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Graduate School in Linguistics
University of Szeged

**The Representation of Covid-19 in Trumpian
Political Discourse and Media Reports:
The Ideology of Racism and Xenophobia**

Summary of the Dissertation
Chen Luyu

Supervisor:
Dr. Erzsébet Barát

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1.Introduction

Donald Trump, who served as the 45th president of the United States (2017–2021), was characterized by an unprecedented reliance on social media, particularly Twitter, as a primary channel for political communication (Enli, 2017; Kreis, 2017). However, Trump’s communicative style extended beyond mere digital presence; it represented a hybrid media strategy. While his offline speeches were often noted for their blustering, threatening, and aggressive nature, these were strategically amplified by non-traditional online tactics. As Wells et al. (2020) argue, this dual approach served to manipulate media coverage and solidify a sense of collective identity—an exclusive “us”—among his followers. Within this context, a growing body of research has examined Trump’s routine deployment of hate speech, investigating how this systematic rhetoric—in Wodak’s (2015) sense—transcends language to inflict violent repercussions on the lives of constructed enemies.

Building on this scholarship, the objective of this research is to explore how this discourse of hate emerged during the final year of Donald Trump’s presidency, overlapping with the pandemic —specifically constructing the figure of targeted people as if they were ‘containers of the China virus’. The dissertation situates Trumpian rhetoric within the context of the rising spate of deaths in the US, demonstrating how blaming China for the pandemic raised not only political tension between the United States and China but also amplified xenophobia in the country. Trump’s repeated statements fostered a general anti-Asian sentiment associated with the stigmatizing term “Chinese virus”, particularly amongst citizens who supported his stance.

To address these objectives, the actual data is concerned with the Covid-19 pandemic collected from March 16, 2020, its formal declaration in the US, to January 20, 2021, the end of Trump’s presidency (Chen et al., 2022). The core concern in the analysis of political discourse pertains to “the question of action”, “of what to do” for the consolidation of power (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2013, p. 17). This project, therefore, investigates and evaluates argumentation to analyze the racist and

xenophobic ideologies at play in the Trumpian political discourse in the Trump tweets responding to the emergence of the Covid-19 virus. In line with my understanding of the mediation of meaning by texts through the different institutions/platforms of media, I shall have three sets of data: President Trump's Tweets, the news report of them by CNN and Fox News, and the readers' comments on their respective Facebook accounts – all three from March 16, 2020 to January 20, 2021. Hence, the project may raise awareness of how (much) the Trumpian rhetoric can manipulate the public discourse and perpetuate dominant values of hate and self-serving ideologies.

2.Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a holistic, multi-layered theoretical framework designed to trace the trajectory of xenophobic ideology from the Presidential linguistic production through the news platforms' reporting to its social consumption in the comments. The framework is structured out of three interconnected dimensions: the analytical methodology, the historical-ideological context of US politics, and the digital landscape of contemporary communication.

The concept of “discourse” is foundational to this study, drawing on Michel Foucault (1972), who defined it not merely as language but as “statements” shaped by power relations and characterized by specific objects, enunciative modalities, concepts, and strategies. Methodologically, the study is anchored in Critical Linguistics (Fowler et al., 1979) and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday, 1978), which views language as a “social semiotic” capable of ideological critique. Acknowledging that Critical Discourse Analysis encompasses diverse methodological perspectives (Meyer, 2001), the theoretical discussion introduces various influential approaches to provide a comprehensive background. These include Ruth Wodak's (1996) Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), which emphasizes the necessity of contextualizing discourse within historical legacies, and Teun van Dijk's (1993b) examination of the cognitive power structures reflected in text. However, the specific analytical design of this study is primarily grounded in Norman Fairclough's (1995b, 2003) framework to analyze how implied statements naturalize ideological

connections between discourse and social practices of ruling.

Furthermore, the inclusion of this historical analysis is predicated on the understanding that the Trumpian rhetoric is not an isolated phenomenon, but one that can be explicitly linked with the history of the United States. Therefore, the research demonstrates that Trump's discourse functions as a strategic revival of the "Yellow Peril" trope and legislative exclusions like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 (Cho, 2022). It argues that American political culture has a long tradition of scapegoating Asian populations during crises, which is coupled with a history of populist anti-intellectualism where "common sense" is weaponized against scientific expertise to create a fertile ground for conspiracy theories. The framework further defines hate speech in a political context not merely as offensive language but as a mechanism for creating polarized divisions that legitimize exclusion under the guise of free speech. This demonstrates in the conceptualization of Trumpism as a distinct political ideology that merges right-wing populism with white nationalist sentiments, positing that Trump's rhetoric moves beyond hate speech to become a tool of governance.

Trump's digital strategy relies on a personalized, informal style that frames him as an "authentic anti-intellectual outsider" (Kreis, 2017). A key component of this legitimization strategy is the weaponization of the term "fake news" to discredit mainstream media (Morgan, 2018). By positioning himself as the sole "reliable source of truth", Trump successfully delegitimizes opposing viewpoints and creates a closed informational ecosystem for his followers (Ross & Rivers, 2018). Therefore, the framework posits that digital engagement is not merely virtual but has tangible, often violent, consequences in offline life. Trump's rhetoric fosters a form of "individualized collective action" where online hate speech serves as a catalyst for offline violence (Micheletti, 2003). The consistently employed stigmatizing terms like "China virus" in the Trumpist discourse directly correlate with a rise in hate crimes (Gover et al., 2020). This underscores a critical shift where political engagement on social media evolves from civic participation into radicalized hostility, necessitating a dual analysis of both the production of hate speech by political leaders and its consumption and enactment by citizens.

3. Research Questions

In accordance with the purpose of the study, three main research questions are addressed, corresponding to the three datasets analyzed:

1. How did Donald Trump's Tweets about the Corona virus function persuasively to produce racist and/or xenophobic meanings around the term 'China / Chinese virus'?

2. How were those ideologies sustained or challenged by CNN and Fox News in their reporting of the President's pandemic-related communications?

3. How are discourses of racism and xenophobia reiterated or contested in citizen comments on the two news outlets' Facebook pages, contributing to or undermining the circulation and normalization of the president's hate propaganda?

These questions together could explore that the Trumpian discourse was not merely an individual peculiarity but became a dominant communicative mode through the mediation of social media circulation.

4. Methodology

To investigate the "textual chain" of the Trumpian rhetoric, the research design adopts a multi-perspectival approach to explore how racist and xenophobic ideology is linguistically instantiated, discursively mediated, and socially reproduced. The methodology follows the logic of the discursive trajectory of the "China virus" narrative: first, the Appraisal Theory (Martin, 2003; Martin & Rose, 2003; Martin & White, 2005) is utilized to deconstruct the production of interpersonal meaning and emotion in the Trump's tweets; second, Fairclough's (1989, 1992, 1995b) three-dimensional discourse model is applied to examine the recontextualization and distribution of this rhetoric by the two cable news outlets; and third, Corpus-assisted Critical Discourse Analysis (CACDA) (Baker et al., 2008) is employed to analyze the consumption and social practice of these ideologies in the public comments.

To address the first research question, the study analyzed a corpus of tweets collected via the Python Library (Tweepy) for Twitter API. Data collection covered

the period from March 16, 2020 to January 20, 2021, capturing all tweets from Donald Trump's official account containing the terms 'Covid/Coronavirus', 'pandemic', 'Asian/Asia', and 'China/Chinese virus'. This systematic retrieval yielded a corpus of 708 tweets (34,692 words). The analytical category for this stage is the interpersonal metafunction within Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday, 1985; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013). This study prioritizes interpersonal meaning to explore Donald Trump's language use in his tweets to construct evaluative stances and express (dis)alignment in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Specifically, the analysis employs the Appraisal framework (Martin & White, 2005) to decode the "Attitude" subsystem. By conducting a mixed-methods analysis—combining frequency counts with interpretive coding—the study examines how Trump's evaluative language functions as political rhetoric—positioning blame, asserting authority, and mobilizing ideological support in the discourse of the pandemic.

To address the second research question regarding how political media frames Trumpian rhetoric, the study adopts Fairclough's (1989, 1995b) three-dimensional discourse framework. This approach aims to explore how the political media discourse produces and circulates public ideologies and shapes the construction of social and political reality of the pandemic when reporting Trump's tweets. The analysis is divided into the three levels of Fairclough's (1995b) framework to explore the ideological positioning and inclination of the two cable news channels. To ensure the transparency and validity of the analysis, I have selected the CNN and Fox News. To ensure the transparency and validity of the analysis, this study focuses on CNN and Fox News as representative case studies. This selection is a methodologically deliberate choice grounded in their established dominance, clear ideological opposition, and documented influence on the American political landscape. Recent years have seen a proliferation of online platforms challenging traditional media; however, cable news remains a primary source of political information. Martin and Yurukoglu (2017) provide empirical evidence that Fox News operates not merely as a broadcaster but as a significant political actor, estimating that it successfully

persuades 3 to 8 percent of its non-Republican viewers to vote Republican, increasing the vote share by approximately 0.3 percentage points in every election cycle since 2000. Conversely, CNN is chosen as the ideological counterpart, widely perceived as the leading mainstream voice of the center-left. As mainstream outlets, they play a significant role in shaping the information the American public receives—CNN from a perspective emphasizing social equality and progressive reform, and Fox News from a right-wing perspective championing individual liberty and capitalism (Stroud, 2011). For the second set of the corpus, a list of ten news articles was selected for this study—five from CNN and five from Fox News. The ten reports were chosen for their explicit reference to President Donald Trump’s tweets where he used the racially charged terms ‘China virus’ or ‘Chinese virus’. The compilation was based on an extensive dataset of news coverage, spanning the same period as the previous analysis, from March 16, 2020 to January 20, 2021. The ten reports were picked for their explicit engagement with the term in question and their relevance to the research focus on ideological framing.

Finally, to analyze public reactions to the media’s mediation of Trump’s rhetoric, this study employs Corpus-Assisted Critical Discourse Analysis (CACDA), focusing on user comments posted on Facebook. The dataset of user comments was extracted from Facebook posts that shared or employed the same statements from the ten news reports analyzed in the previous section. To obtain a relevant sample and ensure consistency between the media discourse and audience responses, the official Facebook pages of CNN and Fox News were manually searched to locate posts linked to these exact ten articles. The study selected only first-level comments—user responses made directly under the original Facebook post by the media outlet—while excluding replies (second-level or nested comments) to focus on users’ immediate and individual reactions to the media’s framing. As a result, the corpus consists of 1,106 comments totaling 21,893 tokens from CNN (referred to as CNNCC) and 1,178 comments totaling 26,790 tokens from Fox News (referred to as FNCC). The corpus reflects the moment the comments were collected on December 20, 2024. The data was adjusted to remove foreign-script words to ensure the language of discussion was

English, and a manual scan was conducted to reduce repeated messages. Furthermore, before generating the keyword lists, all words were examined, and emojis and function words were removed.

5. Findings in Donald Trump’s Messaging on Twitter

The rise in anti-Asian incidents during the pandemic has been attributed by numerous studies to Donald Trump’s use of stigmatizing language, particularly the term “Chinese Virus” (Hswen et al., 2021; Rubin & Wilson, 2021; Cao et al., 2023). In light of warnings from public health experts against such terminology, this study specifically delineates its data collection period from March 16, 2020—the date of Trump’s initial naming of the “Chinese virus” in a tweet—to January 20, 2021, the conclusion of his presidential tenure. This timeframe was purposefully chosen to capture the pivotal moments in the evolution of Trump’s pandemic-related discourse. The commencement date marks a significant rhetorical transition in the discursive meaning-making of the pandemic, initiating the analysis of his evaluative stance. As a consequence, the systematic analysis of evaluative language in the corpus of 708 tweets, analyzed through the Appraisal framework, reveals a dominant pattern of negative evaluation. The data demonstrates a significant preference for negative attitudinal resources (2,062 instances) over positive expressions (1,377 instances). Within the affect system, negative manifestations constitute the overwhelming majority, outnumbering positive occurrences by nearly a double (1,090 vs 544). The breakdown of these emotional resources indicates that fear (47.7%), displeasure (41.4%), and antipathy (36.2%) emerged as the predominant subcategories. This statistical dominance suggests a rhetorical strategy that intentionally utilized anxiety-inducing language to frame the pandemic as an external threat, potentially serving to deflect criticism from the administration. Conversely, positive affect resources were less prevalent and clustered around confidence (26.7%) and pleasure (24.4%), reflecting a strategic emphasis on projecting control and assurance regarding the administration's management of the health crisis. In the domain of judgement, the analysis uncovered a notable focus on veracity under the social sanction category

(58.1%). This underscores the contentious information environment of the time, where Trump frequently contested scientific narratives and media reports. Simultaneously, the emphasis on capacity within social esteem (42.4%) highlights a persistent concern with evaluations of competence, likely reflecting efforts to counter widespread criticism of the administration's pandemic response. Within the appreciation system, valuation resources accounted for the majority (53.7%), suggesting a rhetorical strategy that prioritized assessing the pandemic's significance and worth over engaging with its nuanced complexities.

To investigate whether the use of an explicit xenophobic discourse correlated with a more intense emotional framing, a targeted sub-analysis was conducted on the 112 tweets containing phrases like "China virus" or "Chinese virus". The results reveal a stark intensification of negative affect. While negative emotional expressions made up 67% of the general corpus, this figure jumped to 84% within the subset of tweets containing xenophobic terms.

The second most significant finding was the recurrence of the term "invisible enemy" (25 occurrences). This phrase operates as a powerful deployment of affect, personifying the virus to provoke fear and frame the pandemic as a war. This militaristic framing shifted the required response from medical science to national security, positioning the president as a wartime leader. Additionally, the "invisible enemy" metaphor served as a narrative bridge to assign geopolitical blame, often linking the mysterious threat immediately to negative judgements of China's veracity. Finally, the explicit use of "Chinese virus" (8 occurrences) directly linked the virus to an ethnicity, acting as an intensifier for negative evaluation.

Furthermore, a qualitative analysis of specific tweets illuminates how these resources interact to form a coherent political discourse. In his tweets, Trump frequently combined negative inclination (suggesting fear) and negative unhappiness (antipathy) with positive satisfaction (pleasure) regarding his own performance. This simultaneous validation of his own leadership and discrediting of the "fake news" narratives demonstrates how Trump used affect to construct a dichotomy between his competent administration and a biased (oppositional) press. Through this contrastive

framing, Trump legitimized his efforts while eliciting sympathy from his audience, portraying himself as an underappreciated leader.

The analysis also identifies a strategic balance between expressions of insecurity and confidence. Tweets referring to the “invisible China Virus” (disquiet/insecurity) were often counterbalanced with strong expressions of security through references to being “patriotic” (confidence). This strategic use of affect served to affirm authority while delegitimizing the opposition, reinforcing an “us versus them” narrative. In addition to affect, the tweets heavily utilized judgement and appreciation. Terms like “handling”, “made” and “helped” functioned as positive judgements of capacity and propriety, constructing a narrative of institutional competence. Simultaneously, the term “China Virus” served as a negative appreciation (valuation), provoking a hostile evaluation of the virus’s alleged origin.

The analysis also reveals a specific ideological operation: the construction of racist and xenophobic discourse. This observation echoes patterns from Trump’s election campaigns (Skogerbø & Krumsvik, 2015; Cramer, 2016; Dice, 2017; Lee & Hosam, 2020), but with a specific re-emergence in the context of the pandemic. The findings suggest that Trump’s language choices in naming the virus were not merely descriptive but were evaluative acts that activated and reinforced particular ideological positions, specifically “Trumpism”. His political agenda of “Make America Great Again” was deeply intertwined with “America First” nationalism, which often relies on exclusionary sentiments. The use of graduated language and proclamation resources amplified positive evaluations of Trump, reinforcing an ideological framework where he was singularly capable of national restoration. His positive self-representation was frequently contrasted with negative other-representation (e.g., of Democrats), creating a moral dichotomy. Crucially, the tweets often paired political conflict with the term “China Virus”, implicitly linking domestic political obstruction with the foreign threat. Throughout his presidency, Trump consistently praised American health institutions and the medical system as “great” (positive judgement) in their fight against the hostile “Chinese virus”. This represents a strategic deployment of evaluative language that connected the pandemic

response to a nationalist discourse, reinforcing Trump's "America First" ideology and establishing a logic of racialized nationalism.

6. Findings in News Discourse: CNN vs. Fox News

This chapter aims to explore how media discourse produces and circulates public ideologies and shapes the construction of social and political reality of the pandemic when reporting Trump's appropriate tweets. The analysis is divided into the three levels of Fairclough's (1995b) framework to explore the ideological positioning and inclination of the two cable news channels.

The first level of analysis, the description of the text, begins with a systematic examination of lexical choices through collocation analysis. The data reveals a clear ideological divergence in how each network framed the key actors. CNN's most frequent collocations for the keyword "Trump" included terms like "Trump's rhetoric" and "Trump's diagnosis". This lexical patterning constructs a narrative of critical scrutiny, framing the President's speech acts as controversial objects of analysis rather than authoritative statements. In contrast, Fox News frequently employed the title "President Trump" and pairings like "Trump defends". This framing serves to reinforce his institutional authority and position him as a legitimate leader justifiably responding to external attacks, thereby constructing a narrative of political conflict rather than one of problematic discourse. Similarly, the analysis of the keyword "virus" reveals distinct framing strategies. CNN predominantly utilized the neutral phrase "the virus", isolating politicized terms like "China virus" within direct quotations to maintain critical distance. Conversely, Fox News normalized "Chinese virus" by embedding it within editorial narration, framing its usage not as offensive but as a legitimate act of defiance against political correctness.

The analysis of cohesion and thematic structure further demonstrates how these ideological frames are built into the text. The CNN editorial constructs a cohesive vocabulary chain using strongly negative evaluative terms such as "contemptuous", "bigoted" and "racism". The thematic structure consistently foregrounds Trump and his administration as the agents of these actions, creating an argument that explicitly

connects his specific linguistic acts to a broader critique of systemic racism. In contrast, the Fox News editorial employs a vocabulary chain focused on conflict and procedure (“bizarre exchange”, “combative tone”). Crucially, its strategy diffuses responsibility and reframes the narrative as a procedural dispute and instance of media hostility, effectively deflecting from the ethical implications of the racist terminology.

The second stage of analysis moves beyond the text itself to examine the institutional processes of news production, specifically how events are selected, framed, and mediated through editing practices. This level investigates headlines, the attribution of voices, and intertextual allusions. The analysis of headlines reveals a fundamental ideological split. CNN framed the controversy critically, using inverted commas to distance itself from Trump’s naming and employing adjectives like “malicious” or explicitly attributing the usage to “political reasons”. This positioned the event as a critique of divisive rhetoric. Conversely, Fox News utilized inverted commas neutrally or validly, prioritizing verbs like “defends” and “doubles down”. This framed the rhetoric not as a violation but as a legitimate act of leadership and accountability, presenting the language as a necessary diplomatic stance rather than a source of racial division. Beyond the initial framing provided by headlines, the ideological leaning of each network is further reinforced through the strategic selection and presentation of external voices.

CNN utilized direct speech for Trump nearly twice as often as Fox News, a strategy that exposes his rhetoric verbatim for critique and establishing a distance from his voice. Fox News favored indirect speech, allowing the network to soften and contextually frame the Trumpian speech more favorably. Furthermore, the networks relied on opposing authority figures: CNN heavily sourced international experts (e.g., WHO) to position Trump as scientifically isolated, while Fox News prioritized administration officials and supportive commentators to validate his stance. These sourcing strategies are complemented by the use of intertextuality, specifically allusion, which serves to anchor current events within broader historical narratives. The use of historical allusion demonstrates how each News network contextualized the crisis. CNN linked the “China virus” rhetoric to associate with the histories of

xenophobia, such as the “Yellow Peril”, the “Black Death” and the HIV crisis, framing the discourse as a dangerous legacy of othering. In contrast, Fox News normalized the terminology by alluding to diseases named after locations (e.g., “Ebola”). By invoking these precedents, Fox News constructed a narrative of historical continuity that framed Trump’s speech as standard geographic naming practice rather than prejudice. While the analysis of discursive practice reveals how these narratives are constructed, a complete understanding requires situating these editorial decisions within the macro-level of social practice.

The final level of analysis situates the news texts within their broader social context, concerned with social practice, exploring the social context of the news texts and examines the broader societal effects of the linguistic structures of the reports. Drawing on Golding and Murdock (1979), this level acknowledges that news production is not isolated but deeply embedded in media institutions that disseminate specific social values. As the market becomes competitive, framing strategies are often politicized to align with audience interests, solidifying platform identities and reinforcing the ideological echo chambers of their readership.

In this section, CNN reinforces its identity as a liberal, progressive outlet by consistently critiquing Trump’s rhetoric as racist, xenophobic and divisive. By explicitly connecting the “China virus” term to the broader societal rise in anti-Asian hate crimes (Gover et al., 2020), CNN aligns itself with democratic values of inclusivity and accountability, challenging the authority of the President. Conversely, Fox News solidifies its status as a conservative platform by normalizing Trumpian speech. It frames the rhetoric as a necessary defense of the “America First” nationalism and a rejection of “political correctness” (Zick, 2019), effectively legitimizing the President’s right-wing populist discourse. Through these opposing frames, both networks actively participate in the reproduction of power relations: CNN reinforces liberal multiculturalism, while Fox News bolsters conservative nationalism, significantly shaping societal attitudes regarding race and political accountability in line with the President’s stance.

7. Findings in Online News Comments

Having established how media institutions construct and distribute ideological frameworks, the last analytical chapter shifts the focus to the sphere of consumption and investigates how discourses of racism and xenophobia are reiterated or contested in citizen comments on the two news outlets' Facebook pages, thereby determining how Trumpian political discourse transcends individual rhetoric and becomes a dominant communicative mode through the circulation and normalization.

The final section of analysis examines the social practice of consumption, confirming that digital audiences are not passive recipients but active co-constructors of political meaning. The quantitative analysis of high-frequency content words in user comments reveals distinct linguistic patterns that map onto the ideological divide between the two networks. The corpus, compiled from 1,106 CNN comments and 1,178 Fox News comments within the given period, highlights significant discourse asymmetries. The most telling differences are found in keywords that appear exclusively in one dataset. In the CNN comments corpus (CNNCC), the term “racist” appears with significant frequency (66 instances), whereas it is virtually absent from the Fox News comments corpus (FNCC). This indicates that CNN’s audience is deeply engaged with the racial implications of Trumpian rhetoric, directly responding to the network’s framing of terms like “China virus” in a strategic act of criticism calling it racist and xenophobic. Additionally, CNNCC uniquely features the term “Trumpvirus” (40 instances) – popularized by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. It attributes the severity of the pandemic directly to the President’s inaction. Its prevalence suggests that CNN’s audiences primarily frame the crisis as a failure of domestic leadership and policy, focusing on accountability and social justice. Conversely, FNCC exhibits a different lexical focus. Keywords, such as “Joe Biden” and “Democrats” appear exclusively in this dataset, indicating that this audience frames the pandemic largely through the lens of electoral politics and partisan rivalry rather than policy critique. Furthermore, the exclusive appearance of the word “trust” in the FNCC reflects a preoccupation with credibility and institutional skepticism.

Unlike the CNN commenters' focus on social equality, the Fox commenters adopt a defensive posture aligned with Trump's rhetoric, questioning the validity of political institutions and mainstream narratives.

While both audiences share a focus on fundamental thematic elements—such as “China Virus”, “Wuhan”, and “Trump”, the actual usage of shared keywords reveals deeper ideological divisions. A striking disparity emerges in the use of the word “people”. Fox News comments contain this term over three times more often than CNN comments (235 versus 77). This linguistic pattern aligns closely with the populist rhetorical style identified in Chapter 3, where Trump frequently invokes “the people” to construct a shared in-group identity against perceived elites. The elevated frequency of this term suggests that Trumpian speech has been adopted by his audience. By frequently invoking “people”, Fox News commenters participate in constructing a collective populist identity. While keyword frequency illustrates what audiences are talking about, it does not fully explain how they are positioning themselves within the discourse. Moving beyond frequency counts, the qualitative analysis investigates how these keywords are employed in context.

Therefore, the analysis of concordance lines for the term “blame” in both datasets reveals a stark contrast in how social actors are held accountable. Quantitatively, the CNNCC features a greater emphasis on assigning responsibility, containing over double the instances of “blame” (27 concordances) compared to the Fox News comments corpus (12 concordances). In the CNN comments, blame is directed vertically upwards toward the state apparatus. The discourse characterizes the crisis as a result of administrative negligence, with audiences frequently linking the virus's spread to Trump's dismissal of scientific advice. For instance, commenters explicitly called for Trump's resignation, stating “You are ultimately to blame for not responding soon enough”, thereby reinforcing a narrative of governmental incompetence. Here, “blame” functions as a mechanism for democratic oversight, demanding accountability from leadership. In contrast, Fox News comments direct blame horizontally. The narrative focus shifts away from domestic governance toward external actors (China, the WHO) or domestic political rivals (Democrats). This

discourse reflects a populist worldview that distrusts elites and media institutions. By framing Trump as the courageous defender, the comments reinforce the narrative that he is unfairly targeted by partisan hostility. In addition, the reaction to the specific term “Chinese virus” further exemplifies this divide. CNN audiences critiqued the term as a strategic tool for racial division, arguing that Trump used it to “please his racist base” and deflect from his “incompetent response”. This interpretation aligns with liberal democratic values that emphasize institutional accountability and reject nationalist scapegoating. Conversely, Fox News audiences defended the term by citing historical precedents (e.g., “Spanish flu”), framing the objection to the term, “China virus” as “anti-American hypocrisy”. These comments argued that Trumpian rhetoric was justified and that the focus should be on China’s alleged cover-up rather than on “political correctness”. From Van Dijk’s (2008) perspective, these opposing blame narratives function as mechanisms of power: one seeking to scrutinize authority, the other seeking to reinforce political legitimacy through nationalist solidarity.

To further explore how these narratives manifest linguistically, a clustering analysis was conducted on pivotal keywords — “virus”, “China” and “Trump” —which serve as the central nodes of argumentation regarding responsibility, leadership, and geopolitics. CNN comments prioritize crisis management (“virus under control”), largely avoiding xenophobic labels. In contrast, Fox News comments fixate on origins (“virus originated in”) and adopt Trump’s rhetoric (“the Chinese virus”), reinforcing a narrative that externalizes blame through xenophobia. Moreover, CNN comments offer a nuanced mix of criticism and skepticism regarding blame (“China is to blame for”), whereas Fox News comments exhibit aggressive, direct accusation (“China lied”, “China is responsible”). While both audiences express distrust of Chinese information (“China’s propaganda”), the hostility is markedly higher in the FNCC. Similarly, the President’s portrayal shows the most dramatic disparity. CNN comments predominantly frame him negatively (“Trump is killing us”. “Trump needs to”), holding him personally responsible for the pandemic’s lethality. Conversely, Fox News comments treat him with reverence (“Mr. President Trump”, “God bless”), depicting him as a protective leader while shifting culpability to

external threats like China.

Based on the findings of the previous analysis, three dominant themes emerge that illustrate the ideological lenses shaping audience engagement. Firstly, trust is polarized by platform. CNN comments display deep skepticism toward domestic leadership (“Trump is failing”), aligning with a critique of administrative competence. Conversely, Fox News audiences express high trust in Trump while directing skepticism toward international bodies like the WHO, reflecting a nationalist solidarity against external powers rather than internal governance. Secondly, reasoning styles diverge sharply. CNN audiences focus on policy failures and negligence rather than on global plots. In contrast, Fox News comment argumentation leans heavily into conspiracy, frequently asserting that “China lied” or “covered up” the virus. This mirrors the network’s framing of China as a deceptive global antagonist power responsible for the pandemic. Finally, the results highlight how political identification filters perception. CNN audiences articulate a liberal perspective emphasizing government accountability and rejecting nationalism. Fox News recipients express a conservative, protectionist rhetoric (“Trump is defending America”), prioritizing what they see as national sovereignty and external blame over internal critique. This systemic divergence underscores how media framing transformed the health crisis into a site of polarized ideological struggle.

8. Conclusion

This dissertation aimed at systematically analyzing Trumpian rhetoric and its impact on media discourses and audience reactions during the pandemic, specifically focusing on the final year of Donald Trump’s first presidency (March 16, 2020 – January 20, 2021). The analysis centered on the term “China/Chinese virus” to explore the formulation and reiteration of racist and xenophobic meanings associated with Covid-19. The central contribution of this project is its demonstration that Trumpian rhetoric was not merely an isolated or individual expression but a strategically constructed discourse with significant social and political consequences. The findings demonstrate that Trump actively utilized Twitter to frame the virus in

racialized terms, reorienting citizens' criticism from the government's mislead of the health crisis to a specific ethnic group. By systematically employing negative evaluative language, particularly through the use of geographical and ethnic markers like "China virus" and "Wuhan virus", Trump legitimized xenophobic sentiments and established a direct association between the virus and a specific nationality. This study demonstrates how his use of diverse rhetorical strategies served as a mechanism for community building, crafting tweets that invited affective agreement and forged a political base united by shared values and emotional responses.

Furthermore, the research reveals that media coverage was crucial in magnifying the ideological impact of Trump's rhetoric. Through the lens of Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, the analysis of news reports showed that CNN and Fox News reframed Trump's tweets in ways that reflected their respective political orientations. Media organizations, therefore, are not neutral transmitters of information but active participants in the construction of social reality. Fox News significantly amplified the potency of Trumpian discourse by endorsing and normalizing his rhetoric, while CNN sought to undermine it by framing it as xenophobic and divisive. These divergent strategies of mediation played a pivotal role in either reinforcing or contesting the racist ideologies embedded in Trump's speech, influencing its circulation within the broader public sphere. This polarization extended into the digital public sphere, where the analysis of Facebook comments revealed striking differences in audience interpretation. Generally, CNN commenters attributed responsibility for the crisis to domestic political actors, portraying Trump's response as insufficient. In contrast, Fox News audiences externalized the blame, focusing on China as the primary perpetrator while maintaining a supportive attitude toward the President.

Theoretically, this research offers a nuanced model of how ideologies circulate in polarized digital environments. By empirically tracing the "textual chain" of the phrase "China/Chinese virus"—from Trump's Twitter to news outlets and finally to audience comments—the study highlights a complex process of negotiation rather than a simple straightforward transmission. It challenges reductive theories of media

influence by showing that audiences are not passive; their reception and reinterpretation of political messages are profoundly shaped by their own ideological leanings and the specific media platforms they inhabit. The integration of computational tools with traditional qualitative inquiry addresses the methodological challenge of scaling up close-reading analysis, demonstrating that computer-assisted corpus analysis can reveal large-scale patterns in vast social media datasets that might otherwise go unnoticed. Situating these findings within a broader context reveals that this case study is a contemporary manifestation of a long-standing pattern in American political discourse—the scapegoating of the “perpetual foreigner”. Trumpian rhetoric was not an irregular, but a classic application of a xenophobic playbook adapted for the digital age.

While this study provides significant insights, it is subject to the interpretive limitations inherent in Critical Discourse Studies and the specific scope of the selected data. The findings are contingent on the specific corpora compiled from Twitter, CNN, and Fox News, and may not capture the full spectrum of public opinion. Future research should therefore broaden the scope to include other social media platforms and communication modalities, such as visual signification. Finally, longitudinal studies tracking the evolution of these narratives into Donald Trump’s second term would be invaluable. Investigating whether his racist discourse continues to target China and how his communicative strategies have shifted will provide critical insights into the adaptability of political discourse and its implications for international relations, racialized narratives, and domestic political polarization.

Furthermore, valuable avenues for my future post-doctoral research include extending the analysis forward to encompass Trump’s post-presidency discourse, as well as the rhetoric of related figures like Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and think tanks, and the ongoing Republican narrative. Expanding the inquiry to other media channels and genres may also represent a fascinating and important direction for future investigation. However, for the current dissertation, designing and maintaining the scope on these specific outlets and their associated social media platforms was essential to ensure the necessary rigor and depth of analysis required to fully address

the project's research questions concerned with the discursal workings of the textual chain of xenophobic discourse.

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