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Combating the Covid-19 Hate and Racism Speech on Social Media

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Abstract. The spread of Covid-19 worldwide has been associated with hate and racism speech on social media which sometimes encourages violence and bullying in the different communities. Some officials, public figures and even common people, including students, have been expressing hate, racism, negative, hostile, and intolerant attitudes towards certain groups of people based on their color, origin, race, religion or social/political stance. This study surveys students and instructors' views of Covid-19 five months after the outbreak of the pandemic, and whether they consider it a punishment from God to certain countries or not. Based on the findings, it proposes the creation of an anti-hate Twitter page to teach students tolerance rather than negative sentiment associated with Covid-19.

1.   Introduction

The spread of Covid-19 worldwide has been associated with xenophobia, hate and racist speech on social media which sometimes encourages bullying, microaggression and violence in the different communities. Since the outbreak of Covid-19, some officials, public figures and even common people have been expressing hate, racism, negative, hostile and intolerant attitudes towards certain groups of people based on their color, origin, race, religion or social/political stance. For example, in the USA, President Trump called Covid-19 *"the Chinese virus"*. Former Italian Deputy Prime Minister, wrongly linked Covid-19 to African asylum seekers, calling for border closures. In Indonesia, people called the first women infected with Covid-19 *"devil"*. A man in the UK spat on a black woman, told her he had corona, then intentionally killed her. In Lebanon, people avoided talking to and coming close to a Chinese student and called him *"Corona"*. A party leader asked the Lebanese government to quarantine and lockdown Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. In Saudi Arabia, an actress suggested that Covid-19 vaccines be tried on prisoners. Due to the crisis in Kuwaiti hospitals, a Kuwaiti actress called for throwing foreign laborers infected with corona in the desert. Bahrain refused the return of its Shiite citizens from Iran[1].

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[1] https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=517624355807220

Moreover, in February and March 2020, many Arabs on Twitter considered the outbreak of Covid-19 in China a punishment from God for what it did to the Uighur Muslims[2], and when Covid-19 spread in Iran, they considered it a punishment because they are Magus and Rejectionists, and for political reasons. Such negative sentiments, racist comments and declarations were even assimilated by the young generation who started to openly declare similar negative, hostile and intolerant attitudes towards some countries, religious sects and races.

Since the outbreak of Covid-19 in China, the impact of the pandemic on public health, the economy, tourism, education, sports, commerce, international relations and politics has been the subject of numerous studies. A review of the literature has shown some studies that investigated the spread of hate and racism speech due to the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, [1] looked into racial discrimination of Northeast Indians during the outbreak of Covid-19 in India. [2] examined how news articles frame the rise of anti-Asian racism and sentiment during the Covid-19 pandemic. Another study by [3] proposed a three-stage-based approach that shows how negative sentiments changed over the Covid-19 stages of development: Changing from a domestic epidemic, into an international public health emergency, then into a global pandemic. They percentages of negative sentiment over the three stages were 50%, 50%, and 52% respectively.

A second line of research focused on the spread of hate speech associated with the Covid-19 pandemic on Twitter. [4] found that Covid-19 aggravated Sinophobia on the Internet, and that Sinophobic content exists on fringe Web communities like /pol/ which is a political discussion board on the image-based bulletin board 4chan, and to a lesser degree on Twitter. They noted a shift towards blaming China for the Covid-19 pandemic on Twitter, and a shift towards using more Sinophobic slurs on /pol/. In addition, [5] analyzed Asian hate and counter-hate tweets in the COVID-HATE database. Their analysis revealed that bots constituted 10.4% of hateful users, and were more vocal and hateful; whereas hateful bots were more successful in attracting followers compared to counter-hate bots. Hateful and counter-hate users interacted and engaged extensively with one another. The researchers concluded that counter-hate messages can discourage users from becoming hateful. Moreover, [6] created a classifier that detects and categorizes tweets into four categories: (i) Hostility against East Asia, (ii) Criticism of East Asia, (iii) Meta-discussions of East Asian prejudice, and (iv) a neutral category. The classifier can help researchers in moderating online content and investigating the dynamics, prevalence and impact of East Asian online prejudice during the pandemic.

The literature review showed lack of studies that investigated negative sentiments associated with Covid-19 among Arab students and instructors, and lack of studies about the availability of Twitter pages that target students and educate them with regards to hate and racism issues related to Covid-19, and that alleviate xenophobic narratives and racist attacks by the students. Therefore, the present study aims to: (i) find out whether there are still negative sentiments against certain countries, communities and races associated with Covid-19 five months after the outbreak of the pandemic, by surveying a sample of Arab students and instructors to find out whether they view Covid-19 as a punishment from God to some countries or not, and what reasons they give to justify their point of view; (ii) to search Twitter for pages that combat hate and racism speech associated with Covid-19 in students and instructors; and (iii) to propose a model for a Twitter page that targets students, and teaches tolerance, understanding, open-mindedness and anti-racism associated with Covid-19.

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[2] https://www.facebook.com/100010966335643/posts/1096572814051586/

Due to the harmful effects of hate speech and negative sentiments on individuals, the society, global community and international relations, results of the study will shed light on Arab students and instructors' attitudes towards other communities due to the outbreak Covid-19. It will raise the public, students, instructors, and administrators' awareness of negative sentiments towards other countries, and misconceptions about the causes of the Covid-19 pandemic. Students and educators will benefit from the proposed Covid-19 anti-hate and anti-racist Twitter page, which aims to broaden students' horizons, provide them with multiple views of, and authentic information about the pandemic, to educate students as to the real causes of the Covid-19 and how to reduce its spread; to alleviate hatred and racism; to hold dialogues among culturally diverse students; to re-shape students' perceptions of other races, faiths and religious sects; and to teach the importance of getting together and cooperating to face the pandemic.

## 2.	Methodology

2.1 Participants

The participants consisted of 230 Arab students and instructors (125 students and 105 instructors) who were randomly selected from a population of 15,000 contacts and followers of the author on WhatsApp, Imo, Telegram, Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn. The participants come from different Arab countries, belong to different age groups, and have different academic levels and areas of specialty.

2.2 Sample of Twitter Pages

The author searched Twitter for pages that counteract hate and racism associated with Covid-19 such as pages that teach tolerance and understanding to students. The author used the following search terms and phrases: Teaching tolerance, cultural diversity, combating coronavirus hate speech, Covid-19 and racial injustice, coronavirus anti-hate speech and others.

2.3 Questionnaire-Survey

The subjects answered a questionnaire-survey which consisted of an open-ended question that requested them to state their opinion as to whether they consider the Covid-19 pandemic a punishment from God, and to select the country/countries that they believe is/are being punished by the pandemic (China, USA, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Brazil, Iran, Turkey, India, Malaysia, Philippines, Arab countries). They were also asked to justify their point of view by giving reasons for considering it a punishment or not.

2.4 Content Analysis

The author skimmed through the Twitter accounts, especially the tweets that were published between March and July 2020 to have a feel for the issues tweeted, the followers' interaction features, kinds of information tweeted, and how hate and racism speech, prejudice associated with Covid-19 are handled.

2.5 Statistical Analysis

The author analysed the responses to the questionnaire-survey and calculated the following: (i) The percentage of participants who believe that Covid-19 is a punishment from God; (ii) percentage of participants who do not believe it is a punishment; (iii) percentage of participants who were undecided; (iv) percentage of participants who mentioned each country as being punished by Covid-19; (v) the correlation between the responses of instructors and students. Results of the content analysis of the tweets are reported qualitatively.

3.   Results

3.1 Results of the Questionnaire Survey

Data analysis showed that 51% of the participants viewed Covid-19 as a punishment from God, 33.3% do not consider it a punishment, and 15.7% were undecided (did not know). A positive correlation was found between instructors and students' responses (r =.41) which means that students and instructors have similar positive or negative sentiments (points of view) and that students are affected by adults' points of view. These findings are consistent with findings of a study by [3] which found that the percentages of negative sentiment were 50%, 50%, and 52% across the 3 stages of development of Covid-19.

As to the countries that the subjects think are being punished by Covid-19, results showed the following: China (40.6%), USA (30.5%), all countries (27%), Arab countries (27%), Iran (17%), and India (13.6%). The subjects think that Covid-19 is a punishment to China because of their crimes against Uighur Muslims; to the USA for their invasion of and crimes in many countries; to Arab countries because they are not following the teachings of Islam; and to the whole world because of corruption and vice.

Findings of the present study show some prescribed morals. For instance, some participants interpreted the punishment from an ideological point of view such as *Iran is the enemy of God, enemy of Islam and Arabs.* There are also some social myths as in: *The Chinese eat insects and bats.*

Results also revealed lack of exposure to other cultures, inadequate knowledge, misinformation, and believing and interpreting information without verification as in the following comments: *"China tortures Mianmar's Muslims"; "Russia promotes homosexuality"* and *"Iran mistreats Muslims".* A student said: *I never travelled but this is what I hear.* Some made overgeneralizations such as: *The USA, India, Russia, Germany, France, Italy, Britain, Spain are the axis of evil.* 27% said it is a punishment to all Arab countries and the whole world, on equal footing and without excluding any country.

On the other hand, participants who think Covid-19 is not a punishment said: *"God is just and will not punish all the people in the world"; "people of all religions and faiths have been affected"; "Covid-19 is like other catastrophes (floods, draughts and earthquakes) that hit everybody and any country".* Some gave medical, social, economic, political, travel and commercial causes of the pandemic. Others gave examples of pandemics that took place throughout history such as the Plague and Spanish Flu.

The emergence and spread of hate speech and negative sentiment during the Covid-19 pandemic can be interpreted in the light of the social amplification and attenuation risk framework by [7] which states that the secondary consequences of a risk event (hate speech) serve as amplifiers of the original risk (Covid-19) and activate representations of similar events (negative sentiments) within the receivers (students and instructors). Newspapers, television, and social media are powerful communication tools that enable their users to send (hate and racist) messages and convey information about Covid-19 to millions of people simultaneously. Acting on the assumption that recipients (students and instructors) of a media message process, not only its explicit verbal content, but also the implicit message conveyed through its pictures and figures of speech, such as the pictures of medical staff wearing face masks and shields, gloves and protective gowns, images of patients on respirators, images of dying people and massive graves, dramatic spread of the coronavirus, and the hike in new daily cases worldwide. Adding such pictures of a catastrophic event (Covid-19 pandemic) as a mere means of illustration, can convey information that appeals to the recipients' affect, emotions, cognition and behavior which are interrelated and influence one another. Values, attitudes, social

influences, and cultural identity determine what students perceive as a threat to their well-being, and how they evaluate probabilities and magnitudes of unwanted consequences.

3.2 Availability of Anti-hate Twitter Pages for Students

The author found a limited number of pages on Twitter that promote tolerance, anti-hate and anti-racism. Those pages are:

[1] *Teaching Tolerance* (https://twitter.com/Tolerance_org): It has 93K followers and 14.6K tweets. It is dedicated to creating equitable school experiences for students and supporting educators. Tweets are not specifically focused on tolerance and Covid-19.

[2] *Students Against COVID19* (https://twitter.com/StudentsCOVID19): It has 218 Followers and 123 Tweets. It is an Initiative led by students @HarvardChanSPH to engage students everywhere to tackle Covid-19 by supporting communities and spreading factual information about Covid-19.

[3] *Essex Cultural Diversity Project* (https://twitter.com/essex_cdp): It has 925 Followers and 2,115 Tweets. Through arts, cultural and heritage projects members raise awareness of race equality and cultural diversity, benefiting all people within communities across Essex, England only.

[4] *EMISCO* (https://twitter.com/Eu_Emisco) has 772 followers, and 2,064 tweets. It aims to combat all forms and manifestations of discrimination, hate speech and hate crimes including Islamophobia in Europe. It offers some webinars on the issue of Covid-19. What needs to be done? How can people strengthen the monitoring of racism and discrimination that COVID19 has exposed?

The above Twitter pages focus on anti-hate and anti-racism in general, not necessarily those associated with Covid-19. They do not target students in particular. They are for all people and all age groups. Lack of Twitter pages that counteract hate speech and negative sentiments associated with Covid-19 may be due to lack of new research into this new area of social science. This reflects the need for creating such a Covid-19 anti-hate page on Twitter. This anti-hate page is described below.

4. Proposed Anti- Hate Twitter Page Model for Students

This study recommends the creation of a special Twitter page for counteracting hate and racist speech associated with Covid-19 among students and instructors. The page aims to: (i) teach tolerance to students, (ii) raise students' awareness of the Covid-19 pandemic, (iii) develop critical awareness and critical thinking skills, (iv) develop dialogue skills, (v) develop global awareness related to the Covid-19 pandemic, and (vi) develop students' ability to search for valid and authentic information. Teachers and students from different backgrounds, countries, cultures, ethnicities, religious backgrounds should be asked to follow the page and actively participate in the dialogs and activities. Based on the strategies mentioned by [8]; [9]; [10]; [11]; [5]; [12]; [13] and Paulo Freire's[3] pedagogical approach, the page should focus on the following:

[1] Students and instructors from different backgrounds enter into *dialogue* with each other to gain knowledge of the reality of Covid-19, and to critically reflect on the pandemic. The Twitter learning environment should be characterized by mutual trust, respect, care and members' support of one another.

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[3] https://www.freire.org/paulo-freire/concepts-used-by-paulo-freire

[2]   Since social myths have a dominant tendency, developing critical awareness of the Covid-19 reality through reflection and action, and raising students' critical awareness will help interpret violent incidents related to Covid-19 in students' daily life, and help them understand Covid-19 -related news.

[3]   Encouraging students to gather information to build up a picture around Covid-19's real situation, people infected with it, causes of the pandemic, prevention and treatment, and effects of the pandemic on people's daily life. The students can get up-to-date information on Covid-19 from multiple resources such as: University College Cork's response to Covid-19 (https://ucc.ie/en/emt/ covid19/), *Council of Europe*'s *Covid-19*: *Human rights are more important than ever in times of crisis* (https://www.coe.int/ en/web/portal/ Covid-19), World Health Organization and others.

[4]   Monitoring bias on social media platforms and verifying information by examining the source and checking facts by the students.

[5]   Using science-based education to help students understand the formulation of race and its intersection with science, to help them avoid connecting diseases with faiths and social groups by avoiding certain visual images, and disassociating verbal and nonverbal connections.

[6]   Opposing hate content with counter-narratives and sending out consistent informed counter-hate textual messages to help promote facts, encourage salutegenic behaviors, calm down fears and discourage students from turning hateful. An expert-based dataset of hate speech and counter-narrative pairs can be created. Students can respond and react to, and discuss those. Students may use art and culture for creating counter narratives to counterbalance one-sided narratives and simplified overgeneralizations by hate speakers.

[7]   Raising students' global awareness by bringing the outside world to the students' realm through publishing and watching videos about Covid-19 around the world such as: UNICEF kids' video diaries about life during Covid-19, and CNN's Global Views videos. Student followers can comment on an discuss the video content.

[8]   Raising awareness of the Islamic view of pandemics by publishing views of senior Muslim Scholars such as Al-Azhar Shaikhs, Mufti of Egypt/Lebanon and senior Ulama's in Saudi Arabia which show that pandemics are not a punishment from God to all humanity.

[9]   Raising students' awareness of the Islamic view of the other to teach acceptance and tolerance. The Quran says **"***O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female, and made you peoples and tribes, so that you get to know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you, in the sight of Allah, is the most pious*"*. The Quran also says: *"There is no compulsion in religion. The right path and the wrong path are clear".*[4]

[10]   Students can search for and tweet examples of pandemics that took place throughout history such as the Spanish flu, the plague in the Middle ages and others.

5.   Conclusion

This study is the first of its kind in socio-linguistic research in the Arab World as it surveyed a sample of Arab students and instructors to find out whether they think the Covid-19 pandemic is a punishment from God to some countries such as China, USA, Iran, Russia, some European countries and/or Arab countries or not, and to find out whether there are Twitter pages that target students and instructors and teach them tolerance, critical thinking, dialog, and raise

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[4] http://quran.ksu.edu.sa/translations/english/1.html

their awareness of other cultures, communities, history of pandemics and the causes and current situation of the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition to the creation of anti-hate and anti-racism Twitter page(s) that aim to educate the young generation regarding the Covid-19 pandemic, Arab Ministries of Information should pass laws for monitoring and eliminating hate and racism speech; promoting tolerance, equity and human rights on social media; and banning violators from using social media. However, further studies that investigate the impact of Covid-19 on other social and psychological issues in Arab countries are needed.

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