

Creation of Fear in an Online Environment: A Content Analysis of Public Reaction to Donald Trump's Information Regarding COVID-19

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Abstract

This study examined public reactions on Twitter about Donald Trump's messages regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, which created fear in the public, therefore promoting an increase in panic buying. A content analysis of 52 relevant tweets between March 16 and April 3 identified several themes of public reactions to the messages that were transmitted by Donald Trump about COVID-19, including: incompetence, harm, untrustworthiness, political agenda, misinformation, distraction, lack of empathy, and the dismissal of solving panic buying. The most prevalent theme was the incompetence of Donald Trump, which created fear; therefore panic buying increased among the public.

Introduction

Pandemics are health emergencies that affect how society functions. There have been numerous pandemics to date like H1N1 or Ebola, but more recently, COVID-19, or coronavirus, has swept the attention of the globe. In order to address a pandemic, governing bodies must go about addressing the health crisis in a way that does not scare the public but does accurately assess the issue at hand. When using social media, governing bodies can communicate information about pandemics that is necessary for the public to have awareness. It is detrimental for a governing body to inaccurately address and rely on information to the public because of the fear that may be created in the public. Fear in the public can be acknowledged as panic buying that sparked from the inaccurate representation by a governing body in addressing a pandemic (Salek & Cole, 2019; Bjørkdahl & Carlsen, 2017).

Salek and Cole (2019) analyzed Donald Trump tweets during the 2014 Ebola outbreak to demonstrate that his tweets sparked an exaggerated health crisis by promoting fear in the public during that time. Additionally, they discuss how false information is created and spread by Donald Trump, who was not the

president at the time, as a result of power (Salek & Cole, 2019).

Bjørkdahl and Carlsen (2017) studied the effects of Norwegian media in creating fear around the 2009 H1N1. The authors noted that fear was created as a result of inadequate political leadership (Bjørkdahl & Carlsen, 2017). The fear that was created by the media was exacerbated and lacked evidence (Bjørkdahl & Carlsen, 2017).

The present qualitative study contributes to the existing literature on communication and the creation of public fear by exploring how Twitter users react to Donald Trump's information regarding COVID-19 through tweets discussing his credibility and reliability.

Method

Sample and Sample Selection

The sample consisted of 52 tweets posted in reaction to Donald Trump's tweets regarding COVID-19 information. Twitter was selected as the data source because it is easily accessible by the public and users can express their opinions regarding specific topics. The tweets examined in this study were found by doing an advanced search on Twitter (Donald Trump panic

buying "panic buying") and looking at the latest tweets from March 16 to April 3. Looking at the latest tweets was most appropriate because many responses could be analyzed. There were several tweets in this section, but 52 tweets that accurately represented and discussed the topic of fear and panic buying as a result of Donald Trump's information surrounding COVID-19, were selected.¹

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Only a selection of tweets was included in the sample because many lacked significance and accuracy in discussing the issue of fear and panic buying created by Donald Trump. The tweets that were included for analysis were directly in response to a tweet made by Donald Trump, replying to Donald Trump and one or more other accounts, and mentioning Donald Trump in a tweet. Since these tweets were from public accounts, a Twitter account was not necessary to view these tweets.

Unit of Analysis

The units of analysis for this study were the words and phrases contained in the 52 tweets made in reaction to Donald Trump's messages about COVID-19 that sparked an increase in fear which prompted panic buying.

Coding Procedure

Each tweet was examined individually and open-coded for keywords, phrases, or constructs that captured the meaning or intent of the tweets. In cases where tweet meaning could not be accurately interpreted, further inferences were not made about the comment. Coded comments were then re-evaluated for the presence of general themes such as the increase of panic buying as a result of Donald Trump's messages to the public. Content analysis was used to identify recurring themes contained in the reactions to messages about COVID-19 presented by Donald Trump to the public.

Results

Results indicated a range of topics within 52 tweets made in reaction to Donald Trump's information given about COVID-19. Some users believe that media is the

result of fear and panic buying. Other Twitter users discussed Trump's inaccuracy in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, which created fear and panic buying. Eight general themes were evident in the order of prevalence, a focus on 1) incompetence of Donald Trump, 2) Donald Trump giving harmful information, 3) Untrustworthiness of Donald Trump, 4) Donald Trump acting with political agenda at mind, 5) misinformation given by Donald Trump, 6) Donald Trump using distraction when speaking about COVID-19 and panic buying, 7) Donald Trump's lack of empathy, 8) and Donald Trump not solving panic buying. The characteristics of these groupings are discussed in full detail below (also see Appendix).

1) *Incompetence* referred to a character quality regarding Donald Trump's presidential inability, which accentuates fear in the public. This was the most common category as it encompassed approximately 23% of the sample (n=52). These responses typically question the legitimacy of Donald Trump's ability to lead a country during a pandemic. Some tweets directly call Donald Trump "incompetent" and others indirectly implied that he is incompetent

2) *Harmful information* consisted of tweets that stressed the importance of the effect of the harmful information given by Donald Trump. This resulted in a deepening of the fear that is created in the public. Giving harmful information, which may lack evidence, created a belief that people should be worried, concerned, and prepared for a pandemic, sparking fear and an increase in panic buying. Harmful information is the second most prevalent theme in the tweets at 13.5% of the sample (n=52).

3) *Untrustworthiness* referred to another character quality regarding Donald Trump in creating fear in the public. Donald Trump has changed his perspective about COVID-19 numerous times since the pandemic aggravated. Some tweets directly called him untrustworthy, and others indirectly connote it. Untrustworthiness is tied for third with political agenda and misinformation at 11.5% of the sample (n=52).

¹ The specific search can be found at the following address: https://twitter.com/search?f=live&q=donald%20trump%20panic%20buying%20%22panic%20buying%22&src=typed_query

panic%20buying%20%22panic%20buying%22&src=typed_query

4) *Political agenda* consisted of tweets referring to Donald Trump presenting information in a way that aligned with his political agenda. In this case, tweets state that Donald Trump cared more about his political interests, resulting in public fear because of the disregard for the public safety.

5) *Misinformation* consisted of tweets that discuss the information given by Donald Trump lacks evidence or accuracy. Misinformation given by Donald Trump sparks fear in the public because he is spreading information that does not have any legitimacy, therefore citizens do not know whether or not to trust his information.

6) *Distraction* consisted of tweets that speak about Donald Trump's ability to put the pandemic fear on the media, thus distracting from the real problem that he is causing. By using distraction as a tactic to skew the knowledge of where fear is stemming in the United States, Donald Trump believes he is able to be let off the hook for the panic buying that is occurring. Distraction occurred at 9.6% of the sample (n=52).

7) *Lack of empathy* referred to yet another character quality of Donald Trump that had adverse effects on the public. The lack of empathy was evident in the tweets directly or indirectly. Lack of empathy and not solving panic buying were the least prevalent themes in this study at 7.7% of the sample (n=52) for both.

8) *Not solving panic buying* consisted of tweets that address Donald Trump as creating fear by not addressing the issue of panic buying. In this case, Twitter users believe that Donald Trump is sparking more fear, therefore increasing panic buying. This is perceived as a result of his inability to solve the problem.

Discussion

The majority of tweets made about the information given by Donald Trump stems from a negative point of view. Some of the tweets regarded that media was the core reason for a spark of fear in the public and said that Donald Trump is doing the best he can. Despite this, the present study explored the information given by Donald Trump about COVID-19, information that sparked fear in society and resulted in an increase in panic buying. This finding indicates that the way Donald Trump relays information to the public is achieved in a harmful way because of the lack of competence that he displayed.

Previous studies about public fear, such as Salek and Cole's (2019) and Bjørkdahl and Carlsen's (2017), also indicate the significance of the way in which governing bodies and media express certain information about pandemics. Social networking sites, like Twitter, are not gatekeepers that regulate the accuracy of the information that is given by governing bodies; therefore, harmful and inaccurate information is spread among people, especially if there is a large following (Salek & Cole, 2019; Bjørkdahl & Carlsen, 2017). In the case of Donald Trump, he has a large following of people on social media and uses his account to relay information to the public. However, the fact of the matter is that not all the information given is factual or reliable. When he provides information that is false, or disregards the seriousness of a pandemic, people are likely to question his character and ability to govern the United States. Although he is considered a robust and influential contributor to relaying information about pandemics, there is a complicated dynamic that occurs surrounding the fear that is produced.

There are several limitations to the study that must be addressed when considering the research findings. Only a fraction of overall comments made regarding Donald Trump and "panic buying" was included in the sample. Additionally, it does not take into account the tweets that were made by accounts that were private and could have added potential to the study. Further, it does not take into account the positives that Donald Trump had concerning information given to the public, which may provide a positive perspective and navigates the causation of fear to the effect of the media. Additionally, the tweets could have fallen into one or more categories. Finally, this content analysis examined more than one form of tweets that may be hard to contextually understand, as there are many complex threads on Twitter. While there are limits to applications of this study, previous literature suggests that governing bodies giving information about pandemics can have potentially harmful effects on society by creating fear. As a result, further comparative research should consider how other leaders may nuance fear transmitted to the public by giving accurate information supported with evidence.

References

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Appendix

Themes Present of Donald Trump	Tweet Examples
Incompetence	<p>“Sorry will be too busy panic-buying due to the Trumpocalypse [he] [is] creating through [his] weak leadership and selfishness”</p> <p>“[Donald Trump] [does not] seem at all worried what sort of mass panic and hysteria the threat of a general quarantine would cause!... [His] gross incompetence continues!”</p>
Harmful information	<p>“People are panic buying. I was working in the pharmacy this afternoon and lots of people came in asking for Chloroquine because Donald Trump said so. This is really crazy time, we are just buying anything that could be potentially harmful”</p> <p>“Yeah, @realDonaldTrump is apparently holding another press conference tomorrow. Prepare for more panic buying tomorrow. Every time he opens his mouth”</p>
Untrustworthiness	<p>“[Donald Trump] [is] the cause of all the panic buying!! Stop lying to American citizens”</p> <p>“...Never ever trust cunning Donald Trump he is not praiseworthy. Whenever he tells such thing, lie percentage is about 90%”</p>
Political Agenda	<p>“The delayed response to coronavirus by the Trump administration has helped them, leaving many Americans confused, bereft of information and looking for answers. A situation in which people are panic-buying supplies is ideal for a movement powered by fear and lies”</p> <p>“Yep, We are Making America Great Again. [Donald Trump] totally failed us in every way with the #coronavirus and people are panic buying guns”</p>
Misinformation	<p>“The amount of misinformation [Donald Trump] has put out there is criminal”</p> <p>“The President is misleading the public about treatment options, and it’s [going to] cause panic buying [and] get people killed”</p>
Distraction	<p>“Don’t try to distract people from the real problem in the States. People are panic-buying groceries... Try solve [this] first before finger-pointing, RACIST”</p> <p>“We are not children. More stressed when I listened to him to minimize the threat. Panic buying and hoarding not related to his daily briefings which continued to deny?”</p>
Lack of Empathy	<p>“No wonder everyone is panic buying. Just on how [he] speak[ed] without compassion or empathy. People are dying and [he] just spew[ed] fear”</p> <p>“@realDonaldTrump has the perfect opportunity to step up, be presidential, and tell the nation to stay calm, practice handwashing/social distancing, to avoid panic buying, etc, but instead he chose to angrily attack a reporter and the media”</p>
Not solving panic buying	<p>“Just [came] back from the store where shelves were empty. Panic buying has NOT stopped...and [he is] doing nothing to lessen the panic or fear”</p> <p>“@realDonaldTrump Why wasn’t a requirement to all stores made to limit certain items when panic buying started. Every state should have been told to place restrictions [on] panic buying items the moment it started in the first state”</p>