

Title: COVID-19 and Viral Anti-Asian Racism: A multi-modal critical discourse analysis of memes and the racialisation of the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

This paper examines how internet memes both enacted and reproduced racialisation of the COVID-19 pandemic. We were motivated to undertake this work by a surge in hatred towards and violence against people with East Asian heritage following the outbreak of COVID-19. We focus on memes because of their ubiquity in contemporary culture and their capacity to both reflect and shape discourses. We conduct a multi-modal critical discourse analysis of two prominent memes – juxtaposing a ‘top down’ process of meme selection and distribution (the sharing of ‘the Kung Flu Kid’ meme on Instagram by Donald Trump Jr.) with a ‘bottom up’ process (the ‘Corona-chan’ meme which originated on the website 4chan). We situate our study in a growing literature on politicised memes, challenging an emerging consensus that lauds ‘bottom up’ memes as a democratising force enabling resistance to hegemony, inequality, and injustice. While we do not reject this characterisation outright, we add nuance, showing that racialised memetic discourses around COVID-19 were propagated both from the top down and from the bottom up. We conclude that memes are particularly powerful communicative tools in racialised discourse because their use of polysemy, humour, and cultural reference allows them to subvert the mechanisms that sanction openly racist statements.

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Introduction

COVID-19 (or SARS-CoV-2) was first reported in Wuhan, China at the end of 2019. The effects of this virus since its emergence are difficult to over-state. In total, 133,552,774 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 2,894,295 deaths were reported globally as of 9 April 2021 (WHO 2021b). In response to COVID-19, governments across the world have enacted wide-ranging restrictions on freedom of movement and economic activity, as well as diverting enormous financial and health care resources (Hale, et al. 2021). As such, it is unsurprising that COVID-19 is at the centre of contemporary political discourse and debate.

From the earliest days of the outbreak, there was a significant racialisation of COVID-19. This is visible in a variety of tragic manifestations. For instance, the UK's Metropolitan Police recorded 166 verbal, online, and physical attacks against people described as having an 'Oriental' ethnicity by police officers in February to March 2020 compared to 66 such cases during the same period in 2019 (Financial Times 2020). The San Francisco-based civil society organization Chinese for Affirmative Action (2021) reports 3,795 incidents of anti-Asian discrimination from 19 March 2020 to 28 February 2021 including verbal harassment (68.1%), shunning (20.5%), physical assault (11.1%), civil rights violations (8.5%), and online harassment (6.8%). The nadir of this wave of anti-Asian racism took place in Atlanta, USA in March 2021 when Robert Aaron Long engaged in a string of shootings targeting three Asian spas, killing eight people (Helsel and Elbaum 2021).

We argue that this surge in anti-Asian racism in Western countries since the outbreak of COVID-19 is related to a process of discursive racialisation of the virus. In this paper, we focus on the role played by internet memes in this process. We begin by reviewing the literature on the role and nature of memes in political communication. In this discussion, we explore how memes have entered long standing debates about media and meaning making in contemporary society. A significant part of these debates relates to the power dynamics inherent in memetic communication online, and we discuss a distinction in the literature between 'bottom up' and 'top down' processes of meme generation and propagation. Often, bottom-up processes are seen as more likely to facilitate a democratisation of meaning making and generate discourses of resistance to hegemonic and unjust cultural norms that support unjust power relations. Discussions of top-down memetic processes, on the other

hand, focus on the appropriation and manipulation of politicised memes by elites, which can be used to re-enforce existing hierarchies and naturalise injustices.

Using a paradigmatic case selection logic that privileges insight and impact, we identify two memes to analyse – the first is Donald Trump Jr.’s sharing of a meme entitled ‘The Kung Flu Kid’ on Instagram. This act represents a clear ‘top down’ process; indeed, we show that it was just one link in a chain of systematic racialisation of COVID-19 by the Trump administration in the USA. Our second case is the ‘Corona-chan’ anthropomorphic representation of the virus, which first emerged on 4-chan in the early days of the virus. This was a largely bottom-up meme in terms of generation and dissemination, but, as we show, it nonetheless enacted and sought to drive a highly racialised discursive treatment of COVID-19.

We adopt a multi-modal critical discourse analytic approach. This allows us to explore the interplay of meaning choices and communicative affordances that these cases present. Through this approach, we show how memetic political communication, both from the top-down and the bottom up, represented a means of reproducing and driving a racialised approach to the virus that contained just enough ambiguity to avoid the moral and legal sanctions that would normally accompany racist statements. In this way, we argue, internet memes were used to push the racialisation of COVID-19 just far enough below the radar to avoid punishment or opprobrium. In this case, the bottom-up process was just as inclined (indeed, in many ways more inclined) to scapegoat, elicit existing stereotypes and prejudices, and intimate violence as a legitimate response as the top-down process. We conclude by reflecting on the troubling nature of these findings and outline some future lines of research that could emerge on this topic.

Internet Memes: Meaning, Power, and Ideology

The term ‘meme’ was first coined by Richard Dawkins (1976) to characterise cultural transmission via copying or adapting ideas as acting in a similar fashion as genetic transmission. In the digital era, memes are defined as ‘digital objects that riff on a given visual, textual or auditory form and are then appropriated, re-coded, and slotted back into the internet infrastructures they came from’ (Nooney and Portwood-Stacer 2014: 249).

There is a growing body of literature on internet memes, providing a cumulative scholarly understanding of their key attributes and dynamics. Internet memes are highly plastic and can appear in several formats, including static images, GIFs, and videos. While there are no formal rules to meme-making, almost all memes involve humour, satire, or parody (Knobel and Lankshear 2007; Shifman 2014). Memes are typically derived from existing cultural artefacts. Consequently, a central attribute of internet memes is their intertextuality (Burgess 2008; Knobel and Lankshear 2007; Shifman 2014; Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017).

To understand internet memes as media form, there is the need to bridge traditional media disciplines such as semiotics and 'new media' disciplines. Digital semiology, following the structuralist tradition, established itself as a nexus for investigations into meaning making in the networked world. In a discussion of the semiological interplay between memes and popular culture, Nissenbaum and Shifman (2017: 485) observe that 'a constant flow of signifiers borrowed from movies, ads, games, and street art reciprocally influences, and is influenced by, Internet memes.' The selection of signs and symbols and their combination in the digital space create meaning on both denotative and connotative levels, thus constructing 'myths' (Barthes 1972[1957]). Relying on inside jokes, memes can be seemingly casual, light-hearted, and innocent, a feature that can disguise the culturally and ideologically 'dense' semantic aspect of connotation (Barthes 1977: 45). The use and reception of internet memes therefore varies depending on the existing cultural knowledge and ideological frameworks of individuals.

Shifman writes that 'two main repackaging mechanisms of memes are [...] mimicry and remix' (Shifman 2014: 20). This reflects the seemingly contradictory nature of memes as simultaneously expressing individual uniqueness and cultural connectivity. Meme templates, as they reflect a common cultural knowledge and affinities (Burgess 2008), require the users to have a shared knowledge framework of cultural conventions, yet at the same time, individual users are encouraged to create a personalized message. Meme templates, as Nissenbaum and Shifman observe, are 'socially constructed and systematic', 'create a binding structure for expression, while directing its range of possibilities' (2018:296). The availability of a wide range of (mostly free) digital editing software packages makes it possible for internet users to re-use, recreate, and manipulate existing cultural artefacts. The availability of meme templates and meme generators further widens the affordance of meme

making. Digital media facilitates the return of these augmented cultural artefacts into the public sphere with modified, extended, or revised meanings.

In terms of social and political dynamics, memes are thus easy to create, augment, and share, and have been characterised as a constituent aspect of online participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006; 2013). With communication becoming more screen-dominated in the digital era, images, signs, and symbols are given more prominence in constructing meaning and shaping political discourse and public opinion. Although images have always been part of human communication, the interactive nature of digital media enables user creativity and fragments creation and propagation. This process has both driven the significance of images in representing ideas, information, and knowledge (Kress 2003:20) and lessened the control exercised by traditional institutional hierarchical infrastructures.

A strand of research focusing on the power dynamics of memes in political communication investigates their use as a subversive discursive practice (Kuipers 2002; Knobel and Lankshear 2007; Burgess 2008; Denisova 2019). While some research in this tradition explores the liberal democratic nature of memes, rooted in active audience and consumerism (Fiske 1989); other work gives greater prominence to their subversive potential for culture-jamming as activism (Bennett 2003; Harold 2004; Sandlin and Milam 2008; Bennett and Segerberg 2014). Within the latter tradition, memetic practices are regarded as ‘guerrilla tactics’ deployed ‘with the enemy’s territory’ (De Certeau 1984: 38). In this sense, memes can be seen as the art of the powerless. Many memetic actions do not challenge the powerful meaning-making system openly yet maintain opposition within and against the dominant social order (De Certeau 1984). Memes can thus constitute ‘polyvocal’ discourse incorporating many points of view, including marginal and subversive ones (Milner 2013).

However, even subversive memetic actions operate within the established power structures, exposing them to manipulation by privileged groups. Hall captures this tension in traditional media by highlighting ‘the inter-connection between societal structures and processes and formal or symbolic structures’ (1973:1). Correspondingly, messages encoded in ‘this deep-structure provided the taken-for-granted story-of-all-stories, the paradigm action-narrative, the perfect myth’ (*ibid.*:7). Milner (2016) argues that the logics that structures memes include multimodality, reappropriation, resonance, collectivism and spread, which prioritizes a shared

framework of cultural knowledge based in the Western world. Despite the enabling effects of memetic media, memetic culture is historically rooted in American or Western culture.

Both Barthes (1977) and Levi-Strauss (1987) discussed fluidity and flexibility in semiological meaning making in different contexts. The images imply ‘underlying their signifiers, a “floating chain” of signifieds, the reader able to choose some and ignore others’ (Barthes 1977:39). In the digital formation of meaning making, ‘information technologies create [...] flickering signifiers, characterized by their tendency toward unexpected metamorphoses, attenuations, and dispersions’ (Hayles 1993:76). Does this fluidity in memetic engagement create a disjuncture between hegemonic strategies and resistance tactics?

In examining forms of power and resistance in users’ relationships to interactive technologies, Shaw (2017) revised Hall’s model to capture how interactive digital media affect encoding and decoding processes. When the line between media production and usage is blurred into ‘produsage’ (Bruns 2008), users’ receptions consist not only of their reaction towards the traditional texts but also of the actions these texts invite. As such, the digital media context enables us to interrogate the types of uses media enables and the types of interaction media encourage or discourage (Shaw 2017: 597). In the online sphere, users not only generate dominant, negotiated, or oppositional positions in decoding the message from media, but also take part in the multiple level of co-creation. Due to the communicative affordances of the contemporary Internet, users’ reaction to and interaction with content itself constitutes a ‘meaningful object’ to be decoded.

Memes can thus reflect a bottom-up, grassroots emphasis in digital culture. As such, they may appear to offer a means of resisting the practices of marginalization, trivialization, condemnation, and stereotyping have plagued legacy media representation of minorities (Tuchman 1978; Hall 1997). However, Nissenbaum and Shifman point out that memes could preserve and sustain society’s ‘hegemonic patterns where men and members of dominant ethnicities are forefronted while women and ethnic minorities are marginalized’ (2018: 296). Since memetic culture is US-centric, English-language dominant, the white hegemonic masculinity still dominates the memetic space (Milner 2016). The price of admission for minority groups in taking part in the co-creation of memes is their adoption of the cultural memory of dominant groups.

In this research, we continue with the emphasis in the literature on memes as a reflection of culture, but one that tends to be bound within power structures and ideologically constructed (Burgess 2008; Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2018). The racialisation of COVID-19 resonates well with this emphasis, and we are interested in whether a ‘bottom up’ process of meme creation and propagation offers greater resistance to dominant discourses and repressive ideology when set against a ‘top down’ process. We also seek to understand how, in the context of the racialisation of COVID-19, the communicative affordances offered by memes were leveraged. As such, this research sits within the emerging literature on memes as a form of political communication and speaks to its key themes of meaning making, power, and ideology.

Analytical Approach and Methodology

Much of the work on the political and cultural significance of memes has focused on their propagation and influence on public opinion. Methodologically, such research often combines large-n analysis and computational social science methods (see, for instance: (Pearce, et al. 2018; Tutters and Hagen 2020; Zannettou, et al. 2020). This approach is suitable for identifying where memes originate and how they become politically influential. However, our ontological and epistemological approach is one that places more emphasis on enhancing understanding and making space for critical interrogation than providing causal explanation. Indeed, we adopt a fundamentally critical approach to the discursive racialisation of COVID-19; our purpose is to expose how this discourse is enacted and reproduced so that it can be resisted. We have therefore selected a methodological approach that is qualitative and engages in-depth with a small n (2) of cases of memetic meaning construction and transfiguration during the COVID-19 crisis.

Case selection in such instances is a complex endeavour – as it cannot draw on the logics of representativeness or universality open to large-n studies. Instead, our case selection combines a logic of diversity (putting a ‘top-down’ case against a ‘bottom up’ one) with a paradigmatic logic that privileges the impact and insight offered by the cases. Such an approach enables us to look beyond ‘innocent’ symbolic artifacts and investigate hegemonic ideological control at the connotative level.

Our first case is a high-profile meme entitled ‘The Kung Flu Kid’ shared via Donald Trump Jr.’s Instagram account on March 26, 2020. The sharing of this meme by Trump Jr., a highly

visible campaign surrogate for President Donald J. Trump in both 2016 and 2020, demonstrates the political significance of the meme. Indeed, President Trump insisted on referring to COVID-19 as ‘the China/Chinese virus’ in public statements and frequently made references to the ‘Kung Flu’ on the campaign trail in 2020 (Lee 2020). The core themes of this meme speak to our substantive focus on the racialisation of COVID-19. Our second case was selected to capture a high insight/impact example of ‘bottom up’ meme propagation. In seeking such a case, we visited the database of the meme aggregator site knowyourmeme.com. Looking at the COVID-19 memes in this database, we sought a meme that emerged early in the COVID-19 crisis, featured a racialised depiction of COVID-19, and was not connected to social or political elites. This process led us to focus on the ‘Corona-chan’ meme. The meme has its origins in an earlier anthropomorphic representation of the Ebola virus (Ebola-Chan) on the same platform, and emerged in January 2020, going on to be widely shared on other social media platforms (Knowyourmeme 2021).

Our methodological approach to analysing these memes situates us within the field of multimodal critical discourse studies (MCDS). MCDS can be thought of as a fusion of critical discourse analysis (for an accessible discussion, see: (Van Dijk, 1993)) and visual communication studies in media analysis (Machin 2013). MCDS analyse the communication of discourses infused by ideology and power through a variety of semiotic resources, modes, and genres (Ledin and Machin 2017). They also acknowledge that much of the shaping and enactment of discourses takes place beyond formal channels of political communication, and are experienced ‘as fun, as style, and simply as part of the taken for granted everyday world’ (Machin 2013: 347).

Two ground-breaking works in this tradition (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996; 2010) provide key conceptual and methodological tools that we will employ in our analysis. The first of these is the identification and analysis of choices within a repertoire of meaning potentials afforded by a given mode (or combination of modes) of communication. The second is the connection between communicative mode and the types of epistemological commitment that the communicator makes. We are particularly interested in how memes can use affordances derived from a combination of their combination of humour and polysemy (Boxman-Shabtai and Shifman 2015) to racialize COVID-19 in a manner that sidesteps a full epistemological commitment to racist rhetoric.

Case 1: The Kung-Flu Kid Meme

The Kung-Flu Kid meme is an example of the how memes can be deployed as part of a top-down political campaign designed to scapegoat a nation and a culturally diverse ethnic group. This meme rose amidst growing geopolitical rivalry between the US and China centring around trade and security during the Trump administration but has deeper roots in post Cod War geopolitics. The rise of China in past decades has intensified tensions in its economic and political relationship with a developed world dominated by the US. The ‘China threat’ discourse has featured in policy formulation in the US (Broomfield 2003) and has triggered anxiety about China’s global ambitions and concerns of future war between the two superpowers (Allison 2017; Okuda 2016). The Trump administration’s strategy of downplaying the COVID-19 threat to the American population in early 2020 was becoming a political liability. In this context, Peters (2020) asserted that ‘Trump’s quick pivot to blaming China is a deliberate strategy, supposedly backed up by internal Trump campaign polling and designed to obfuscate the details of the truly inadequate US response.’ What is notable in this strategy was the use of discursive gambits – the most prominent of which was seeking to use the term ‘China virus’ rather than COVID-19 (or other medical terms) in the Trump administration’s communications on the issue.

The term ‘China virus’ was first coined by Charlie Kirk (@charliekirk11, 2020: n.pag.), who according to the *New York Times* is ‘a new breed of political agitator that has flourished since the 2016 election by walking the line between mainstream conservative opinion and outright disinformation’ (Rosenberg and Rogers 2020). Figure 1 reproduces a tweet by Kirk from 10 March 2020.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

This tweet contains most of the key ingredients of a viral message. It uses five lines of lightly punctuated short sentences. The use of ‘now’ at the beginning connotes urgency and crisis. The coinage of ‘China Virus’ is eye-catching, bold and sensational, it immediately creates a ‘us vs. them’ narrative, which is reinforced in the clause ‘if we can control of our borders’ (@charliekirk11, 2020: n.pag.). The third line exhibits Kirk’s endorsement of Trump and it is followed by an advertisement of his Apple podcast show in which he promised to tell ‘SO MUCH MORE!’ in capitalized letters and exclamation mark to maximize attention. The

tweet also contains a video clip lasting 2 minutes and 20 seconds, suitable for the bitesize information consumption in the social media era. The use of capitalized letters and yellow fonts again augment the message in the tweets and offers the readers a chance to be further indoctrinated. In the embedded video, Kirk stigmatised immigrants into the US from the Southern borders as criminals. By the time of writing this article, the meta data associated with this tweet provided by Twitter indicates that it was retweeted more than 11,000 times and liked by more than 26,000 users as of April 8, 2021. Among the retweets quoting this tweet, the most significant came from Donald Trump's official account: 'Going up fast. We need the Wall more than ever!' (Yam 2020).

Trump used the term 'China virus' instead of 'COVID-19' at a news briefing at the White House on Monday, March 16, 2020 (Yam 2020) despite the Centre for Disease Control's warning against naming diseases after locations to avoid the stigmatization of residents from that location and the WHO's official statement indicates that the origin of the virus is yet to be confirmed (WHO 2021a). On the following day, Weijia Jiang, CBS Senior Whitehouse correspondent who self-identifies as 'Chinese born West Virginian' in her Twitter bio, tweeted the following message:

This morning a White House official referred to #Coronarivirus as the 'Kung-Flu' to my face. Makes me wonder what they're calling it behind my back. (14:25 17.03.2020)

Jiang's tweet received over 430,000 likes, 92,000 retweets and 19,000 quote tweets as of April 4, 2021. However, she also received abusive messages endorsing the linkage between Chinese ethnicity and the COVID-19 virus.

The 'Kung Flu Kid' meme was posted on Instagram by Donald Trump Jr. on March 26, 2020. In the post, he credits the pro-Trump Instagram account American AF as his source. The video is a combination of a clip from the 1984 film *The Karate Kid* and a collage of moments from Donald Trump's public statements about COVID-19 and campaign rallies. Both sections of the video have been overlaid with various images to construct the meme's narrative. We reproduce the key plot points of this video in a storyboard format in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

When looking at this video in terms of meaning choices, a first focus is the cultural reference that the meme draws on. In straightforward narrative terms, the meaning choice is clear: the USA's response to the COVID-19 pandemic is represented as a fight, which is consistent with Kirk's combative style in his 'China virus' tweet. The choice of film clip is also noteworthy, as it evokes a genre of Regan-era American action movies wherein the narrative arc offers a simple good versus evil dichotomy and a cathartic moment of triumph. President Trump's association with the genre of professional wrestling and his reposting of a similar meme (in which he beats up a wrestling character overlaid with the CNN logo) indicates that this choice is 'on brand' for the President's social media presence.

Following classic film logic, the antagonist is dressed in black and the protagonist in white, leaving no doubt about which character is the 'good guy' and which is the 'bad guy'. Furthermore, the adversary 'plays dirty', by deliberately and viciously targeting their opponent's weak point (shot 2). In terms of racialisation, however, clear meaning choices are made by the meme in selecting the signs and symbols that are overlaid on the antagonist throughout the scene. The first is the Chinese flag, made visible on the black-clothed antagonist's chest. The second is the familiar representation of a microscopic COVID-19 particle that overlays his face. This theme is heightened by the audio playing as the protagonist delivers the winning blow: 'It comes from...China'. The closing images of the meme see Donald Trump, still garbed in his white headband, effortlessly batting away the virus.

A critical analysis of the meaning choices used in this meme demonstrate the extent to which it racializes the COVID-19 pandemic. In the heat of the pandemic, the image of microscopic COVID-19 particle has been widely circulated in the media sphere, connotating crisis, public health risk, and even death. The overlaying of COVID-19 virus over a human figure creates an arbitrary symbolic sign, identifying the virus as a (Chinese) human antagonist to be beaten, tamed, and defeated. The meme's narrative also discursively presents and legitimates violence against an anthropomorphised China as an appropriate and effective response to the problem.

More subtle, however, is the relatively weak epistemic commitment that this meme makes in communicating these ideas. Firstly, the use of humour plays a softening role. Indeed, the text

accompanying the posting of this video by Donald Trump Jr. starts ‘Hahahahaha’ and contains two ‘crying laughing’ emojis to emphasise the meme’s supposed hilarity. The title of the meme, *The Kung Flu Kid*, is a play on words, connoting the playful nature of the meme. The final segment, scored by a nostalgic, over-the-top song from the soundtrack of *The Karate Kid* (‘You’re the best around’ by Joe Esposito) plays President Trump’s expressive hand gestures for laughs. This softening effect of humour combines with the polysemic nature of the meme to loosen its epistemic commitments. Those who argue that the video is not racist may point to its core message of Donald Trump being tough and effective against a formidable challenge, while painting the Democrats as ‘part of the problem’. They might also argue that the meme is ‘just a joke’ or ‘not to be taken seriously’. Crucially, the humorous tone of the video provides just enough ambiguity for a political actor like Donald Trump Jr. to avoid the social, political, and legal sanctions that come with straightforwardly promoting racialized violence.

Case 2: The Corona-chan Meme

The anthropomorphic treatment of the virus (and the specifically Chinese labelling of its human representation) is even more pronounced in the ‘Corona-chan’ meme. Importantly for our purposes, this meme emerged early in the COVID-19 crisis in January 2020 and in advance of the pivot towards racializing the virus by political elites described in the previous section. It originated on the website 4chan – a community-based content aggregation site well-known for its role in the ongoing ‘culture war’ in American politics and its relative hospitality to Alt-Right political ideology (Nagle 2017). The Corona-chan page on KnowYourMeme.com shows that this meme is associated with 188 images and 10 videos (Knowyourmeme 2021) derived from the original template, which is reproduced in Figure 3.

FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

This template is a black and white pencil sketch of a racialized and sexualised young Asian woman. She has enlarged gazing eyes, resembling images from horror films. She wears a skimpy red dress, barely covering her hips and thighs. The heart-shaped opening hole in the centre of the dress reveals her cleavage. Her enlarged eyes, tiny waist, and bashfully locked knees signify a child-like innocence. This image draws on the archetype of female anime characters popular in manga, anime, video games and other audio-visual media forms. Originating in Japan, manga and anime have been produced, disseminated, and consumed in

wider Asian countries as a popular culture form, constituting a major part of East Asian cultural identity (Iwabuchi 2002; Hillenbrand 2009; Chua 2011; Chua 2012). Digitation facilitates anime fansubbing (subtitling animation in foreign languages, and in most cases, in English), which further removes the barriers of global communication ‘by allowing multiple mediation of cultural text’ (Lee 2011: 1134). Manga/anime characters have thus gained currency as a recognizable symbol of particular type of East Asian identity that open to intermediation and interpretation globally.

Central to gendered representation across anime genres, is the contentious archetype of shōjo (adolescent girls) characters in pornographic and horror texts. In particular, the sexual exploitation of the shōjo bodies of the anime characters which often endow the characters with multi-layered signification of childlike innocence, sexual seduction, mythical power, and dangerous transformation at the same time. Saito argues that the icon of a particular type of beautiful fighting girl as an archetypal anime character has shown ‘a bizarre mixture of cruelty and childish naïveté’ (Saito 2011: 3) and attains ‘a paradoxical reality in the process of being [sexually] desired and consumed’ (Saito 2011: 5)

The Corona-chan character bears striking resemblance to the familiar sexualized shōjo characters in manga and anime, signalling an undeniably East Asian racial and gender identity. The Chinese cultural references can be detected in her dress, hairstyle, and accessories. The red skimpy dress the character wears is derived from the Chinese traditional dress *qi pao* but is much shorter and tighter. Her dark hair is loosely tied back, revealing the face. Two hair accessories shaped in the form of a microscopic COVID-19 particle decorated her hair. Her holds in one hand a Chinese paper folding fan with the black skull motif which is a well-recognized symbol of death in Western culture. In some memetic recreations, the fan was replaced with a Chinese national flag. Her other hand often holds a corona beer, a bowl of green soup with bat wings floating on top, or a mysterious staff which associated with a weapon stirring up chaos. To further the danger connotation, this image is adorned with octopus-like tentacle decorations around her waist bearing the symbols of the covid-19 virus, as Figure 4 shows.

FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

As with the ‘Kung Flu Kid’ meme, the representation of the COVID-19 virus as a person marked as Chinese is a striking meaning choice. Furthermore, the portrayal of Corona-chan indicates a sinister and underhand characterisation – emphasised by the ‘fake smile’ of the original representation, aspirations for global domination and controlling WHO, or militarised violence. The implication here is that the Chinese state deliberately created and spread COVID-19 as a geopolitical strategy. The meaning choice behind the batwings attached to the character has strong racial overtones and connects to a wider narrative connecting the COVID-19 outbreak to ‘unclean’ Chinese food consumption practices; in this case, eating bats (Palmer 2020).

If the Corona-chan anime character links heavily to the sub-culture of manga, anime and computer games, the real-person cosplayed Corona-chan further blurs the line between symbolic representation and reality. By dressing up a real human figure as racialized and sexualised COVID-19 virus, the memes act as agitators of the anti-Chinese online insults into the ‘real’. The music video *Wuhan! (Got You All Infected)* was released by the infamous underground Alt-Right, or, for some, ‘neo-Nazi’ animator Emily Youcis (Eyes on the Right 2020). In the music video, Youcis (2020) creates a binary opposition between an anthropomorphized COVID-19 virus symbolizing China and a human in yellow hazmat suit driving an ambulance symbolizing the rest of the world. Her anthropomorphic virus image contains key Corona-chan motifs including the black wig, fangs, skimpy red *qi bao*, bat wings, and corona virus hairballs. Her image is superimposed on a bowl of noodle soup with a pair of chopsticks.

To provide an anchorage to the visual media which could create floating chains of signification, the lyrics packaged racist disinformation as ‘true’ and entertaining:

Wuhan cooking in the kitchen
Bio-weapons that we serve raw
Yeah I eat the bats in the soup that be raw
Got the CCP declaring martial law

So, one more time I come
Chinese takeout that’ll make you cough up a lung

'cause our disease spreads dormant
Lock you in your crib with a government's warrant

I make sure everything we eat is raw (repeat)

CHORUS:

Yo when I cough up in your face you know I spit direct
Wuhan Wuhan I got you all infected
I got that head-cold shit that make you grab your neck
Wuhan Wuhan I got you all infected
And you know we come through releasing bio-tech
Wuhan Wuhan I got you all infected
Over fifty-thousand dead five-hundred thousand suspected
Wuhan Wuhan 'cause I got you all infected

The viral spreading of Youcis' video across multiple platforms (e.g. YouTube, BitChute, gab.com; telegram) was such that, at the time of writing (April 8, 2021), it had been viewed over 90,000 times and triggered its own memes by other content creators. Images from these cosplay versions of the meme, as well as Youcis's video (far right pane) are presented in Figure 5.

FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE

As 'textual poachers' (Jenkins 2013), meme creators often remix cultural symbols circulated in the public space already. In Youcis' music video, she remixed American rapper Busta Rhymes *Woo-Hah! Got You All in Check* with self-created lyrics and music video, combined with components from Corona-chan memes, Chinese pop music video, and news clips containing the medical staff in hazmat suits and police officer uniforms on Chinese streets in China, creating a sense of reality, conspiracy, and emergency.

Discussion and Conclusions

The 'model minority' syndrome means that Asian/Chinese in the US and the UK in general fare well in education, economics, health, and well-being compared to other minority ethnic groups. This can mask issues of racial discrimination (for a particularly pronounced example

of wilful blindness of this sort, see: Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 2021). Racist terms and stereotypes typically have ‘a long and not easily dismantled history’ (Hall 2018:30) and this is very much the case with Asian/Chinese communities in the West. Racism against Chinese and Asians, to borrow Hall’s words, persists ‘as a result of the *struggle* around the chains of connotations and the social practices which made racism possible’ (Hall 2018: 30). Racist tropes, stereotypes, and terms of abuse remain culturally accessible even when below the surface. The evidence outlined in this article demonstrates the alacrity with which anti-Asian/Chinese cultural and symbolic resources were drawn on in online discourse relating to COVID-19.

The case of the Kung Flu Kid video shows the ease with which memes with lightly encoded racist messages can be employed by political elites and the effectiveness of using humour as a softening device. Semiotically, the Coronavirus is built into the meaning making process as symbolic sign which connotes a conspiracy-linked Chinese (and indeed, Asian) ethnicity and identity. Relatedly, aggression and violence are justified when the memes conflate Chinese/Asian-ethnicity and avatars of the Chinese state, building the myth of a binary opposition with the courageous and justified warrior of the US and the dark, secretive, evil China. The symbolic richness of the Corona-chan meme shows that racism is ‘connected to a constellation of issues, interests, and ideas in American politics and international relations’ (Kurashige 2016:xi). A ‘threat’ discourse emerged in the US in parallel with China’s economic growth in the early 1990s, and this threat was defined as political/ideological, military/strategic, and economic/trade (Yang and Liu 2012). The Corona-chan meme shows that this politically-driven discourse has become a currency for ‘bottom up’ meme culture and now sits alongside other stereotypical racist tropes (for example, themes of duplicity and ‘unclean’ food practices).

Comparing the Kung-Flu Kid and Corona-chan memes, we encounter several striking similarities in meaning choices. The use of anthropomorphic representations in both serves to materialize the invisible threat of COVID-19 in the form of a highly visible human body that connect to a Chinese nationality and ethnicity. This person is represented as untrustworthy, deceptive, conspiratorial, and bent on dominance. Coronavirus has thus been created as myth and myth is ideological. Another common feature is that the semantic resources and meaning choices that drive a racialised discourse around COVID-19 are presented in a way that softens their epistemic commitment. The use of humour and polysemy can be observed in the

unthreatening ‘anime’ style drawing and the integration of Corona beer in Corona-chan and the over-the-top musical choice and playful use of Donald Trump’s hand gestures in the Kug-Flu Kid meme. In this sense, we argue that these memes allow those who create and share them to enact and reproduce racist discourses that would attract far greater sanction if they were directly expressed in words.

We argue that signification in the world of memes does not exist in an ideology-free vacuum. Few observers of contemporary Western politics will have failed to notice a growing populism that mistrusts medical authority and global health governance and is prone to indulging in conspiracy theory thinking. The use of a highly sexualised female body as a symbol of Coronavirus exhibits a toxic masculine culture that fits easily with this worldview and that is particularly pronounced in large pockets of online memetic culture. The rise of a ‘China threat’ discourse has both produced and adapted a range of symbolic cultural resources that animate both memes.

When set against expectations of the capacity of memes to reflect the ‘bottom-up’, grassroots, and resistive nature of contemporary digital culture, the evidence examined in this article tells a depressing story. Memes from the ‘bottom up’ are every bit as capable of reproducing and driving hegemonic logics that scapegoat ethnic minorities as those from the ‘top down’. Indeed in the cases we examined the ‘bottom up’ process appears to have occurred well in advance of the exploitation of such ideas from the ‘top down’. This resonates with the conclusion of Nissenbaum and Shifman that ‘once memes achieve a certain level of popularity and become part of meme generators, they transform into top-down repertoires’ (2018: 306).

This conclusion is evidently based on a micro-sample of the available memes surrounding COVID-19 and race, but it nonetheless serves as a clear caution to those who foreground the emancipatory and anti-racist potential of memes. On the whole, it appears that the meme sphere was very useful to those seeking to racialize COVID-19. That memes exist dialectically is not lost on us. One avenue of future research that this paper points towards is whether and how memes can be used to resist and ‘call out’ racialised discourses around COVID-19. Our research uncovered evidence of memes of this nature, for example the #iamnotavirus artist-led initiative. However, given the explosion of behavioural

manifestations of anti-Chinese/Asian racism since the advent of COVID-19 that we outlined in the opening of this paper, it is clear that such efforts have failed to stem the tide.

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Figure 1. Kirk (2020) Tweet Originating 'China Virus' term.



Figure 2. Storyboard of the Kung-Flu Kid Meme

Shot: 1



Action

COVID/China squares up to America/Trump

Dialogue

Referee: Ready...Fight

FX

Crowd noise background sound.

Shot: 2



Action

COVID/China targets Trump/America's injured leg with vicious blow.

Dialogue

None

FX

Dramatic music, crowd noise indicates shock and concern.

Shot: 3



Action

America/Trump uses crane kick to knock out COVID/China

Dialogue

Trump: It comes from...China...It's not going to happen, as long as I'm president.

FX

Kick sound effect, crowd cheering.

Shot: 4



Action

Donald Trump bats away animated COVID-19 logo.

Dialogue

DT: 'Get this thing out of here, wif ya?'

FX

Music: Chorus of 'You're the best around' by Joe Esposito (from Karate Kid soundtrack)

Figure 3. Original Template for the Corona-chan meme



Figure 4. Adaptations of the Original Corona-chan template



Figure 5. Cosplay interpretations of Corona-chan meme



