COVID-19: How Twitter Promotes a Sense of Safety

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Introduction

For a Twitter user, the hashtag is an essential part of a successful tweet. It's a simple way to group tweets, and an excellent way to spark conversation among Twitter users, especially if the hashtag is trending. Although entertainment is prevalent on Twitter through short tweets, the platform also serves to inform millions of current news and pressing issues. Due to the novel outbreak of COVID-19, news concerning the virus, factual or not, can be seen on this platform. Various hashtags, such as #COVID19, #maskon, #6feet, and #staysafe have been used by millions of users to spark discussion about the virus. The trending tag #staysafe brings together different types of Twitter users for different purposes. Many people are experiencing this virus playout in different ways, although most recognize that the new normal that is currently being created will last for quite a while, so new routines and ways of living are inevitable to occur (Armstrong, 2020). New ways of communication have emerged to keep people connected, such as Zoom, Netflix Party, and Hangout Meet by Google (Koeze, Popper, 2020). Many areas of the United States are reopening in phases to slow the spread of the virus while adjusting to a new normal, while trends of safety concerning the virus continue to rise on Twitter (Kim et al., 2020).

Methods

In this report, the hashtag #staysafe was used to collect a sample of tweets through the Twitter Archiving Google Spreadsheet (TAGS). At first, around 3,155 tweets were collected dating back to June 23rd. The tweets were filtered to have a better sample of tweets to analyze; this was done by requiring every tweeter that tweeted to have a minimum of 1000 followers, to ensure that robotic accounts and other potential scam accounts would not be included. The maximum number of tweets collected was set at around 600 tweets so there was not an overflow

of content, seeing that there were 3,155 collected in the first place. The spreadsheet was set to update every hour to have ample content; thus, new tweets with the hashtag #staysafe would be added to the spreadsheet every hour. The TAGS spreadsheet not only collected the text of the tweet, but also the username, user's followers, number of users the user is following, date and time of the tweet, location of the tweet, and a link to the tweet to view on Twitter. Additionally, any retweets were filtered out to reduce duplicate content.

In order to analyze the tweets collected, codes were created such as open codes which were for any miscellaneous notes, the poster (whether this is an organizational or individual account), the logical or emotional appeal, the type of communication, potential political stance, user estimated age, and rationale. Overall, determining the political affiliation of the Twitter account was the most difficult. A majority of the Twitter accounts were organizational accounts, so a political affiliation could not be designated. Further, determining the political affiliation of individual accounts was based on aspects of profiles, which involves some subjectivity.

Some tweets were written in different languages. Instead of throwing these tweets out, I used the information within the tweet by translating it into English. These tweets were valuable as they reveal the perspective of the hashtag #staysafe from a point of view and physical location in which English was not the primary language used. @InfoNashik, District Information Office in Nashik tweeted "मंगल कार्यालयात लग्नसोहळे, परंतु 50 वऱ्हाडीनांच परवानगी; जिल्हाधिकारी सुरज

मांढरे यांनी काढले आदेश #staysafe" (District Information Office, 2020). This translates from

Marathi to "Weddings at the Mars office, but only 50 brides allowed; Collector Suraj Mandhare issued the order #staysafe," which reveals how India is moving to a new normal of limiting participants at a wedding; despite the language barrier, tweets like these are helpful as they give a sense of safety from the other side of the world.

Data Analysis

Figure 1 reveals how a majority of the tweets with the hashtag #staysafe were associated with safety. A majority of the other tweets were linked with entertainment purposes, whether this is celebrating the start of a new day, revealing positive COVID-19 updates, or showing a new song released in quarantine. Political and financial rationales were not used heavily, revealing how the hashtag was used to inform Twitter users by educating people on safety and precautionary measures to prevent the spread of the virus, while the other majority serves to entertain Twitter users.
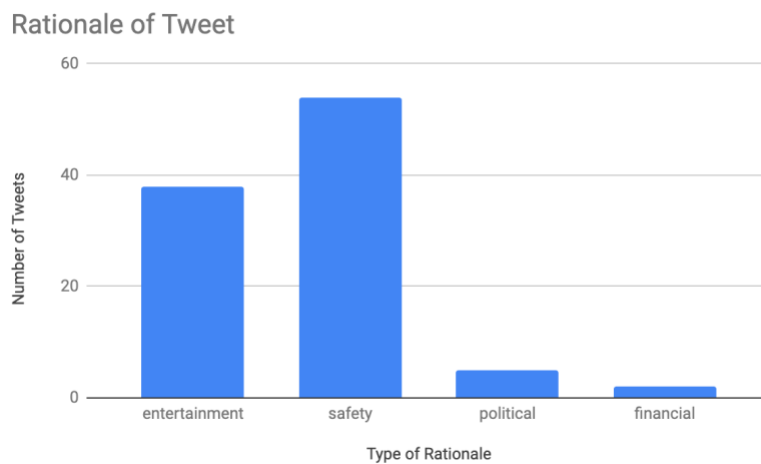

FIGURE 1

Figure 2 shows how a majority of the tweets came from organizational accounts; few tweets with this hashtag were made by creative, individual users. Even though I did not create a code for this, a lot of tweets came from countries outside of the United States, such as India and Kenya. This would make sense as the spread of COVID-19 is a global issue and anyone in the world with Twitter can use the hashtag #staysafe. This additionally makes sense because the Tweets started to collect on the TAGS spreadsheet archive at night on the Eastern Time Zone,

which is the start of a new day across the world. Thus, as the highest volume of tweets occurs in the morning, this reveals how many foreign organizational Twitter accounts were used to promote safety from COVID-19 in various countries.
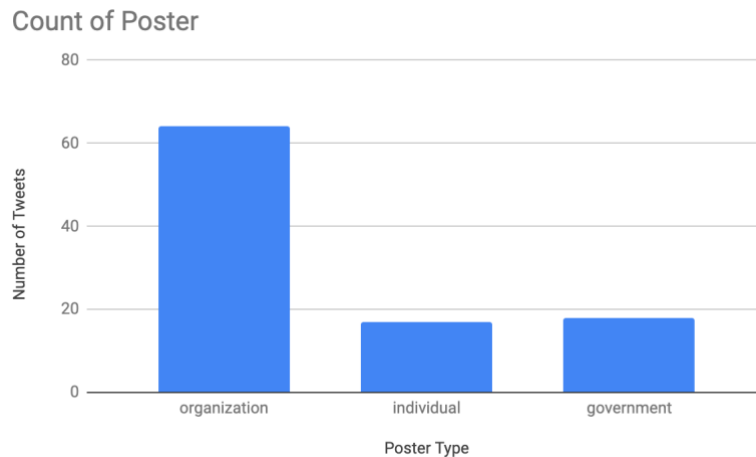

FIGURE 2

Figure 3 reveals how the organizations that tweeted using the hashtag #staysafe tend to prefer logic by stating facts about COVID-19, while individual accounts lean toward emotion, describing the outbreak from a very personal and humane level. A Twitter account in India (@COVIDNewsByMIB) tweeted a tweet containing factual information that serves to inform by saying, "#CoronaVirusUpdates: #COVID19 testing status update: @ICMRDELHI stated that 73,52,911 samples tested so far. 2,51,195 sample tested in 24 hours #StaySafe" (CoronaVirusUpdates, 2020). Rather than showing emotion, the goal of the organizational account is to spread factual information to the Twitter user.
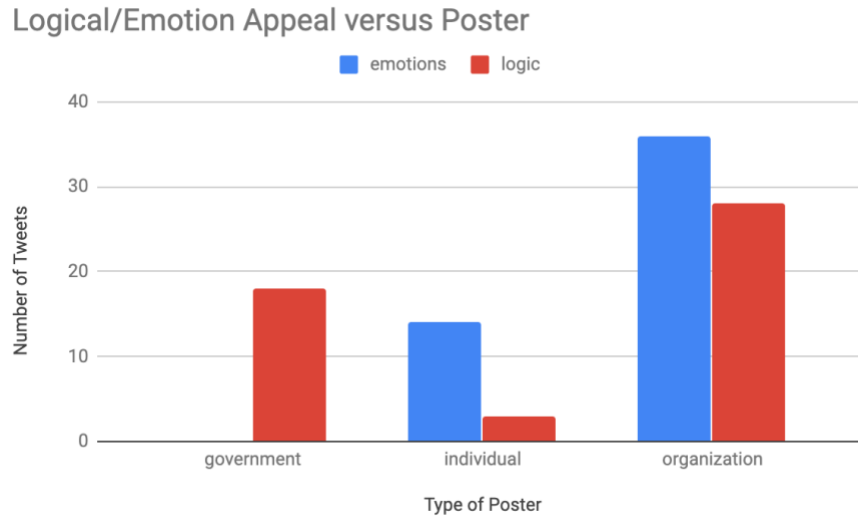
FIGURE 3

Figure 4 serves a similar purpose as Figure 3, in the sense that it backs up the claim that organizational or governmental accounts, a majority of the time, promote a sense of safety by spreading information that pertains to slowing the spread of COVID-19. On the other hand, individual accounts generally serve to entertain, and show a sense of adjustment and reality into the new normal.
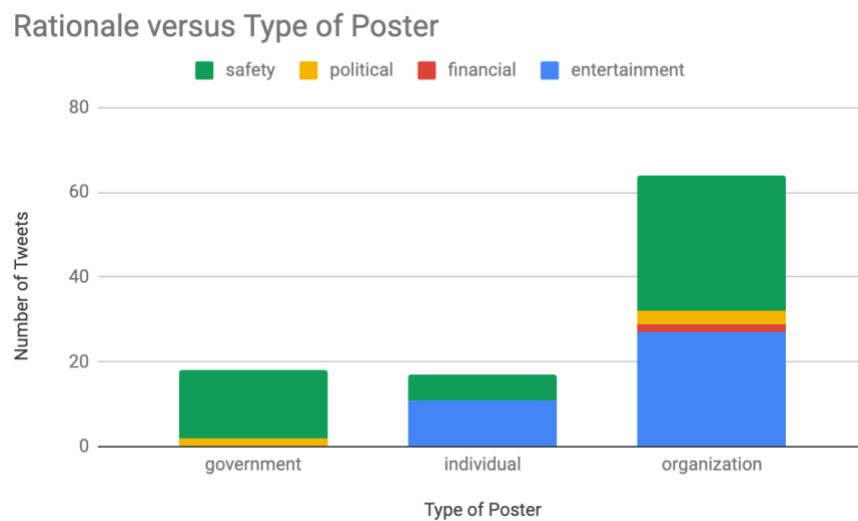

FIGURE 4

Conclusion

This report represents a minute proportion of all of the tweets with the hashtag #staysafe. The peak use of this hashtag is predicted to be around March or April of 2020 when the fear of the virus was much higher, regardless of the number of cases present. Even though physical distancing significantly slows the spread of the virus, this does not stop millions of Americans from not obeying the stay at home orders (Cowling, Aiello, 2020). There has been a recent trend in the ability of Americans to not want to stay home any longer; toward the end of April, on average for 18 to 44 year-olds, the percentage that were willing to stay home was only 63%, compared to the peak toward the end of March in which nearly 70% of people were willing to stay home; on the other hand, adults ages 65 and up tend to comply the most, as 74% were willing to stay home toward the end of March. (Kluch, 2020). One older tweeter bashes the UK government that is currently reopening despite the uncontrollable number of deaths by saying, "We are simply not ready to release lockdown. #staysafe" (Deurzen, 2020). Differences in age can play a significant factor in the argument of reopening, as the virus impacts older adults significantly more than younger adults.

As it is a platform that anyone can use, the spread of misinformation is inevitable, especially in terms of COVID-19. Twitter is making efforts to remove false information about the COVID-19 outbreak; to inform the Twitter user that the content of the tweet is unreliable, Twitter will alert the user with "some or all of the content shared in this tweet conflict with guidance from public health experts regarding COVID-19" (Seitz, 2020).

The hashtag #staysafe brings Twitter users together to promote a sense of safety, regardless of how one is experiencing the outbreaks of COVID-19. Organizational accounts as well as individual users generally encourage safety precautions, such as in the following tweet by

@sp_ganjam: "Stay aware and make others around you aware, let's all spread the word that we all need masks to stay healthy and safe. #usemask #staysafe" (SP GANJAM, 2020). This provides Twitter users with information that encourages the use of a mask which can effectively slow the spread of the virus. Additionally, the general trend of adjusting to a new normal was present, as almost 40 tweets (as seen in Figure 1) were made for entertainment purposes, many showing new ways of entertainment that can be facilitated at home through online streaming services. Fischer mentions in an article that, "we may also feel the tug of a survival instinct that can activate during periods of widespread peril: a desire to cope by looking out for one's neighbors"; this new normal is creating an environment in which people look out for each other more, as deep emotional growth can potentially outlast a crisis. (Fisher, 2020). One tweet by @FranTownsend mentions, "Day 100: red #hibiscus from my garden terrace #NYC #StayHealthy #StaySafe," which promotes positivity and optimism for others to see, as a picture of the hibiscus is included; additionally, the use of "day 100" shows the adaptivity of this user to the world that is normalized (Townsend, 2020). Thus, the hashtag #staysafe on Twitter brought together different Twitter users, all united through different perspectives regarding the COVID-19 outbreak.

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