

**CONTEXTUALIZING COVID-19 RELATED MISINFORMATION
AND DISINFORMATION: AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH TO
THE INFODEMIC**

by
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AND DISINFORMATION: AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH TO
THE INFODEMIC**

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ABSTRACT

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Floyd, Corona-chan, intersectionality, racism, sexism

This thesis makes a multi-layered cultural analysis on media content featuring misinformation and disinformation through an intersectional gaze. In the context of the "Infodemic" following COVID-19 pandemic, the aim of this thesis is to focus on issues of racism, sexism, classism and ageism through a nuanced take on viral phenomena such as relevant offensive memes and Twitter posts. Issues imbued with online falsehoods such as misinformation and disinformation emerging in the aftermath of George Floyd's death and an alarming increase of Sinophobia is contextualized in the framework of intersectional inquiries. Specifically, this thesis explores the connection between promoters of online falsehoods who exploit a disease-weary public to market emotions and the increasing level of racist, sexist online performances. To achieve such exploration, tracing over viral phenomena of the "Corona-chan" and "George Floyd Challenge" becomes central to this analysis. Drawing on theories of intersectional work, this thesis intermingles the concepts of online falsehoods in light of the current literal viral predicament of the coronavirus with the digital viral predicament of the spread of misinformation and disinformation. Therefore, an outtake on the increasing anti-Chinese sentimentality is studied through qualitative analysis in the context of a digital creation, surrounded in particular formation of misinformation and disinformation relevant to the myths and half-truths of the coronavirus pandemic. Thus, issues of global importance is established in juxtaposition to the interference or online extortion of one's identity through media discourses.

ÖZET

COVID-19’U DEZENFORMASYON VE MİSENFORMASYON BAĞLAMINDA İNCELEME: YANLIŞ BİLGİ SALGININA KESİŞİMSSEL BİR YAKLAŞIM

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Bu tezde kesişimsel bakış açısı kullanılarak, mesenformasyon ve dezenformasyon içeren medya kaynakları üzerinde çok katmanlı bir kültürel medya analizi yapılmaktadır. COVID-19 beraberinde, yanlış haberlerin yayıldığı bir ortamın ışığında, bu tezin amacı; çok çabuk yayılan, kırıcı Twitter açıklamaları ve online şakalara incelikli bir yorum getirmektir. İnternet üzerinde çok çabuk yayılan ve tamamıyla doğru olmayan bilgiler içeren bu mesenformasyon ve dezenformasyonlarda, George Floyd’un ölümü ve Çin kültürüne duyulan nefret gibi önemli meseleler kesişimsel bakış açısı bağlamında incelenmektedir. Bu tez, özellikle, internet üzerinde yanlış bilgi dağıtan ve hastalık dolayısıyla yorgun düşmüş halktan istifade ederek duygu pazarlamacılığı yapanlarla, online ortamda artan miktarda ortaya çıkan ırkçılık ve cinsiyetçiliğin bağlantısını dikkate almaktadır. Böyle bir araştırmayı gerçekleştirebilmek için, "Corona-chan" ve "George Floyd Challenge" gibi yaygın olguların üzerinden geçmek, muhakkak ki, çok önemlidir. Kesişimsel çalışmaları dikkate alarak düzenlenen bu tez, internette bir hastalık gibi yayılan yanlış haberlerin tatsız vaziyetini, fiziksel COVID-19 hastalığının kaygı dolu düşüncesi ile bir araya getirmektedir. Böylece, Çin karşıtı hislerin görünmeyen kısımları, coronavirus pandemisi ile ilgili hayali hikayeler ve yarı gerçek söylemlerden oluşan dezenformasyon ve mesenformasyonların nitel bir incelemeyle görünebilir bir duruma bürünmektedir. Bu şekilde, medya söylemleri, küresel dünya açısından önemli meseleleri bireysel kimliğin internet üzerinden müdahale ve gaspıyla yan yana yerleştirerek, açıklayabilmektedir.

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To the misinformed

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1. INTRODUCTION

“The WHO declared that besides the pandemic threat, originated by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, an infodemic has been generated by a large amount of information available on the matter, as well as by the difficulty to sort the veracious information from the false (World Health Organization, 2020)”(Pulido et al. 2020, 379)

During a time where the threat of COVID-19 kept most people stranded at home, a growing number of falsehoods kept appearing in online sources. While most of us searched for information through online platforms, an alarming number of cases indicate that the level of information vis-a-vis the novel corona-virus contributed to what the official sources call an Infodemic.(Pulido et al. 2020, 379) When director of The World Health Organization, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, declared on February 2020 that "we are not only dealing with a pandemic, but also an infodemic" (*Munich Security Conference* 2020); the extent of the problem might not have initially included the secondary plane of sociopolitical issues. However, the traditional definition of an infodemic which primarily refers to health and medicine related falsehoods (Sarıkaya and Uzunkopru 2020) found new avenues for discourses of manipulation during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, it became a special case of oddity in connection with an increasing use of the Internet, setting the problem of misinformation and disinformation apart from previous cases of pandemics. This is especially the case since individual and collective efforts for change in response to falsehoods spreading on the Internet became more prominent due to an increase in sentiments of doubt, anger and mass panic in conjuncture with the uncertainty provided through circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic.

While this problem continues to become incrementally prevalent to the current state of global issues and find representation through news stories, online posts and memes, I believe that an analysis investigating the multivariate nature of misinformation and disinformation became necessary. Even though studies analyzing

the deliberate spread of falsehoods -disinformation- and the inadvertent spread of falsehoods -misinformation- indicate several patterns for which the dissemination of false information occur (LSE et al. 2018, 7), a more qualitative take which considers the pertinent power relations through an intersectional lens is lacking. My thesis is meant to address such a gap in the literature and help filling in a portion of this void.

Comprehensive media research (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018, 2) shows falsehoods spread “farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information”. This extensive analysis indicates 3 million people tweeted 126000 stories of falsehood for 4.5 million times. Similar to Oyeyemi et al., their explanation for this phenomenon takes place through an understanding of “cascading information”. (Oyeyemi, Gabarron, and Wynn 2014) A rumor cascade begins with a claim from a Twitter user and the claim imbued with falsehoods get retweeted, creating a collection of retweets which spiral out of control. The information could be both intentionally falsified as disinformation or simply created out of ignorance as misinformation. However, more importantly, the propagated rumors can be any source of media; links, photos, articles, and even jokes and memes. This is where my thesis becomes relevant. I am interested in the social change that came along with the Infodemic. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, a new online experience has emerged. Occurrences which have social implications such as George Floyd’s death and COVID-19 related Sinophobia got public response. At the same time, radical thought got expressed through Internet "memes" which will contribute to my analysis.

Oyeyemi et al. (Oyeyemi, Gabarron, and Wynn 2014, 1) promotes the idea that misinformation in Twitter propagates a highly dangerous, massive misinformation consumption. Surely, people reaffirm a false belief once they acknowledge it and post it online for all of the contacts to see. By seeing the falsehoods in the profiles of people they trust, viewers start to acknowledge the misinformation and disinformation to be as trustworthy as the people whose profiles they follow. However, it should not be forgotten that through this chain of events, the effectiveness with which correct information spreads is greatly hindered as well. Since correct, scientific based information is less likely to be tweeted, it is more probable that general Internet users will encounter false information via the accounts of people whom they consider like-minded. (Bessi et al. 2015, 3) In the event that official medical relevant information is unavailable or incomplete, like-minded spreaders of misinformation and disinformation will find that it has become easier to spread false information. Looking at previous cases of information crisis related to pandemics, a study during the information crisis of Ebola indicated that due to the lack of reach official, trust-

worthy sources have on social media, people tend to visit like-minded, closed network sources. (Sarıkaya and Uzunkopru 2020, 10) Therefore, this creates an echo-chamber effect wherein falsehoods find more platform for outreach than useful, correct information. Ultimately, the infodemic which is essentially another form of a public health crisis related to the pandemic manifests.

On the topic of public health crises, there are people who for personal gain, petty hatred or simple ignorance would promote falsehoods which are likely to cause a public emotional response whom I call *Discourers of Disinformation*. Based on the concept of "subjugated knowledge" by Foucault, these *Discourers of Disinformation* work to embody a form of online "virtual oppression" through their digital performance and online posts, subjugating the vital knowledge about the disease. (Foucault and Ewald 2003) Since the spread of misinformation and disinformation ensures a mode of ignorance which is highly dangerous in the context of pandemics, the emergence of coronavirus infodemic establishes a position of power on the account of the knowledge concealing *Discourers of Disinformation*. This concealing happens through a bombardment of falsehoods on the Internet, making true and trustworthy information less accessible via an online biosocial experience of the disease. This is -more often than not- not as accurate as the real experience; hence diverting attention towards a cascading body of half-truths and falsehoods. Once *Discourers of Disinformation* exploit the effect "cascading information" has on the public who experience falsehoods through the people they trust (or rather prefer to believe), manipulation of multiple emotions is almost guaranteed. Their propagation of hateful, scapegoating discourses serve to meddle with life narratives and hijack identities from victims of oppression through an exploitation of public emotions embedded in forms of digital information, specifically containing falsehoods.

"Information has a profound function of deception. It matters little what it "informs" us about, its "coverage" of events matters little since it is precisely no more than a cover: its purpose is to produce consensus by flat encephalogram. The complement of the unconditional simulacrum in the field is to train everyone in the unconditional reception of broadcast simulacra. Abolish any intelligence of the event. The result is a suffocating atmosphere of deception and stupidity." (Baudrillard 1995, 68)

I believe the *Discourers of Disinformation* concept fits into this narrative of the Infodemic in the context of misinformation and disinformation with regards to daily intake of news, media and memes. Their discourses of deception is concerned very

little about information, but more about the "hyper-reality" they create through emotional exploitation which serve to disqualify questioning minds seeking "real" knowledge.

"If people are vaguely aware of being caught up in this appeasement and this disillusion by images, they swallow the deception and remain fascinated by the evidence of the montage of this war with which we are inoculated everywhere: through the eyes, the senses and in discourse." (Baudrillard 1995, 68)

Discourers of Disinformation employ the simulacrum of reality in stories of falsehood and cater to the senses. The media that they envelop their discourses of racism, sexism and ageism function in a deceptive manner which gets people caught up. Viral stories and videos of misinformation and disinformation are perfect examples to this fascination. For example, George Floyd's death, half-truths about his early life as well as his fame post-death fit into this category. Moreover, Sinophobic memes such as Corona-chan are aimed to deceive and fascinate people through the "eyes, senses and discourse". Therefore, I will incorporate the *Discourers of Disinformation* into my analysis.

The growing body of information online has created the problem of tracking ideas and interpreting different blogs of information. (Leskovec, Backstrom, and Kleinberg 2009, 497) "Memes" as they evolve through time and get more popularized across the web, require a more nuanced understanding of the pertinent daily news. Continuous interaction with online sources enables new pathways to emerge from interpretations of daily occurrences of social significance. On this topic, Leskovec et al. (2009) identifies a gap between the existing body of literature and the online experiences through which continuous daily interactions find representations:

"Prior work has identified two main approaches to this problem, which have been successful at two correspondingly different extremes of it. Probabilistic term mixtures have been successful at identifying long range trends in general topics over time. At the other extreme, identifying hyperlinks between blogs and extracting rare named entities has been used to track short information cascades through the blogosphere. However, between these two extremes lies much of the temporal and textual range over which propagation on the web and between people typically occurs, through the continuous interaction of news, blogs, and websites on a daily basis." (Leskovec, Backstrom, and Kleinberg 2009, 497)

Memes in particular can attest to this interaction between the web and people. As news stories continue to flow into people's lives on a daily basis, the need to track and interpret them increases. Leskovec et al.'s (2009) design to track news cycles and meme behavior, how phrases get changed over time and information is manipulated through connections as well as the number of transfers memes get through allows analyses vis-a-vis the "dynamics of mutation". In their trial to define an "essential core" to the catchphrases included in the memes, I see the potential for qualitative methodology. Especially during the time of the Infodemic, social occurrences inspire the "dynamics of mutation". New media sources, stories and memes find great circulation. Through their circulation, emotions are defined and propagated; opening up the need for new inquiries regarding racism, sexism and ageism. This is where an intersectional approach becomes essential in creating a meaningful analysis on online information and media containing falsehoods. When current events of social importance get overemphasized, manipulated and interpolated with racist, sexist and ageist frustrations online, a virtual social oppression is emphasized. This thesis is meant to benefit from an intersectional lens to identify the methodologies with which such virtual oppression is created.

"The intersectional approach is consequently based on a non-additive principle that refers to how different social categories mutually constitute each other as overall forms of social differentiation or systems of oppression (Collins, 1998; de los Reyes & Mulinari, 2005) and in creating complex identities, where different identifications are always mutually constitutive (Staunæs, 2003; Buitelaar, 2006)." (Christensen and Jensen 2012, 110)

As social critique, complex online identities are constructed in the context of the Infodemic, media sources and online performativity require a different lens to sift through information, leading to new (or ignored) interpretations. Kathy Davis (Lykke 2014, 110) suggests treating these identities not as standalone categories but understanding them through an analysis constituted by various levels. Therefore, an understanding of intersectionality will allow "to take variety in power contexts into account" (Lutz 2015, 39), especially in the context where online constructions of identities are created in conjunction with responsive elements to current events, news, misinformation and disinformation.

Shifman et al. (Shifman, Levy, and Thelwall 2014, 739) articulate the service Internet jokes can output as "powerful agents of globalization and Americanization." In a time of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, such servitude could imply the

Discourers of Disinformation at work, having a tremendous effect on the messages embedded within certain Internet memes. The way these memes could incur the use of slurs, photos and slogans imbued with sexism, racism and ageism imply there are more things involved with jokes than just comedy. Schild et al.'s analysis on "the emergence of Sinophobic behavior on Web communities" (Schild et al. 2020) such as Twitter and -on more extreme cases- the notorious image boards of 4chan, trace a growth in both the usage and invention of Sinophobic slurs. Online posts and memes portraying such growth has, thus, been recorded in an effort to contextualize the online post COVID-19 Infodemic circumstances and predict the increasing effect of Sinophobic mentality.

Looking back on previous viral outbreaks and online falsehoods, a more nuanced understanding might emerge if one contextualizes online experiences through disease induced emotional responses. In fact, Marcus and Singer (2017) have done a very similar analysis of posts and memes regarding the Ebola virus outbreak, to what I have in mind about the coronavirus situation. During the time of the Ebola virus outbreak, an anthropomorphized version of the virus got -ironically- spread in online communities. This anime style drawing of a girl in a nurse outfit, holding a skull in one hand was called "Ebola-chan".

"Ebola-chan, we suggest, represents a striking example of the biosocial experience of an infectious disease epidemic in the age of the Internet. More than a mere fear response in times of mass hysteria and uncertainty, she came to embody some of the complex social and political issues provoked by an infectious disease outbreak." (Marcus and Singer 2017, 342)

This interpretation of the meme in a complex social and political situation, in light of a viral outbreak is an enlightening analysis for the COVID-19 circumstances. In fact, a similar meme portraying an anthropomorphized version of the coronavirus, "Corona-chan" (Pauliks 2020, 47) emerged very soon after the COVID-19 outbreak became a huge threat to the Western communities. Therefore, I found it of paramount importance to base a section of my analysis to both highlight the extenuating similar, viral phenomenon as well as account for the lack of literature covering it.

In this thesis I will be using a multi layered cultural analysis on digital sources of misinformation and disinformation while also benefiting from an intersectional framework. Since this is an analysis related to online experience, I will be including

stories from multiple news sites, media sources implicating information pertinent to my analysis through an intersectional lens. The idea is to identify global problematic issues such as the murder of George Floyd and the growing number of Sinophobic cases and base my analysis in a framework which is able to account for methods of online viral oppression in the context of viral crisis. In the process of tracing through news, memes and online posts, my analysis is meant to connect issues of power, COVID-19 related public fear and the promoters of false information. My aim, through this analysis, is to explain the fundamental working basis of what I call the *Discourers of Disinformation*. During the incorporation of ideas and discourers, a subsection of the malicious *Discourers of Disinformation* which I call *Merchants of Emotion* will work to not only further their digital hegemony or create chaos in times of crises, but also strive to profit off of public vulnerability to misinformation and disinformation.

Merchants of Emotion are people who promote, or benefit from the promotion, of misinformation and disinformation. Inspired by the concept of *Merchants of Doubt* by Oreskes and Conway (2011), *Merchants of Emotion* embody the discursive elements of digital oppression and profit through the chaos it creates within the context of the infodemic. *The Merchants of Doubt* were the tobacco company executives in the second half of 20th century who financed any study which might cast doubt on the fact that tobacco is a harmful product to consume. They claimed, doubt was their product as opposed to what they were actually selling, tobacco. This doubt enabled them to cast suspicion on how devastatingly harmful smoking could be via methods of manipulative information promotion, like emphasizing other causes of cancer and publishing such studies as well as making these studies more available to doctors and to the public. Similarly, the *Merchants of Emotion* who are *Discourers of Disinformation* looking to benefit off of their manipulation, also back stories in line with their profits. For example, "free America" campaigns were promoted in order to get people outside and get them to spend money on products which they were less likely to buy whilst indoors and social distancing. Hao (2020)

Using narratives of fear, "production of truth through power" (Foucault and Ewald 2003) is achieved in the discourses of emotional manipulation. *Discourers of Disinformation* could be from any ethnic background and from anywhere in the world, since anyone who has access to the internet can function as *Discourers of Disinformation*. By situating the concept of *Discourers of Disinformation* into the analysis of current globally important happenings while also contemplating the structures of power, placing limitations on individual identities, I hope to make a case for acknowledging the importance of online performativity. In online performativities, online identities are performed and explored through messages embedded in posts

and memes. They shape the online world and are shaped by the online world. Their online performances "exercise power", therefore, placing the *Discourers of Disinformation* as the modern and selfishly manipulative users of "performative language" (Austin 1975).

The terms *Discourers of Disinformation* and *Merchants of Emotion* will be explained with reference and relevance to the context of the Infodemic in chapter two. In this chapter, the tobacco companies which were prominent through the second half of the 20th century whose purpose was to market an unhealthy product gains special importance. The famous memo by tobacco company executives: "Doubt is our product" (O'Connor and Weatherall 2019, 95) emphasizes a model of manipulative marketing which, I believe, got carried over to the 21st century. Just as these prominent tobacco companies put forth the idea that "scientific doubt must remain" (Oreskes and Conway 2011, 16), disseminators of falsehoods ensure that emotional chaos, anger, fear and anxiety remain. Oreskes and Conway (2011), thus, branded the tobacco companies which were responsible for the strategic circulation of "scientific doubt" as the "Merchants of Doubt". Through inspiration from Foucault, I decided to name their modern counterparts who make sure the uncertainty of information remains and chaos of emotion reigns, the *Discourers of Disinformation*. Then the subsection of profiteers who disseminate (or help the dissemination of) the oppressive discourses and exploit emotionally vulnerable public to sell overpriced medicine, masks, disinfectants, electronic razor-blades and even toilet paper become the *Merchants of Emotion*.

In the third chapter, I look back on previous studies concerning misinformation and disinformation regarding viral outbreaks for a more temporal understanding. In the first section, I cover issues relevant to sharing important virus-related information and how this is lacking in the COVID-19 circumstances. Looking at previous pandemics and how scapegoating mechanisms functioned, especially in creating racism and in some cases sexism, will establish a basic framework for how I situate racism and sexism into pandemic weary crowds. However, my main focus in this section will be on the Ebola virus related studies since the Ebola virus was the closest viral outbreak that found online expression of closest proportion to COVID-19. Fung et al.'s (Fung et al. 2016, 462) extensive analysis that displays more than half of tweets spreading misinformation, contextualizes the cascades of falsehoods which get spread in a time of viral infection. Even then, this information is provided to be -in later chapters- juxtaposed with coronavirus circumstances, therefore, serve to emphasize what deems coronavirus pandemic and the following Infodemic unique especially vis-a-vis sociopolitical events.

Even though the Ebola virus was not as widespread as COVID-19, signifiers of electronic nature were emphasized through an analysis of the public response. More specifically, the anthropomorphized meme version of the Ebola virus, “Ebola-chan” (Marcus and Singer 2017, 342), is one of the major key points of the first section. In the second section of the second chapter, I identify sources that spread misinformation as they are relevant to the analysis about the *Discourers of Disinformation* argument. My analysis traces over the sources which exploit online vulnerabilities and how they leave readers open to a more abuse. In doing so, the analysis suggests that global issues might have connections to online posts, news and memes.

For the fourth chapter I have decided to take a closer look on specific online phenomena. My first action is to focus on “The George Floyd Challenge” where white men kneel on friends’ neck to reenact the death of George Floyd and somehow prove online that a bullying police officer did not play a hand in his death. From there, I move onto the falsehoods spread on behalf of his perpetrator. Here, in the aftermath of George Floyd’s murder, “agenda setting” (Jang, Park, and Lee 2017, 1292) premises of media get entangled with an analysis on the power structures that enable racism and sexism through the spread of misinformation and disinformation.

In an epidemic weary global context, the death of George Floyd and the myriad of falsehoods which got spread on behalf of oppressors get special attention from my analysis using an intersectional framework. I keep asking “the other” question as Kathy Davis (Lutz 2015, 40) suggests and try to incorporate a multilayered analysis into confused and ignorant contextual media discourses. In the last section of this chapter, I pay specific attention to the role *Discourers of Disinformation* play through the methods they employ to steal the “script” (Christensen and Jensen 2012, 110) of George Floyd’s identity. They exploit a disease weary world as they infect (or benefit from the infection) it with misinformation and disinformation.

The fifth chapter is about Sinophobia in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and how it is related to a manner online in which racism, sexism and ageism fester. Scapegoating mentality allows a form of “defensive denial” wherein all of the responsibility for the unfortunate outcome of an outbreak is forced on the “guilty other”, in the coronavirus case, China. (Schild et al. 2020, 5) In this “guilty other” a “specter of race” (Denike 2015, 114) is established in stories and memes as they are surrounded with assemblages of racism, sexism and ageism. I analyze such misinformation and disinformation stories, posts and memes in order to complement a contextualization of the Infodemic.

Similar to the “Ebola-chan’s” anthropomorphizing, an anime-style “Corona-chan” was created. (Pauliks 2020, 47) As I inquire into the different versions of memes

displaying “Corona-chan”, my analysis displays a deep connection to the methods employed by the *Discourers of Disinformation*. Therefore, similar to “Ebola-chan”, the emergence of “Corona-chan” stands as “a striking example of the biosocial experience of an infectious disease epidemic in the age of the Internet” (Marcus and Singer 2017, 342). Moreover, the biosocial experience in the presence of not only the COVID-19 but also combined with both preexisting and highlighted emotions of racist, sexist and ageist nature indicate a newly emerging attitude towards virtual performances. In my analysis, I set out to identify the functionality of *Discourers of Disinformation* whose influence on the virtual performances exploit weaknesses in the flow of information due to racist, sexist and ageist undertones as well as negative feelings due to the crisis of COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, this cultural analysis on the connections of virtual performance, researches and emphasizes the formation of a new online world in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the Infodemic that followed it.

2. DISCOURSERS OF DISINFORMATION

2.1 Dealing With Misinformation and Disinformation

The crisis of misinformation and disinformation during the quarantine days of COVID-19 pandemic has indicated that relatively new media sources such as Twitter, Facebook or even WhatsApp groups of hive minded individuals need to be rethought and reshaped. Otherwise, the consequences might be too severe. “Disruptive media technologies have always created utopian expectations and dystopian fears. Radio was once hailed as promising world peace.” (LSE et al. 2018, 13) There is too much at stake in times of sickness where lives are in constant danger and an online spark of misinformation could create a wildfire. Since the London School of Economics Commission on Trust and Technology published a report on possible problems and how to address them, I have found it imperative at this point to examine the standards they stated. After all, to know the *Discourers of Disinformation*, one must understand their methods and how to address the problems they cause.

Implementations of accountability need to be introduced lest the public gets led astray towards the malignant consequences of misinformation and disinformation. First, too much information -most of which is irrelevant and inaccurate- can confuse readers. It could lead the otherwise interested parties seeking information on the Internet towards a path of cynicism, considering a stark realization, that “true knowledge” which is free of Internet manipulation is unattainable. Therefore, any and all responsibility to engage with structures that affect the public life gets replaced with a state of apathy. Furthermore, the apathy of citizens towards these structures and what goes on within them mean the structures are not held up to a standard of ethical code, hence not accountable. The LSE commission (LSE et al. 2018, 13) defines these consequences as the five giant evils of the information crisis.

While the LSE report certainly has a point in claiming these “five giant evils” - confusion, cynicism, fragmentation, irresponsibility, apathy- to be the symptoms of an online disease, I believe a historical lens gazing on the mechanics of media is essential in identifying the delicate intricacies of what creates the disease. This historical lens should allow the readers to be present for a mindset, ready to carry over the lessons learned and able to focus on the economic entanglements which go along with the symptoms of the disease.

On the surface, the inadvertent spread of incorrect information (misinformation) and the conscious spread of falsehoods (disinformation) might not appear to be the result of a deliberate plan. However, since most stories are suggested, promoted as if they were ads and created in conjunction with sponsored content, lead me to believe a more encompassing look on the methods of ancient ad agencies is essential. After all, the Internet did not abolish advertisements; it only forced ads to evolve and be more tailored to one’s tastes. If not ads, popular jokes which have gone viral, Internet memes could also be part of this category. Looking at the progression within this category, first, one chooses to view memes of one’s tastes. Then, eventually following a set of memes, in order to entertain oneself, one could end up causing one to receive messages of hidden meaning and agenda one did not foresee receiving. Could misinformation and disinformation be the result of such tailoring?

2.1.1 The Infodemic

"Information epidemiology, or infodemiology, identifies areas where there is a knowledge translation gap between best evidence (what some experts know) and practice (what most people do or believe), as well as markers for “high-quality” information." (Eysenbach 2002, 1)

When laypeople are unable to have proper access to “high-quality” information, crises as highly volatile as pandemics become exponentially more problematic. A recent study conducted in early 2020 shows that when "coronavirus precautions" were googled, less than half of the sources were in alignment with the official World Health Organization preventive measures. (Sarıkaya and Uzunkopru 2020, 9) This lack of access to “high-quality” information explains why the World Health Organization had to declare that "we are not only dealing with a pandemic, but also an Infodemic". (*Munich Security Conference* 2020)

Since more than half of the information available concerning precautions is false, this situation creates an excessive amount of health related misinformation and disinformation to spread, thus creating an Infodemic of health related circumstances, which is a health crisis above anything else. However, the excessive sources of falsehoods also have a secondary level of impact on society, especially with regards to the spread of false stories concerning viral videos such as George Floyd's murder, the photos of toilet paper hoarders as well as sneering, scapegoating videos vis-a-vis people of Asian descent. *The Discourers of Disinformation* come alive through these viral phenomena to exploit emotions of anxiety, fear of infection as well as revitalize, reiterate and popularize ideas of racism, sexism, and ageism.

Furthermore, while the *Discourers of Disinformation* have always had an oppressive impact on both primary and secondary levels through rumors and stories, the coronavirus circumstances set themselves apart by how major the sociopolitical impact has become via online platforms. I will refer to this historical juxtaposition once again in the following chapters to contextualize what makes the current Infodemic special, especially by supporting it with cases from George Floyd and Sinophobia related falsehoods.

2.1.2 Merchants and discourse

The story of the tobacco companies in the second half of 20th century, promoting their health damaging products through unconventional means can illuminate how today's online ad services can manipulate public opinion through misinformation and disinformation. For this to make sense, a modern reading of *Merchants of Doubt* by Oreskes and Conway (2011) is necessary.

As Oreskes and Conway explain, while the dangers of tobacco usage were known for many decades, public opinion was diverted towards falsehoods. (Oreskes and Conway 2011, 16) In fact, tobacco companies funded alternative research on purpose to cast doubt on the effective danger of tobacco usage. For example, if there were other causes for cancer, then the indubitable harm that smoking causes would be considered not as certain as it would have otherwise been. The mere existence of doubt on the health hazards of smoking allowed tobacco companies to sell so many cigarettes. Therefore, instead of focusing on the facts, ad agencies for these companies focused on promoting doubt on the account of health issues. Moreover, tobacco companies also funded scientific research and journals on how there are other reasons for lung cancer in order to further discredit the idea that their product

is harmful to health. Doctors were provided these journals and studies, free of charge, so they could relay the "scientifically backed" message that smoking was not harmful. These tactics redirect attention from the facts towards falsehoods, much like misinformation and disinformation pop up various irrelevant or incorrect information to bog down the critical thinking capabilities of readers on many levels.

A tobacco company higher-up noted: "Doubt is our product since it is the best means of competing with the 'body of fact' that exists in the mind of the public." (O'Connor and Weatherall 2019, 95) It is evident from this particular memo of executives affirming the idea that their actual product is "doubt", rather than what people think they buy which is tobacco. This memo attests to a case of massive mental manipulation. My concern is, as widely known as the dangers of smoking might have become, the actual mentality of these perpetrators remained. In fact, they have become more influential and overbearing thanks to the wide use of the Internet.

Truth will, no doubt, eventually come out as it did with the tobacco case. However, stories of misinformation and disinformation tend to slow down progress and allow a negative effect to be present. In the meantime, the public will not have solid access to correct information which they could access had it not been for the misdirection provided by misinformation and disinformation.

"Systematic deprivation of the opportunity to acquire knowledge as a result of an unfairly organized and/or poorly functioning epistemic basic structure constitutes an injustice no less serious than income- or liberty-deprivation." (Kurtulmus and Irzik 2017, 143)

Then, whatever the reason, the providers of misinformation and disinformation commit an injustice, whose effects are felt by entire communities. My aim here is to acknowledge this injustice and find a way to get a step ahead of the manipulators by perhaps understanding what their real product is this time. What have the *Merchants of Doubt* started selling at this juncture in time, what is their discourse in establishing their oppression during the outbreak of COVID-19?

2.1.3 Emotion

As vulnerable as they might be to oversimplification, focusing on collective emotions in times of crisis is essential. This is especially the case with an overarching Infodemic, wherein people from all over the world act both as consumers and crafters of information. Though we would like to envision ourselves as rational beings, a lot of emotion goes into both the consumption and crafting phases. In fact, Pribram claims a “collective emotion” as well as the “after-effects of meaning making” which are associated with media involvement should be understood not through cognition but through an analysis of sociocultural factors. (Pribram 2019, 173)

Events of great sociological meaning can be viewed as expressions of collective response. Sharing emotions as “co-present” audiences creating commonalities on a global scale incite an “affective or emotional responding” (Pribram 2019, 172) The revitalization of Black Lives Matter movement in light of the brutal murder of George Floyd by a ruthless police officer can be considered such a response. His last minutes on earth were captured by a camera and shared through a myriad of social media platforms. Furthermore, everyone who shared that video who also commented, providing an opinion and thus contributing to the expression of a response on a global scale using a global platform.

New parameters were defined for what it meant to be a global citizen who is aware of sociocultural wrongdoings. George Floyd’s last words were “I cannot breathe” which -for many people- was also expressing a legitimate fear of COVID-19 and what its effects might be on one’s body. On the surface, what seemed like an arbitrary connection to the quarantined public due to the epidemic encapsulated a repressed disdain for tyrants and cultural bullies. This connection created a domino effect for social change, since the public whose values were stomped on by a bullying authority figure was a perfect metaphor. For example, many colonial statues were destroyed in different parts of the world, public funding was cut from police forces and protests all over the world emerged. (Smith 2020) Therefore, in this case, public response emerged to already existing forms of oppression which found representation online, through the “viral” spread of a heinous manifestation of power.

“Convergence suggests an already-existing collective to which individuals calibrate themselves versus active collective systems of experiences and expressions that create specific sets of emotional parameters.” (Pribram 2019, 173)

In this regard, the public as a collective responded by individuals calibrating their values against the experiences they viewed on media platforms. Their action validated the collective experience of hatred for tyrants and bullies which was sparked by the video of Floyd's murder.

Seeing how powerful public response was to the death of George Floyd, made me realize, even though this time a positive outcome could be spoken of (except public destruction due to riots and looting), in many cases emotions could be -and probably were- manipulated and various responses were prompted by media outlets. Imagining every time, a story pops up, which by the way could be fabricated as misinformation and disinformation do, individuals would inadvertently calibrate their values against the experiences they were viewing. We are already at a stage in global access to the Internet wherein bots are actively diverting attention towards manipulative ends. What if stories were being fabricated to affect elections and important social decisions? What if people with a considerable reach were promoting products in the name of social justice whereas the actual reason for their involvement was purely of monetary nature? When stories of such nature are imbued with elements likely to prompt an emotional response and are promoted through technological means, it could lead to massive manipulation of the masses. This is exactly what the *Discourers of Disinformation* practice. Their digital methods of information subjugation result in a manipulation of the masses. On an individual level some might be easy to identify, like the U.S. president Donald Trump, who on many occasions, claimed false "medicines" like bleach to be the cure for the coronavirus which inescapably caused the laypeople who take their president seriously on matters of medicine to sustain damage. On more anonymous levels which might be harder to pinpoint where the culprit might be hidden behind strings of stories which lead to nowhere, a more substantial analysis is necessary. In these cases, the discourse might be available but the practice of power is processed through misinformation, in a viral fashion where uncertainty "incubates" in the psyche of the public, festering in their minds, then eventually "exploding in the form of individual or mass panic". (Huremović 2019, 37) To cure this digitally transmitted virus, big data analytics are already working on a definitive answer to pinpoint such manipulation.

“To perform their most recent analysis, the researchers studied more than 200 million tweets discussing coronavirus or covid-19 since January. They used machine-learning and network analysis techniques to identify which accounts were spreading disinformation and which were most likely bots or cyborgs (accounts run jointly by bots and humans).” (Hao 2020)

When Twitter and various other forms of social media become more prominent force of news distribution, a scenario where bots and cyborgs dictate the ways in which news get received would imply a catastrophic result the likes of which can be compared to a proper dystopia. Then, emotional outrage and stories of ignorance which were promoted, might start to overshadow true information. In fact, this is one of the reasons why the LSE commission (2018) was concerned with political reformation vis-à-vis the Internet media resources.

2.1.4 Promotion

Headlines which claim to be part of “social movements” or promoting change have become more visible in the past year. However, how much of it is really about change and not some ulterior motive is subject to discussion. During a necessary lockdown due to COVID-19, claims of “freeing America” have circulated through a crowd of Twitter accounts. Since sensational reporting mechanisms have also become more popular, these claims of “freeing America” got more attention than it probably deserved to get. What looks interesting in this situation, despite the illogical cease of self-isolation during a pandemic, is the fact that the tweets supporting the act of “freeing America” were backed by agents of disinformation who promoted a discourse of safety from coronavirus. In doing so, the *Discourers of Disinformation* popularized the belief that "stories" of coronavirus was a hoax to keep the "public" (whoever they might be) locked up in their homes, thus enslaving them. Therefore, freeing these Americans whose liberties supposedly had been infringed on became an object of emotion, people proudly protested. During these protests, massive levels of consumption was also promoted by *Discourers of Disinformation* who equated the freedom to consume with freedom in general. Eventually, the sub category of *Discourers of Disinformation* whom I identify as the *Merchants of Emotion* stood to profit from people buying electric razors to give themselves a good haircut, people who bought new clothes which fit them better, people who bought alcohol to party together and the list goes on.

According to an AI analysis conducted by Katleen M. Carley and her team at social cyber-security division in Carnegie Mellon University, deliberate action was taken to promote the illogical movement. Methods with which the agents of disinformation wove distant oddballs into what appeared to be a well-heard community is uncanny.

“The system looks for 16 different maneuvers that disinformation accounts can perform, including “bridging” between two groups (connecting two online communities), “backing” an individual (following the account to increase the person’s level of perceived influence), and “nuking” a group (actions that lead to an online community being dismantled).” (Hao 2020)

This way, people of “desired” opinions get to look like a spokesperson with a huge crowd of people following them, whereas the “undesired” opinions and people who hold them get “nuked” by a range of trolls, haters and overall disgusting content which result in the community of “undesired” opinions to disperse. Obviously, this is not limited to just opinions. Stories and memes could also be promoted in a similar fashion. In fact, when I delve more into the subject of memes related to social change and intersectional media presence, in the background, *Discourers of Disinformation* will once again emerge as the prominent promoters of “desired” opinions.

While the “free America” campaigns were backed by bot promotion, this does not suggest that there weren’t any followers of “free America” campaigns. Indeed, there were marches to support it. However, the scope of their following was made to look gargantuan, especially in comparison to the opposing much more level-headed opinions, in order to demand political change. Looks like the LSE commission (LSE et al. 2018) was right to hold dystopian fears after all.

Seeing the lengths to which the disinformation accounts went, one can adhere, quite logically, to the idea that there is an underlying motive at play here. In fact, what really urged me towards this line of inquiry was the undeniable similarity between the methods of the “free America” disinformation campaign and the methods with which *Merchants of Doubt* promoted favorable scientific studies to keep selling tobacco. These nefarious tobacco companies not only supported research on “alternative reasons” behind lung cancer, but also advertised the findings of such studies, giving it airtime on national television. Through this promotion a smoke cloud was cast on the undeniable harm of smoking, much like how the backing of certain individuals with a particular take on “freeing America” were much more publicized than the people against breaking the quarantine. Therefore, *Discourers of Disinformation* were able to portray the general population as insensitive, ignorant idiots whose sheer number stand to overpower any individual attempt to socially distance and be wary of viral infection. This way, a sense of powerlessness is promoted. Since this discourse challenged one’s ability to remedy a pandemic ridden society of disease through precaution, one is urged to either join the band of “idiots” and drop any futile measure of precaution or be miserable in one’s lonely, depressing quarantine.

In this scenario, I perceive a much more potent power structure at work whose discourse has far exceeded that of the pertinent national television from the second half of 20th century thanks to the technological tools provided by the world wide web. Therefore, the question I would like to ask here is, have the *Merchants of Doubt* become the *Discourers of Disinformation and Social Change* ? If so, should the public be warned to take the online presence of social justice warriors with a grain of salt? After all, in the future the divide between a claim to freedom with malicious intent (or at least backed with the potential exploitation of the public good faith in mind) might not be as clearly perceptible as the unreasonable nature behind the claim to “free America” when the pandemic is still quite destructive.



3. HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND SOURCES OF FALSEHOOD

3.1 Ebola

To understand COVID-19 related misinformation and disinformation, a more temporal and global comprehension is necessary. Especially looking at the incremental frequency of fake news through time and locating a possible pattern might prove useful for future references. A more nuanced understanding of the progression towards an Infodemic can shed a light on how my analysis on the *Discourers of Disinformation* are relevant. Therefore, I want to start out by focusing on previous outbreaks such as 2014-2015 Ebola and 2009 Influenza pandemics as well as how they relate to the online platforms.

The Ebola outbreak sets itself apart from most of the previous outbreaks since it came about when Twitter was the most prominent form of social media. Information about the disease found so much more platform via a myriad of tweets by anyone who had access to the internet because 2010s were dominated by the popularity of tweeting thoughts. Comparatively, other outbreaks such as swine flu and bird flu which came about after the invention of the Internet do not come close in terms of how wide the audience for the Ebola Infodemic was. Even though the invention of the Internet corresponds to 90s and social networks such as Facebook existed, time-wise, the other outbreaks do not correspond to a simple ease of access to online platforms for the laypeople. The availability of Twitter on smartphones and how Twitter became central to the spread of falsehoods, viral phenomena and daily news deemed the Ebola outbreak and the Infodemic that followed it a much more superior strain of "viral specimen" to analyze.

Another reason for focusing on Ebola Infodemic is, because it was a recent predicament. The 2014 Ebola outbreak is the closest example to the current situation of

information crisis related to the outbreak of contagious diseases. It is perfect for our purposes since a considerable amount of time has passed for it to have imposed on us a certain temporal perspective. However, it is still close enough to 2020, therefore, its relevance to our predicament of misinformation and disinformation regarding to similar media outlets might provide a good learning experience.

Studies at the time of the Ebola outbreak, regarding medical misinformation, are indicative of a pattern involving English speaking audiences:

“A 2014 study found that 55% of English-language tweets from Guinea, Liberia, and Nigeria during September 1–7, 2014, using the terms “Ebola” and “prevention” or “cure” contained medical misinformation.” (Fung et al. 2016, 462)

Medical misinformation about cures or disease prevention were able to gain attention not only through serious-looking engagers, but also through joke-making, half-serious individuals. In fact, memes about Ebola (Marcus and Singer 2017, 342) played a role in shining a light on the belief herbal healers of African heritage preventing Ebola with nonscientific methods. In one such particular meme, the anthropomorphized drawing of Ebola is displayed as a woman. Since she carries a skull, she is akin to a traditional witch doctor from a Western point of reductionist view which is juxtaposed with her nurse dress symbolizing Western medicine.

“Ebola-chan is a particularly potent signifier for those who have no personal experience with the disease and yet who live in an electronic media world in which exposure to Ebola information is ubiquitous.” (Marcus and Singer 2017, 342)

Therefore, in an online context of the disease wherein people who have not experienced the sickness of it, or seen it in effects, the “Ebola-chan” meme functioned to create a surreal understanding as it both mocked and perpetuated the online falsehoods about the disease.

In time, despite the reach of Twitter increasing, due to the direct result of more than half of the disease related tweets being misinformation, public trust has eroded. In fact, in a cruel twist of irony, the government regulated sources of Chinese origin whose posts were more comparable to blogs than tweets, microblogs, contained very little misinformation.

“The low proportion of microblogs with alternative health information at the onset of the global response to the 2014–2015 Ebola outbreak mirrors results from studies during the 2009 influenza pandemic, when only about 2 percent of tweets were seen as misinformation.” (Fung et al. 2016, 471)

Mostly official sources were quoted for health information and the alternative sources of health-related inquiries were either censored or were not attempted at all. In any case, despite being of authoritarian nature, numbers indicate that Chinese sources were more reliable in a time of crisis.

However, it goes without saying that both censorship and freedom of speech is essential for dissemination of disease related information. Misinformation and disinformation should obviously be eliminated before they threaten public safety while striving to keep outside interference to public modes of online performance to the possible minimum. It just so happens, at the time, fact-checking mechanisms were either not in place or not competent enough to weed out misinformation. The fact that an English-speaking audience would enter keywords like “Ebola” or “prevention” and would get misinformation responses more than half of the time (Fung et al. 2016, 462) is alarming. Perhaps, this is one of the lessons tech companies as well as governmental and public organizations in charge of creating such preventive measures should have learned from. Even though appropriate steps were taken in the right direction by the LSE commission in 2018 to establish a form of online governance in the United Kingdom (LSE et al. 2018), a universal UN-like commission is still lacking when it comes to overarching, reliable and independent fact-checking mechanisms. Perhaps this is the right path to follow with regards to how minimal censorship and maximum online liberties are appropriated without being detrimental to society and health.

The lack of health misinformation on Chinese microblogs does not mean liberties were respected or useful information in its entirety was conveyed to the public. More importantly, governments left to their devices, unchecked, could result in cover-ups as well as statistical inaccuracies representing the number of active cases throughout their governance to appear on top of things. For example, Fung et al. rightly points out:

“Although censoring allows governments to control rumors and alternative information, it can put the society at risk of a potential government cover-up, as in the initial denial of the 2003 severe acute respiratory syndrome outbreak in China.” (Fung et al. 2016, 471)

This is why it is essential to look back on other outbreaks to gain perspective. Only through the prism of time will we be able to discern the fundamental discrepancies within the official announcements and reality of public circumstances. Such previous governmental cover-ups can -rightly- raise suspicion vis-à-vis the current COVID-19 situation; who is to say that there have not been any cover-ups? On the topic of cover-ups, it appears, despite having mapped out the genome of COVID-19, the Chinese government released the information which would have had a tremendous impact in slowing down the effectiveness of the virus. Apparently, tight controls and ruthless competition within the Chinese health system played a huge part in delaying the release of this crucial information. In fact, even more upsetting, a lab posted the information on a virology website and only then -but still two weeks later- was the official report announced. (AP 2020)

“The delay in the release of the genome stalled the recognition of its spread to other countries, along with the global development of tests, drugs and vaccines. The lack of detailed patient data also made it harder to determine how quickly the virus was spreading — a critical question in stopping it.” (AP 2020)

As the virus spread and critical patient data stayed concealed, the actual pandemic was followed in parallel with another form of pandemic; the Infodemic. Not only was the information delay responsible for delaying the development of tests, drugs and vaccines but also responsible for a period of lack of information, or lack of proof to disprove falsehoods, through which misinformation and disinformation could be spread.

When we look at the Ebola virus and misinformation following it, the situation sets itself apart from COVID-19 in terms of the extent of reach. Despite COVID-19 reaching more countries and posing more of a threat to the world due to containment problems, the data that the Chinese government had related to the coronavirus was not released in a timely fashion.

“This would not happen in Congo and did not happen in Congo and other places,” he said, probably referring to the Ebola outbreak that began there in 2018. “We need to see the data. . . .It’s absolutely important at this point.” (AP 2020)

In light of the news that the announcement time of the Coronavirus outbreak was

delayed, could we really blame conspiracy theorists when they question the intent of the Chinese government, especially since questionably low number of people were declared dead? Not just the Chinese government, but the delay most assuredly served the *Discourers of Disinformation* well.

In the period where access to information was hindered, discourses of Sinophobia and white nationalism flourished. Old and rooted concepts of racism reemerged as stories related to the pandemic found platforms to spread. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic and the infodemic, China was being portrayed as a threat to democracy and global economy. A Sinophobic sentiment was becoming more common amongst Western media platforms. China's economic growth combined with how the "communist" Chinese authoritarian regime had been treating its citizens allowed China to be seen as a rising problem.

Especially considering the massive population of China, historical as well as current Sinophobic discourses involving refugees and immigrants led Chinese people in Western communities to be treated with disrespect. This was the case for the Chinese builders of Transcontinental Railroad who immigrated to the United States to find work in the 19th century. It is still the case for current immigrants to Western communities who migrate to find work today. Both back then and now, these immigrants are portrayed as job-stealing scapegoats for economic distress.

Following the scapegoating and variety of fear discourses regarding Anti-Chinese sentiments, a "subjugation" of knowledge emerges since right questions about pandemic management and information crises are averted. Thus, modes of power manifest themselves in misinformation imbued in ignorance. Through this period of ignorance, falsehoods were spread much more efficiently, and public health faced more danger than the virus itself. They were subjected to the heinous sources of the Infodemic.

3.2 Sources of Falsehood

Boggling down the public debate is one of the major downsides of misinformation and disinformation. When the streams of information on the internet become muddied, surfing to learn more about a serious health hazard becomes hazardous in and of itself. In this section I would like to trace various ways in which these vulnerabilities represent themselves and how one needs to tackle some of the challenging and

plausible conspiracy theories.

As I have mentioned in the previous section about misinformation regarding Ebola, there is a lesson to be learned about the wild spread of health misinformation. At some point in the COVID-19 lockdown, some of the lessons which had passed us by during other outbreaks had to be learned. Tardáguila (2020) in her quest to illuminate the public about COVID-19 related misinformation, leads an army of fact-checkers, part of 48 fact-checking organizations and 30 countries who are working to debunk false information. (Tardáguila 2020) However, as hardworking as the fact-checkers might be, their results are not instantaneous. Vulnerabilities arise due to the sheer abundance of misinformation and disinformation. Recognizing them is becoming harder; they evolve to be more plausible and the wide-spread panic impairs otherwise sound judgement of the people. As CDC's input on the psychology of a crisis indicates; paradoxically, during a time of crisis such as an epidemic, while the people's need and active search for information increase, their ability to process information decrease drastically. (CDC 2019)

The state of vulnerability that a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic creates can be exploited. This vulnerability is where the debate about digital *Discourers of Disinformation* can become relevant. Thus, it becomes important to recognize and be prepared for the different versions of vulnerabilities. Since sources of misinformation exploit those vulnerabilities, identifying the sources will inevitably lead to a more aware screening of the internet. Heidi Larson categorizes these sources as "bad science", "interest groups", and "super spreaders". (Larson 2018, 309)

"Bad science" refers to people with credentials who claim unverified scientific information to be accurate, hence creating a pseudo-scientific scam that uninitiated individuals might find plausible. A good example for this might be Andrew Wakefield's claims to the ridiculous correlation between MMR vaccines and autism; a former physician creating a myth which is simply not supported by the scientific community. (AJB 2020, 8)

"Super spreaders" would refer to the people in social media who come into contact with many other people online and spread the false information that they have gathered to others. This is probably the most common source of misinformation since there are a myriad of tweets by countless individuals who believe themselves to be in the right, who propagate the falsehoods they have encountered to many other individuals. Unfortunately, we are more prone to believing information that has been repeated. (Vicol 2020) Super spreaders in this case are both a victim and a cause of misinformation. This "illusory truth effect" as, Vicol explains, is responsible for amplifying the outreach of "super spreaders" since more and more people get to

repeat what they have come to believe as truth because they have seen the same type of misinformation elsewhere. Therefore, this effect stands for "cascading" levels of falsehoods on the internet as the people recognizing other forms of falsehood which they had encountered and propagate the false information confidently to others. In fact, the major contributor to the current Infodemic is due to these cascading levels of falsehoods as they get -quite ironically- more viral.

"Interest groups" would refer to promoted content for which the misinformation would serve as a means to an end. I would find it the most problematic of all since there is blatantly evil intent behind, especially connecting, once again, to the *Discourers of Disinformation* debate. A good deal of money is to be made from abusing people's insecurities, inability to process information due to a sense of immediate danger as well as the need for simple security in times of crisis. Alternative "medicine" was proposed in misinformation tweets during the Ebola pandemic as well. (Fung et al. 2016, 462) However, money might not be the only goal. If not monetary, there are political and sociological effects *Discourers of Disinformation* could look for. For instance, EUvsDisinfo, which is a European Union funded project to seek out Russian funded disinformation in European media, has uncovered hundreds of coronavirus related cases of attempts to undermine democracy.(EUvsDisinfo 2020, 462) This is hardly a surprise considering there were KGB generated HIV related conspiracies as part of the Cold War politics.(AJB 2020, 8)

In the case of "interest groups", one of the biggest in fact, might be Facebook. Joanna Hoffman who was once a close advisor to Steve Jobs the late Apple CEO, compares the effect misinformation and disinformation creates on the users to tobacco much like I do.

"You know it's just like tobacco, it's no different than the opioids. We know anger is addictive, we know we can attract people to our platform and get engagement if we get them pissed off enough. So therefore what, we should capitalize on that each and every time?" (McKeever 2020)

Despite knowing what the questionable source dictates to be incorrect, one cannot simply abandon the discussion. That is -apparently- the end goal of the platforms which enable misinformation and disinformation to be spread. The more time one spends on responding to false sources which were promoted by interest groups through bot services or through the simple processes of acknowledgement by interest groups, the more one gets angered; thus, creating an engagement comparable to tobacco or opioids as Hoffman suggests. This is in fact, what inspired me to articulate

the *Discourers of Disinformation* discussion through an intersectional lens, which I will go through in the following chapter.



4. INTERSECTIONAL GAZE ON THE DEATH OF GEORGE FLOYD

4.1 "The George Floyd Challenge" background

The approach to false information articulated by Wang et al (Wang et al. 2019) encapsulates the type of falsehoods one might find abundantly shared on social media. They could be in the form of hoaxes, conspiracy theories or any other misleading misinformation or disinformation. I have tried to touch upon some of the misleading sources and the vulnerabilities times of crisis can create on a previous chapter. Here I will be looking at one specific falsehood; a heinous defamation campaign targeted to sway the opinions of young audiences.

“A growing body of research (Conway et al., 2015; Groshek and Groshek, 2013; Neuman et al., 2014) has challenged the original notion of media agenda setting wherein the elite media set the agenda for the public.”
(Jang, Park, and Lee 2017, 1292)

One such agenda setting occasion that became relevant was in the aftermath of a much viewed video portraying a police officer killing George Floyd, an unarmed African American man who was lying down, neutralized. The video portrayed the police officer pressing his knee down on Floyd’s neck while Floyd shouted “I can’t breathe” quite aghast. (Jimenez 2020)

Following the video footage of George Floyd’s death going viral, a ‘George Floyd Challenge’ has come up to discredit the way he was murdered. At this point, committing an act of somewhat challenging nature and challenging someone you know to repeat the process upon one’s completion of the task had become common practice

as a prank amongst especially young people. (Jang, Park, and Lee 2017) What gets really interesting in this case is how such a benign looking prank format became a malicious viral phenomenon. To complete a “George Floyd Challenge”, which somehow aimed to prove that one could not die from someone kneeling down on one’s neck, one had to kneel down on a friend’s neck and send the video to another friend asking them to repeat the process. Acting just like the police officer who tried to “subdue” an African American man, whose actions were “allegedly” in alignment with common police protocol, the people participating in the “George Floyd Challenge” -who were mostly white males by the way- set out to reenact the “Floyd incident”. The fact that most of the “challengers” were white males showcases the racist cruelty. The disinformation that kneeling on a human’s neck is harmless gets promoted. Therefore, as cruel as it may be, the idea was that the challenge being repeated many times through individual efforts would “prove” in the eyes of the public that the whole incident was “blown out of proportion” as it is usually the way with “fake news”. (Ibrahim 2020)

“The George Floyd Challenge” sounds so ridiculous and made up that despite it being mentioned several times, I still had my doubts about whether it was some sarcastic post about police brutality or not. I think it is a testament in and of itself to the level of misinformation on the internet in the wake of the post-corona online environment, riddled with an Infodemic, that I had to fact check the sheer existence of this challenge. To my dismay, it was real and some of the challengers got hate crime charges. Nur Ibrahim who fact-checked this challenge’s existence claims that despite it gaining a lot of attention, the challenge was not widespread. (Ibrahim 2020) This further supports my claim in the third chapter about the nature of falsehood promotion where information is promoted heavily to induce public outrage. The people who mostly knew of it, like me, were either in disbelief or consumed by sheer disgust. Since people who heard about the challenge did not know it was not widespread, even more anger is incited, hence the *Discourers of Disinformation* were successful.

If the challenge is not widespread, what made it so well-known in the first place? Could it be that as Lee et al (2017) suggested, the elite media were setting an agenda for the public through the means of emotion manipulation? People certainly reacted en masse to George Floyd’s murder, why would they not react to the mockery of his unfortunate end? As Hoffman (McKeever 2020) suggested, anger is addictive. Knowing this opioid like nature of the reactionary state of the audiences, making the perpetrators of “George Floyd challenge” more available to the public eye, as if it was practiced more often, can lead to “cascading” levels of outrage.

Looking back at previous challenges such as the “ice bucket challenge”, one realizes, the dynamics of the interplay between traditional media and social media have not come to a perfectly balanced harmony. As a brand new prominent social phenomenon, “the ice bucket challenge” had its moment both in the traditional media and the social media where an end goal of “illness awareness” was reached. Throughout the process of awareness creation, dynamics between traditional and more modern ways of media coverage enabled a more nuanced way of reporting called the “intermedia” where one source reports on a report from another source. (Jang, Park, and Lee 2017, 1294) When stories are told and retold, somewhere along the line the sophistication of information could decrease and cause inadvertent spread of falsehoods (misinformation). It could just be that the systems checking for misinformation and disinformation might not be capable enough to unbundle the layers of reports some of which might just be reporting to debunk the falsehoods.

However, I still cannot help but wonder if the social media platforms’ algorithms were curbed on purpose, could the *Discourers of Disinformation* be in action in George Floyd’s aftermath? I believe that an intersectional gaze should be directed towards this incident to really comprehend how the stories of few “challengers” got blown out of proportion and what the delicate intricacies between ethnicity, gender and age had to do with it. Above all, this analysis is surrounded by elements of coronavirus related circumstances making it nuanced with a perspective pertinent to the current events. As Helma Lutz (Lutz 2015, 40) suggests; employing intersectional methods to unfold the potential of feminist research, that is based on Kathy Davis’s (Lykke 2014) understanding of multi-layered analysis, is achievable through asking about Matsuda’s “the other” question.

"The way I try to understand the interconnection of all forms of subordination is through a method I call “the other question”. When I see something that looks racist, I ask “Where is the patriarchy in this?” When I see something sexist, I ask “Where is the heterosexism in this?” When I see something that looks homophobic, I ask “Where are the class interests in this?” (Matsuda, 1991, p. 1189)"(Lutz 2015, 40)

Here, my aspiration is to find misinformation and disinformation surrounding George Floyd’s murder and consider these falsehoods with the mindset of intersectional concepts in light of COVID-19 panic Infodemic. Thus, the following sections will trace how misinformation and disinformation about George Floyd’s work, his performativity, his supposed drug problem, his age and vulnerability to COVID-19 fit into the falsehood spreading perpetrator mindset.

4.2 Institutionalized Racism Perpetuated

The practisers of the ‘George Floyd Challenge’ appear to be mostly white males who were doubtful about the nature of George Floyd’s murder. (Ibrahim 2020) Their dubious stance does not stem from any sound evidence, but rather perpetuated by a blind respect for a position of authority. This respect, of course, extended towards the bully behavior wherein the people of power such as the Minneapolis Police officer who kneeled on a person’s neck for neutralization. It is evident that something more sinister is occurring where kids choose to reenact the demoralizing scenario of Floyd’s murder for comic effect. In fact, one such occasion was where two students from Brisbane private school St. Joseph’s College Gregory Terrace recreated Floyd’s demise in a cheerful TikTok video and shared it online for all to see as if the whole situation was part of playtime entertainment. Unfortunately, a spokesperson for the school explained that the student in the video who was getting kneeled in the throat was being bullied. (Ibrahim 2020) This would imply that the kids were aware of the nature of police brutality, they embraced it and mimicked it in their school bully demeanor. The institutionalized attitude of bullying in the police forces towards an ethnic minority was not only perceived and internalized, but also the violent behavior was perpetuated thus ensuring a future generation of perpetrators and victims.

For a multilayered analysis, as Kathy Davis (Lykke 2014) suggests, where I perceive racism, I find myself inclined to ask the question: “Where is the age and gender interest in this?”. I think the age and gender interest here could be attributed to the “young, black man riddled with drugs” narrative. In fact, the terms “thug” and “druggies” have been used on Twitter by various right-wing representatives who claimed Floyd’s death to be due to drug use, thus believed Floyd’s murder by a cop to be a hoax. (Hart 2020) Therefore, as a part of this hoax, the male teenagers who perpetuated this specific violence towards black people contributed to these allegations in their vicious replication. Their white nationalist agenda is personified in the challenge which affirms the emasculation of the black man.

The racial connotation in creating this narrative of the hoax refers, as (Hart 2020) suggests, to an age old myth about the drug crazed African American who not

only is unhinged and crazy strong but also is a beastly man after "others' women". In fact, this goes even further than just a misogynistic argument. The historical racism had been embedded deep within the institutional level that eventually found its way through policy making. Southern police departments decided to change their weapons for higher caliber, stronger guns as a means to fight off the black men who had gotten beast-like qualities and exceptional capabilities who needed to be taken care of. (Musto 1989) In light of this historical relevance, if we consider the violent action that the policeman who arrested Floyd to be the result of a mindset that, not only saw Floyd as a sexually potent black man after "other's women", but also a drug driven beast who needed to be hunted down and subdued as an animal, this story makes a lot more sense.

4.2.1 Floyd's Adult Movie and Criminal Record

As part of a smearing campaign, sensitive information regarding Floyd's past was revealed and shared en masse, as if that mattered in the face of someone bending a knee on one's neck. In an effort to discredit his capabilities as an outstanding citizen, as if featuring in a porn video changes the way one should be treated, as if one simply lost the right to be treated with respect, "Floyd's porn video" circulated, gaining infamy.¹ Not only was this information received with sarcastic comments like "He was a great father" or "He choked his co-stars", but also the fact that this information was shared on a Reddit board with 'fun fact' labeled over it, speaks volumes about the common racist indifference towards the inhumane perception of the African American peoples. There is nothing 'fun' about a victim of bigotry who was suffocated, then got denied the simple dignity of not having his life meddled with and ridiculed in the aftermath of his murder. This information has no bearing on the situation surrounding his death whatsoever, but then, why was it dug up and spread like it was inescapably pertinent to the case? Once again, we need to ask the right questions which enable us to connect the dots. As Kathy Davis (Lykke 2014) suggests, where is the patriarchy in this? How is sexism connected to this story?

¹The message board that shared the "alleged" adult video of George Floyd and mocked him in the comments section:

(r/minnesota - Fun fact: George Floyd (2020 Minnesota riots) once worked as a male pornstar. Here is SFW video of him introducing himself as "Big Floyd/Floyd the Landlord" in a porn video for TheHabibShow (also he is in fact originally from Houston, Texas) N.d.)

https://www.reddit.com/r/minnesota/comments/gtcvy8/fun_fact_george_floyd_2020_minnesota_riots_once/

While there might be some truth to Floyd's involvement with the porn industry, the fact that it comes up in response to a heinous act and is shrouded in disinformation and misinformation about his 'potency' is indicative of a demented mindset, one that has plagued humanity for many years. This twisted way of seeing the world got people interested in the sharing of 'Floyd's adult video', while serving in a patriarchal mindset that sees women as a commodity. The mindset associates black men with beast-like qualities on many attributes, then, is extended to the virility of a superhuman creature (the perception of the African American Community by White Americans) as well. Users on the same Reddit sharing platform make jokes about 'Big Floyd' making a delivery. Therefore, in this case, a black man who is much more sexually capable is actively pleasing women in a spectacle wherein the white male patriarch is excluded from the picture all together. Indeed, the same mindset would imply that Floyd "stole their women" and acted in a much more masculine way through his well delivered, well documented gratification.

His past criminal record is also utilized in a similar fashion; stories of half-truths and falsehoods coated with a layer of racism and sexism. Just like his adult movie resurfacing, his alleged criminal record was shared with many myths and abhorrent misinformation.

The stories of his criminal record, his drug use and his involvement in the adult industry are mass circulated through unnatural means, one could say, are all part of a 'pushed' agenda. It is an attempt to rob him of his identity for which he held the right to create. Thus, his narrative was twisted towards an angle which stands to enable mechanisms of racism, and sexism.

"Prins argues that narratives tell us how people draw on different categories in the construction of their life-story. She sees identity as a narrative in which we both play the lead role and write the script (Prins, 2006: 281)". (Christensen and Jensen 2012)

If one cannot write their own script, one becomes a person robbed of identity, life and meaning. In Floyd's case, rather than not being able to write the script of his life, it is taken away from him through a disempowerment campaign. He might not have been a saint; however, some parts of his story are being overemphasized or changed to compensate for the misdeed he endured so patriarchal oppression, sexism and racism can continue.

The released cam footage (Jimenez 2020) of Floyd's death displays Derek Chauvin who was the arresting police officer for Floyd, exert excessive force with a conde-

scending tone, as if he was addressing someone who was completely ignorant and not deserving of respect. I believe this to be a manifestation of a racist demeanor where the racist attitude implores him to assume an African American to be a criminal. His actions, as rooted in racism as they may be, were reflecting the attitude he would most likely direct towards someone with whom ignorance, low socio-economic power is situated. Indeed, when Floyd claims he ‘could not breathe’, Chauvin’s answer is one that of plain condescension. He says: “If you can talk, you can breathe. It takes a lot of oxygen to talk.” (Jimenez 2020) As if Floyd’s cries of sheer desperation and agony implies a tone that is deserving of mistrust, Chauvin treats him like he was in the middle of a scam and believing him would damage him greatly. Needless to say, outrage followed in the aftermath of the footage of Floyd’s death becoming viral. However, the unfortunate push-back from racist, sexist patriarchal fear-mongers triggered a series of disinformation campaigns shrouded in the form of falsified photos and memes.

The following meme responses to this video footage of Chauvin treating an African American horrendously, showcase the kind of disinformation that would exemplify a post coronavirus fear mongering mindset that fits perfectly into this analysis. One such meme (Lee 2020) involves a warning against Floyd who, they claim, had spent many years in prison due to a number of illegal activities. The list of these illegal activities this particular meme (and variations of it) include armed robbery, cocaine possession and dealership, armed robbery of a pregnant women in her home. The so called ‘funny side’ of the meme issues a warning to people who have been ‘brainwashed by the media’ to equate Floyd to the likes of angels. Essentially, by listing the series of crimes Floyd had committed, he would then lose his so-called angel-like qualities and be regarded as the ‘criminal black man’ whom the creators of the meme had already recognized thanks to their ‘elevated’ levels of intellect (or the unacknowledged racist beliefs).

Despite what the creators of similar memes would have people believe, Dan Evon (2020) has fact-checked and debunked the claim that Floyd had performed an armed robbery of a pregnant woman in her home. (Evon 2020) Several other variations² of the same ‘warning meme’ include suggestions like before his arrest Floyd was high on meth, getting into his car to get ready for another armed robbery of a pregnant lady. The joke there was “too bad the pregnant lady didn’t have a gun” (Lee 2020). It was even suggested that Floyd asked the pregnant lady whether she wanted him to kill her baby. Thankfully, Dan Evon’s fact-checking debunks allegations that the

²Can be accessed through:

<https://www.snopes.com/news/2020/06/12/george-floyd-criminal-record/>

pregnant woman who is the subject of this allegation was not pregnant and according to the police reports she was not even hit by Floyd at all. (Evon 2020) Even though facts suggest otherwise, these memes of manipulation suggest a sinister hand at work whose deliberate spread of falsehoods make sense in the particular context of previous chapters and this is where I should like to continue my analysis.

4.3 Discourers' involvement in Floyd's Story

The way sexism and racism are relevant to Floyd related videos and photos of falsehood becoming viral is nuanced in such a way that can be explained with the *Discourers of Disinformation* narrative. This process is shackling him -or his legacy- to the falsehoods and misdirection by *Discourers of Disinformation*, people who would like to see falsehoods spread for their gain, someone else's loss or simply chaos for its own sake. Therefore, their motivations are not univariate, a simple, easy "thumbs up" on an online platform could be the reason why falsehoods were propagated by the *Discourers of Disinformation*. It could be that the discourses were only created to perpetuate notions of already existing racisms, sexism and ageisms. In any case, while the motivations are certainly of multivariant nature, and hard to ascertain, the results are a lot more clearer in the intersectional analyses.

First of all, the sheer fact that, in a meme context (Evon 2020) a woman who was not hit by Floyd and was not even pregnant, became the subject of vulnerability and sought to 'incur' an outcry implies a patriarchal gaze. Since, in a patriarchal perspective riddled with sexist approaches, masculinity would have the defining protective demeanor towards the objectified women whose baby, in this context, as the next generation, could also potentially represent the treasure-like commodity. Therefore, the supposed attack on this woman, who by herself is an object of value, also host to another quite as valuable object inside her, incurs an online patriarchal wrath that gets multiplied with every circulation the memes receive. Consequently, these memes, whose origins are predominantly based on falsehoods or half-truths act as the instruments of sexist, racist agenda through which the *Discourers of Disinformation* function. Every time their agenda is promoted and spread on the internet platforms, they receive recognition and possibly support for what they promote; racist, sexist, patriarchal understanding of current events.

The way that *Discourers of Disinformation* act in this context, their direct message

to the public as a warning, is not the only path to achieve various profitable end goals. The power that comes with mass producing and disseminating falsified information during the time of the pandemic where most people are indoors and have the leisure time to sort through pages of online news create an opportunity to also send in more subtle messages which promote, in this case, pro-gun agenda. Indeed, when the meme template here depicts the vulnerable pregnant woman to be incompetent in defending herself, the message suggests she should either get a gun or a man, or better yet, both. In this sense, pro-gun agenda is pushed, women's vulnerable state is affirmed and men's position as the protector and leader of the family is reestablished and secured.

Discourers of Disinformation whose methods find different outlets of public reach, extend using a myriad of methods. On the surface, it might seem like there is not a connection between pro-gun attitude and a police officer kneeling on an African American person's neck, but here we are in a relevant meme, discussing this apparently interconnected issue. In a novel fashion, through the misinformation and disinformation tactics in the social media posts that *Discourers of Disinformation* employ, the power of the patriarchy is extended to the public gaze, working to disempower the already weakened groups which sexist, racist agenda targets. Power can manifest itself through many "discursive elements" and different strategies. (Foucault 1978). Indeed, as per Foucault's claim, power of the patriarch finds manifestation through the acknowledgement of the memes' messages which entail falsehoods and half-truths whose promotion in the media platforms are enabled and ensured by a vulnerable situation created and perpetuated by a pandemic induced crisis circumstances.

Interestingly, there were many misinformation cases suggesting black people were impervious to the coronavirus despite the fact that black people were actually dying at higher rates due to COVID-19. (Tayag 2020) In the aftermath of Floyd's death, a variety of his coronavirus test results surfaced almost immediately on Twitter posts, attributing his death to the fact that he had been infected. Only after a full autopsy report it was confirmed on June 4th, that Floyd actually had been infected with COVID-19. Unless posters somehow got a hold of Floyd's test results early, these were claims indubitably intended to acquit the police officer who kneeled on Floyd's neck. As a bonus racist insinuation, they suggested that Floyd was also irresponsible for going out infected, when he should have been at home, quarantined for public safety. Hence, in this narrative of irony, his act of endangering public safety would designate Floyd to be the architect of his own demise. It seems the racist narratives were subject to change in the cases where overall net racism triumphs.

In actuality, the stigmatization intent was irrelevant to the reality of Floyd's infection status since the claims of his COVID-19 positive test results indicated he was very likely asymptomatic (Tayag 2020)

“The function of the stigmatization and material sanction is to establish hierarchies of value on the basis of race and class difference and legitimate local, regional, and global relations of race and class inequality.” (Schippers 2007)

Nefarious attempts to paint Floyd to be the marginal, drug crazy minority who endangered public safety is, certainly, in servitude to establishing a hierarchy. In this hierarchy, the police officer who knelt on Floyd becomes the manifestation of patriarchal, racist power through which the manipulative disinformation spreaders find material to concoct a spectacle of ‘murder-porn’.

True agents of *Discourers of Disinformation* might be considered in this hierarchical category; who post to sell ideas, who perpetuate structures of oppression through discourses of power and disqualify lay people from having access to true knowledge, especially vis-a-vis socially and medically relevant information in the time of the Infodemic. However, people also make posts to raise awareness about the current events such as retweeting the footage of Floyd's murder or retweeting about the wickedness of the "Floyd Challenge". Although the intent there might have been of positive nature, the forces at play who stand to benefit from Floyd related information becoming viral can still be malicious. In fact, the spectacle effect his footage embodies (or the misinformation and disinformation posts which followed) can benefit sexist and racist agenda. Considering people attended gatherings to watch spectacles in the medieval ages (Huizinga 1970, 1997) important moments were hitherto part of the display as gory as they might be. The gory details of earlier history which extend to the modern life can be exemplified in the so called ‘spectacle of an experience’ that a click of a button provides.

“Then they would put the images on postcards. Now, we have the internet and all this social media. I do not see a difference. It becomes a murder pornography. You just sit there and watch somebody killed in real time.” (Brown 2020)

Creating a spectacle out of someone getting killed had been an effective method to find an outlet for anger on a massive scale. Through that expression of anger as well

as various other emotions, people holding power can find a path to manipulation. In fact, this philosophy of making use of the effect that spectacles can create has aided rulers of ancient times in assuring a prominent governance over the public. These could have included brutal fights, animal related violence, guillotine or public hangings. In any case, the spectacle of ‘murder-porn’ has been utilized (or advised to be) in an attempt to cultivate power.

“In the early modern period Machiavelli advised his modern prince of the productive use of the spectacle for government and social control, and the emperors and kings of the modern states cultivated spectacles as part of their rituals of governance and power” (Kellner 2003)

Moreover, these rituals surely have changed, adapting to the circumstances the times might bring. As Brown (2020) suggested, it used to be that images of racist agenda would be put on postcards, in an effort to reach many other people. Since the outreach capabilities have improved thanks to technology getting better and the Internet’s contribution to globalization, the people who exploit opportunities of possible spectacles can have a better control over vast distances. *Discourers of Disinformation* are such people who exploit spectacles for personal gain in the form of "subjugated knowledges". In fact, not only do they exploit people’s preference for spreading socially significant news featuring the violence African Americans have to face due to institutionally racist violence, but also manufacture their own twisted versions of an event through the dissemination of half-truths, disinformation and misinformation.

George Floyd’s case is not an exception to the exploits of *Discourers of Disinformation*. It is fairly reasonable to attribute the fact that Floyd’s video became so well-known to the spectacle effect such a “murder pornography” creates. A juxtaposition created by the memes and twitter posts (essentially half-truths and disinformation) of him being part of adult film industry appropriates a literal connection to porn since, his murder is displayed side by side with his naked performance. People calling themselves Big Floyd³, the name he introduced himself with in this adult film, released videos portraying the ‘Floyd Challenge’ and his own script of identity got taken away from him in this manner. The script of his life he wrote for himself in his adult film performance (Christensen and Jensen 2012) got taken away from him

³Reddit comment section displays racist, sexist jokes:

https://www.reddit.com/r/minnesota/comments/gtcvy8/fun_fact_george_floyd_2020_minnesota_riots_once/

forcefully, just like how his literal life was also taken away. Therefore, the murder-porn analogy fits twice, both metaphorically and literally on the murder and the porn accounts. His literal life was taken away from him by a position of patriarchal, racist authority; and the script of his life was taken away from him through an online misinformation and disinformation campaign, in an attempt to promote racism and sexism for a patriarchal cause. On the porn side of the analogy, the spectacle effect of his literal murder creates an influence that initiates an incentive to promote and retweet his video by many people who, as Brown (Brown 2020) suggests, watch the video of his murder in a tranced, gratified state as if watching an adult film. On the other side of the analogy of porn, his literal video featuring sexual intercourse gets displayed side by side with his spectacle of a murder which arouses anger. Quite metaphorically and literally, *Discourers of Disinformation* have a hand in juxtaposing George Floyd's murder and porn videos. They, hence, bring a murder-porn scheme into existence to induce anger and confusion to an already vulnerable public in the aftermath of the Infodemic for sexist, racist reasons.

5. SINOPHOBIA AND ITS CONNECTIONS

In this chapter I aim to trace over the boundaries between an online performance of Sinophobic language and memes containing COVID-19 related misinformation and disinformation through an intersectional framework. From this vantage point, the stories are still evolving as we are still within the progressional timeline of the Infodemic. Ignorance is created and perpetuated through the dissemination of falsehoods in online platforms such as Twitter and 4chan for which I will expand my analysis. In these platforms, power manifests itself through racism, sexism, ageism. In terms of studying such displays of power, I believe a Foucauldian (2003) attitude towards knowledge in understanding ‘discursive struggles’ and ‘subjugated knowledge’ where online platforms are exploited to perpetuate ignorance, is essential. After all, methods of misinformation and disinformation not only reconstruct identity as “subject” to the manifestations of media, such as Twitter posts and memes but also benefit off of the mental fog created in clouds of manipulated emotion. In this process, while maintaining focus on racism, sexism and ageism; my analysis is meant to be engaged with a fundamental connection to manipulative falsehood spreaders, the *Discourers of Disinformation*.

5.1 Scapegoating mentality

Through various pandemics and within many Infodemics, discourses blaming "the other" have emerged. In fact, scapegoating alone is not novel to the coronavirus. Studies indicate that the 1918-1919 H1N1 influenza did not originate in Spain, it was most likely originated in British camps in Europe. However, that infamous pandemic is forever known as "The Spanish Flu". (Trilla, Trilla, and Daer 2008) As the neutral power during the World War I, the Spanish citizens were marginalized through rumors of scapegoating. The racist mindset at the time blamed Spanish

citizens for spreading a deadly disease. Alternatively, the historical rivalry between Spain and France contributed to the pandemic being referred to as the "French Flu" in Spanish sources at the time. As you see, the history behind racist scapegoating and pandemics go decades back.

The "swine flu" panic in 2009 was used not only as a means to marginalize "the other" but also used in contexts of weaponization and war, much like how "Coronachan" will be used in the arguments about "removing the boomer generation" from existence, thus punishing them. When media reported "Swine flu hits the Gaza Strip" (Angeli 2012, 217), it was used in this context as a biological weapon narrative through otherization of war. In this "hyper-reality", the scapegoats of war, in this case Gaza, was punished through the attack of a deadly virus.

The H1N1 and swine flu metaphors discussed here further support the metaphors surrounding Spanish flu, SARS, and avian flu in that the metaphors describe the current context in which the metaphors are used, blame a scapegoat, and refer to powerful forces to suggest that policy makers and health officials have no control over the flu. However, different metaphors are used depending on how the flu is named. Names intended to invoke emotion, such as swine flu, often include metaphors that blame and instill fear. (Angeli 2012, 218)

Instilling fear in the consumers of media and rumors who are already in an anxious state is an age old trade. This enables people in power, like policy makers, to not only absolve themselves of responsibility but also create stigmatized identities which bring about hidden but already existing notions of racism and sexism. Media defined the onset of AIDS as a "mysterious new gay plague", stigmatizing non-binary genders. (Angeli 2012, 206) The discourse here enables the "inexplicable" nature of the disease to extend to the "unorthodox" nature of the non-binary genders.

Despite the fact that methods of otherization and scapegoating have hitherto existed, the COVID-19 pandemic and Infodemic is still special. The levels of disinformation and misinformation which came about following the outbreak of the coronavirus is unique in its own right. There has never been this much access to the global communication at this scale when a pandemic was in place. Daily online posts and constant updates on the disease as well as stories continue to make new experiences, create new forms of language and therefore enable new forms of discourses to manifest which the *Discourers of Disinformation* surely exploit in spreading falsehoods. Therefore, the COVID-19 Infodemic is much more prominent, more sinister and overbearing than any other Infodemic which have ever existed.

One of the most prominent ways racism manifests itself in online platforms is through the use of racist language. Studying racial slurs which are part of falsehood spreading processes is imperative to understanding the methods with which *Discourers of Disinformation* exploit the public in contention with itself to find a scapegoat for the emergence COVID-19. In the case of COVID-19, as Schild et al. (Schild et al. 2020, 5) suggests, the scapegoating mechanism works in a framework of ‘defensive denial’. At earlier stages of the coronavirus outbreak, the virus was a distant story. Therefore, western communities did not feel an urgent threat in which they would be compelled to take extreme precautions. However, when the coronavirus reached Western communities and imposed an immediate danger, the threat became more contextualized, inducing reprehension. In this apprehensive state, defensive denial kicks in; shifting the blame of not taking the pandemic circumstances more seriously in a global context or perhaps not aiding a disease-ridden country, to something else.

In the circumstances surrounding Sinophobic mannerisms, the blame is shifted towards the Chinese people and government who could not contain the virus and allowed it to spread over many countries. Denike explains this particular form of scapegoating as an “assemblage of fear that imbues security discourse”. (Denike 2015, 111) Denike’s take on this “security discourse” involves a “specter of race” which is highly relatable to the unstable COVID-19 circumstances wherein the specter of the disease might haunt one anywhere, any time. Therefore, the “foreign other” -which happens to be the Chinese people in this case- who is to blame for unleashing a viral specter onto the Western society, are the subject of racial discrimination, hatred and “race distinctions”.

People with huge audiences, such as the U.S. president Donald Trump, contributed immensely to the trend of scapegoating. In fact, after Trump referred to COVID-19 as the “Chinese flu” in one of his tweets (Yam 2020), this scapegoating process has become inescapably visible. Despite the World Health Organization announcing a name, at an earlier date in February 2020, COVID-19 (coronavirus) as such (WHO 2020), President Trump referred to the virus as ‘the Chinese virus’ in March. His referral was not caused by a lack of a better definition for the coronavirus. Instead, that particular tweet was the result of his advance towards a scapegoating mentality. Obviously, Donald Trump is not the only person resorting to such tactics. In fact, a growing number of people have contributed to an emerging trend of spreading Sinophobia whilst invoking racial slurs.

In light of a myriad of tweets emerging due to COVID-19 becoming more and more widespread, and people contributing to a growing community of online slur utterers, the need for a comprehensive analysis increased tremendously. Schild et al. have

done an extensive research analyzing the increase of racial slurs vis-a-vis Sinophobic context of the coronavirus wherein 222,212,841 tweets were taken into consideration. (Schild et al. 2020) As they concluded, the amount of Sinophobic slurs increased tremendously. Imagining the sheer number of responses from this pool of tweets to a racially charged specter of a virus in a context where quarantining is concerned, one cannot help but watch the verbal racism progress. As Peters argues, the anxious quarantine circumstances of isolation and panic buying can shift one towards a siege mentality. (Peters 2020) In this siege analogy, the attack comes from an invisible force which is probably the worst kind of invader one could imagine, since ordinary defenses do not mean much. Therefore, the outcry against the scapegoat which set the invader upon oneself have a big chance of setting an already highly unstable community towards escalation of Sinophobia, maybe even violence. The following cases of media slander can represent the level of overall public discomfort. Since most of them are prominent journals, such as Wall Street Journal, Daily Mail and Der Spiegel containing Sinophobic denigrations, they can attest to the unease and voice the general concern.

“The Jutland Post, published a cartoon by replacing the five stars of the Chinese national flag with pictograms of the coronavirus. The Wall Street Journal noted, “China is the real sick man of Asia”. Courier Picard headlined the tragedy as “Yellow Alert”. Der Spiegel described that CIVID-19 was made in China. In the same vein, The Washington Times conceived that the virus was China’s secret biological weapon. Foreign Policy linked the global spread of the infection with the Belt and Road Initiative. Many newspapers, especially Daily Mall and The Sun, ascribed the virus with Chinese eating bats, snakes, and dogs.” (Rafi 2020, 4)

While these are prominent journals possibly shaped by the public opinion, they are also shapers of opinion since an impression on readers is inevitable. Assuming these popular journals usually contain moderate opinions for which restrained quality of an expression is a given, it might be important to look at more fringe platforms. After all, a more thorough analysis containing an intersectional approach is, more than likely, going to be richer for occasions where opinions are expressed openly, regardless of how racist, sexist, ageist they might be.

5.2 Sinophobia in the shadow of misogynistic contempt

One of the many ways in which racism manifested itself during the Infodemic was, through the use of fake stories of racist insinuations concerning the origins of COVID-19. These were stories mostly imbued in paranoia as well as Sinophobia. One such misinformation was due to a video of a Chinese woman eating bat soup. (Taylor 2020) This video resulted in creating a global uproar, causing many people to believe the reason behind the COVID-19 outbreak was eating unsanitized, weird food. Surely, Sinophobia is at the center of this misinformation case. After all, unfamiliar or not, attributing a global pandemic to an entire nation just because someone ate something in a video is pretty far-fetched, not to mention irresponsibly inaccurate. In fact, the way I see it, even if it were true that this specific lady was responsible for causing the pandemic, that surely does not hold all of her fellow citizens accountable as her accomplices. That would be the quintessential showcase of racism. As bleak as this picture already is, as far as I can tell, that is not the entirety of it.

I believe underlying socioeconomic and racist issues are present in the particular misinformation about someone consuming bat soup to be the cause of the COVID-19 pandemic. First of all, this entire story reeks of condescension. The fact that most people would find eating a bat unorthodox is not the only reason why the video of a Chinese woman eating bat soup became so widespread. The condescension does not end at the level of exotic nature of the meal, a notion of economic inferiority is implied. The assumption is, someone poor enough to eat bats caused the pandemic due to the rumors that bats were being sold in underground, unofficial and probably dangerously unsanitized meat markets. Therefore, anyone who would be ignorant enough to buy from those -supposedly- filthy vendors were dragging down the quality of life everywhere else. In other words, the Chinese uncultured citizens who were “uneducated” enough to buy unhealthy meat products were being held responsible for a global state of crisis. Just like how George Floyd was compared to a beast-like creature, the Chinese people who consumed bat soup were compared to beasts who were inhuman enough to “sink” so low. Moreover, the scapegoating process needs to extend to an intersectional framework; wherein the underprivileged citizens are subjected to marginalization, both due to a stigmatized view of a Western oriented gaze as well as a position of Sinophobic racism.

Despite the actual video of bat consumption being filmed in 2016 (Taylor 2020), misinformation regarding correlation with the origin of COVID-19 was spread. Many issues could have been the reason behind this “bat soup” story becoming so promi-

ment. Fact-checkers might not have been able to reach enough people or people might not have paid attention as much as they needed to. However, regardless of the reason behind this narrative becoming famous, *Discourers of Disinformation* were able to feed off of the issues of anxiety, Sinophobia and sexism. The woman in the story is utterly voiceless, she even received death threats and more commonly rape threats. (Taylor 2020) Her “life’s script” is ripped away from her, much like George Floyd. Instead, a new narrative was forced on her identity. The new narrative was one of illiteracy, indecency and ignorance. Through this new and demeaning narrative, *Discourers of Disinformation* could have been able to push particular agendas as much as fear mongering and Sinophobia allowed them. For example, Shaban emphasizes allegations about the coronavirus having been manufactured in Chinese laboratories and Red Bull containing the virus on purpose. (Rafi 2020, 12) This implication of conniving nature stands as a subversion tactic. According to the misinformation, the Chinese would aim to infect Red Bull drinkers since, as a bioweapon, the virus would render consumers of Chinese Red Bull products ineffective. These misinformation cases cast suspicion of Sinophobic nature in an attempt to decrease Red Bull sales. Perhaps, due to a decline in the sales of Red Bull products, a rise in different energy drinks might emerge thanks to this Sinophobic attitude. In this sense, the responses such as anxiety and Sinophobia that *Merchants of Emotion* (which constitute a subsection of *Discourers of Disinformation* dealing with monetary gain) promote relate to material products. Therefore they have an impact on the market forces.

5.3 Misinformative jokes spreading sexism and racism

The discourse of fear is being exploited in misinformation and disinformation cases to justify the use of horrendously inappropriate language. Opinions of the online audiences were swayed in a narrative of condemnation regarding the Chinese community. The people who are -supposedly- responsible for an increasing number of deaths, economic difficulties as well as pressure on health care systems, then suddenly are in a position where sympathy for verbal-racial abuse is less warranted. (Rafi 2020, 11) Therefore, an increasing number of racial slurs were observed. Schild et al.’s (2020) extensive analysis on the incremental usage of Sinophobic old slurs as well as the creation of new slurs on Twitter and 4chan platforms, indicate a “defensive aggression” mechanism at work. In this “defensive

aggression”; they conclude that cultural taboos, issues of sexuality and perpetual societal oppression finds voice. The frustrated voice, in this aggressive state, more often than not, resorts to passive-aggressive, inappropriate jokes in the form of memes. One such meme I like to take a look at originated in the image boards of 4chan, where the coronavirus was happily welcomed and cartoonishly depicted in the form of a teenage Chinese girl with bat wings attached. (Pauliks 2020) In this meme, the anthropomorphized version of the coronavirus, “Corona-chan”, stands as the epitome of sexist, racist, ageist mindset in the aftermath of COVID-19 outbreak.

5.4 The many faces of “Corona-chan”

While the coronavirus stood as an effective danger, a number of “defensive aggressors” frustrated through issues of sexuality and oppression decided to depict the novel danger of the pandemic through an expression of conspiratory jubilation. In several versions of the “Corona-chan” meme, it displays the anthropomorphic version of the virus stabbing someone from behind. In this version, a minimalistic depiction of a person, the head consists of only the design of Chinese flag, thus suggesting China set the COVID-19 pandemic onto the world. By setting a contagious virus onto the world, as the meme infers, China would then have the opportunity to present the world with medicine through which it can both earn money and the status of a savior. The misinformation of Sinophobic conspiracy that fuels this meme is not only subject to methods of racism, but also methods of sexism and ageism in various other versions.

To begin with, “Corona-chan” is represented in anime style, as a sexualized Chinese girl wearing a traditional qipao. Here, I would like to ask the question, why is the virus that people denigrated as the Chinese bioweapon depicted as a young anime-style woman? Pauliks claims the “Corona-chan” memes’ oversexualization, even fetishization of the anthropomorphized anime-like drawings to be of soothing nature. (Pauliks 2020, 47) His idea is that the coronavirus is drawn as a female who appears tremendously less dangerous than the contagious disease. However, considering there were also memes of sexually and artistically similar nature about the Ebola virus, with a similar name called “Ebola-chan” (Marcus and Singer 2017, 350) I believe this not to be the case. Since the Ebola virus did not pose as much of a threat to the Western world as the Coronavirus indubitably did, the need to

moderate the anxiety which might arise from a sense of impending doom, did not exist. Therefore, a discourse of fear alleviation appears irrelevant in the case of “Corona-chan”. What does seem relevant, however, is the fact that they were both female anime drawings where a high level of fetishized sexualization overflowed.

“Corona-chan” in her traditional Chinese dress, personifies a sexist agenda through which the modes of misinformation get entangled with a Sinophobic narrative. *Dis-courers of Disinformation* who exploit several stories of misinformation surrounding the origin of the COVID-19 virus, utilize a method of indoctrination which acts to place Chinese as the people responsible for unleashing a superhuman anime character onto the world. First of all, the fact that she is drawn in the style of an anime character, which is obviously not real, is indicative of her made-up nature. This could imply an underlying imposition that the anime character-like depiction of the virus is as made up as the real one, or possibly a Chinese hoax to wreak havoc on the world. Since there were cases of disinformation and misinformation questioning even the reality of COVID-19, since people were making online inquiries as well as declarations about the validity of pandemic related statements (Gruzd and Mai 2020), I believe a fictional representation of the disease in question was quite fitting. In a surreal context where people ask that others film the inside of nearby hospitals to prove the existence of the coronavirus pandemic, presenting an anthropomorphized version of the virus as a cartoonish character is not far-fetched.

The fact that both “Corona-chan” and “Ebola-chan” are portrayed in anime style attests to the racist mindset towards Asians. To begin with, in this mindset, anything east of the Western communities regardless of cultural intricacies, are referred to as Asians or easterners. In this context of the Asian-originated viruses; coronavirus and Ebola virus are depicted in anime style, something Asian. Therefore, by simply drawing these anthropomorphized versions of the viruses and spreading them online, an appropriation of something Asian is achieved, while they are turned against Asians by making a cliché out of them.

In “Corona-chan’s” depiction, the misinformation story where consuming massive amounts of “bat soup” is identified to be the reason behind COVID-19 outbreak, is not forgotten. An ornamental set of bat wings are attached to either side on the back of the anime character-like girl, placing her more visibly dissimilar from a regular person. Her beast-like appearance could suggest two things. One, that she is of mythical nature, as I have already mentioned, “Corona-chan’s” unreal status represents the disbelief in the existence of the coronavirus and the stories of misinformation relevant to that disbelief. The second suggestion her beast-like appearance could point to is, that she is the beast of China. This is a reference to the

misinformation stories (Rincon 2020) claiming that China manufactured the virus in biolabs and released it to the world, or that somehow it was released out of Wuhan's bioengineering labs through contamination and not through anyone conspiring to release it. In any case, the idea was that she was the modern Chinese version of the freakish Frankenstein's monster (Mary 1998) and just like the monster, she was put together using different parts of other living creatures. The bat wings in her depiction can attest to that nature. Furthermore, in "Corona-chan's" comparison to Frankenstein's monster, her traditionally Chinese attire and her appearance could imply that in her, there is a bit of the Chinese monstrosity. After all, Frankenstein's monster had a bit of Doctor Frankenstein who created it.

Coming up to the coronavirus outbreak, China was being mentioned more and more in juncture with the atrocities its government was committing. Humanitarian media outlets had been occupied with the treatment of the Hong Kong protestors (Feng 2019), the violence against the Uighur Turks and their inhumane encampment (Maidland 2020) as well as the overall Chinese governmental oppression (Roth 2020) in the lead up to the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, an anti-Chinese sentiment was already in the making. The developing anti-Chinese sentiment, thus, created a vulnerability that enabled the *Discourers of Disinformation* to exploit. In the crisis situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, it became easier to make a scapegoat out of this already forbore nation and advertise notions of Sinophobia through misinformation like the bioengineering of the virus story. Overall, the monster which created the monster, as the racist narrative goes, is the monster one should fear. As a result, in the depiction of "Corona-chan", China becomes the real danger and the Chinese are the real monsters one should look out for. Chinese people are, then, invariably capable of creating monsters which wreak havoc on the world and can create more like "Corona-chan". Hence, as the Sinophobic understanding of the "Corona-chan" memes (Pauliks 2020) promoted by the *Discourers of Disinformation* deem; the Chinese become the faceless, profit-calculating evil masterminds one should not trust.

The anime-style drawing that depicted "Corona Chan" and the "chan" addition to the coronavirus have Japanese roots. While the choice of involving clearly unrelated cultures might seem arbitrary to the Chinese scapegoating narrative, the inclusion of Japanese culture is still relevant to the racist meme. Through the racist gaze in which "Corona-chan" was depicted, it might not have been possible (or necessary) to distinguish between different Asian communities, hence equating Japanese culture with Chinese. Therefore, the Sinophobia that started the joke and perpetuated the specter of danger, starts to extend to an entire region of "others". Not just the Japanese or Chinese, but all Asians might be held responsible for causing

the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, all of the Asian communities stand victim to a marginalization that enables a racist mindset to spread its emotional exploitation. In accomplishing an otherization of the Asian communities, the *Discourers of Disinformation* involve themselves with the business of exploitation of fear, anxiety and uncertainty through misinformation and disinformation concerning the effects of coronavirus and its reach. From the *Discourers of Disinformation's* perspective, the chaos that will ensue from having cast more doubt towards the already ambiguous presence of the virus is profitable. After all, emotions are their product and the more general public consumes, generates and redirects emotion, the better the sales.

5.4.1 “Corona-chan’s” Sexuality

The “Corona-chan” character is a Chinese femme fatale; she is surely as dangerous as she is appealing to the fetishizing crowd of the meme’s consumers. The fact that she hosts danger and danger flows through her is evident from the way her hair pins are colored and shaped. They are funky looking toxic representations with lots of green, imbuing her with an assumed infectiousness. The pins’ are also shaped in a way that resembles the appearance of the novel coronavirus under a microscope. In this made up “script” of the disease’s life, the sexist idea manifests itself through the lifestyle of the portrayed Chinese lady. In several different memes (Pauliks 2020), she is either killing people through her toxic touch, betraying them by stabbing them from the back or inviting people towards her toxic touch through lewd demeanor. She is also holding a bottle of Corona brand beer. One interpretation is that this adds onto her toxicity as the contagious virus. Another interpretation is that she herself is drinking that beer, and this creates an air of a “party girl” who is out to have fun and explore her sexuality freely. Therefore, her sexuality is stigmatized with an understanding that any woman who gets in contact with many people should be assumed to be as toxic as “Corona-chan” is. Promiscuity is stigmatized with a link to the deadly nature of a highly infectious disease, thus marginalizing many women for their lifestyle choices. Resulting in a clash of the binary mentalities between liberal freedom and conservative strictness regarding lifestyle choices, this denunciation of the treacherous nature of the femme fatale virus enables the *Discourers of Disinformation* to subvert the public opinion in a sexist way. The attempt indicates this specific purpose of creating an enemy of "certain" marginalized women during the Infodemic. As the virus covers more and more ground, women’s sexuality and their choices are undermined. While an argument about free will is taking place, the *Discourers of Disinformation* are able

to market more emotions and perhaps have more monetary gain through a policy of appeasement, since they appear to be understanding towards each side of the argument. This would be quite like setting up the conditions for a nonphysical war to take place and supplying the fighting parties with ample abstract ammunition.

5.4.2 The “Boomer Remover”

From an environmentalist perspective, “Corona-chan” is referred to as the savior of the world and in one meme she gets angry at people for calling her a virus. (Shevade 2020) Instead she calls people the virus and by getting rid of the virus with her contagion, she becomes the antiheroine. This claim of hers is related to the anxiety about COVID-19 killing the elderly much more effectively. For this context, “Corona-chan” meme also connects to an ageist point of view. As Shevade (2020) explains, “Corona-chan” is also referred to as the “boomer remover”. This is the manifestation of a specific kind of anger towards the people who, as the meme assumes, are responsible for the environmental issues of the world today, the “boomers”. The concept of the “boomers” comes from the well-known “baby boomer” generation who were born in the aftermath of World War II. In this meme, boomers are portrayed to have been born in an era of “assumed” abundance and prosperity. Following this assumption, a reproachful disdain for the “boomers” is expressed through “Corona-chan’s” scorn and wrath.

In the promotion of anger against this specific demographic, the *Discourers of Disinformation* are using another kind of crisis against people whom they hold responsible, another group is identified as the scapegoats. In fact, we are led to believe the scorn of “Corona-chan” is warranted and the fact that the elderly are dying en masse in the COVID-19 epidemic is supposed to be divine justice. After all, as “Corona-chan” claims, the polluters of a beautiful earth for which the next generations have a right to enjoy, should face the proper punishment for only thinking about their own selves. If they were more considerate of the environmental issues affecting the world, the birthright of the future generations would have been preserved. Instead, the people whom the ageist narrative consider responsible, supposedly, acted very similar in nature to a viral infection, consuming the resources of the host for their individual gain and eventually destroying the host. In this regard, the “boomer remover” title is appropriated to “Corona-chan” in an effort to direct the anguish younger generations feel towards the obliterated state the world’s environment is in. The *Discourers of Disinformation*, once again, stand as the expert manipulators

and promoters of emotion through redirection of already existing distress.

While the means of accomplishing ageist scapegoating are achieved through discourses of emotional manipulation, a more nuanced glance over the methodology of "boomers' termination" reveal Sinophobic undertones. The discourse of "removing boomers" from the Earth embodies a Sinophobic understanding connected with ageism because of the way "boomers' termination" is acknowledged. The fact that the anti-heroine (in this case in particular), "Corona-chan" is responsible for this ageist "cleansing" indicates a redirection of fear. All things considered, something evil and monstrous like "Corona-chan", especially knowing it is somewhat akin to the Chinese equivalent of the Frankenstein's monster, is exterminating "demons of old".

In fact, this monster taking out another monster idea is similar to outsourcing the job of taking care of "old problems" to the overseas factories of death. This idea is rooted in Sinophobia and Asian racism in general since this "dirty work" is appropriate to the "lowlife" factory workers whom the racist beliefs consider inhuman anyway. Therefore, it is not the least bit shocking to perceive the inhuman, lab-spawned creature of death (Corona-chan) to be the incessant instrument of death which works as tirelessly and as ceaselessly as the poor factory workers whose lives mean next to nothing for the entitled, racist consumer. After all, this concept infers, both Corona-chan and Asian factory workers live only to serve the young and rich Western consumers. They are meant to handle young Western people's problems and needs. As a result, the idea of "removing boomers" associates with a consumerist, racist mindset which not only ignores the misery of Asian factory workers, but also entitles one to absolving one from the responsibility of handling one's problems, which in this case are the "irresponsible" boomers.

In the case of the "boomer removers", although some might have contributed to the pollution of the earth, surely not everybody is responsible. The misinformation in this case is surrounded in half-truth as there are many innocent "boomers" who were not actively responsible for the immense pollution the world has to endure. It could also be said that any "boomer" who did not work to stop the collapse of the environment is a contributor to the demise. However, even among those, there are still those who probably exerted tremendous energy to put a stop to the decline of nature as we know it. Also, it is not particularly that age demographic's responsibility; many people from other age groups have contributed to the earth's current demise.

All things considered, *Discourers of Disinformation* have successfully utilized defensive denial and defensive aggression through the "Corona-chan" meme message

on the case of ageism. Since the “boomer remover” message managed to get mainstream attention in many Twitter messages (Whalen 2020), people considering the virus to be effective only for the elderly utilized a defensive denial about COVID-19’s danger to everyone else. Making the scapegoat, the elderly, take up the entirety of danger alleviates some of the pressure the looming death might have caused. As for the slurs and hatred which the elderly had to endure online during the pandemic, they can be explained with the ruthless utilization of defensive aggression in which, the scapegoat, the elderly faces aggression in a fashion that acts defensively. Through the expression of anger towards the “boomers”, a feeling of relief and content is achieved.



6. CONCLUSION

As a concept, this thesis has introduced the *Discoursters of Disinformation* who can be creators, spreaders and promoters of sources of misinformation and disinformation to establish an online form of oppression. In this oppression, knowledge is "subjugated", proper access to information relevant and important to public health and safety is disqualified from laypeople through modes of overwhelming falsehoods. Furthermore, the secondary composition of the coronavirus Infodemic which delves into the sociocultural and political realms of society is exploited. This exploitation happens through manipulative and emotional elements of *Discoursters of Disinformation* working to both reignite and conceive new forms of racism, sexism and ageism. In their attempts to incur emotional responses from public, *Discoursters of Disinformation* create chaos, emphasize social and political unease, thus establish modern structures of manipulative power over pandemic-weary crowds.

From the *Discoursters of Disinformation*, a particular group of profiteers called the *Merchants of Emotion* follows within the boundaries of discoursters. This concept was inspired by the idea of *Merchants of Doubt* by Oreskes and Conway (2011) whose definition allowed the tobacco merchants of the 20th century to be identified with their actual product, the doubt they produce in the public eye regarding the harm their tobacco cause. Similarly, the *Discoursters of Disinformation* promote public emotions through online falsehoods to ensure an environment favorable to them presents itself. Since the anxiety due to COVID-19 has stranded more people than usual to their homes, an Infodemic surrounding the information vis-a-vis the coronavirus emerged (Pulido et al. 2020, 379), and the *Discoursters of Disinformation* were able to exploit public emotions.

In light of the recent COVID-19 pandemic and the Infodemic following it, this thesis has tried to explore the involvement of *Discoursters of Disinformation* in the spread of online misinformation and disinformation contained in online posts, stories and memes. My multi-layered cultural analysis on the online media content containing these falsehoods is meant to trace over issues of racism, sexism and ageism. Through these falsehoods, the *Discoursters of Disinformation* have exploited online platforms

such as Twitter and 4chan to promote emotions from which they establish digital oppression vis-a-vis knowledge and power. I argue, in the aftermath of a crisis weary world due to the effects of COVID-19, *Discourers of Disinformation* take over the practices of what (Denike 2015, 124) refers to as the “systemic practices of specific historical and political paradigms”. In fact, when I attempt to apply an “intersectional gaze” on issues regarding the death of George Floyd and the stories of falsehood which followed, the aim is to display how *Discourers of Disinformation* “work through race to both produce and appease collective affects of fear and dread and disdain” (Denike 2015, 124).

To accomplish working through the products of *Discourers of Disinformation*, I followed Kathy Davis’ (Lykke 2014) suggestion and analyzed the layers of meaning through asking the questions about “the other” which allowed me to consider intersections of oppression. Furthermore, especially on the task of comprehending “Corona-chan”, previous work on “Ebola-chan” (Marcus and Singer 2017, 343) have guided me in employing a Geertzian understanding why “a ‘thick description’ or layered analysis of her existence is necessary for examining her import”. Considering her import is what message or emotion the *Discourers of Disinformation* bring to the “Corona-chan” meme, “the multi-vocal cultural nexus reflective of contemporary social complexity (Geertz, 2001: 338)” (Marcus and Singer 2017, 343) inevitably emerged once my thesis reached the different layers of cultural analysis.

In conclusion, it helped me digest the information related to the work of *Discourers of Disinformation* through a Foucauldian (2003) understanding of “subjugation”. The attempt to manipulate, promote and disseminate emotion via means of falsehood, serve to hijack or consume the “life’s scripts” and identities of people who suffer from oppression of any kind. In the case of the murder of George Floyd, falsehoods surrounding his “life’s script” was spread to reduce the value of his innocence in the public eye as well as his and his family’s right to a righteous wrath concerning the violence he endured. Similarly, in the case of Sinophobia, racist ideology was spread through falsehoods like coronavirus originating from eating bat soup. These stories as well as the memes following them, detached people of Asian descent from an individual right to writing one’s own “life’s script”. In doing so, other aspects of falsehoods which invaded different intersections of oppression in threatened identities got explored. As a result, my analysis indicates “the subjugated knowledge” about the oppressed identities, which were silenced through misinformation and disinformation, were promoted by the *Discourers of Disinformation*. In the time of the Infodemic, scapegoating mechanisms were examined through an intersectional gaze to indicate and emphasize the connection between manipulated emotions and the recent public health crisis of the COVID-19.

6.1 Limitations and reflections

The emergence of COVID-19 as well as the Infodemic that followed it is still relatively new. Literature related to the coronavirus is still emerging. In fact, this topic is so new that some of the articles I have benefited from are not even two months old. Additionally, major part of the new research relevant to misinformation and disinformation is conducted through quantitative methods as opposed to the qualitative research I am interested in. Therefore, even though I hoped I was filling a gap in the literature, my thesis definitely suffered from the lack of relevant research on the subject.

While I am making an analysis on news, online posts and memes, I cannot presume to know all there is to know about misinformation and disinformation. My reach only extends to the cases I have encountered and even then, the concept of the *Discourers of Disinformation* is not exhaustive. Furthermore, a more specific gendered analysis employing both quantitative and qualitative methods might encourage further discussion, especially vis-a-vis media content where the "script" of one's life is reclaimed through intersectionality. Such as when a privileged aspect of one's identity becomes central to the "script" of one's life, overshadowing or encompassing an underprivileged part through an online presence in the wake of the Infodemic.

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APPENDIX A

Terminology

Corona-Chan: An anthropomorphized version of the coronavirus in online memes. In this anime style depiction, the virus is portrayed as a young Chinese girl in traditional attire, holding a Corona brand beer in a sexually suggestive manner. Her hairpins are depicted similar to what the COVID-19 virus appears under a microscope.

Ebola-Chan: An anthropomorphized version of the Ebola virus in online memes. In this anime style depiction, the virus is portrayed as a young girl in a sexually suggestive nurse outfit. She is holding a bloody skull with a smile on her face. The ends of her hair get tied up to look like what the Ebola virus appear under a microscope.

The Boomer Remover: Boomers refer to the generation of baby boomers who were born in the aftermath of the second world war. The name "Boomer remover" is given to Corona-chan in an effort to emphasize her effectiveness in posing a threat to the elderly. In online contexts, this name is uttered in a joyous fashion since the same context holds the baby boomer generation responsible for causing environmental problems and not addressing global issues properly.

The Discourers of Disinformation: People who spread and promote discourses imbued in falsehoods in order to create emotional responses such as anxiety, fear, doubt, mistrust. They secure a form of virtual oppression in an effort to disqualify certain information from ever reaching the laypeople. Their discourses circumvent the proper dissemination of knowledge since the spread of misinformation and disinformation through an abundance of falsehoods which contribute to Infodemics as well as thrive in them.

The Merchants of Emotion: As a subsection of Discourers of Disinformation, the merchants of emotion are primarily concerned with profiting off of the spread of falsehoods. They may promote or badmouth products in order to further their monetary gain. They exploit emotions such as anxiety and fear so they could sell products. These products may include and are not limited to medicine, overpriced electric shavers and non-Chinese energy drinks.