Discursive Strategies of Manipulation in COVID-19 Political Discourse: The Case of Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro

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Abstract
This study aims to investigate the discursive strategies of manipulation and their realizations in political speeches about COVID-19 pandemic delivered by Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro. The scheme of manipulation strategies proposed by van Dijk was used to analyze the data. The findings show that the manipulation in both speeches is delivered through ideological polarization, discrediting the others, emotionalizing the argument, emphasizing the power, moral superiority and credibility of the speaker, and adducing seemingly irrefutable proofs of the speaker's beliefs and reasons. Among these strategies, ideological polarization is the most frequent strategy used by both speakers. Polarization can indoctrinate a community with shared beliefs and values because of its close relation with particular ideology and belief. These findings add to a growing body of work on discursive manipulation, suggesting that political discourse can be a potential source of societal manipulation. Most importantly, these results draw a point whereby ideological polarization is the most effective and prevailing category while adducing seemingly indisputable proofs of the speaker's beliefs appears to be less compelling.

Keywords
political discourse, critical discourse analysis, COVID-19, discursive manipulation strategies, politics, ideological polarization

Introduction
After breaking out in the city of Wuhan, COVID-19 has killed and infected thousands of people. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), as of October 18th, 2020, the new deadly virus caused more than 40 million confirmed cases with over 1.1 million deaths globally. Over time, both the numbers of confirmed cases and deaths keep increasing. Triggered by this pandemic, many well-known political figures attempt to make their ways to influence people. In this regard, the role of political speech is significant since it presents arguments as a way of building and maintaining a social relationship and proposing ideas, policies, and political projects (Hashim & Safwat, 2015).

Politicians act based on beliefs, ideas, and values, which they intend to realize (Martin, 2015). The concept of political discourse allows politicians to affect people’s knowledge and understanding of both social and political realities in wider environment. The political community, such as parties, guide the politicians to maneuver themselves and demand them to accomplish particular goals through interaction with their allies and rivals and daily political activity (Kampf, 2015).

As people who have power over the society, many politicians use an impressionistic view to influence others and make them believe and do things against their will and interest (van Dijk, 2006a), which is regarded as manipulation. Political address is seemingly the most reliable political discourse that generally includes discursive manipulation. The manipulation in speech, which covers a national context, is a powerful tool to obtain advantages, maintain power, and avoid responsibility (El-Hussari, 2010). Sustained by media, the dissemination of manipulated information in speeches can be widely expanded to outreach more recipients.

Manipulation is one of the notions in Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA), but it gets relatively poor attention. Researchers have analyzed manipulation in media

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discourse (Ali & Omar, 2016; Lihua, 2012; Ozyumenko, 2017; van Dijk, 2017) and in letters (Karimi & Tabrizi, 2015). However, manipulation studies in political discourse, especially speech, are scarce. Additionally, to the best of our knowledge, there is still very limited research on manipulation in political speeches addressing the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, this study tries to fill this gap by examining the discursive manipulation strategies in COVID-19 political speeches delivered by state leaders.

Manipulative discourse regarding COVID-19 is the legitimation of decision to slow down the spread of the virus and manage new normality during the pandemic. This study focuses on two selected speeches delivered by politicians concerning COVID-19: (i) President Trump’s speech on Wednesday, March 11th, 2020 from the Oval Office; (ii) President Bolsonaro’s speech on national broadcast on Tuesday, March 24th, 2020. Given President Trump’s contingency plan to confront the virus, the chosen speech constitutes occasions on which he revealed the European travel ban to the public, which was taken without consultation, and the lower risk of infection regardless of declaring a national emergency. On the same occasion, he accused the European Union of failing to combat the virus by not taking the same precautions as the United States. President Trump was not only addressing Coronavirus-related matters on behalf of the American government, but he was also establishing his authority via discursive interaction, which could have impacts on the concerning public. On the other hand, President Bolsonaro highlighted his dominance by straightforwardly urging the citizens to return to normality. In his speech, he accused the Brazilian media of spreading fear. While the two speeches come from politicians in response to COVID-19, they essentially belong to the same political communication as they were produced under the same situational contexts and purposes. Based on all these factors, we believed that both speeches are worth studying from the perspective of CDA.

To restate, the current study seeks to investigate the discursive manipulation strategies and their realizations used by President Trump and President Bolsonaro in their remarks on the COVID-19 pandemic. It is expected that the findings can give insight into how language, authority, and society are intertwined within political discourses of COVID-19 pandemic.

**Conceptual Framework**

Manipulation in political discourse is defined as “an illegitimate control by the manipulator over other people” to make them believe that any policies taken are done in people’s best interests when, in fact, the policies only favor the manipulator (Cabrera-Peñuelas, 2017, p. 209). Manipulation can be either interpersonal or societal. Manipulation between individuals is counted as interpersonal while societal manipulation is performed by institutions or organizations to harm the collectivities of people, such as readers, voters, audience, and public opinion (van Dijk, 2017). Both are troublesome as the manipulated people are unable to see the negative within the context (Wilson, 2005) and “it reproduces, or may reproduce, inequality: it is in the best interests of powerful groups and speakers, and hurts the interests of less powerful groups and speakers” (van Dijk, 2008a, p. 216). Since social-political manipulation is related to the abuse of power, social-political manipulation is ideological, which include ideologies, ideological attitudes, and ideological discourse structure realized in discursive manipulation strategies (van Dijk, 2006b).

**Manipulation and Ideology**

Ideologies are mental representations that build social cognition and are shared by groups of people (van Dijk, 2015). Since ideologies can be shared, acquired, adopted, and implemented by members of communities, politicians impose their ideologies to realize their interests and control the social and political practices of the groups. Ideologies may also control group knowledge. This type of specific knowledge is a social belief that is acquired, shared, and held to be true by a group (van Dijk, 2001). Political figures who have power in society can control group knowledge by dominating the access of public and non-public discourse and determining which kind of information will be given to the public through the mass media (van Dijk, 2012). They can also acquire operational capacities and technical tools to form and spread malicious misinformation and place social bots to interfere with the directions of online conversations (Badawy et al., 2018). The press covertly or openly favoring a particular political figure can marshal the discursive power to continuously establish public understanding based on their perspectives (Ali & Omar, 2016). All of these unjustified dominations may subsequently lead to the manipulation of public knowledge and indirect control of the minds and actions of the public.

**Manipulation Strategies**

Manipulators are seen to have different strategies in reproducing their power that is contrary to the interests of the dominated people. Hancock et al. (2007) map out the linguistic behaviors mainly employed by manipulators which include producing more words, using more third-person pronouns, and employing more terms related to senses. In his recent findings of manipulation, van Dijk (2017) finds that local manipulation strategies also implement lexical derogation, selective accusations, presuppositions, disclaimers, positive self-presentation, suspicions and accusations as facts, generalizations, numbers game rhetoric, along with delegitimizing and legitimating accusations. In this study, our analysis and discussion are based on van Dijk’s (2006a) scheme of discursive manipulation strategies which include
emphasizing the power, moral superiority and credibility of the speaker; polarizing ideology; discrediting the others; emotionalizing the argument; and adducing seemingly irrefutable proofs of the speaker's beliefs and reasons.

The power, moral superiority, and credibility of the speakers are stated through particular speech acts, metaphors, rhetorical speech, formal speech, and significant attitude and realization including intonation, volume, speed, tone, and lexical choice (van Dijk, 2006a). Ideological polarization is portrayed in the Us/Them polarization (McCoy et al., 2018). Through polarization, the speakers are given the opportunity to divide people into ingroup representing friends and allies (us) and outgroup referring to enemies (them) (van Dijk, 2006b). The polarization can also be linked to discrediting dissidents by showing clear differences expressing the properties “us” and “them.” The outgroup “them” is seen to be the bad side while the good side is presented by the ingroup “us.” Furthermore, avoiding denial and accusations of misconduct along with shifting blame can point to another intricate way of discrediting others (Hansson, 2015).

Showing emotional appeals is considered vulnerable in political discourse. However, the notion gives access to the speaker to manipulate the recipient into thinking that the speaker understands, shares, and relates to their attitude, desire, and emotions. By that means, recipients often believe and behave upon the manipulated information without fact-checking them (Blass, 2005). To appeal to the recipients’ attitudes and emotions, the speaker makes use of authoritative sources. Through rhetoric, explicit and implicit information, figures, and photographs, people’s emotions can be provoked (Higgins & Walker, 2012). The last strategy is called adducing irrefutable proofs of the speaker’s belief. A reasonable argument can work to construct another argument by offering information that seems impossible to deny.

**Methodology**

This qualitative study used critical discourse analysis approach to examine manipulation in the speeches of President Trump and President Bolsonaro on COVID-19. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) covers the existence of social-power abuse and inequality which endure in the social and political context through text and talk (Fairclough, 2018; Fairclough et al., 2011, 2013; van Dijk, 2015). CDA also seeks to acknowledge and examine social inequality and provides a critical perspective in analyzing discourse studies. Manipulation is part of social problems and political issues which constitute dominance. To analyze such notion, CDA is the appropriate framework as it does not merely explain the discourse structures but also their social and political context.

Manipulating people means manipulating their minds and actions. Manipulative discourse targets the shared attitudes, ideologies, and knowledge of groups of people since these social representations control what people think, do, and say in any circumstances for a long period (van Dijk, 2006a). In this sense, manipulation typically focuses on the social cognition and social dimensions of shared beliefs instead of individual mental models (van Dijk, 2009). Whereas the features of cognitive and social dimensions are beyond discourse analysts, the involvement of discourse components in reproducing or resisting dominance can be described and explained. To analyze the detailed description of the manipulative discourse moves, a social-cognitive approach by van Dijk (2008b) was used as the specific analytical framework.

The data of this research consisted of two texts. The first source was the transcript of President Trump’s speech on COVID-19 pandemic in the beginning of pandemic. The transcript was taken from the New York Times website. The second was the English transcript of President Bolsonaro’s speech addressing COVID-19 in a national television which was obtained from the Guardian News Youtube channel. Utterances produced by both President Trump and President Bolsonaro became the focus of the research.

All sentences were analyzed and labeled corresponding to the manipulation strategies proposed by van Dijk (2006a). Each researcher, who is well acquainted with political discourse, categorized the data independently and the inter-rater reliability was 84.5%. The discrepancies were then discussed until a consensus was reached. In addition, we also considered a socio-political context to help interpret the findings better.

**Results**

The Manipulation Strategies Regarding COVID-19

Politicians appeared to engage in manipulation while delivering a speech on COVID-19. President Donald Trump and President Jair Bolsonaro made use of six features of discursive manipulation, which are classified into ideological polarization; discrediting the others; emotionalizing the argument; emphasizing the power, moral superiority, and credibility of the speaker; and adducing seemingly irrefutable proofs of the speaker’s beliefs and reasons. While President Trump used all of the features, President Bolsonaro excluded one category namely adding seemingly irrefutable proofs of the speaker’s beliefs and reasons.

**Ideological Polarization.** Farrell (2016) proposes that ideological polarization on science creates public uncertainty, scientific misinformation, controversy, and cancelation and delay policy. He further asserts that polarization impacts numerous individual choices, individual attitudes, and personal trust in science as a whole. President Trump and President Bolsonaro implemented this effective strategy through
speech acts, manipulation of explicit or implicit information, lexicalization, and rhetorics. The notion is presented in data (1), (2), (3), (4), and (5).

(1) The vast majority of Americans: The risk is very, very low.

In datum (1), President Trump stated that the risk of getting exposed to COVID-19 for the majority of Americans is very, very low. His argument is neither supported nor proved by empirical studies, thus the credibility is questionable. By using the hyperbolic move, he appears to underestimate the severity of the threat faced by the country, contradicting his previous action of calling a national emergency on the virus. The polarization gives a strong impact on the recipients’ cognitive models as they are assured to believe that the possibility of being infected by the virus is low. The manipulative effect here consists of suggesting that the low chance should not make Americans worried. Moreover, President Trump implies that those who are not Americans have a higher chance of getting the virus exposure.

Ideological polarization is also realized in a form of commissive speech acts. According to Ngoan and Dung (2017), commissive speech acts deal with words that demonstrate what the speaker commits him/herself to do in the future. The act is broken down into offering, promising, refusing, threatening, vowing, and volunteering.

(2) We made a lifesaving move with early action on China. Now we must take the same action with Europe. We will not delay.

By saying we will not delay in datum (2), President Trump promises that he and the America government will implement the same lifesaving move on Europe in which they have already applied to China. The new strategy bans travelers who have been in countries which are parts of the Schengen border-free travel area within 14 days before entering the United States. As a result, 26 European countries, excluding the United Kingdom, Ireland, and non-Schengen countries, are affected. The commissive speech act will not delay functions to convince the recipients that the action will help reduce the threat of getting COVID-19 from anyone coming from Europe. However, as a global pandemic, COVID-19, is not limited to any particular continent, the unaffected and the returning United States citizens might still be able to transmit the virus to Americans.

(3) The virus will not have a chance against us.

In datum (3), President Trump provided implicit information through the rhetoric move the virus has no chance against us. The noun Americans is omitted after the object pronoun us. This rhetorical device aims to simplify his statement by stating fewer details. As no scientific studies sustain his statement, it can lead to deception in which Americans are unaffected by the infectious virus regardless of being a global crisis. The recipient’s cognitive models are convinced to believe that the information is not misleading, prompting them to be less cautious on COVID-19.

(4) What we have to contain at the moment is panic, hysteria, and at the same time map out a strategy to save lives and avoid mass unemployment.

Meanwhile, the ideological polarization in President Bolsonaro’s speech is mostly rhetorical. In datum (4), he manipulated the content of the talk by using hyperbolic moves to emphasize his insulting argument. President Bolsonaro views the public concern of the outbreak as panic and hysteria, exaggerating his claim. The exaggeration enhances that nobody should be in a panic about the virus.

(5) We must return to normality. A few state and municipal authorities must abandon lockdown measures, such as ban on transportation, closing businesses, and mass confinement.

Particular lexical items show underlying concepts and beliefs (van Dijk, 2006b). The lexicalization in data (5) is expressed through the verbs return and abandon. President Bolsonaro dismisses the threat of COVID-19 by ordering him/us/them to go back to normality, opposing the state lockdowns. He also presents a significant move in overlooking the seriousness of the virus by renouncing the implemented lockdown measures. His move represents his resolute COVID-19 denial and indicates that the long-ailing economy is his highest priority rather than public health and safety.

Discriminating the Others. As a result of verbal and multimodal communicative acts, discriminating the others aims to attack someone by lowering his/her credibility through criticism, accusation, and insult that refers to a negative evaluation (D’Errico et al., 2012). To specifically discredit the others, President Trump and President Bolsonaro exploited this notion by displaying Us/Them polarization, vilifying the other, using the communicative acts, and attacking the other’s characteristics. The data (6), (7), (8), (9), and (10) below explain how this manipulative strategy is applied.

(6) This is the most aggressive and comprehensive effort to confront a foreign virus in modern history.

Presented in datum (6), President Trump mentioned the term a foreign virus to refer to COVID-19, which makes him appear to express prejudice against people from other countries. Through the controversial term, he implies that the virus did not originally erupt from any area within the United States. Thereby, he claims that the highly contagious
virus escalating around the world came from other nations, and non-Americans are taking part in propagating the exposure. The negative evaluation will make the recipients to blame non-Americans for creating the pandemic and letting it occurs.

(7) The European Union failed to take the same precautions and restrict travel from China and other hot spots.

To precisely discredit the European Union, President Trump accused them through the use of lexicalization failed in datum (7). He presupposes that the European Union have not taken significant efforts in preventing the virus at the early stage by shutting down the travelers from China and they have, eventually, brought the virus into the United States. The discrediting effect here causes the recipients into believing that the European Union is guilty of transmitting COVID-19 to the United States. In addition, President Trump also casts doubts on the competence of the European Union. This signifies that he blames them for lacking knowledge and information in handling the virus.

(8) At the same time, we are monitoring the situation in China and in South Korea. And, as their situation improves, we will re-evaluate the restrictions and warnings that are currently in place for a possible early opening.

Another way of discrediting others is through criticism. Illustrated in datum (8), President Trump uttered that he and the American government are monitoring the situation in China and in South Korea. Using the lexicalization monitor, he indirectly criticizes China and South Korea for being remotely ready to curb the spread of COVID-19 because of their lack of competence. Thereby, to re-evaluate the restrictions and warnings for a possible early opening, they have to observe their situation. By criticizing and attacking China and South Korea’s move in handling the pandemic, President Trump aims to give negative evaluations and resort to his familiar strategy, blaming foreigners. He convinces the recipients to believe that the restrictions could be withdrawn for an early opening, however, it relies on the situation in those Asian countries.

(9) No nation is more prepared or more resilient than the United States.

To generally discredit the others, President Trump declaims on the ideological polarization between the United States and other nations in datum (9). Calling other nations less prepared and less resilient, he infers that they are ignorant in responding to COVID-19 disease and protecting the public, eventually making them have a higher risk of further escalation. The manipulative result induces the recipients to believe that the United States is ready to conquer the pandemic and respond to this unprecedented public health emergency.

(10) A lot of the media have gone against the grain. They have spread fear.

In datum (10), President Bolsonaro directly attacked the Brazilian media by accusing and vilifying them. He pointed out that they have gone against the grain, largely showing and supporting actions on the opposite side of the government. Using third-person pronoun, he vilified the media by accusing them of spreading fear among the public, fueling the outcry by reporting the death toll in Italy, hence making the current situation becomes more unstable. By disseminating incorrect statements, President Bolsonaro attempts to influence the public opinion and assure the recipients to firmly believe that the media has manipulated them.

Emotionalizing the Argument. Inappropriately displaying strong emotional appeals elicits the manipulation of the recipients’ emotions and feelings, which are labeled as pathos (Brown et al., 2012). President Trump and President Bolsonaro emotionalized the arguments by employing overall emotion, positive self-presentation, and rhetorical devices. The feature is represented in the data (11), (12), and (13).

(11) I am confident that by counting and continuing to take these tough measures, we will significantly reduce the threat to our citizens and we will ultimately and expeditiously defeat this virus.

President Trump put an emotional framework in datum (11). Instead of sharing a logical statement, he inserted an overall emotion, confident, to reinforce his argument and sway the emotions of the recipients. When President Trump refers to his confidence, he is also presenting his emotional side, thus emphasizing his argument that the virus could be defeated by leaning into the tough efforts he and the American government will put into place. He conveys that the recipients’ unprecedented devastation and needs of tackling the deadly virus are understood and the same need and desire are evoking him to take action. By associating with the recipients’ feelings, President Trump attempts to strike their emotions and win their trust. Thereby, he has the power to decide which precaution and policy to be placed, and the recipients will ultimately support his view.

(12) I will always put the well being of America first.

Positive self-presentation is also directed to develop the basis of emotion-based argument. van Dijk (2006a) argues that positive self-presentation is individual impression management that enhances their own positive features. The rhetorical argument in datum (12) works to build appeals to the
recipients’ pathos. President Trump signals that he will commit himself to always consider that the well being of Americans is more important than anything else. He attempts to obtain the sympathy of the recipients and stir them to identify with his message. This will give the recipients an insight that President Trump is essentially a superior leader that understands public needs and values.

(13) In my case, given my athletic history, if I was to be infected, it would not necessarily concern me. I wouldn’t feel anything other than at most a little cold or under the weather.

Depicted in datum (13), President Bolsonaro explicitly formulated emotional manipulation through emotional appeals, presupposition, narrate denial, misleading information, and shaming. Refusing to admit that COVID-19, which ranges from very mild to severe symptoms, can cause serious individual damage, he wrongfully claims that he wouldn’t be concerned if he was infected. The factive presupposition functions as indirect manipulative assertion which less easily disputes the truth than a direct assertion (van Dijk, 2017). In the following argument, using the term feel that is part of senses, he spreads misleading information by comparing the new virus to the flu. Thereby, he overlooks the serious crisis caused by the worldwide pandemic. To undermine the recipients, he indirectly criticizes their responses toward the disease in his overall argument and considers that the spread of the virus is nonsense. By inserting improper emotional appeals and disregarding factual evidence, the validity of President Bolsonaro’s argument does not prove to be justified and can run a great deal of public distrust.

Emphasizing the Power, Moral Superiority, and Credibility of the Speaker. President Trump and President Bolsonaro enhanced their power, moral superiority, and credibility by characterizing their positive self-presentation and appearing to outwardly highlight the seriousness of the matter. Details of the analysis are described below in data (14), (15), and (16).

(14) We have been in frequent contact with our allies, and we are marshaling the fullpower of the federal government and the private sector to protect the American people.

President Trump begins his speech through his positive self-presentation by emphasizing his credentials: respecting the federal government and the private sector for contributing to safeguarding the well-being of Americans and recognizing the allies and the importance of communicating with them. The manipulative effect in datum (14) consists of suggesting that he maintains good communication with the allies, that are currently facing the same difficulty, or possibly worse, in the mids of the pandemic, and the United States government has planned strategies in which private sector also participates. By mentioning two important sectors taking part in curbing the virus and the continual contact with allies, President Trump induces the recipients to picture him as an intuitive leader who respects their allies and does not leave out significant parties outside the government to take the matter.

(15) After consulting with our top government health professionals, I have decided to take several strong but necessary actions to protect the health and well being of all Americans.

The datum (15) above illustrates how President Trump used the face-keeping movement to emphasize his power and moral superiority. Employing the subject pronoun I, he rhetorically enhances his strong position by recognizing the importance of taking several actions to protect Americans from the looming crisis because of the virus. He implies that the United States has prominent health experts with whom he has discussed strategic moves. In the following, he infers that his legal entitlement allows him to draw the policy and strategies that will be placed. To convince the recipients, he implies that all Americans, without exception, will be safeguarded by the efforts to prepare for the peak of the outbreak.

(16) We have gone almost against everything others are doing.

In the case of President Bolsonaro, positive self-presentation depicts his authority and moral superiority in datum (16). He admits that the country has been taking the opposite strategy to what others are doing, countering the efforts in preparing for the worst of this COVID-19 crisis. His strong denial of the severity of the virus and his unnecessary interest in Brazil’s economy may contribute to endangering many vulnerable Brazilians lives. Moreover, his argument shows his superiority to oppose decreed strategy and delay or cancel policy progress.

Adducing Seemingly Irrefutable Proofs of the Speaker’s Beliefs and Reasons. Arguments with subjective and possibly controversial statements are automatically extracted to provide structured data for models of arguments and reasonings (Lippi & Torroni, 2016). As a discursive manipulative strategy, adducing an argument offers to support the speaker’s belief and reason. President Bolsonaro excluded the notion while President Trump used it to specifically elaborate his previous argument. The domain is analyzed in datum (17) and (18).

(17) Additionally, last week, I signed into law an $8.3 billion funding bill to help C.D.C. and other government agencies fight the virus and support vaccines, treatments and distribution of medical supplies.
Testing and testing capabilities are expanding rapidly, day by day.

To reinforce his argument about supporting vaccines, treatments, and distribution of medical supplies, President Trump rhetorically adduced that testing and testing capabilities are expanding rapidly. The argument in datum (17) is a valid logical statement, however, is not supported by detailed information, such as the approximate quantity and which area is the testing available for. By stating this, the recipients are reassured that the government is taking this matter seriously by urging the health care resources and accessible COVID-19 testing. Thinking that all testing capabilities will be provided in the meantime in each state, the recipients are convinced that all Americans can equally obtain it and the public fear of contagion can be lessened.

(18) Our banks and financial institutions are fully capitalized and incredibly strong. Our unemployment is at a historic low. This vast economic prosperity gives us flexibility, reserves, and resources to handle any threat that comes our way.

In datum (18), President Trump rhetorically claimed that the vast economic prosperity gives them flexibility, reserves, and resources. He signals that any threat, including infectious diseases, such as COVID-19, can be countered by the help of economic wealth. He induces the recipients to believe the United States government can essentially perform the strategy in an attempt to halt the spread of the virus by depending on the economic prosperity. In the following, his argument implies that the government will not fail and leave the public with the crisis.

Discussion

Based on the results of the study, the manipulation in both speeches is delivered through ideological polarization; discrediting the others; emotionalizing the argument; emphasizing the power; moral superiority and credibility of the speaker; and adducing seemingly irrefutable proofs of the speaker’s beliefs and reasons. Likewise, this viewpoint is congruent with Lihua’s (2012) study that manipulation emerges in a disguise and purpose to alter the recipients’ knowledge, beliefs, and attitude. This finding is also in line with Ali and Omar’s (2016) research which considers discursive manipulation as the content of talk manipulation carrying institutional power that is practiced to establish public knowledge and indoctrinate one’s ideology and belief to the recipients. Bouchnak (2015) also states that the manipulation have control over the recipients through polarization and self-presentation at the discursive level.

President Trump and President Bolsonaro engage in societal manipulation regarding COVID-19. The whole manipulation features can be found in President Trump’s speech, while President Bolsonaro excepts one notion coded as adducing seemingly irrefutable proofs of the speaker’s beliefs and reasons. As his other argument does not sustain with indisputable evidence, the polarization he attempted to enforce seems to be weaker. Regardless of the different applications of the manipulative strategies, the manipulative effect is quite the same.

A secondary finding of this analysis is that the manipulation in the speech of President Trump and President Bolsonaro demonstrates the negative attitude and negative evaluation of both presidents toward the global pandemic. The severity of the new virus and the quick transmission cycle of it are downplayed by both sides. The recipients are induced to believe that the virus is not a threat that they cannot fight and defeat. In the following, the presidents present a lot of misleading information, incorrect arguments, and false theories to convince the recipients into thinking that the government will not fail to protect the public, reduce the risk of exposure, and prevent financial difficulties for the people.

Among several manipulative strategies, ideological polarization is the most frequent category to be encountered. Polarization is employed when major groups in society need to obtain dramatical changes in structures, organizations, and power connection (McCoy et al., 2018). The notion is very powerful and effective as it can influence a great deal of people in a wider environment. Because of its close relation with particular ideology and belief, polarization is able to indoctrinate a community with shared beliefs and values. Through particular linguistic features, polarization is used specifically to overlook the seriousness of the matter by assuring the recipients to think otherwise and establishing an image that foregrounds a certain individual or party. This strategy, however, can undermine democracy and increase authoritarianism (McCoy et al., 2018; Metawe, 2020) by “reinforcing resentments and contributing to rising mass negative partisanship, strengthening tribal tendencies of loyalty to in-group, and conflict with out-party, increasing social distance, and decreasing willingness to cooperate and compromise with the political out-group” (McCoy et al., 2018, p. 26).

Adducing seemingly irrefutable proofs of the speaker’s beliefs and reasons is the least category contributing to the discursive manipulation performed by the presidents. This might happen because the speakers cannot come up with undeniable proofs to assist another argument. Offering reason, proof, or evidence in a form of argument works to build a better foundation for the polarization, thus make it irresistible to the recipients. However, President Trump only proposes few arguments to reinforce his messages. This suggests that the polarization is merely an incorrect argument that runs to create distrust and controversy.

Given the primary role of manipulation, these findings are essential to understand the discursive manipulation strategies in political discourse and much broader implications that construct them. Showing inappropriate emotional appeals,
positive self-presentation, and rhetorical figures cover how political figures emotionalize their argument over logical evidence to win the emotional reaction from the recipients. It is also well understood that positive self-representation along with manipulation of implicit or explicit information are effective features to enhance the speakers’ power and adduce another argument. Specific speech acts, rhetorical devices, pronouns, lexicalization, along with emphasize and de-emphasize the topic contribute to the polarization framework. The effects of displaying Us/Them polarization, vilifying others, using communicative acts, and attacking other’s characteristics are visible to discredit someone or group of people. This refutes the suggestion proposed by Bouchnak (2015) who views the ideological investment as a strategy that aims to develop a negative evaluation for others and emphasize the Us and Them framework. These contradictory findings might occur because the ideological framework in the political speech focuses on expressing the positive evaluation of one side and draw any possible reasons to sway the recipients to believe and think under the speaker’s will while the negative views are aimed to disgrace an individual or a group’s reputation and credibility.

The findings provide implications for the public to recognize misinformation and conspiracy theories by improving media literacy through strong critical-thinking, awareness, and integrating research skills. Interpreting, evaluating, and fact-checking all received information are influential in creating active and well-informed public. Although the actual result is difficult to be measured, the approach appears to be effective in preventing manipulation.

Conclusion

The results of the present study provide evidence that politicians also manipulate a group of people to control their minds and action by displaying Us/Them polarization, giving negative evaluation, involving emotional appeals, providing details of an argument, and emphasizing their power. The findings add to a growing body of work on discursive manipulation, suggesting that political discourse is not resistant to become a source of societal manipulation. Most importantly, these results draw a point whereby ideology polarization is the most effective and prevailing category while adducing seemingly indisputable proofs of the speaker’s beliefs appears to be less compelling. Through this study, society is given an insight into how to prevent such public manipulation by improving media literacy.

One notable limitation of the present study is about the number of data. If more speeches with the same topic are analyzed, findings can better unravel the realization of discursive manipulation in political discourse. Another limitation is that it more focuses on the use of discursive properties in manipulation. Some strategies, such as positive self-presentation, pronoun, and Us/Them polarization, can be practiced in different manipulative notions. This suggests that future researchers can map out the properties of manipulation to provide a more analytical model of manipulation strategies.

Additionally, the scope of the present study leaves several gaps regarding manipulation, such as the social effects of manipulation and non-verbal communications that represent, accompany, or strengthen manipulation. Future researchers can give more significant contribution by conducting research concerning such topics. Furthermore, more profound research is expected to examine non-English language speeches to give a deeper understanding of the realization of manipulation in political discourse.

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