hyperbolic claim. The threat at the end of the comment regarding the DotR ('day of the rope') is used as an intertextual reference to a term that dates back to a fictional novel published in 1978 by a neo-Nazi named William Pierce, who proposed that 'race betrayers' should become the targets of lynching by white supremacist rebels. The book, and especially the term DotR, have been cited for decades amongst violent white supremacists (Ward, 2018).



The ideological white supremacy is further fostered through multimodal resources of imagery and its captions. Here, recontextualization involves adding new elements to the meaning (Machin, 2013). The caption text in the image seems to refer to the Chinese (and other people of colour) as either the devil or the monster as they clash with the virus. The character in the image hopes that both of them die. In the caption, the character refers to himself as human, which could suggest that the commentator is implying that only white people are humans. A focus on the interpersonal and compositional characteristics of the image representing a German character (from the anime *Legend of the Galactic Heroes*) allows us to suggest that the medium shot (cutting the figure from the waist) denotes a social relationship with the viewer. The physically strong, white-skinned male person (cf. Aryan characteristics) of the image belongs to ‘us’ and not to ‘them’, and, combined with the direct gaze, it indicates engagement with the viewer: it is a demand picture, meaning that the character looks at us and symbolically demands action (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Pettersson & Sakki, 2020).

An admiration for violence often appeared together with animalistic metaphors and slurs:

Extract 5 (8kun 1)

1	Does empathy come into play when you have to fumigate your house due to an
2	infestation? No, getting rid of vermin is just basic hygiene.
3	If you want to push the ‘they’re people just like us, one race, the human race’
4	nonsense, then it’s self defense. They’re killing the planet we call home and
5	threatening our existence in the process. Time has proven that humans and non-
6	human hominids can’t coexist peacefully, not in the same country, not even on the
7	same planet.

In Extract 5, the commentator employed animalistic language (Line 2) to suggest that the Chinese are less than human and should be eliminated (Lines 1–2). To strengthen this argument, the commentator used a concession – an acknowledgement of potential counter-arguments (Line 3) – and suggested a secondary justification for the elimination of Chinese by referring to the notion of self-defence (Line 4). The metaphoric language enabled the commentator to propose a genocide of the Chinese (Lines 1–2 and 5–7) without using the term explicitly. The references to the planet and the country (Lines 4 and 6–7), the repetitive use of the word ‘not’ (Line 6) and, particularly, the sharp contrast between ‘they are killing’ and ‘our existence’ (Lines 4–5) and between ‘non-human hominids’ and ‘humans’ (Lines 5–6) justified the call for genocide.

Calls for violence were often escalated to calls for genocide in our material. On sites like 8kun, the genocide comments were rather direct:

Extract 6 (8kun 2)

1	Cold War? You people are fucking pussies. <i>The fucking chinks have intentionally created</i>
2	<i>the worst ecological, humanitarian, economic and biological disaster in known geological HISTORY.</i>
3	We don't handle this these
4	little faggots will see it as Weakness instead of Mercy as such notion is an anathema to the
5	Oriental savage.
6	The only language they understand is force, as they are slaves.
7	<b>BLOOD NOW.</b>
8	>>84729 [responding to previous comment] You will never
9	>>84786 [responding to previous comment] belong here.
10	<b>VAPORIZE ALL CHINKS.</b>

In Extract 6, the commentator used hyperbolic language to blame Chinese people for the pandemic (Lines 1–3). Derogatory language, dehumanizing slurs and the imagery of oriental

savages were used to legitimize violence against and the elimination of the Chinese (Lines 1, 4–5 and 10), and uniquely human attributes and secondary emotions (such as compassion) were denied (Lines 4–5; Leyens et al., 2000). The commentator mobilized revenge by describing the Chinese people as a threat that needs to be ‘vaporized’ (Lines 7–10). This urgency is highlighted by the use of all caps and bolding (Lines 7 and 10). In the same vein, Extract 7 employed extreme violent imagery related to American white supremacy by suggesting the ‘lynching’ (Line 2) of ‘rice niggers’ (Line 1).

Extract 7 (Ylilauta 7)

1	Laughing at the surprised, you cannot trust the rice niggers.
2	Wouldn't it be funny if chinks were to be lynched around here.

As in Extract 7, the extreme racist violence was framed as ‘funny’. Rhetorical questions enabled the strengthening of the consensus for joint laughter. Hatred and humour were entangled in this way in many commentaries (Billig, 2001). However, a note of caution should be made with respect to their interpretation. According to Poe's law, the author's intent cannot be clearly recognized when it comes to seemingly parodied extreme views (Aikin, 2009). Some of the comments portraying the monstrous Chinese might as well be considered trolling. In the same way as humour, alongside its derogatory function, trolling also serves as entertainment; trolls may amuse themselves and other Internet users who can see through the deception (Dynel, 2016).

To conclude, the dominant rhetorical strategies employed to construct the image of the monstrous Chinese were animalistic metaphors, slurs and coarse and hyperbolic language. By describing Chinese people as subhuman or as dangerous animals, they were depicted as something to be eradicated. Thus, the main function was to justify and legitimate hostility and violence against the Chinese. This rhetoric can incite and mobilize violence in real-life communities (Jeung et al., 2021). This echoes the argument that the language-based denial of humanity can ultimately serve to free people from moral restraints and legitimize violence and even genocide (Bar-Tal, 1990; Cervone et al., 2021; Haslam, 2006; Leyens et al., 2000).

## Immoral Chinese

This discourse portrayed the Chinese as liars and thieves. Central to this discourse was criticizing and mocking the Chinese way of being and living. Negative stereotyping combined with affective expressions of disgust and humorous devices, such as irony and sarcasm, were the dominant rhetorical strategies used to represent the Chinese as lacking morality and, thereby, delegitimize their humanity (Bar-Tal, 1990; Tileagă, 2007).

Many commentators suggested that China was lying about the origin and spread of the coronavirus. Virus metaphors were commonly used to essentialize the lying nature of the Chinese. These dehumanizing depictions portrayed Chinese people as the origin of the virus and the ones responsible for spreading it:

Extract 8 (Suomi24, 3)

1	I agree. Chinese are extremely cruel, merciless, thieves and liars. They are like viruses.
2	They deceive the world's economy, selling useless masks for a ruthless price when the
3	world is suffering from China virus. The Chinese are responsible for this pandemic.

In Extract 8, with a list of four (Line 1), lying and cheating were essentialized as the natural traits of Chinese people. In addition, different forms of discursive dehumanization interconnect in the same comment: the Chinese were depersonalized as being all the same (Line 1), delegitimized as norm

breakers (Lines 1–2) and dehumanized as ‘viruses’ (Line 1; Tileagă, 2007). Many commentators referred to the poor quality of Chinese products and expressed their disappointment with Western governments for allowing China to fool them. Lying and cheating were essentialized as the natural traits of Chinese people, often using humoristic tools such as in Extract 9 below:

Extract 9. (Ylilauta 7)



The meme in Extract 9 drew a parallel between Chinese and Jewish stereotypes, presenting both as greedy and dishonest. The yellow-coloured skin, a traditional rice hat and a red jacket with a symbology of the Chinese flag were used to depict Chinese people in a stereotypical manner (Lennon & Kilby, 2020). Together with a greedy facial expression and hand gesture, the image functioned to personify and delegitimize Chinese people as lacking in morality (Tileagă, 2007). The image depicting a Jewish person in a stereotypical way recontextualized the discourse by paralleling the two images in a way that did not just add new prejudicial meanings and historical continuity to the image on the top (Machin, 2013) but also served as a humorous device. This meme was shared numerous times on different threads, and, as previous studies (Dynel, 2018; Hakoköngäs et al., 2020) suggest, memes may provide an easy way to share humorous and derogatory content without needing to directly state one's own opinion. Even among viewers who do not share Sinophobic views, the paralleled comical figures and stereotypical cues recognizable to diverse audiences have appeal and the potential to amuse and provoke laughter (Malmqvist, 2015).

Multimodality and visuality provided humoristic frames in many commentaries used to stereotype and discursively dehumanize Chinese as immoral (Sakki & Martikainen, 2021). Chinese products were generally stereotyped as low quality, mass produced, cheap and easily breakable (also see Extract 3):

## Extract 10 (Ylilauta 7)



1	>Order good for nothing chinashit
2	>Get good for nothing chinashit
3	Surprised electric rat [image caption]

As in Extract 10, ‘chinashit’ was an often-used metaphor for the low quality of Chinese products. In this case, the use of the multimodal resources of a well-known Pikachu figure and its caption text re-contextualized the comment as humour. These kinds of children's cartoon characters and other popular imagery may enable the denial of the serious intent of the memes (Askanius, 2021). In other words, the post can be interpreted as an expression of irony, implying that one should not be surprised when the things people order from China prove to be of poor quality.

Food culture also served as a rhetorical resource for the discourse of dehumanizing the Chinese in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Disgust was the dominant emotion expressed by these commentators:

Extract 11 (8kun 2)	
1	from now on chinese food means bats marinated in sewage oil and dogs&rats boiled
2	alive anyways

Extract 12 (Suomi24, 3)	
1	Asians are fast... in eating deep fried bats, dogs, ants, beetles, erection inducing
2	horn powder, civet cats, rats and other nice snakes and molluscs. It's a matter of
3	honour to them to eat wild animals, it increases spirit and strength. Disgusting
4	nation, fucking hell!

The discussion on food was similar in the American and Finnish forums. Both extracts above described Chinese people eating habits as inhuman, unethical and savage. In Extract 12, the poster generalized ‘disgusting’ eating habits to all Asian people and categorized them as one nation (Lines 3–4). These kinds of commentaries may be regarded as instances of dehumanizing discourse, as disgust works as a strong other-condemning emotion, enabling the representation of the Chinese as less than human (Nussbaum, 2004; Tileagă, 2007).

The rumours about eating bats as the origin of the virus were rampant across these boards, effectively connecting the virus to Chinese people directly:

## Extract 13 (8kun 2)



In Extract 13, the commentator verbally declared being aware of the norms prohibiting ethnic discrimination. However, the commentary together with the multimodal message conveyed through the meme of a Black child shouting in a speech bubble with big letters ‘that’s racist!’ and the images of viruses labelled ‘Made in China’ made it clear that the post should be read ironically. These incongruent multimodal resources of the verbal comment and the image constructed two different meanings: the former prohibiting the label Chinese in reference to the coronavirus, and the latter visually implying the contrary (Liu & O’Halloran, 2009). The references to racist accusations through verbal and visual semiotic resources connected the contradictory meanings and implied that the comment ridiculed people who call those who dare to blame the Chinese for COVID-19 racist. In other words, humoristic devices served to mitigate accusations of racism (Augoustinos & Every, 2007; Sakki & Martikainen, 2021).

To conclude, this discourse served the function of mocking, moralizing and blaming the Chinese and their cultural norms. Questioning the morality of Chinese eating habits and national character warranted their delegitimization and moral exclusion (Bar-Tal, 1990; Tileagă, 2007). Working in tandem with dehumanization processes, multimodal resources were used as tools to recontextualize the commentaries as humour (Askanius, 2021; Breazu & Machin, 2019) and legitimize Chinese people as acceptable targets for derogation (Hodson & MacInnis, 2016). It also served as a way to frame racist ideologies as humour and present them to the general public in a lighter and more acceptable fashion (Billig, 2005; Schwarzenegger & Wagner, 2018).

## China as a threat

This discourse represented China as a threat that is attempting to conquer the world:

Extract 14 (Ylilauta 7)

1 this, china is unironically the biggest threat and a problem to the world

In many online commentaries, an acute division was constructed between the evil communist China and the morally superior but naïve West. In some comments, the imagery of China as a threat was used to justify other political or ideological views, such as anti-immigration or misogyny, and dominated many Finnish online forums (Pantti et al., 2019):

Extract 15 (Suomi24, 3)

1 China is a communist dictatorship. China also controls North-Korea making it  
 2 nations’ shitty mutt.  
 3 West must immediately stop feeding and medicating North-Korea. Giving  
 4 development aid is the most destructing thing a dumb pseudomoral person has done.  
 5 China does not give developmental aid at all.  
 6 China only looks for benefits and conquers. China has already taken control of the  
 7 whole western economy and will take everything in the end.  
 8 Then an absolute rip-off and a brutal slavery are gonna happen.

9	The current EU-leaders, who have been revealed to be endlessly idiotic and
10	extremely bad criminals are only making the robbery that China commits faster, as
11	well as population explosion in Africa and India and as if it wasn't bad enough,
12	they are supporting the spreading of the barbaric Islam and the destruction of our
13	own culture and nations.
14	Now is the time to defend us and take the power from merkels, urpilaiset and
15	ohisalat.
16	Defending must be valued.
17	Otherwise, we are approaching hell fast.

The beginning of Extract 15 constructed an image of a menacing China that aims to conquest and take over the entire world (Lines 1–7). This threatening image was used to justify the anti-Islamist, anti-EU and misogynistic discourse introduced in the latter parts of the commentary (Lines 9–15). The commentator employed war-related, militaristic (Lines 14 and 16) and biblical (Line 17) metaphors to warrant and motivate its readers to deny the power of the three female politicians listed (Chancellor of Germany Angela Merkel, Finnish Commissioner in the EU Jutta Urpilainen and Finnish Minister of the Interior Maria Ohisalo; Lines 14–15). It demonstrates how racist Sinophobic discourse could intertwine with misogynist online hostility (Saresma et al., 2021). The commentary explicitly called for action using ‘we’ (Lines 12, 14 and 17) and justified this action as being in the defence of culture and nationality (Lines 12–13), echoing the rhetoric of the far-right discourse found in previous studies (Askanius, 2021; Petterson & Sakki, 2017; Verkuyten, 2013).

The discourse of China being a threat mostly served as a resource for mechanistic dehumanization. The Chinese were portrayed as a robotic homogenous mass who unquestionably follow their communist dictator. Agency was thus attributed to China as a nation, depersonalizing all its citizens as being a part of a brutal system (Tileagă, 2007). In this discourse, China was depicted as an engine of a global conspiracy among female leaders, Islam and communists who oppose the ‘white, civilized West’.

In many commentaries, China's threat was warranted by conspiracy beliefs. Suspicions regarding whether the coronavirus was created in a military lab and spread to the rest of the world by the Chinese, either on purpose or accidentally, were common. Conspiracies and dehumanization discourse entangled in many online commentaries. This discourse was common among the online platforms considered here:

Extract 16 (Ylilauta 7)	
1	Fuck those chinks, the slit-eyes really have the gall to do this... First, they create the virus
2	with their shitty ways even if there have been warnings of the risks for years.
3	Then they let it spread when they screw up their
4	prevention measures already in the beginning and when this ‘gift’ has spread into a
5	worldwide problem, then they sell shitty overpriced equipment around the world.
6	By all the fucking logic that country should be made to pay the damage and be responsible
7	for the whole shit, even by force.

The commentator used racist terms such as ‘chinks’ and ‘slit-eyes’ (‘kinuskit’ and ‘vinosilmät’ in Finnish; Line 1) and coarse language (Lines 1, 6 and 7) that served as dehumanizing categorizations (Tileagă, 2007) to blame Chinese people for the origin and spread of the virus and for selling low-quality equipment and masks. Animalistic metaphors with derogatory slurs legitimized the conspiratorial arguments. As in many commentaries, there was a demand for retribution from China even if violence was required to obtain it (Lines 6–7). Theories about hiding information, spreading the virus on purpose and raising equipment prices were common:

Extract 17 (Ylilauta 6 & 7)	
1	China organized agents to the West at the end of last year who had already been injected
2	with COVID, let it spread all around the West and ‘accidentally’ letting the virus
3	loose in Wuhan, like they would look like sufferers so the West would help China.

4	Now China is selling the aid they have gotten back to the West
5	( <a href="https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8193197/China-forces-Italy-BUY-masks-coronavirus-supplies-donated-Beijing.html">https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8193197/China-forces-Italy-BUY-masks-coronavirus-supplies-donated-Beijing.html</a> )
6	
7	and sells useless masks all around Europe and the United States with outrageously
8	expensive price, collecting money clearly with some other intention than taking measures
9	against corona.
10	At the same time China is intentionally lying about the effects of the virus and is presenting
11	that it has allegedly been stopped in already controlled conditions.
12	The plan is to bring the West into chaos and on their knees by sacrificing a few of China's
13	own citizens, as it is the communist way.
14	The conquest is beginning at the end of this year.
15	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWP56VIgPIw">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWP56VIgPIw</a>

The comment presented in Extract 17 appeared in several different threads on Ylilauta. The narrative elements of the conspiracy theory were similar to many other posts suggesting that the coronavirus was spread by the Chinese to the Western world on purpose (Lines 1–3) to sell low-quality masks to Europe and the United States for a higher price (Lines 4–9) and to ‘bring the West into chaos and on their knees’ (Line 12). The comment echoed the image of the Chinese as lying thieves and robots who lack human emotions and are willing to sacrifice their own people (Lines 12–13) and, thus, employed delegitimizing and dehumanizing categorizations (Tileagă, 2007). The (brutal) communist ideology provided a rhetorical resource to warrant mechanistic dehumanization (Haslam, 2006). The message was concretized through a threat-evoking metaphor of conquest (Line 14). The hyperlinks to a news article (Lines 5–6) and a YouTube video (Line 15) attached to the comment are a useful rhetorical strategy to warrant a claim while personally distancing oneself from the argument (Sakki & Pettersson, 2016) and supported this view of conquering China as well.

To conclude, compared to the two previous discourses (monstrous and immoral Chinese), the discourse of China as a threat mostly constructed a milder form of dehumanization known as depersonalization (Tajfel, 1981; also see Billig, 2002; Tileagă, 2007). The function of the threatening-Chinese discourse was to blame China for the virus (under the guise of a warning) and spread conspiracies and chaos. The conspiracies were often boosted by coarse expressions and dehumanizing slurs, making out-groups seem hostile, strengthening the division between groups and causing chaos. In these online forums, the pandemic provided a fruitful platform for conspiracies about the world-conquering China and Chinese (van Bavel et al., 2020; Imhoff & Lamberty, 2020).

## CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The media has played a key role in the dissemination of derogatory messages and conspiracy theories, and social media platforms provide an anonymous space for the growth and mobilization of hatred (Wen et al., 2020; Zhang, 2020). This study has contributed to the field of discursive research on dehumanization by deepening our knowledge of the specific features of Sinophobia and the multimodal forms of dehumanization in online hate speech. In such discourse, the animal and insect metaphors previously used in reference to other ethnic groups, for example, in Nazi propaganda, could be creatively revised and blended with Chinese-related slurs with the aim of warning about the swarming, infecting and deadly nature of ‘Chinksects’ and ‘Chinkroaches’. Compared to previous discursive research on anti-Semitic, Islamophobic and anti-Roma rhetoric (Breazu, & Machin, 2019; Burke, 2018; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016; Verkuyten, 2013; Wodak, 2015), as one distinct form of othering, Sinophobic rhetoric employs the imagery of the ‘Made in China’ metaphor and multimodal images of mass-production for the depersonalization of Chinese people as identical copies

of each other. There is, however, a clear continuity in the Sinophobic discourse from the early 20th century till today. The early-20th-century British society's use of the language of 'invasion' when discussing Chinese immigration, economic activity in Britain and the takeover of European societies (Renshaw, 2016) has shifted to the language of 'conquest', pointing to China's attempt to take over the world – even by force – using a 'bioweapon'. On the other hand, while the associations of dirt and disease with China have deep historical roots, the immorality of the Chinese is no longer constructed so much in terms of their narcotic behaviours and sexual threats (Renshaw, 2016) but more on the basis of their eating habits and deceitful character.

In this study, we identified three discursive practices used for dehumanizing the Chinese. Following Billig's (2002) and Tileaga's (2007) suggestions, we sought to examine how online discourse de-personalizes, delegitimizes and dehumanizes Chinese and Asian people. Our findings confirmed their proposition of different tones in discursive dehumanization, suggesting that animalistic or mechanistic dehumanization (Haslam, 2006; Haslam & Loughnan, 2014) might be differently positioned in this continuum of dehumanization. Mechanistic dehumanization was related to a milder depersonalizing discourse that portrayed China as an agentic and threatening dictatorship, while animalistic dehumanization was more extreme, being used to depict Chinese people as less-than-human targets of elimination. Delegitimization was constructed through the recognized violation of pivotal norms, especially related to disgusting eating habits. However, it is worth noting that these differences were not straightforward, as the three forms of dehumanization were interconnected and could be found in all discourses. These discourses did not grow independently but reflected political, cultural and ideological factors (Tileagă, 2016), such as the fact that the virus was first found in Wuhan, China and traced to food markets selling wild animals (Xiao et al., 2020). As our study shows, the scapegoating and conspiracies spreading online frequently mentioned the origins of the virus, but other aspects of China, such as the country's human rights violations, were also used to legitimize hatred towards Chinese people and their nation.

This study also suggests that the discursive dehumanization of the Chinese occurs through humour and conspiracies. Following the call to investigate the role of humour in dehumanizing discourse (see Billig, 2002; Hodson & MacInnis, 2016), our findings illustrate how dehumanization is framed as humour using visual and multimodal tools. These semiotic resources were not used in most commentaries; but when they were deployed, they mostly served as the humoristic frames for derogatory content. Going beyond the linguistic modes of narration towards multimodality allows a person to invoke shared negative stereotypes and express xenophobic views while avoiding accusations of racism (Askanius, 2021; Sakki & Martikainen, 2021). The results of this study are in line with previous studies suggesting that racist discourse is common in many online spaces in the form of joking and stereotyping (Billig, 2005; Breazu & Machin, 2019; Sakki & Martikainen, 2021). In agreement with the previous literature (De Sousa, 1987; Malmqvist, 2015; Sakki & Martikainen, 2021; Schwarzenegger & Wagner, 2018), we argue that this combination of hatred and humour (Billig, 2001) is used to normalize and mainstream the derogatory message and maintain hierarchy between in- and out-groups (Hodson & MacInnis, 2016).

While humour served as a rhetorical tool for negative stereotyping and moral exclusion, conspiratorial beliefs were employed to portray China as a world-conquering threat. Animalistic metaphors and slurs were often used to warrant the conspiratorial arguments about China's secret plan regarding the coronavirus. These descriptions were also used to depersonalize the Chinese as a homogenous out-group and construct a mechanistic dehumanization that portrayed them as cold and unfeeling. This kind of dehumanization resembles the techno-Orientalist view of the Chinese as a technologically advanced but intellectually and morally primitive mass of people (Sang, 2020). The most common conspiracy theories were about China intentionally creating the virus as a bioweapon and having plans to take over the West by spreading the virus there (van Bavel et al., 2020; Zannettou et al., 2020). While our study does not allow us to make any judgement about the power of this discourse, in light of the numerous violent attacks against Chinese and Asian-looking people (Center for the Study of Hate & Extremism, 2021; Gover et al., 2020), we are tempted to conclude that such discourse can lead to tangible actions.

This study is not without its limitations. First, it is important to acknowledge that the findings were affected by the different social, political and historical contexts that feed and regulate online discourse,



which is beyond the scope of this paper. Our goal was not to compare the United States and Finnish sites, as such a comparison would not be meaningful due to the differences in these sites' accessibility, formats and transnational user bases. Perhaps the only clear difference between the results originating from the United States and Finnish sites was the prominence of white supremacy on 8kun, which potentially reflects the long roots and history of this ideology in the United States. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that some sites have more moderation (removing posts and comments) than others. For this reason, it may be that some of the worst comments had already been removed from Suomi24 (which is the most moderated forum of the three platforms considered in this study) before we were able to access them.

Another crucial limitation of this study is its rather small sample size. However, prior to the selection of these samples, we went through dozens of online threads and determined these seven to be the most illustrative for capturing the topic under study. Although our findings are not generalizable, the fact that we obtained similar results through analysing online threads from different sites with different user bases and audiences suggests that our results may be transferable to other contexts, thus confirming the transnational and global character of online hate speech (Saresma et al., 2021). The fact that the analysed discussion forums have more than millions of users, they transgress national boundaries and are interconnected with various other online media, these forums constitute a significant voice when it comes to shaping, (re)producing and spreading hate speech against diverse groups of people.

Although social psychological research is increasingly aiming to address the consequences of COVID-19 for racism and intergroup relations (see the special issue in BJSP, Smith & Gibson, 2020), discursive research on this topic remains scarce. While this study is a step in this direction, more research regarding how online hate is constructed and spread on social media platforms, how it affects the Chinese and other minorities and what can be done to combat it is urgently needed.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was funded by the Academy of Finland (grant nos 295923 and 33219)

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

All authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

**Inari Sakki:** Conceptualization; Formal analysis; Funding acquisition; Investigation; Methodology; Project administration; Resources; Supervision; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing.  
**Laura Castren:** Conceptualization; Investigation; Methodology; Writing – original draft.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The online threads analysed in this study can be freely accessed here (note that access to 8kun sometimes requires Tor browser): <https://8kun.top/pnd/res/84697.html>, <https://8kun.top/pnd/res/72587.html>, <https://keskustelu.suomi24.fi/t/16342356/jatkossa-ei-osteta-mitaan-kiinalaista!>, <https://keskustelu.suomi24.fi/t/16346198/kiinan-hallitus-viilannut-jarkyttavalla-tavalla-kaikkia-linssiin>, <https://keskustelu.suomi24.fi/t/16341193/taas-kiinalaiset-valittaa-mtv-uutisissa>, <https://ylilauta.org/koronavirus/121691821>, <https://ylilauta.org/koronavirus/121723817>

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**How to cite this article:** Sakki, I., & Castrén, L. (2022). Dehumanization through humour and conspiracies in online hate towards Chinese people during the COVID-19 pandemic. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 00, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12543>

**APPENDIX 1**

TABLE A1 The identification and number of comments on the seven threads analysed

Platform	8kun	8kun	Suomi24	Suomi24	Suomi24	Ylilauta	Ylilauta
Conversation thread no.	1 <sup>a</sup>	2 <sup>b</sup>	3 <sup>c</sup>	4 <sup>d</sup>	5 <sup>e</sup>	6 <sup>f</sup>	7 <sup>g</sup>
Number of Comments	207	135	208	24	23	81	340

<sup>a</sup> Anti-Chinese propaganda.

<sup>b</sup> No title, thread starts with the words of first comment saying “The Chinese are absolute...”

<sup>c</sup> Kiinan hallitus viilannut järkyttävällä tavalla kaikkia linssiin [Chinese government has fooled everyone in a horrible way].

<sup>d</sup> Jatkossa ei osteta mitään kiinalaista [From now on, let's not buy anything Chinese].

<sup>e</sup> Taas kiinalaiset valittaa mtv uutisissa [Chinese are complaining again on MTV news].

<sup>f</sup> Onko kenelläkään mitään tietoa mitä kiinassa tapahtuu tällä hetkellä? [Does anyone have any information on what is going on in China at this moment?].

<sup>g</sup> Kiinalaiset vain nauroivat matkalla pankkiin. Eurooppa servattu [Chinese just laughed on the way to the bank. Europe served].