

Analysis of Twitter Discourse Relating to the Coronavirus

Alia Martin

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

English 105

June 27th, 2020

Introduction:

The coronavirus has been a pressing issue around the world since January of 2020 and yet still remains mysterious. “This is a novel virus, new to humanity, and nobody knows what will happen,” says professor of epidemiology Anne Rimoin in a New York Times article (Kristof). It is a popular topic of discussion everywhere, especially on social media platforms. Twitter, for instance, is filled with tweets about the coronavirus from both individuals with very few followers and well-known organizations. Studying conversations on Twitter that relate to the coronavirus can illustrate the opinions of the general public on the virus and the safety measures that are currently in place to prevent its spread. Twitter can be used to advocate for a cause or simply to express feelings of frustration, excitement, and everything in between. It is an intimate platform through which educated assumptions about a community can be fabricated.

Methods:

To research the general position of Twitter users on the coronavirus and the safety measures that have been taken as a result of this pandemic, the hashtag #Covid19 was studied. A Twitter Archiving Google Spreadsheet (TAGS) was used to collect all of the tweets containing this hashtag and update the sheet every hour with new tweets; about 59,000 tweets were collected in total. They were organized in a spreadsheet that included detailed information about the tweet, including the username of the poster, the location of the post, the number of followers the user has, etc. The tweets that contained “RT” were then filtered out, but the number was still far too large to analyze fully, therefore the tweets were narrowed down to those posted between 22:29:30 and 22:31:40 on June 23rd for a manageable 101 tweets.

These 101 tweets were then coded in multiple categories: the position on safety measures, the tone, whether the tweet was political or not, the rationale included, the intent, whether the post was from an organization or an individual, and, if the user was an individual, their age, gender, and political leaning. These codes were formed through careful analysis of each tweet and were then used to create visuals that helped illustrate the general consensus from all of the conversations. Secondary sources from academic journals and news websites were then researched to corroborate the findings from the Twitter conversations studied.

Data Analysis:

The primary conclusion from the data was that the vast majority of Twitter users support the safety precautions that have been taken to slow or cease the spread of the coronavirus. In Figure 1, it can be seen that, of the seventy tweets that were able to be coded into one of these

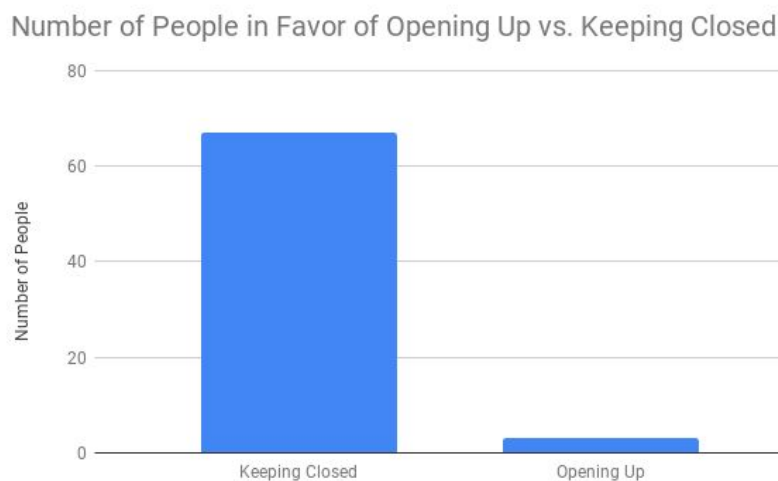


Figure 1; Position on Coronavirus Safety Measures

two categories, only three of them support opening up businesses and abandoning most of the safety precautions. This position is made extremely clear in many tweets, including a tweet from @ONUMX, Naciones Unidas México, that instructs “#QuédateEnCasa Mantén el

distanciamiento físico, lo mejor es no salir de casa para evitar la propagación del virus #COVID19 #TeCuidasNosCuidas #OnuMxCOVID19.” This Spanish translates to “#Stayathome Maintain physical distance, it is best not to leave home to avoid the spread of the virus #COVID19 #YouTakeCareofUs #OnuMxCOVID19,” which supports the safety measures of social distancing and remaining at home whenever possible. Scientific research validates this stance, explaining the benefits of wearing masks and social distancing as well as the cloud of mystery that continues to surround the coronavirus and the methods by which it can be spread. An article from Healthline states, “researchers found masks led to a more than threefold reduction in how much virus people sprayed into the air.” This research proves that masks can limit the spread of the virus, justifying the majority of Twitter users who advocate for mask-wearing.

While many tweets seemed to support the safety measures that have been created to prevent further spread of the coronavirus, the justification for this belief varies. According to Figure 2, logos was most commonly used with pathos as a close second. When logos was

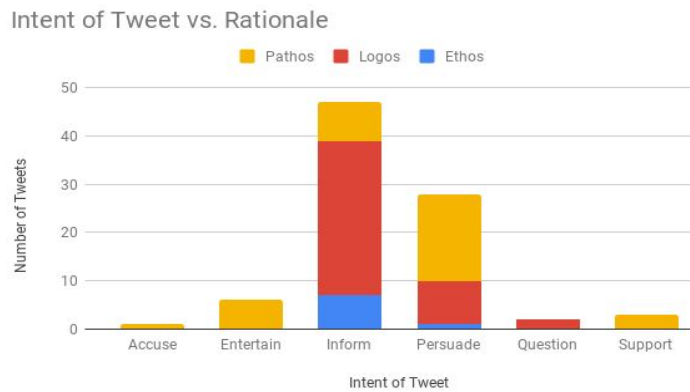


Figure 2; Tweet Intent versus Rationale

employed, it was primarily in the form of statistics, such as in a tweet by Daniel Russell. Russell writes, “Another record number of #COVID19 cases for #Dallas today. I'm glad @CityOfDallas

updated their mask policy,” and then goes on to share the statistics from that day. This strengthens Russell’s argument by justifying the updated mask policy with increasing coronavirus numbers. Furthermore, this belief is supported by an article featured in the British Medical Journal that warns the reader of a second wave of the coronavirus and explains the continuing need for safety measures (Wise). News sources such as CNN also validate the need to take the coronavirus seriously. In an article written Thursday, June 25th, Chris Cillizza writes, “2.4 million Americans have tested positive for coronavirus and more than 121,000 have died.” He goes on to say that Texas is one of three states that have reported “record numbers of daily coronavirus cases” (Cillizza). These large numbers confirm many Twitter users’ beliefs that the coronavirus is not something to be taken lightly. Additionally, the CNN article links the coronavirus to the U.S. President Donald Trump, and multiple Twitter users do as well. For instance, one Twitter user writes, “Our ridiculous traitorous racist deranged idiotic President doesn't even talk to the leading doctors in charge of our national response to #COVID19” (Seleshi). Seleshi places blame on Trump for the deaths caused by the coronavirus, and Figure 3 shows that 15 of the 99 coded tweets are also political in some way.

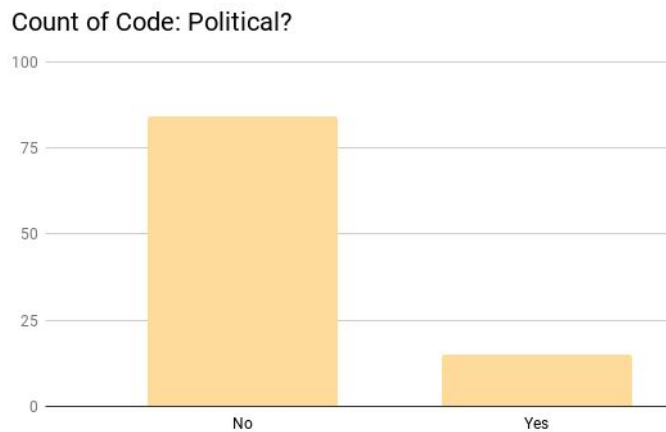


Figure 3; Number of Tweets that Reference Politics

While the tweets that were studied provided in-depth information on how the general public views the coronavirus, there were limits to the data that was collected. For example, the total number of tweets that were captured within a short time period was around 59,000 while only 101 were analyzed. This is a very small sample for such a large set of data, meaning it could be a misrepresentation of the Twitter community.

Conclusion:

Studying Twitter conversations can provide insight into how individuals relate to issues around the world. Twitter serves as an outlet for sharing emotions and personal beliefs, and research on individual tweets can be connected to make conclusions regarding the feelings of the general public. The discourse in Twitter can also illustrate the reasoning behind individuals beliefs, which can be helpful when engaging with social issues because it enables one side to understand where the other is basing their decision. Posting on social media platforms can feel anonymous, empowering people to share their innermost thoughts. Overall, Twitter is intimate and can be used to make educated and researched assumptions about a community, which can be extremely beneficial when interacting with social issues such as the current coronavirus crisis.

Works Cited:

Barnes, M., & Sax, P. E. (2020). Challenges of “Return to Work” in an Ongoing Pandemic. *New England Journal of Medicine*. doi:10.1056/nejmsr2019953

Cherney, K. (2020, March 18). Does Wearing a Mask Protect You from the Flu and Other Viruses? Retrieved from <https://www.healthline.com/health/cold-flu/mask>

Cillizza, C. (2020, June 25). Donald Trump has been suggesting the coronavirus is under control for 156 days now. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/25/politics/donald-trump-coronavirus-downplaying/index.html>

Kristof, N. (2020, May 20). Let's Remember That the Coronavirus Is Still a Mystery. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/20/opinion/us-coronavirus-reopening.html>

Naciones Unidas México. [@ONUMX]. (2020, June 23). “#QuédateEnCasa Mantén el distanciamiento físico, lo mejor es no salir de casa para evitar la propagación del virus #COVID19 #TeCuidasNosCuidas #OnuMxCOVID19.” [Tweet]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/ONUMX/status/1275556817628803075>

Russell, D. [@drussellwx]. (2020, June 23). “Another record number of #COVID19 cases for #Dallas today. I'm glad @CityOfDallas updated their mask policy.

06/23 Numbers:

Total - 17299

Per 1000 - 6.33

New Cases - 454

Data: <https://t.co/roJDKFQv33>.” [Tweet]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/drussellwx/status/1275557068741713923>.

Seleshi, Y. [@yonathanseleshi]. (2020, June 23). “Our ridiculous traitorous racist deranged idiotic President doesn't even talk to the leading doctors in charge of our national response to #COVID19. It's clear why our country has failed so badly at handling this.

<https://t.co/O6YvrJL6Ve>.” [Tweet]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/yonathanseleshi/status/1275557108012871680>.

Wise, J. (2020). Covid-19: Risk of second wave is very real, say researchers. *The British Medical Journal*, M2294. doi:10.1136/bmj.m2294