Offensive, hateful comment: A networked discourse practice of blame and petition for justice during COVID-19 on Chinese Weibo

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Abstract
Using data from user comments to the official social networking account of the Hubei Red Cross Foundation on a participatory web platform, this study attends to the offensive and hateful comments produced by ordinary Internet users to blame the elite authorities for their malfeasance in managing the donation during the COVID-19 in China. Drawing on Discursive Psychology, we focus on the rhetorical strategies that users employ to legitimise their actions as well-founded evidential blame against a norm-breaking act rather than radical extremist speech. The associated hatred among discussants are moral, social judgements. That said, hate speech also helps construct the moral standards of a normalised society.

Keywords
Discursive Psychology, social media, hate speech, blame, identity

Introduction
Unlike traditional mass media which is dominated by the elites (Van Dijk, 1993), social media reaches a broader audience and allows easy access by ordinary people to engage in socio-political discussions in a seemingly decentralised and democratised manner than otherwise in mass communication. One prominent evidence is the freedom of expression (if we put aside the issue of censorship, see Wu and Fitzgerald, 2021 for more
discussions). Compared with mass communication with its participant identifiability (see Jaidka et al., 2022), social media communication can be depersonalised (Lea et al., 2001) and anonymous (Citron, 2014), allowing deindividuation of self and other, that is, not sharing personal information with other discussants (Lee, 2007). Insofar as people are unidentifiable and unaccountable (Postmes and Spears, 1998), communication can be wildly uncontrolled, offensive and radicalised in a way that encourages hostility (Anderson et al., 2014).

While some scholars understand social media as a platform, a public sphere that realises, to greater or less extent (see Dahlberg, 2007; Kruse et al., 2018), deliberation and democracy (Halpern and Gibbs, 2013; Sørensen, 2016), the present study considers social media as a paradigm of communication (KhosraviNik, 2017). These mediated actions/activities display an order that differs from those of other paradigms (e.g. mass and interpersonal communication). This new paradigm, by its unique affordances that transcend the spatial, temporal and technical limits and allow actions that might not be observed as such in other types of interactions, assigns ordinary people easier access to participate in contentious socio-political issues in either collaborative or defensive manners.

One activity pervasive in social media communication that has attracted a burgeoning scholarly interest in recent years is offensive speech, such as trolling (Hardaker, 2010), dehumanisation (Haslam et al., 2011), flaming (Jane, 2015) and hate speech (Assimakopoulos et al., 2017; Baider et al., 2020). The boundary between these speech acts is opaque. For example, while hate speech is most widely understood as a speech produced to harm, hurt and degrade vulnerable groups based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity and gender (Baider and Kopytowska, 2018; Kopytowska, 2017), scholars have also noted that ‘due to its explicit reference to the emotion of hate, it is also used more colloquially as a general label for any kind of negative expression’ (Paasch-Colberg et al., 2021: 171). While varying understandings, it is agreed that these expressions and their associated emotions, attitudes and evaluative stance are disseminated, proliferated and amplified on social networking sites (SNS), leading to a ‘discursive spiral of hate’ (Kopytowska et al., 2017: 68) which, once uncontrolled, can have consequential social impacts such as sharpening polarisation and social distinctions ( Hodges, 2017) and being materialised into physical violence and crime (Kopytowska and Baider, 2017). Importantly, such hateful interactions are ‘seemingly becoming the new norm’ (Keipei et al., 2017: 2) rather than a norm-breaking societal activity.

To expand the understanding of hate speech, the present study examines the rhetoric of such discourse in online communities, that is, how discussants describe events and others and arrive at an understanding of recognisable social actions. Unlike earlier studies focusing on hate speech against vulnerable groups (Lahti, 2022; Technau, 2018), we present instances where ordinary citizens produce hate speech against elite authorities during the COVID-19 pandemic in China. In doing so, it contributes to the literature by first providing a new lens through which we understand hate speech: while it can be a discriminatory and victimising discursive practice against vulnerable groups, it can also be a collaborative digital practice, albeit being radical, extremist and offensive, that functions as a democratised social movement (Harlow, 2011) towards justice, anti-corruption and moral regulations. We propose a discrimination/justice dichotomy that leads to social
demarcation/normalisation. We argue that while hate speech against individuals/groups based on their protected characteristics, such as race and gender, is discriminatory, exacerbating social demarcation, the instances we presented here are acts that help understand and construct the moral standards of a normalised society. Second, the study offers a tentative advancement of hate speech research with a rigorous analysis of the details of online interaction, treating hateful identities as constructed in and throughout the mediated interaction.

**Literature review**

*A new look at hate speech*

The definition of hate speech varies from study to study. One possible explanation is that hate speech, as a digital (Jones et al., 2015) and social (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997) practice, is taken as a contextualised act (Baider et al., 2020; Pohjonen and Udupa, 2017), the content and function of which are pertinent to the situational context. In their widely cited definition, the Council of Europe (1997: 107) described hate speech as ‘all forms of expression which spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance. . .’. This definition details the scope (i.e. hatred associated with discrimination and intolerance) and the perlocutionary force of hate speech. In their latest memorandum, the Council of Europe (2022: 7) modified their earlier conception to define hate speech as

all types of expression that incite, promote, spread or justify violence, hatred or discrimination against a person or group of persons, or that denigrates them, by reason of their real or attributed personal characteristics or status such as ‘race’, colour, language, religion, nationality, national or ethnic origin, age, disability, sex, gender identity and sexual orientation.

Central here and also in those that have been used by other studies (e.g. Assimakopoulos et al., 2017; Baider et al., 2020; Baider and Kopytowska 2018; Chetty and Alathur, 2018; Mafeza, 2016) are notions of discrimination based on some protected characteristics and actions that are, or intend to be, offensive and violent, thereby violating the fundamental rights of human beings. Yet, we consider such understandings representing parts of the richer landscape associated with hate speech, particularly in the new communication paradigm where freedom of expression or digital democracy is more prominent. We propose here a new look at the concept: hate speech could also serve as an amplified blaming involving extreme expressions, holding someone accountable for their destructive behaviours.

If we take hate speech as a ‘variant’ of free speech (Chetty and Alathur, 2018: 108), encouraged by the affordances of social media, then what we propose here can be taken as a variant of hate speech. It is in many ways akin to conventional understandings, for example, it is associated with hatred and usually involves extremist expressions (although recent studies on covert hate speech report different findings, Baider and Constantinou, 2020; Ben-David and Matamoros-Fernández, 2016). Differences lie in the intent: it is not produced to discriminate or take away the civil rights of individuals/groups based on their innate characteristics. In this study, hate speech is a derogative and defamatory
statement that invokes and disseminates hatred and blaming against individuals/groups, by reason of their malfeasance, to the extent that alienates individuals/groups from an orderly society.

For this understanding, it might be necessary to briefly review studies on blaming, which has been widely documented through many studies (Pomerantz, 1978; Reisigl and Wodak, 2001; Van Dijk, 1992, 1993; Wodak, 2003, 2006). The conclusion that can be drawn from this body of work is that blame usually emerges as an incipient action of justification, involving the management of moral accountability (Augoustinos and Every, 2010; Pomerantz, 1978; Sneijder and te Molder, 2005) and categorisation of the blamed target (Gibson and Roca-Cuberes, 2019). In constructing blames, studies within ethnomethodological traditions have shown that blames are usually administered indirectly (Adelswärd et al., 1988; Atkinson and Drew, 1979; Riggs and Due, 2010).

**Online communication in China**

Against the backdrop of the so-called digital democratisation, a consistent challenge among Chinese netizens is the evasion of censorship in their online performance. As Wu and Fitzgerald (2021: 365) stated, Chinese netizens need to ‘develop creative ways to engage in political criticism’. These include, for example, using parody names (Tao, 2021), irony (Wu and Fitzgerald, 2021), rumours and ungrounded claims (Wu, 2018), *e gao* (also known as online spoofs, Meng, 2011), emotional expressions and radical gestures (Dai et al., 2015). These studies have, in one way or another, portrayed Chinese online communication as an avenue through which netizens voice their discontent and resistance against policies, authorities or any form of activism in opposition to sociocultural/political issues (Yang, 2009). While the censor has intervened in users’ online performance, studies have also pointed out that not all activities are prohibited. In a survey of 60 media professionals, Shao (2018) reported that censors are more likely to block actions that threat or challenge the Party’s authoritarian rule while being more tolerant of criticisms of the government’s performance.

**Applying DP to online hate speech**

Over the past two decades, there has been a scholarly boom in applying Conversation Analysis (CA) and Discursive Psychology (DP) to asynchronous typed texts (Antaki et al., 2006; Giles et al., 2015; Lamerichs and te Molder, 2003; Meredith and Richardson, 2019). Scholars have pointed out that insofar as online texts, both (quasi-)synchronous and asynchronous, are designed for particular recipients – albeit not in the same way as in spoken conversations (to be discussed later), they are inherently interactional even if there is a lack of apparent interaction (Meredith, 2021; Meredith and Potter, 2013). In that sense, as Meredith and Potter (2013: 374) argued, ‘it will be necessary to use a method which can explicate this’. The term *discursive psychology* was introduced by Edwards and Potter (1992: 259) to ‘respecify[... and critique’ psychological topics (e.g. cognition, emotion, memory and identity) and their methods of investigation in mainstream psychology. With its roots in different theoretical and empirical traditions, particularly ethnomethodology and CA, DP aims to understand ‘how psychology is
constructed, understood, and displayed as people interact in everyday and more institutional situations’ (Wiggins and Potter, 2008: 73). In other words, what are considered underlying cognitive processes in mainstream psychology are treated in DP as discourse practices following ‘a set of formal procedures and rules that can be identified and described’ (Huma et al., 2020: 316). As Edwards and Potter (2005: 242–243) stated, DP starts with discourse to examine how ‘those presumptively prior and independent notions of mind, intention, motive, etc., are topicalized, categorized and, in various less direct ways, handled and managed within discourse itself’. In this way, DP treats language as ‘performative’ rather than ‘an externalisation’ of underlying cognitive processes (Tileagă and Stokoe, 2016: 4). Examples include how people describe their mental states (Edwards and Potter, 2005), display subjectivity/objectivity (Wiggins and Potter, 2003) and attitudes (Edwards, 2005; Potter, 1998), manage accountability (Edwards, 2000; Hepburn, 2000) and mobilise categories of identities (Alexander and Stokoe, 2020; Augoustinos et al., 2011).

Like CA, DP abstains from speculating participants’ intentions and motives in their interaction but instead privileges participants’ interpretations of the current interaction based on observable evidence, that is, what is shown in interaction (Huma et al., 2020). Yet, unlike CA, which concentrates on the structural organisation of talk-in-interaction (Schegloff, 2007), DP ‘has tended to focus on participants’ formulations and categories, and has picked up on issues of turn organisation and sequential placement in a less thoroughgoing way’ (Hepburn and Wiggins, 2007: 11). It mainly concentrates on the rhetorical (the notion here is oriented to persuasion, see Potter, 1998; and Warnick, 2007 for Medium Theory) and interactional organisation of texts; and these texts are considered as descriptions of ‘versions of reality’ (Sneijder and te Molder, 2005: 676). Compared with CA, DP is more flexible when approaching asynchronous online interactions (Meredith, 2021), as it ‘extends more readily to studies of written text’ (Potter and Edwards, 2013: 703). Examples include newspaper comment threads (Meredith and Richardson, 2019), forum discussions (Sneijder and te Molder, 2006; Wiggins et al., 2016) and blog commentaries (Lester and Paulus, 2011; McGannon et al., 2017). When applying to hate speech, DP would be powerful in explaining descriptions of events, stimuli, persons and intents of the discourse, for example, how targets of hate speech are described and categorised and how hostile and extreme expressions against individuals/groups are justified. In this study, we take the vantage point of DP to examine how issues such as identity and accountability are addressed and built up in online hate speech as an act of blame. By understanding hate speech and its associated activities (e.g. expression of hatred) as an action or a practice, we are suggesting that the speech producers are following some orders and norms that guide their speech. To the best of our knowledge, the current application of DP to online hate speech is new.

Data

The study is part of a larger research on mediated discourse of blame during a national health crisis. The data consist of user comment threads collected from Sina Weibo – the most influential SNS in China (Zhao and Lin, 2020), with 516 million monthly active users as of February 2020 (Tao, 2021). In China, Weibo is the most widely used digital
tool through which ordinary users participate in contentious socio-political issues such as anti-corruption (Feng and Wu, 2018), political criticisms (Wu and Fitzgerald, 2021) and judicial trials of governmental officials (Guo and Jiang, 2015). All data were collected in February 2022.

In this study, we focus on user comments to the official account of the Hubei Red Cross Foundation (HBRCF) regarding the management of medical reliefs to Wuhan (where case 0 in China was reported) citizens during the first wave of COVID-19 in China (December 01, 2019 to April 20, 2020) before Wuhan lifted the lockdown. As the largest state-owned non-profit organisation in China (Long, 2016), the Red Cross is responsible for the management of all forms of medical supplies collected from varying sources in the national fight against the pandemic. We chose the first wave as our entry point of analysis because we consider that as the government, the authoritative agency (HBRCF), and the ordinary people are inexperienced in dealing with the new virus, their description of the events and attitudes about others could be a rich resource for the study of issues that are of great interest to sociolinguists and communication scholars. The data processing algorithm was written in python and executed in Pycharm. We extracted information at multiple levels, such as the number of likes and retweets, user comments and the date. Given the focus of this study, some metrics (e.g. the number of likes) will not be used here but elsewhere (Author, forthcoming). In total, we collected 14,540 comments containing 292,253 Chinese characters. The comments were analysed in Chinese and translated to English for illustration. In our illustrations, D stands for Discussant (see Figures).

Unlike synchronous interactions, the comments here may lack apparent interactions between discussants, and none of these comments was responded to by the HBRCF. Yet, as Meredith and Potter (2013) stated, the lack of apparent interaction in online texts shall not shy away our understanding of their interactional purposes. Such texts are designed to construct versions of reality in a way different from conventional understandings. First, given the unique recipient design (Meredith and Potter, 2013), the interaction between the discussants shall not be measured in the same way as those in spoken conversations. The lack of apparent response from other discussants (e.g. response via the use of @ reply) does not warrant an argument for lack of interaction. Other criteria shall be considered, such as lexical repetition and topic coherence (Herring, 1999; Feng and Wu, 2018) between comments. Second, the HBRCF’s non-response to the comments could be a ‘response’ in itself, which is beyond the scope of this study. For these considerations, DP, whose foci are more on formulations and categorisations than sequential organisations, is suitable for the current investigation.

Findings and discussion

The analysis focuses on how discussants construct the target of hate speech (the HBRCF) as a legitimate hateable (see Pomerantz, 1986: 227 on ‘legitimate complainable’) via different objectification strategies (Edwards, 2005). We identified four dominant constructions of a legitimate hateable: (i) normalising the hate speech via extreme case formulations; (ii) foregrounding a description of the target’s malfeasance; (iii) constructing the target as a recidivist and that their action as recidivism; and (iv)
constructing a ‘Scarlet’ identity. These strategies formulate hate speech as a sequential and logical outcome of wrongdoings, which in turn explicates the moral standards of a normalised society.

**Normalising the actions projected in hate speech via extreme case formulations**

Edwards (1994, 1995) introduced the term *script formulations* to refer to events, descriptions and actions that are routine or exceptional, making inferentially available how people make sense of the world, treating actions/activities as being predictable and expectable in which ‘temporal sequence, causality, and rational accountability are mutually implicative’ (Edwards, 1997: 288). In our observations, when producing hate speech, discussants use a hybrid of different scripts, for example, extreme case formulations (Edwards, 2000; Pomerantz, 1986), iterative modals and generalised present tense (Edwards, 1995). The comments are given as a reply, using the comment tag, to HBRCF’s announcement, which indicates the direct recipient (Meredith and Potter, 2013) of the message and the target of the hate speech. In the announcement, the HBRCF posted five images to explain the refund to the China Siyuan Foundation for Poverty Alleviation who donated nearly two million RMB to HBRCF after the outbreak of the pandemic. This announcement evoked heated discussions among users who jointly challenged the truth value of the announcement and blamed the officials as corruptive.

One recurrent script in formulating hate speech in our data is the use of extreme case formulations, that is, ‘expressions using extreme terms’ (Edwards, 2000: 347) such as *entirely, really, forever, every* (Pomerantz, 1986). This formulation constructs the future action projected in the hate speech as a regular pattern and a routine practice of an order.

Extracts 1–4 (Figure 1).

Extracts 1–3 are presented by the discussants as an independent comment to the HBRCF’s announcement. In these comments, the Discussant formulates the hate speech in a way that seemingly has no particular object in mind via the use of extreme case formulation: 都 (all) (Extract 1), 反正 (anyway) (Extract 2) and 谁 (anyone) (Extract 3). In asserting an exclusive and non-exceptional connection between death and making money out of the national crisis, the Discussant builds a cause for the proposed action projected in the hate speech: **买骨灰盒 (buying coffins)** and **肺炎疫情死亡 (dying from COVID-19)** to be a natural outcome of an action. By formulating it as a final that could happen to anyone, the statement is hearable as being more objective (Wiggins and Potter, 2003), where death is treated as a legitimate penalty for someone’s actions rather than a subjective evil wish produced by the Discussant. This is particularly the case in Extracts 1 and 3, where the proposed penalty is COVID-19, implicating Karma’s effect. The power of the effect is also constructed by the use of iterative modal **will** which indicates a habitual or predictive behaviour (Edwards, 1995).

Sometimes, the comments may be replied to by other users; in that case, the original comment develops into an independent thread. In Extract 4, the initial comment (line 1) receives 102 responses. Many of the responses are repetitions of the initial comment. Here, we selected some responses for illustration based on the criteria of non-repetitiveness.
The comment of Discussant 4 invokes an active joint construction of hate speech (Lahti, 2022) in proposing the death of the target. The original comment (line 1) is produced indiscriminately: instead of targeting specific individuals/groups, the comment is given as a gentle reminder to everyone, of which the gentleness is further modified by the smiley face (Herring and Dainas, 2017). The formulation of the reminder via a declarative, formulated in the generalised present tense, makes it hearable as a telling of truth or
regularity, thereby not allowing refutation (Edwards, 1995). In the following lines (2–4, 6), the hateful messages couched in the original comment get upgraded through a progression of precision: the population of the death and their life aftermath (line 2), the immediacy of death (lines 3–4) and the preparation work for a burial (line 6).

The objectivity of hate speech in the original comment is explicitly recognised in line 5, where Discussant 8 displays agreement (Lahti, 2022) and alignment (Stivers, 2008). Seen in this light, the discussants jointly construct hate speech as a legitimate punishment for some wrongdoings rather than language that involves insult, humiliation and verbal attack. This treatment of hate speech is particularly visible in line 6, where the Discussant builds a connection between the action of the target (挪用公款 embezzlement and withholding of goods) and the action projected in the hate speech (压棺材做寿衣 making coffins and shrouds).

**Foregrounding a description of the target’s wrongdoings**

Hate speech may also be legitimised by foregrounding a description or reporting of the target’s wrongdoings in the comment. This structure is similar to the *since/because*-structure in English, which affords the statement ‘a reasonable conclusion, a rational inference’ (Edwards, 1997: 287). That said, the production of hate speech as the second part of a statement after a presentation of an action (i.e. factual event description) instantiates the ‘close relations between temporal and logical connections [...] for treating events and actions as expectable, and for drawing inferences’ (Edwards, 1997: 288). In that sense, it recontextualises the target’s actions as readily culpable and help other users establish who was to blame (Attenborough, 2016). Consider Extracts 5–7 (Figure 2).

In Extracts 5–7, the hateful message suggesting an immediate death of HBRCF and their families is produced in such a way as to have other users see the target’s culpability. In so formulated, albeit being hearable as a curse conveying the Discussant’s strong hatred, it implicates a causative relationship between what is to be happened and what has been made. In other words, the suggested action projected in the hate speech is formulated as a logically reasonable and consequential outcome of the agent’s ill-conduct.

One commonality here is the discussants’ formulation of a contrast. In Extract 5, the Discussant presents, in line 1, a contrast between what is considered a respectful action (money donation) and evil behaviour (bribery), implicating the guilt of the target and making relevance to the incipient hate speech. In addition, the presentation of a respectful action shall also be taken as the formulation of a moral standard, making a case for the punishment of violations. This contrastive formulation is more pronounced in Extract 6 where the Discussant explicitly blames the target for being cruel to illegally take the money used for life-saving (line 1). That said, the target’s behaviour is considered as depriving the life of a group of people who could have lived longer. Seen in this light, the hateful message projected in the second part of the comment (line 3) can be unapologetically treated as the death penalty for murder, a legitimate practice in a normalised society. Likewise, in Extract 7, social disharmony (line 1) is presented as a factual description, making the incipient hateful message relevant. In these extracts and other samples in our corpus, one distinctive feature in the presentation of contrast when describing the target’s wrongdoings is an explicit naming of the importance of the goods, materials and money.
of which the blamed recipient made illegal use. The articulation of donation, life-saving and frontier in the examples presented here constitute the seriousness of the situation and, thus, the importance of money and goods.

Constructing a recidivist identity

Another form for introducing hate speech is a temporal construction through which the target is formulated as a recidivist and their action recidivism. That said, the behaviour being blamed here is referenced not only as a crime but also as a recurrence of a previous behaviour about which the target has been sanctioned. In that sense, the target’s behaviour is portrayed as being more culpable that deserves hateful messages. Consider Extracts 8–10 (Figure 3).

The historical event mentioned in Extract 8 (line 1) is a social media scandal about Guo’s lavish life that caused severe public suspicion of the Red Cross Foundation and its management of the donation (Long, 2016). By referring to the event, Discussant 13 calls for a reminiscence of the target’s previous record via the temporal structure initiated by ever since, which functions as an explanation of their degradation (line 1) and attribution of accountability. In that sense, line 1 can be taken as an announcement or a reminder of
evidence on the target’s record in handling the donation, building a case for the forthcoming hate speech. In line 2, the commenter portrays the target’s behaviour to which the hate speech is directed as an extreme or highly unbelievable instance via the even construction and the lexical choice of dare. In so formulating, the Discussant constructs the recipient’s behaviour as more than a falling back into old habits, but rather, an upgrade
of a crime. That said, the target is treated as an experienced recidivist who is subject to a more serious punishment (i.e. punishment from God).

In a likewise manner, the hate speech in Extract 9 (lines 1 and 3) is given in an environment where a reference to a previous scandal was announced (line 2). Using the script device of *ever since*, Discussant 14 describes the target as a liar and indicates expectancy about their behaviour. We see a degradation of the target identity here: in line 1, the argument that the money is saved for their coffins suggests that these people are dying. Yet, in line 3, the Discussant excludes the target from fellowship, constructing them as animals with derogatory qualities: smelly and decayed. If something is defined as such, it is declining and falling into ruin, making destruction and death a naturally and logically relevant next.

Extract 10 starts with a statement suggesting that the incipient *scold* is an outcome of the target’s invitation (line 1), a second pair part (Schegloff, 2007) of an invitation-offer sequence. In that sense, the incipient talk is constructed by the Discussant as being structurally and semantically preferred (Schegloff, 2007). This formulation thus affords the target as being accountable rather than the Discussant. In line 2, Discussant 15 makes references to the target’s earlier behaviour, constructing the target as a recidivist who falls back into their criminal behaviours, making relevance to the incipient dehumanisation (line 3) (Brudholm and Lang, 2021; Ho, 2021). Here, the description of the target as displaying extremely nasty qualities that will be found in neither human beings nor animals verbally excludes the target from sentient beings. This exclusion is immediately supported at the next line (line 4), where disagreements about the target’s current action and solution, or what is considered appropriate and expected action, are announced. Together, these actions make relevant the proposal for destruction (lines 5 and 6). Notable here is that in proposing a cause of death: 一人一口唾沫把你们淹死 (that the target drowns in the saliva of each of the Chinese), the Discussant implies that there is a nationwide attitudinal and behavioural agreement in understanding and dealing with the target’s wrongdoings. First, the Discussant and the fellow Chinese align with each other in considering the target as guilty and culpable. Second, the proposed cause of death also implicates the Discussant’s understanding that other fellow Chinese would scold the target in a likewise manner. It is such consensus that indicates the moral standards and the regular practice of society.

Also interesting to note here is the use of smiley faces, functioning as a tone modification (Herring and Dainas, 2017). Rather than using emoticons such as angry, sad or sceptical faces to correlate with the sentiment conveyed in the hate speech (Bick, 2020), the use of joyful emoticons could be implicative. That the emoticons being given in an environment where *scold* (line 1) and hate speech (lines 3–6) are produced could be taken as either a downplay of the harshness of the statement, that is, functioning as a hedge to the illocutionary force of an accusation, or an indicator that the hate speech is produced in a rational manner. The continuous use of smiley faces in line 6 could also be taken as performing some actions, for example, conveying a proposition: ‘I am so glad about your death’. Seen in this light, the emoticons are constitutive of hate speech.

**Constructing a ‘Scarlet’ identity**

In this last part of our analysis, we will show how hate speech is produced towards the institutional order rather than behaviour via a construction of what we call a ‘Scarlet’
identity: formulating the HBRCF as inherently wicked and thereby a legitimate hateable. Consider Extracts 11–19 (Figures 4 and 5).

Extract 11 is hearable as a wrap-up of a phenomenon that goes beyond the level of a description of behaviour towards some sort of an innate bond that is unchangeable and recurrent. That said, it can be taken as an order or norm of the institution, which is distant from the widely accepted norm of society. Therefore, it is the order that is to be hated or
scolded. While there is no explicit articulation of the target’s wrongdoings, the reference to Guo and her close connection with the Red Cross are constitutive of the recipient’s behaviour as a relapse into crime. The metaphor 生出 (giving birth to, line 2) implicates the target as the soil of bribery. That defined, the Discussant displays an orientation towards the innate property of the blamed agent as being unscrupulous, untrustworthy and repentant, making relevance to the F-word (line 2).

In Extracts 12–19, discussants actively collaborate in constructing the target of hate speech as an institution set to bring darkness, rather than love and care, to society. In other words, its institutional norms and ideologies (Fairclough, 2013) are being challenged. These comments are presented here chronologically, with Extracts 16–18 being posted at the same time. A hybrid of strategies is used to present the recipient as a dreadful, bestial, evil, and, most prominently, a wicked blackhearted identity. First, in several comments (Extracts 12, 14, 17), the Discussant verbalises the word 黑心 (blackhearted) to place moral blame and accountability on the HBRCF.
Second, the attribution of blame and accountability is also instantiated via the use of metaphor. For example, in Extract 13, Discussant 18 describes the Red Cross as a black louse, a type of parasite which lives on warm-blooded hosts. At one level, the word lice is a near homophone of cross in Chinese, though the intonation is slightly different; and at another level, the living habits of lice, that is, blood-sucking, can be taken as a dehumanising metaphor for the target’s behaviour (Musolff, 2017). In other words, Discussant 18 displays an orientation towards the target identity as being an ingroup/a member of a reviled and disgusting dehumanised entity, degrading the target from human beings to parasites and denouncing them as not being a proper part of a normalised society. The lexical replacement of foundation with its homophone bribery implicates the Discussant’s understanding of the recipient as missioned by bribery and corruption, activities that are morally and legally unacceptable in human society. In alignment with Discussant 18, Discussant 19 also orients to the recipient’s wicked blackhearted (Extract 14) identity by describing their dietary habit as eating human blood-soaking bread.

The third device to present a wicked identity of the target is the proposal of a new name (Extracts 15, 16, 18). By naming it as 黑会 (Black Cross) – a metonym used to refer to people who work there, the Discussant disapproves of its identity as life-saving and caring but instead considers the target as showing opposite qualities. This is particularly marked in Extract 18 by incorporating an image into the comment (line 3), which, apart from presenting the reported image in the text (line 2), also visualises the Discussant’s understandings/attitudes about the target as destined to perform some morally and legally unacceptable actions such as bribery, corruption and cheating (in the sense that the Discussant shows doubt about the recipient’s announcement about the flow of money). These devices detach the people so categorised from human beings, from the sorts of people that we do.

Explicit verbalisation of alignment and affiliation (Stivers, 2008) is also observed: in Extract 16, the Discussant’s announcing of support and approval towards any actions performed to verbally degrade the target via an indication of future action (give a like), placed after Extract 15 where Discussant 20 produces a hateful message, is aligning and affiliative. In addition, the promise of future action (line 2, Extract 16) can also be taken as an invitation (to the extent that the statement displays the Discussant’s stance) of alignment and affiliation with other users. The joint construction of the target identity is summated in Extract 19 which is hearable as an overall assessment of other users’ behaviours rather than the target’s. The assessment can be taken as both an approval of others’ ongoing online behaviours and an agreement of others’ understanding (i.e. the psychological state) of the recipient. That said, Discussant 24 nicely wraps up and endorses co-participants’ actions as a joint endeavour in constructing the target as such.

**Conclusion**

In this article, we provide empirical evidence of the ways through which online users construct a legitimate hateable identity by reason of their behaviours. The examples invite a different understanding of hate speech in terms of speaker intent and the content of the speech. We illustrate a variant of hate speech whose primary function is to blame and accuse groups for their malfeasance during a national health crisis. Taking the
vantage point of DP, we have shown how online discussants present HBRCF’s identity as a legitimate hateable, justifying and objectifying the incipient hate speech as logically supported, fully evidenced (see Warnick, 2007 for credibility) blame against those whose actions are considered norm-breaking rather than extremist, irrational derogative expressions. The four rhetorical constructions we observed orient to different aspects of the blamed: the first three constructions focus on the actions of the blamed, for example, extreme case formulations and making references to previous habits are constitutive of socially unacceptable individual behaviours. Yet, the last strategy of constructing a Scarlet identity is more oriented to the institutional order, culture or ideology of the blamed agent. Interestingly, by ascribing to institutional order the accountability for the bribery and actions of a similar kind, discussants pre-empt future actions (i.e. donations) and relationships with the recipient, resisting not only the target group but the entire culture that shapes the performance of the recipient. A consistent theme throughout these strategies is that they construct the speech as moral, social judgements (Childs and Hepburn, 2016; Edwards, 1999). In so doing, the hate speech reflects or indicates the moral standards and regularities of a normalised society.

The speech being mostly offensive and radical, wishing for an immediate death of the target and their families, for example, can be taken as a networked act of anti-corruption, boosted by the anonymity and depersonalisation of online communication. The consensus among discussants in constructing the hateable target identity can be taken as an online exposure or disclosure of corruptive behaviours. The proposed verdict (e.g. death in varying forms) can function as a petition for justice. It shall be noted that the speech is produced by ordinary citizens against some authoritative figures, which is less likely to happen in conventional mass media communication. While recent studies in Chinese online communication have already described the power of social media in expressing public voice, resistance and discontent about socio-political concerns (Tao, 2021; Wu, 2018), their findings mostly suggest the use of indirect language. Unlike these studies, we provide evidence on how netizens use extremist and radical expressions while shifting the accountability for making such statements to the target of the speech. In so doing, the netizens question the authoritative abuse of power in the national fight against the virus, propose the moral order and engage in the discussion of the verdict of the blamed target. This bottom-up pattern is common in ‘online exposure and condemnation of corruption’ (Dai et al., 2015: 38). One possible explanation is the so-called deliberative digital democracy which affords ordinary individuals opportunities to participate in ‘rational communication and public opinion formation that can hold decision-makers accountable’ (Dahlberg, 2011: 859). People have argued that there is no public sphere in China with its media censorship (Zhou, 2006). Some scholars have called Internet use in China networked authoritarianism, that is, a state where discussions about the country’s problems emerge on the Internet under the control of the country’s single ruling party (MacKinnon, 2011). That said, online activities should align with some norms regulated by the government. For example, while the censor would block acts that threaten the Party’s authoritarianism, more tolerance is given to criticisms of the government’s performance (Shao, 2018). In the latter sense, Internet use in China has provided people with more freedom of expression than classic authoritarianism. The data we included in this study provides empirical evidence on the freedom of criticism against government performance.
One avenue for further research would be to examine the responses to hate speech: while previous studies have contributed insights at this level, such as confrontation and reappropriation (see Cervone et al., 2021 for a review), research on top-down elite-bottom responses is sparse. Such knowledge could provide insights on the authoritarian control over discursive content and space, that is, to what extent the authorities agree, rebut or challenge the public accusation, which is particularly important for a better understanding of various issues (e.g. state–people relationship and its impact on discursive practice) that would interest scholars in communication, language, politics and sociology.

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