

# The two-way Othering during the COVID-19 pandemic: The role of political statement and media

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## Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has seen increased instances of race-related hate crimes in the U.K., both offline and on the internet. On the other hand, at the beginning of the pandemic, Othering has also been used as a political tool to shift the blame to the Chinese-other. Lacan distinguishes between *the other* (another person that the self faces) and *the Other* (a thing which is ontologically distinct from both *the self* and *the other*). In Lacanian terms, the Chinese-other is *the other*, whereas the virus itself is *the Other*. To study how political statements using Othering and scapegoating tactics affect how the group see *the other*, this paper examines news and social media sentiment and Google search trends in the U.K., as well as Weibo posts in China, before and during the first four months of the pandemic. The results suggest that the Othering process not only exists in the U.K. but also in China, where the Western-other is reduced to the symbol of a 'racist'. However, to counter the effect of being Othered, the Chinese government has proactively used the media to emphasise the image of the virus as *the Other*.

**JEL Classification:** D91; Z13; Z19

## Keywords

COVID-19 — sentiment — Othering

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## Introduction

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in January 2020, the development of the COVID-19 pandemic is also accompanied by increasing racism towards the Chinese people (Weale, 2020, March 17). The tension has heightened since the number of cases has increased in the U.K. A keyword search of 'anti-Chinese U.K.' on Google yields a result of 4,420 pieces of news between 19<sup>th</sup> January 2020 and 20<sup>th</sup> April 2020 – The same keyword search results in 727 pieces of news for the period between 19<sup>th</sup> January 2019 and 20<sup>th</sup> April 2019. Meanwhile, victims of racist attacks such as Sylvia Wu<sup>1</sup> have also been coming forward to speak about their experiences. At the same time, the number of anti-Asian hate crimes on social media has also been increasing (Macguire, 2020, 5<sup>th</sup> April).

Although much of the news reporting has been bringing attention to the increasing incidences of racial attacks and discriminations, scapegoating and Othering behaviour have been observed in ways that certain news is reported. The process of Othering involves labelling individuals who do not belong to the norm of the social group as subordinates (Saïd, 1979). Similar behaviour has also been observed in political statements made by certain politicians. For example, on 16<sup>th</sup> March 2020, the President of the United States Donald Trump

specifically labelled COVID-19 as a 'Chinese virus' (BBC News, 2020, 18<sup>th</sup> March). Meanwhile, when interviewed by BBC on 29<sup>th</sup> March 2020 following news reporting on 'U.K. missing out for EU ventilator schemes' (BBC News, 2020), senior British Conservative Party politician Michael Gove shifted the blame to China for being "not clear about the scale, the nature, and the infectiousness" of the disease (Proctor, 2020, para.3). Before the interview, his wife Sarah Vine posted a picture on Twitter suggesting that Chinese markets were still selling bats (Figure 6 in Appendix). These political statements and social media posts can have consequences of exacerbating racial discriminations towards the Chinese people in the country at the beginning of the pandemic when the virus was mostly spread in China.

Nevertheless, the process of Othering not only occurs amongst the 'Westerners' in Othering their Chinese-other, but can also occur amongst the 'Chinese' in Othering their Western-other. Similar to how the Eastern culture may be reduced to stereotypes in Orientalism, the Western world may also be stereotyped in the form of Occidentalism. Orientalism stereotypes the Chinese as being irrational and barbaric (Saïd, 1979) as well as authoritarian (Vukovich, 2013). The former are products of Imperialism, whereas the latter results from the Communism-Liberal democratic geopolitical tension. On the other hand, Occidentalism stereotypes the Westerners as machine-like colonists with civilisation but no culture (Buruma & Margalit, 2005). Both forms of Othering dehumanise

<sup>1</sup> On 1<sup>st</sup> February 2020, a person said to Chinese citizen Sylvia Wu at a West London underground station, "You didn't bring virus from China, I hope." (Channel 4, 2020).

*the other* to symbols and stereotypes, and consequently reduces the understanding of the other culture to the full extent.

This paper examines how deliberate acts of Othering by media reporting and political statements can affect internet users' opinions towards the Othered group. More specifically, the paper studies how internet searches on Google and posts on Twitter in the U.K., as well as posts on Weibo in China, have changed immediately following these politicised events. The main reason of choosing China and the U.K. as a pair for the comparative study is that the former is where the first COVID-19 case was reported, and the latter has the highest total number of deaths amongst the European countries at the time when this paper was written (May 2020). The reason for only focusing on Weibo in China is because of the bans on accessing Google and Twitter in the country. Weibo, which is the largest micro-blog website in China, is an alternative of Twitter in the country.

Besides the initial outbreak of COVID-19 in China, several subsequent events should also be taken into account in the analysis. This is because that when the first case and death were confirmed in the U.K., as well as when the country faces more stringent policies such as lockdowns, the overall anxiety towards the virus of the general public increases. The paper aims to examine the impact of these specific events on internet users' opinions towards the Othered group. The timeline of these events is outlined in Table 1. Both search and hashtag volumes on Google, Twitter and Weibo, as well as Reuters' sentiment index, are used as indicators of the extent of Othering in response to the studied events.

The originality of this paper lies in two aspects. First, it connects psychoanalysis with internet and social media sentiment analysis. In particular, the paper distinguishes the ideas of *the other* and *the Other* in Lacanian psychoanalysis, and aims to identify the Othering process associated with both. The former commonly refers to the other person that individuals encounter, whereas the latter, which also referred to as a Symbolic other, transcends above the intersubjectivity (Fryer, 2004; Lacan, 2004). Second, it analyses the Othering process not only from how the Chinese-other is othered in the U.K. but also how the British-other are Othered in China – Othering is an act of defending the essence of *the self*, which contains historicity, norms, traditions and existing social narratives. The process is therefore two-way. The results of the paper have the following policy implications. To protect the rights, safety and equality of ethnic minorities in the country, policy-makers should ensure fair reporting of the media, as well as reduce miscommunications not only between the natives and the minorities within the country, but also between countries.

### The Threat of *the other* and *the Other* in COVID-19

The self/other dichotomy is one of the key concepts in philosophy and psychoanalysis. Much of the discussions on the topic happened during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, amongst thinkers such as Camus, Derrida, Lévinas and Lacan. Even though all of these

thinkers provide relevant insights to the discussion of this research paper, Lacan's theories are particularly applicable in the context of this study. The main reason is that Lacan makes a specific distinction between the concept of *the other* and *the Other*. For example, within an inter-subjective dialogue, the other person is *the other* that *the self* faces, whereas the language and ethical codes that *I* and my personal counterpart share are *the Other* – They are *the Other* to both *the self* and *the other* (Figure 1). Therefore, in the context of COVID-19, *the other* is the foreigner, whereas *the Other* is the virus itself.

Othering regards individuals who do not share the norm of the social group as subordinates (Saïd, 1979). Here, the norm of the social group equates to the version of *the self*, whereas the Othered individuals are *the other*. In a way, Othering is an act of defending the essence of *the self*. In the process of Othering, the alterity of *the other* is compromised, since they are different from *the self* and the norm of the group (Derrida, 1973). Orientalism is one example of Othering. In more severe cases, Othering may develop into scapegoating, when *the other* is blamed to be the one causing the negative social consequences (Douglas, 2002). Both Othering and scapegoating involve strengthening the existing stereotypes of the Othered individuals. Part of Othering can exist to avoid the practical danger that a group faces. For example, since it is not possible to see the virus, the act of avoiding people who have a high possibility of carrying the virus can also form a survival strategy.

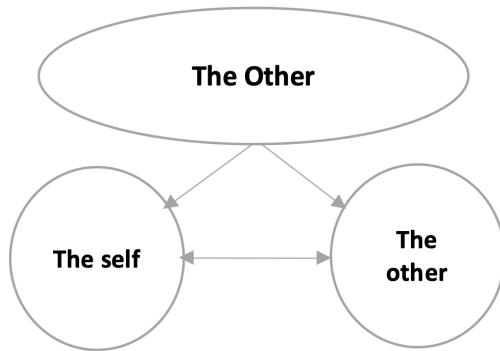
Othering can also occur in the direction from the dominated to the dominant group. Therefore, similar to how the Western-self may Other the Chinese-other as the ones that are 'primitive', 'barbaric' and 'infectious' shown in Orientalism (Saïd, 1979), the Chinese-self may Other the Western-other as the 'oppressors' and 'racists' shown in Occidentalism (Buruma & Margalit, 2005).

To Lévinas, the discussion of the relationship between *the self* and *the Other* (*l'Autre*)<sup>2</sup> is also a discussion on ethics, leading to the practical question of how to face and address *the other*. Lévinas argues that Western ontology traditionally reduces the other to an object of consciousness. Lévinas proposes ethics that *the self* should preserve the alterity of *the other* when *the self* encounters *the other*. *The self* should recognise that *l'Autre* is not us, but is also something humanly. This means that *l'Autre* should not be dehumanised or objectified (Lévinas, 1969; Fryer, 2004). It should be noted that Othering is a phenomenon that exists even during normal times and extends into areas such as labour markets. Using a field experiment which sends out fictitious resumes assigned with either a White sounding or an African American sounding name, Bertrand and Mullainathan (2003) found that White names received 50% more call-backs from the employers for interviews.

The heightened tension between the native *self* and *the*

<sup>2</sup>Lévinas' use of *the other* and *the Other* differs from Lacan's. His use of *the Other* (*l'Autre* in French) is in relation to *the Self* (*le Même* in French). To reduce confusion, *l'Autre* is used here.

other during COVID-19 coincides with the shift of political attitudes towards race and liberal ideology. Examples of such shifts include the rise of anti-globalisation movements and right-wing populism, which both have resulted in increasing xenophobic behaviour (Appadurai, 2017). Therefore, the pandemic contributes to, rather than creates the tension.



**Figure 1.** The other vs. The Other.

Source: Adapted from Lacan's theories (Fryer, 2004)

## Methodology and data collection

Table 1 contains the key Othering events following the first case being reported in China on 19<sup>th</sup> January 2020. The analysis is conducted using social media data. In particular, data from both the U.K. and China are collected. The former includes Google search trends and social media data from sources including LexisNexis Social Media Analytics<sup>3</sup>, and the latter includes Weibo posts in China. Since the study aims to examine how specific events impact on Othering, the analysis specifically focuses on changes in sentiments and volume of posts following the analysed events. However, it is difficult to separate the fear due to the genuine threat of COVID-19 and the effect of deliberate Othering. Therefore, Table 1, which outlines the key dates and details of the events, not only includes deliberate Othering events but also events that may heighten people's fear towards the virus. The former type of events includes comments from the current U.S. President Donald Trump, senior British Conservative Party politician Michael Gove and his wife, whereas the latter type of events includes first instances of confirmed case and death in the U.K.

On the analysis of the Othering towards the Chinese people in the U.K., the indices examined on Reuters through LexisNexis Social Analytics are sentiment towards China and anger level towards China. On the other hand, the searches examined on Google trends are 'China virus', 'Chinese virus', 'ban Chinese' and 'boycott Chinese' (see Table 2). The

choice of keywords is based on the following reasoning. First, Reuters provides region-specific sentiment analysis, and therefore effectively reveals changes in sentiments directly towards China and the Chinese people. On the other hand, Google trends are not able to distinguish positive or negative sentiments associated with searches. As a result, the choice of keywords on Google needs to be specific and targeted. The two approaches, therefore, complement each other. Second, the anger index is chosen since the anger towards China most likely arises from the anger towards the country and towards the people. It is possible, however less likely, to be an emotion expressed towards the virus itself. Third, 'Chinese virus' is the original phrase used by President Trump. If his comments made an impact on the sentiment, the searches of the phrase as well as its related phrase 'China virus' are likely to surge. Fourth, whether or not to 'ban Chinese' has been in the centre of public discussions since the outbreak of the pandemic, and made headlines for some newspapers. Examples of these headlines include the cover page of *Evening Standard* on 6<sup>th</sup> February 2020. Even though such discussion is based on the reasonable concerns over the potential spread of the virus, it can still shed some light on public attitudes towards the Chinese people. In particular, through examining the search when the virus becomes under control in China in March, it provides some insights on whether the discussion to 'ban Chinese' at that time is purely out of safety concerns. Finally, the choice of the keyword 'boycott Chinese' is based on the popular Twitter hashtag 'BoycottChina'. Whilst 'boycott China' makes more reference towards Chinese products, 'boycott Chinese' has a stronger racial reference on the internet. Therefore, in the context of this study, 'boycott Chinese' is a more suitable keyword. Nevertheless, the main caveat of using 'boycott Chinese' is that the keyword search on Google also includes searches on 'boycott Chinese products'.

The analysis on Google trends is through examining the changes in the number of searches both in the long-term and in the short-term. The long-term trends provide a benchmark on the Othering events during the normal time. The analysis on social media and news sentiment is through examining Reuters sentiment index. Reuters news is used as the main source of the news, whereas LexisNexis Social Analytics is used as the social media database (Thomson Reuters, 2019). On the other hand, 'China anger' refers to the levels of anger and disgust shown towards the country, which ranges between 0 and 1 with 1 being the highest level of anger. Different from 'anger' which mostly addresses subjective emotions, 'sentiment' not only contains subjective emotions, but also objective facts regarding the situation in the country. The caveat of the method is that the sentiment index is constructed based on volume, which treats official statements, media articles and social media posts from an ordinary internet user of equal weights. However, such limitation does not have much impact on the analysis, since the knock-on effect of official statements and media articles is captured by the posts from ordinary internet users on Twitter.

<sup>3</sup>LexisNexis Social Analytics is a platform which contains social media contents from various social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

No.	Date	Event
1	19/01/2020	The first confirmed case reported outside Hubei, China.
2	23/01/2020	The Chinese government announced lockdowns of the city of Wuhan and other cities in Hubei Province.
3	30/01/2020	WHO declared COVID-19 as a public health emergency.
4	31/01/2020	The first case in the U.K. was confirmed.
5	06/03/2020	The first death in the U.K. was confirmed.
6	12/03/2020	The U.K. moved into the 'delay' phase*
7	17/03/2020**	Trump labelled COVID-19 as 'Chinese virus' on Twitter.
8	20/03/2020	The U.K. government requested closure of non-essential public venues including pubs and restaurants.
9	23/03/2020	The U.K. government announced a 3-week long lockdown.
10	29/03/2020	Michael Gove blamed China for not containing COVID-19 and his wife Sarah Vine posted on Twitter that the country was still selling wildlife animals.

\* In the plan of battling against COVID-19, the U.K. government outlines four phases: 1) containment; 2) delay; 3) research; and 4) mitigate.

\*\* Trump's post referencing 'Chinese virus' occurred on 16<sup>th</sup> March 2020. However, since the post was at 10:51 pm, which is not only late night in the U.K. but also 17<sup>th</sup> March 2020 in China, the analysis, therefore, focuses on searches and posts on 17<sup>th</sup> March 2020.

**Table 1.** Key events examined

Platform	Keywords
Reuters (through LexisNexis Social Analytics)	China (sentiment and anger)
Google	'China virus', 'Chinese virus', 'ban Chinese', 'boycott Chinese'

**Table 2.** Keywords search on Reuters and Google.

On the analysis of the Othering in China towards the West, Weibo data is used. Weibo, meaning 'microblog' in Chinese, is the most popular microblogging platform in China, which is very similar to Twitter. Since Twitter is not available in China, Weibo is the main microblogging platform in China. The number of active users on Weibo as of December 2019 was 516 million (Weibo Corporation, 2020). Weibo posts mentioning 'U.K./British people' 'discriminate/discrimination' and 'China/Chinese' are examined (Table 3). The choice of the keywords aims to: 1) examine whether or not there is an increasing number of xenophobic behaviour towards the Chinese people living in the U.K. based on their own experiences; and 2) examine how the Chinese internet users react towards race-sensitive events targeting the Chinese people in the U.K. In particular, the analysis aims to study whether or not the internet users stereotype the 'West' in an Occidentalism way. The reactions towards the events outlined in Table 1 may be common behaviour as part of the conventional lifecycle of news articles. Therefore, similar to the analysis conducted on Google search trends in the U.K., both long and short-term searches are also conducted for Weibo posts.

Contrary to Trump and Gove's attempts to strengthen the image of *the other*, Chinese media and official statements focus on registering the image of *the Other*. In other words, they focus on emphasising that COVID-19 is *the Other* for

both the Chinese and the rest of the world. 'Community of shared future for mankind' (originally as “*人命共同体*” in Chinese), is a political statement created by the former President of China Hu Jintao and advocated by the current leader Xi Jinping<sup>4</sup>. The phrase establishes the value framework of human beings sharing a community of common destiny. The country's constitutional amendment in 2018 included the term in its preface. The phrase emphasises the need for replacing Othering behaviour with global solidarity. Therefore, an analysis on how the number of news articles including the phrase has changed is also conducted using Google News function, to examine whether or not the use of the phrase has increased during COVID-19.

The choice of keywords from the British and Chinese sources is asymmetric, since the power relation between the two is not symmetric. If the Chinese and/or the British believe that Othering exists, how the former (the party being Othered) sees the latter (the party Othering) differs from how the latter sees the former. Such asymmetry also aligns with the Orientalism-Occidentalism dialectic.

<sup>4</sup>At the opening ceremony of CPC in Dialogue with World Political Parties High-Level Meeting in Beijing in 2017, Xi Jinping said, "Building a community with a shared future for mankind is, in essence, to connect the prospects and destinies of every nation and country closely together, share weal and woe, and turn planet Earth into a harmonious family" (Xinhua net, 2017).



Platform	Keywords
Weibo	'U.K./British people' + 'discriminate/discrimination' + 'China/Chinese'
Google News	'Community of shared future for mankind'

**Table 3.** Keywords search on Reuters and Google.

## Results and discussion

### Orientalism: Analysis through Google trend and sentiment analysis

As data on anti-social behaviour is not available during the writing of this paper, the limitation implies the inability to analyse how racism behaviour unfolds during the development of the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.K. Nevertheless, Google trend analysis and Thomson Reuters market sentiment analysis can provide more recent insights on instant social reactions to the pandemic, and are solutions to resolve the data limitation.

#### a. Reuter sentiment index

Figure 2 includes the sentiment trends and anger levels towards China between 1<sup>st</sup> January 2019 and 30<sup>th</sup> April 2020. 'China sentiment' rates the overall positive references net of negative references towards China, which ranges between -1 and 1. The relatively more stable and relatively more volatile lines on the figures correspond to 90-day and 30-day rolling sentiment respectively. The areas between the two lines refer to the short-term sentiment relative to the long-term sentiment. Green and red areas refer to positive and negative relative sentiments respectively, with darker colours indicating higher relative values. The top-left and top-right graphs in Figure 2 show that sentiment towards China starts to deteriorate in late January following the outbreak of COVID-19 in the country. The top-left graph shows that sentiment towards China has improved in the news since the beginning of April 2020 as the situation stabilises in the country. However, the top-right graph suggests that the sentiment on social media has not been improving.

The bottom-left and bottom-right graphs in Figure 2 focus on the anger element of the sentiment index. The two graphs show that the initial outbreak in China in late January did not have any visible impact on anger level. However, an increase in anger level is observed in social media in March, when the situation in China stabilises and the circumstance outside China worsens (Figure 2 – bottom-right). The increasing anger level in social media is also accompanied by the increasing anger level in the news (Figure 2 – bottom-left).

#### b. Google trend

Figure 3 shows the Google trends for the four keywords between 21<sup>st</sup> April 2019 and 20<sup>th</sup> April 2020. It should be noted that the long-term trend is based on weekly data, and does not capture daily searches. The scale of the graphs is the

popularity index of the search, where 100 indicates the peak of its popularity and 50 implies that the search level is half of its peak popularity. The labels between 1 and 10 on the graphs correspond to the 10 key examined events outlined in Table 1.

The long-term trends provide the following insights. First, the long-term trends all suggest that the searches of the examined keywords only began to soar following the outbreak of the pandemic. Second, the surge in searches of 'China virus' and 'Chinese virus' occurred mostly during January, when COVID-19 was mostly contained within China. On the other hand, President Trump's negative labelling of the virus on Twitter did not seem to cause much reaction on Google searches amongst U.K. internet users during the week when the event happened. Third, the graphs suggest that there were surges in searches on 'ban Chinese' and 'boycott Chinese' during the week ending 29<sup>th</sup> March 2020.

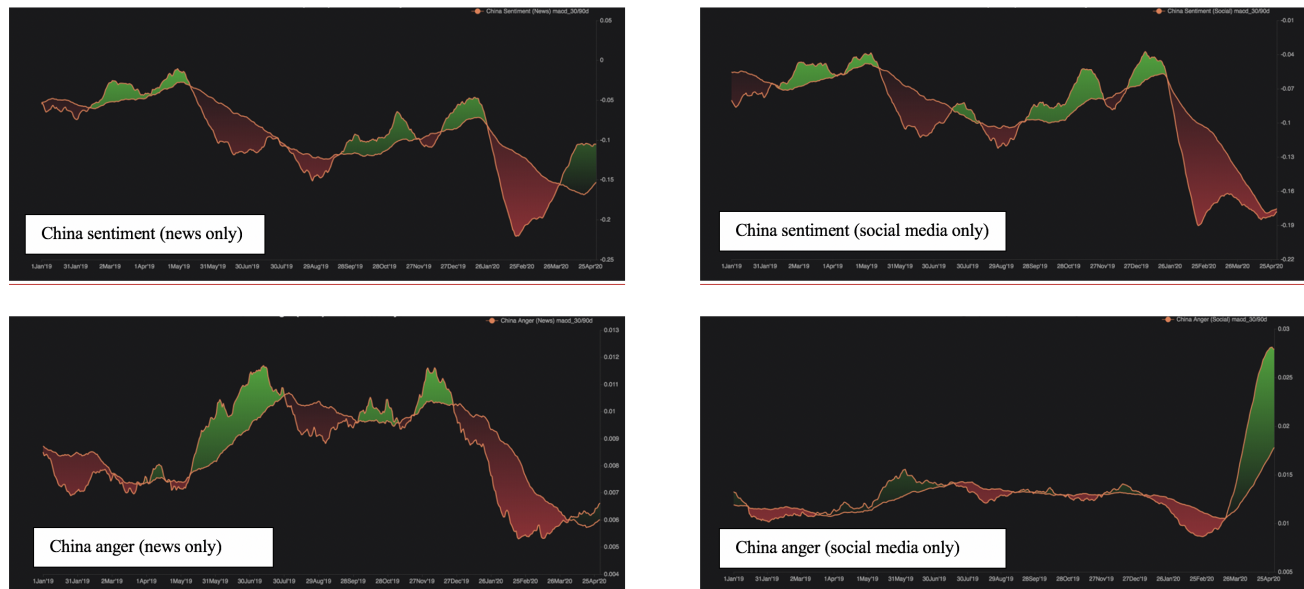
The bottom-left and bottom-right graphs in Figure 3 focus on a shorter period (1<sup>st</sup> January 2020 to 18<sup>th</sup> April 2020) and therefore enable a closer examination of how the events have affected the search patterns. Overall, besides the initial outbreak of COVID-19 in China, President Trump's comment or the other events listed in Table 1 did cause some changes in the search patterns of 'China virus' or 'Chinese virus', where an increase in searches is observed for both keywords. On the other hand, a surge in searches on 'ban Chinese' is observed on 29<sup>th</sup> March 2020. Finally, daily searches on 'boycott Chinese' have been consistently high since March and did not experience any surges following any of the listed events in Table 1. Above all, the increase in searches on 'ban Chinese' following Michael Gove and Sarah Vine's statements is the highest. There were no searches of the term during most of the time before 29<sup>th</sup> March 2020 and peaked to its highest popularity on that day.

### Occidentalism: Analysis through Chinese social media Weibo

The idea of Otherness and the act of Othering not only exist in the direction from the British towards the Chinese, but also in the direction from the Chinese towards the British.

Therefore, it is also important to examine how the narratives of the Chinese people towards the British people have changed since the outbreak of COVID-19, especially following the key events outlined in Table 1.

8790 posts containing 'U.K./British people' 'discriminate/discrimination' and 'China/Chinese' on Weibo dated between 4<sup>th</sup> April 2017 and 20<sup>th</sup> April 2020. More specifically, the



**Figure 2.** China sentiment index and China anger index: 01/01/2019 – 30/04/2020

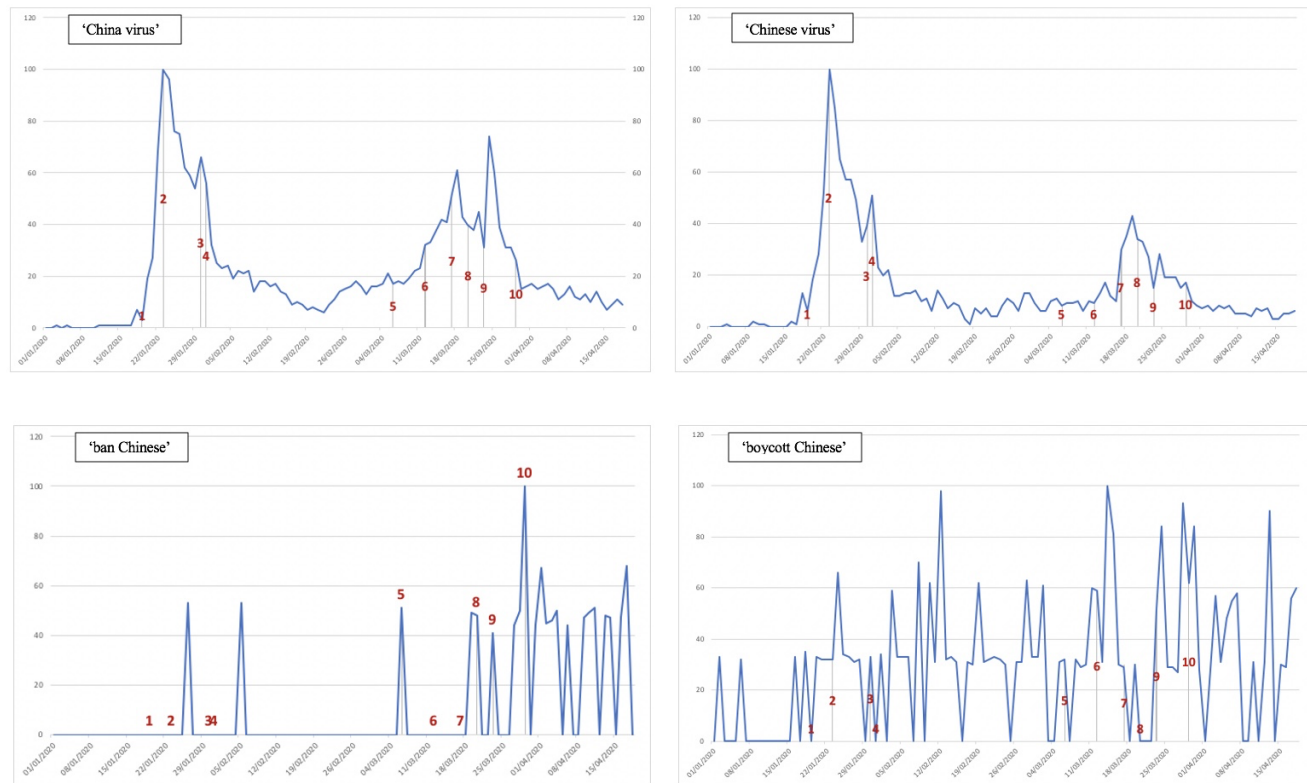


**Figure 3.** Google searches: 21/04/2019 – 20/04/2020.

number of posts is 34, 16, 1638 and 7102 for the four consecutive years. The examination of the posts reveals that many of them consist of posts and reposts of news articles. The final dataset, therefore, removes all the posts and reposts of news articles which do not contain any personal comments. The final dataset contains 3865 posts, with the distribution of

34, 15, 1158 and 2658 for the four consecutive years. Given that most of the posts are concentrated in 2019 and 2020, the analysis will focus on the posts of those two years.

Figure 5 plots the time series distribution of the number of posts, which include news articles, between 1<sup>st</sup> January 2019 and 20<sup>th</sup> April 2020, along with the markers of the key events



**Figure 4.** Google searches: 01/01/2020 – 18/04/2020.

Year	Number of posts
<b>Including news</b>	
2017	34
2018	16
2019	1638
2020	7102
Total	8790
<b>Excluding news</b>	
2017	34
2018	15
2019	1158
2020	2658
Total	3865

**Table 4.** Distribution of posts between 2017 – 2020 (including news and excluding news).

outlined in Table 1. The top right graph in Figure 5 is the time series plot which includes news articles between 1<sup>st</sup> January 2019 and 20<sup>th</sup> April 2020. The purpose of the bottom-left and right graphs in Figure 5 is to closely examine the trends during the examined period, by eliminating the reactions following the initial outbreak in China. The plots reveal a sharp increase in posts following the outbreak of COVID-19 in China during

the examined period. The first peak occurred on 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2020, following the reporting in China on the event that news presenter Piers Morgan ‘mimicked’ Chinese language on TV by referring to a Chinese milk brand that royal family member Peter Phillips endorses as ‘Ching Chang Chong milk’. The incident resulted in 1589 people complaining to Ofcom<sup>5</sup> and the news channel issued an apology statement. Even though the event occurred had no reference to COVID-19, its timing stirred discussion on Weibo linking the implied racism to COVID-19. The second surge occurred on 8<sup>th</sup> February 2020, when Chinese media reported that Sylvia Wu, a Chinese citizen living in the U.K., shared her experience on Channel 4 as a racism victim<sup>6</sup>.

The bottom-left graph in Figure 5 is the plot which removes all news articles, and therefore only includes personal anecdotes which contain the three keywords. It shows that the relevant discussion on 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2020 was mostly reposting of the news articles, and there was only a small number of personal anecdotes on the Piers Morgan incident. However, there was a large number of discussions on the topic following Sylvia Wu’s appearance, suggesting that the news coverage in China has triggered internet users to share their views and ex-

<sup>5</sup>Ofcom is a U.K. government-approved regulatory and competition authority for broadcasting.

<sup>6</sup>The original coverage of the story on Channel 4 is found on: [channel4.com/news/man-at-tube-station-said-to-me-you-didnt-bring-virus-from-china-i-hope-chinese-citizen-sylvia-wu](https://www.channel4.com/news/man-at-tube-station-said-to-me-you-didnt-bring-virus-from-china-i-hope-chinese-citizen-sylvia-wu)

periences on the topic. Closer examinations of the posts show that most of the comments and anecdotes relate to labelling the British as racists, and in many cases, without providing evidence.

The study of the first two surges of the number of posts reveals that there is a delay in news reporting in China on some of the events. For example, the Piers Morgan incident occurred on 21<sup>st</sup> January 2020 but was only reported in China on 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2020, whereas Sylvia Wu spoke on Channel 4 on 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2020 but was only reported 5 days later. As a result, there is a possibility that social media reactions are not immediately shown following the outlined key events in Table 1. Through careful examination, it is found that, besides the two events mentioned above, the two other events that were not reported in China on the day that they happened were event 7 and 10, which were both reported a day later.

Observing Figure 5 whilst taking into account the delayed reporting of event 7 and 10, it shows that there is a surge of the number of posts following Trump's, as well as Michael Gove's and Sarah Vine's statements. However, all the other events do not have any visible impact on the post volumes. Finally, when the news articles are removed, it shows that the effect that event 10 has on public discussions diminishes.

Aligned with the earlier research hypothesis, the Chinese media and officials see COVID-19 as an opportunity to further promote the idea of 'community of shared future for mankind', by emphasising that the virus is mankind's common enemy. In the first four months in 2020, the number of news articles mentioning the phrase is already 3 times the volume in 2019. There is also a soaring number of posts in March 2020, which coincides with the time when the virus starts to spread outside Asia (Table 5 and 6). It, therefore, suggests the possibility of the Chinese government using *the Other* to counter the effect of being Othered by the 'West' as *the other*. Nevertheless, it does not mean that the emphasis of the idea of *the other* does not exist in China. With the increasing number of cases amongst African communities in Guangzhou, a Southern Chinese city, the African residents in China are now facing being Othered in the country (Burke et al., 2020, 27<sup>th</sup> April).

Year	Number of news articles
2015	941
2016	1,700
2017	4,180
2018	9,310
2019	9,880
2020*	27,700

\* The search includes news articles between 01/01/2020 and 22/04/2020.

**Table 5.** Chinese news articles which include the term 'community of shared future for mankind' (by year): 2015 - 2020.

Year	Number of news articles
Jan 2020	5,750
Feb 2020	4,160
March 2020	11,500
April 2020	14,700

**Table 6.** Chinese news articles which include the term 'community of shared future for mankind' in 2020 (by month): January 2020 – April 2020.

## Conclusion

### Summary

The findings of examining internet users in the U.K. and China suggest that political statements and media play an important role in shaping public opinions in both countries. As a result, domestic news reporting and political statements that carry significant messages of Othering can exacerbate such processes. In the event of COVID-19, the Chinese government and media aim to counter the effect of being Othered by the West, by shifting the emphasis and blame to *the Other*, which is the virus itself.

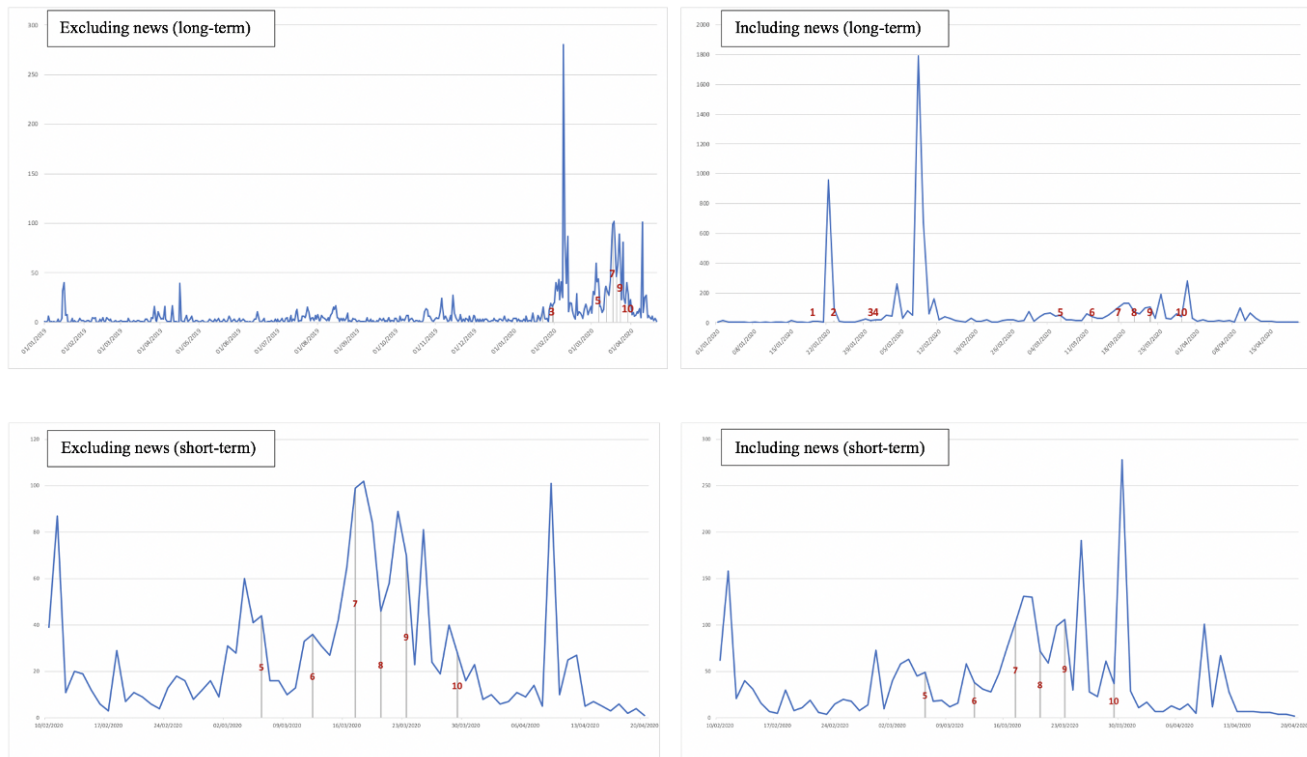
### Policy implications

Othering not only damages the relationship between the ethnic majority group and the ethnic minority groups within the country but also between countries. Therefore, Othering exacerbates the divide and misunderstanding between one group and another, which can also extend beyond race and culture. It may further contribute to both social and economic inequality. To reduce racism and xenophobic behaviour within the society and Internationally, political statements and journalistic reporting should avoid using Othering in delivering messages or reporting news. Besides, international communities should foster platforms for better communication, and therefore reduce the opposition and antagonism between communities. Above all, a transnational effort is needed to counter racism as results of Othering in different countries and context.

### Future research

There are several limitations of this paper. First, the social media analysis does not take into account the reaction amongst the social media audiences of the posts, where the number of likes, reposts and comments are not taken into account. Second, it is difficult to distinguish whether the changing behaviour towards the Chinese people in the U.K. is due to the concerns over the spreading of the virus or out of xenophobia. Therefore, this study aims to reveal preliminary descriptive findings, rather than causal relations. Above all, the secondary data may not fully capture the experience of the Othered group. More specifically, the secondary data cannot unveil the underlying discourse that these individuals experience, especially in cases when racism is internalised. In such cases,





**Figure 5.** Weibo post volumes: long-term (01/01/2019 – 20/04/2020) and short-term (10/02/2020 – 20/04/2020).

the individuals may not choose to report or even realise the discourse.

Future research on the topic includes two possible directions. First, in terms of methodology, surveys, interviews and comparison studies may be conducted for Chinese residents in the U.K. and African residents in China. In addition, causal studies using Difference-in-Difference can identify how COVID-19 has contributed to cases of racism attacks in areas with higher infection rates differently to ones with lower infection rates. Second, future research can examine whether Othering is reflected in the labour market during the period examined in this paper.

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## Appendix



**Figure 6.** Sarah Vine's tweet on 29<sup>th</sup> March 2020.  
Source: Twitter (2020).