Hegemonic Masculinity and Leadership Response to Covid-19: Critical Discourse Analysis of President Trump's Political Rhetoric in the Global Pandemic

Aroobah Sarfraz Lak & Tasawar Hussain

Abstract

Based on the understanding that leadership is performed through language and discourse, this article endeavors to dissect the political rhetoric of former U.S. President Donald Trump during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic from March-May 2020. An overview of Trump's political rhetoric vis-à-vis Covid-19 depicts an overt subscription to masculinized metaphors and militaristic wartime imagery. The post-positivist feminist traditions argue that masculinity and 'combative language' are engaged in a mutually constitutive cycle of production, regeneration, and construction of the male identity as an agent of politics and violence, meaning that combative militarist wartime rhetoric is itself gendered. This article applies the theoretical and methodological lens of Critical Discourse Analysis in conjunction with post-positivist feminist traditions to explore if the social and discursive construction of Trump's hegemonic masculine identity as a 'strong man' and 'fearless warrior' is reflected in his political rhetoric generally and in his Covid-19 responses particularly. The themes that emerge from Trump's political rhetoric highlight his gendered identity that is further perpetuated in his speech acts and manifested in his leadership response. Our goal is to understand the manifestation, acceptance, and naturalization of hegemonic masculinity within the social and discursive identities of 'male agents of politics' through the themes that emerge in Trump's speeches.

Keywords: COVID-19, Pandemic, Trump, Masculinity, Gender, Leadership

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Introduction

President Trump's response to the Covid-19 pandemic is one of the lasting legacies of his presidency in the U.S. history. The U.S. has a comparatively advanced healthcare system, nevertheless, when the pandemic finally hit, it was caught unprepared and seemingly plunged into a state of chaos like the rest of the world. Western media blasted President Trump's Covid-19 response as 'lethal incompetence' and accused him of 'complacency,' 'weakness,' and 'self-interested[ness]'[i] His leadership during Covid-19 was declared a 'reckless insouciance'[ii] personified. Mainstream western media contrasted him and other male leaders to the women heads of state whose mature response to the Covid-19 pandemic rendered the former complacent deniers and big babies in control of the most powerful nations on earth. [iii]

Due to the relatively better response to Covid-19 from Western ewomen leaders during the first wave of Covid-19, the dominant mainstream discourses on Covid-19 brought a renewed focus on the perceived impact of leaders' gender on their leadership. Popular discourse on Covid-19 leadership reflected the naturalization of gender hierarchies in the theory and practice of politics. During the first wave of Covid-19, the dominant discourses on pandemic leadership praised women leadership's "feminine" traits, such as empathy, for their better handling of the crisis. Male leaders, on the other hand, were judged against the standards of hegemonic leadership traits that connote leadership as a natural masculine domain. [iv]

Feminists in the field of political studies contend that the subject and practices of politics are gendered because they create different hierarchies of privilege and exclusion within communities, albeit affecting them in relatively disparate capacities. [v] Moreover, the gendered nature of politics constructs a gender-based division of labor. It subscribes decision-making powers such as economy, politics, and statecraft to the man and reproductive duties to the woman. [vi]

The social and discursive distribution of rights and responsibilities constructs politics as a masculine and patriarchal arena with 'male' as its main protagonist: 'the agent of plitics.'[vii]

Shepherd asserts that explicit subscription to the 'physicality' of subjects and agents of politics warrants a critique of the traditional essentialist understanding of gender that creates a direct correlation between body and behavior. That is, if the body is branded male, it should possess traditional 'masculine' qualities of 'agentic traits': aggressiveness, assertiveness, authority, power, and agency; on the other hand, if the body is branded female, it should possess and display stereotypical 'feminine' qualities such as emotions, fragility, empathy, etc. [viii] On the contrary, post-positivist feminists define gender as a 'social and discursive construction' of gender identity associated with and inscribed on sexed bodies. [ix] The social and discursive construction of individuals identities manifests in socio-political interactions. Feminists argue that the construction of masculine gender identities and their association with 'male bodies' reflect an understanding of a specific way of doing male gender. The social and discursive construction of man as 'an agent of politics and political violence' manifests in a specific male speech pattern seemingly more inclined towards usage of 'militarist and wartime language' in their political rhetoric. Feminists criticize 'militaristic/wartime political rhetoric' as "inherently masculine, power-based, paternalistic and violent" rooted in a systemic production and reinforcement of oppression and authority. [x]

Masculinity and combative language are engaged in a mutually constitutive cycle of production, regeneration, and construction of the male gender identity, meaning that combative and militarist wartime rhetoric is gendered. Michel Foucault argues that gender binaries are a "permanent social relationship" and an "ineradicable basis" of all relations and institutions of power. [xi] Critical feminists take this point a little further in arguing that the gendered nature of militarist wartime rhetoric is rooted in a systematic construction of systems of authority

and oppression built upon a masculinized system of power hierarchies and gender binaries.[xii] Tinker deconstructs the dominant and pervasive gender bias and power hierarchies within dominant discourses of politics as the "experience of men for men." [xiii] Bremmer argues that the concept of hegemonic masculinity is a "culturally idealized form of power" pervasive and reproduced in personal, social, and institutional settings within the mainstream and dominant discourses of politics and international relations. [xiv]

Connell defines 'hegemonic masculinity' as a socially constructed idea of 'masculinity' based on the social and discursive association of the male gender with power, authority, and dominance. Based on the understanding of 'man' as a natural agent of politics and violence; the male and manliness (power/ authority/ agency/ leadership/ aggressiveness) are celebrated and glorified as a 'warrior.' This creates superficial/artificial gender hierarchies and dichotomies that do not necessarily correspond with the factual attributes of masculinity displayed by the majority of men. In other words, hierarchies within hierarchies are created by socially and discursively constructing different tiers of masculinity. Within a specific socio-political setting and cultural context, 'hegemonic masculinity' as a product of a specific social and discursive construction of patriarchy sustains and legitimizes patriarchal hegemonies against other versions and tiers of masculinity and femininity. [xv]

Dean argues that the idea of 'hegemonic masculinity' has been closely linked to the notion of U.S. presidency. The intersubjectivity of masculine identities and the signifiers of "manliness" such as display of strength, toughness, authority, power, independence, and agency have seemingly come to define the American presidency.[xvi] Harp argues that traditionally it is expected of the U.S. presidents to display a form of hegemonic masculinity that makes them stand apart from the crowd. [xvii] U.S. presidents present themselves as 'strong men'; they thrive as leaders when the calamities strike, standing tall like pillars of stability and certainty among chaos

and uncertainty.[xviii] This association of gendered norms of manliness, connoting agency of politics and violence, with the U.S. presidency compels the President to maintain a facade of 'fearlessness' during a crisis. [xix]

U.S. presidents have historically declared wars during social crises that did not warrant a 'declaration of war'. Nixon declared war on drugs, Johnson announced a war on poverty, and Reagan waged a battle against AIDS. [xx] Trump followed his predecessors and declared war on coronavirus. He proclaimed himself a 'wartime president' spearheading a war against an invisible enemy. It highlights the proclivity of U.S. presidents to militarist responses amid social obstacles instead of understanding the structural roots of the issue.[xxi] An overview of presidential communication in the U.S. indicates that the pandemic metamorphosed into a rhetorical discourse.

Political rhetoric is a communicative act strategically and purposefully constructed to achieve a desired response from the targeted audiences (citizens) within a specific socio-political and cultural context. It reflects a relationship between inter-conceptuality and intersubjectivity of language and human cognition within a specific socio-political rhetorical situation. Narratives and discourses are rhetorically constructed, with linguistic devices such as tropes, metaphors, and analogies that cleverly add representations of identity to create a desired subliminal effect on an audience.

In the context of pandemic responses, it is essential to consider the high levels of the biosecurity threat posed by the pathogen (SARS-CoV-2) to human security (life, health, social, and economic/financial wellbeing) of citizens that ultimately warranted its evolution into a rhetorical situation. [xxii] A rhetorical situation is s "a complex of person, event, object and relations presenting an actual or potential exigency which can be completely or partially removed, if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigency." [xxiii] Exposure to a language, its metaphors, connotations, and

denotations build our conceptual systems, affect our cognitive processes, and construct our perception of the world around us.

Political rhetoric of the leaders uncovers the inter-conceptualities and inter-subjectivities of their choice of linguistic tools, the tropes, metaphors, and analogies, with their self-perceptions and self-identities. [xxiv] Cameron suggests that gendered social expectations of engaging in a particular way of speaking compel male and female bodies to implicitly learn and engage in a specific way of speaking which reflects in their choices of different linguistic tools and metaphors. The male gender's exposure to a communicative style replete with violent, militaristic language reflects the gendered understanding of the male speech acts to be representative of their militarist, warrior identity.[xxv]

This is further corroborated by a recent study by Dada et al. that shows that during the initial phases of the outbreak of Covid-19, male heads of states used war metaphors in greater "frequency and volume" than their female counterparts. During the first Covid-19 wave, women leaders' use of war metaphors averaged 6.1 in 19 speeches whereas, for male leaders, the average was 25.4 wartime references in 40 public speeches. Trump alone used war terminologies 136 times in his 23 public addresses within this timeframe.[xxvi]

A significant difference between the language of male and female leaders warrants a further inquiry into their political rhetorics. Fairclough argues that the emergence of a potential crisis reveals the essence of the phenomenon and the identities of the subjects in that crisis.[xxvii] The emergence of sudden moments of instability during crisis uncovers the deep-seated power hierarchies and hegemonic agenda underlying ideological and socio-political constructions of states, institutions, and agents of politics. Accordingly, we take the post-structuralist standpoint that language is a metaphorical mirror and reflects reality as it is perceived and constructed by its user. In this article, with the help of Critical Discourse Analysis, we analyze the manifestations of Trump's hegemonic

masculine identity in his political rhetoric and leadership response to Covid-19.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

Political discourse is never neutral: it constructs identities through linkages of concepts in a series of signs creating in-group and out-group identities through discursive tools, symbolism, and association. [xxviii] Identities are produced, naturalized, and reproduced through social and discursive practices. As a complex amalgamation, identities manifest themselves through the cultural, racial, social, political, and biological variables.[xxix] The identity of a subject is not monolithic, fixed, or stable; it is always in flux, constantly evolving. Therefore no single aspect of identity in principle is more fundamental than others.[xxx]

The actions and speech of political subjects emanate from their socially and discursively constructed identities. Through discursive strategies of silencing and denial of 'other identities,' the social and political hierarchies of dominance and subordination are created within social and political arrangements.[xxxi] Based on this understanding, critical discourse analysis "seeks to explore the connection between language, power and, ideology" that results in construction, deconstruction, and resistance to the hegemonies and hierarchies of power within the socio-political structure.

CDA argues that far from being neutral, social practices are deeply gendered, with a group-based socio-cognitive perspectival representation articulated and constructed to sustain power hierarchies, regimes of truths, and hegemonies of dominance within a specific socio-political context. [xxxii] There is a dialectical relationship between discourses and social practices; it is discourse that gives meanings to subjects' identities and directs their social and discursive behaviors, reflective and constitutive of powerful groups that control discursive powers. And the emergence of instabilities and crises uncovers deep-seated power hierarchies underlying

socio-political and ideological structures of subjects, be it states, institutions, specific groups, or political agents. [xxxiii]

Setting the Methodological framework for CDA

The main objective of the methodological framework of CDA is to explore the relationship between reality and discourse through association or co-variation by placing discourse within a specific context. The breakdown of the process is as follows:

Table 1: Breakdown of the methodological framework of Trump's political rhetoric during the Covid-19 pandemic

Text	Speeches of Trump
Context	Unexpected emergence of the COVID-19
Analysis:	Discursive practices/ lexical indicators to inform thematic breakdown of discourse - Utterances of masculinised wartime rhetoric. - Assertion of masculine hegemonies of discourses of politics in the political rhetoric of Trump. - Imbrications of hegemonic gendered identity on political rhetoric of the President.

1. Data Collection

The first requirement of the methodological framework of CDA is to identify a discrete body of text (written/spoken words) to scrutinize the discursive construction of reality through language, symbolism, and metaphorical tools used within a specific context. For this study, the text comes from the speeches/public addresses of Trump during the first wave of the pandemic in the U.S. These speeches are available online on public domains, and transcripts are available on Rev.com. The speeches are correlated with the number of registered Covid positive patients and the number of Covid-related deaths on the

same date to better contextualize Trump's political rhetoric with the help of the empirical data.

Table 2. Data Collection

	Selected speeches			
	President Trump			
No. of Speeches	Date	Registered cases	Covid-19 related deaths	Criteria for selection of speech
1	March 12, 2020	1,423	70	Covid-19 declared global pandemic
2	March 18, 2020	5,738	176	Declaration of National Emergency of Covid-19
3	March 24, 2020	36,468	973	**Change in rhetoric:** Trump suggests opening the country before Easter.
4	April 27, 2020	93,2248	53,557	Reports of Trump ignoring PBD regarding Covid-19 surface. Trump blames China in a televised national address
5	May 15, 2020	1,173025	79,112	Trump promises vaccines

				through operation 'warp speed'

2. Context

Theoretical approaches of CDA require placing a text within its historical and socio-political context to understand the constructivist effect of the discursive practices (language) that generates a particularly reductive world and establishes social and discursive hegemonies and hierarchies of power.[xxxiv] The context for this study is a sudden/abrupt emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic.

3. Analysis

Utilizing retroduction, CDA contextualizes the social and historical parameters of the text and builds a structure from its empirical manifestations. Through the processes of articulation and interpellation demonstrable effects of discourse are uncovered.

a. Articulation: Investigating the signifying elements (words, metaphors, tropes, etc.) within texts to identify how meanings are fixed. Through articulation, key elements (linguistic signifiers, masculinised (hegemonic masculinity, gender identity, militarist rhetoric) in the text (Trump's speeches) are identified and classified into dominant themes that emerge from the text.

b. Interpellation: Identifying the manifestation of subject's identities in the text (spoken/written) and naturalization of meanings and acceptance of subject positions.

Table 3. Themes for Discourse Analysis

	Dominant Themes	Occurrences
1	Downplaying the Threat: Strong Man identity of Trump	March 11, April 27

2	Militarist Nationalist Political Rhetoric:	March 18, March 20, May 15
2.1	Masculinised identity of Agent of violence	
2.2	Rhetoric of Nationalism, Patriotism and Americanism	March 12, March 18, May 15
3	The Rhetoric of Control and Consolidation of Power	March 18, March 24, May 15
4	Shifting Responsibility and Blame Attribution	March 18, March 24, May 15, April 27
5	A Disregard for Scientific Advice	March 11, March 18, March 24, April 27
6	Economic Considerations	March 18, March 24, April 27, May 16

1: Downplaying the Threat of virus:

Downplaying the threat posed by the coronavirus appears to be a dominant and recurring theme in Trump's political rhetoric despite the demonstrable effects of the virulent nature of Covid-19 in Asia and several European countries. The initial phase of Trump's political rhetoric seems to revolve around 'minimizing the threat' posed by the virus. Trump's rhetoric is replete with constant reassurances to the general public that the threat posed by the virus was relatively low for the vast majority of the population. He reiterates that only the elderly population was at risk of developing Covid-related complications. His downplaying of the coronavirus threat inadvertently creates a false sense of immunity among the younger population and arguably worsens the spread of the virus. This discourse of downplaying the Covid threat constructs an illusion of safety and perception of control over the pandemic situation resulting in a delay in pandemic responses and unpreparedness of the healthcare system.

Trump's address on March 11, 2020, the day WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, ensured the nation that they were in safe hands, as their government was taking "the most aggressive and comprehensive" actions to "confront a foreign

virus." In his machismo fashion, Trump assured the American people that: "To the <u>vast majority of Americans</u>, the <u>risk is very very low</u>. <u>Young</u> and <u>healthy people</u> can expect to <u>recover fully</u> and <u>quickly</u> if they should get the virus"; "The <u>greater risk is for elderly</u> population with <u>underlying health conditions</u>. In general <u>older population should avoid non essential travel</u> in crowded areas…."; "We will <u>learn</u>, and we can <u>turn a corner</u> <u>on this virus</u>. Some of the <u>doctors say it will wash through</u> and <u>will flow through</u>, in interesting terms, <u>very accurate…</u>"

His later speeches shared optimism for a better turn of events and tried to cover up the flaws in his Covid-19 response by assuring the Americans that the virus would wash through itself. Therefore, mass testing "was completely unnecessary." On March 24, he said: "Actually, this year we are having <u>a bad flu season, we lose thousands</u> and <u>thousands of people a year to flu</u>. We <u>don't turn the country off…</u>"

The theme of downplaying the threat of Covid-19 continues even with a total death count of 86,000 in May 2020. Trump trivialized the impact of Covid-19 in the U.S. Ensuring the public that only a fraction of Covid-19 patients died due to Covid-related complications while most of the patients survived and remained unaffected. By giving the analogies of Spanish flu, Trump hinted at the development of 'herd immunity' albeit not recognizing it as a national policy against Covid. Undercounting and disregarding the number of Covid-related deaths as a relatively smaller percentage appears to be another significant aspect of his rhetoric.

On May 15, 2020, he stated:

> And in <u>many cases</u>, they don't have a vaccine and <u>a virus or a flu comes</u> and <u>you fight</u> through it. We haven't seen anything like this in 100 and some years, 1917, but <u>you fight through it.</u> And people sometimes, I guess, we don't know exactly yet, but it looks like <u>they become immune</u> for at least a short while and maybe for life. <u>But you fight through it. …</u> Many of us have <u>lost</u>

> friends…. but <u>it's a very small percentage</u>. It's <u>a very, very small percentage.</u> I say it all the time. It's a <u>tiny percentage</u>. The <u>vast majority</u>, many people <u>don't even know they have it</u>. They have it or <u>they have sniffles</u> or they have a <u>very minor signs</u> and they recover.

2. Militarist Political Rhetoric

In a broader perspective, after initially downplaying and trivializing the threat of the virus, Trump reverted to a militarist nationalist rhetoric constructing Covid-19 as an existential threat.

2.1 Masculinised identity of the Agent of Violence

Trump's political rhetoric was replete with masculine semantics of war tropes, military metaphors, wartime imagery, and cultural memories of World War II. Trump rhetorically constructed Covid-19 as a 'clear and present' yet 'invisible enemy' by creating binaries of 'us vs them.' He assured the Americans of achieving a 'complete victory' against his toughest enemy. Trump not only declared himself a wartime president but also evoked federal legislation only applicable during actual wartime. He drew battle lines between the frontline and home front, and declared hospitals and healthcare services the frontlines in the war against Covid-19 and healthcare workers such as doctors, nurses, and janitorial staff as frontline workers and soldiers.

A dominant and recurring element in Trump's rhetoric is the heroization of healthcare workers, referring to them as veterans and warriors. With clever invocations of similarities with WWII, he encouraged collective action in the "war" on Covid-19. On March 18, 2020, he stated:

> I view it as a, in a sense, <u>a wartime president</u>. I mean, that's <u>what we're fighting</u>. It's <u>a tough situation</u>…..It's <u>an invisible enemy</u>…That's <u>always the toughest enemy,</u> the <u>invisible enemy</u>, but we are going to <u>defeat the invisible enemy.</u> I think we're going to do it even faster

> than we thought and will be <u>a complete victory</u>. It will be <u>total victory</u>… America is engaged in <u>a historic battle</u> to safeguard the <u>lives</u> of our citizens, our <u>future</u> society.

Similarly, on March 20, 2020 Trump stated:

> <u>Americans</u> from every walk of life are <u>coming together</u> and thanks to the spirit of our people, we will <u>win this war</u> and we are, <u>we're winning</u> and we're <u>going to win this war</u>...In <u>World War II</u> <u>young people</u> in their teenage years <u>volunteered to fight</u>… They <u>wanted to fight</u> so badly because they <u>loved their country</u>…We are all in this together and we'll come through together. It's <u>the invisible enemy</u>.

Trump stated on May 15, 2020:

> My administration cut through every piece of red tape… very <u>vicious virus</u>…; to <u>battle the virus</u>, my administration <u>marshalled</u> every resource at our nation's disposal… <u>administration fighting relentlessly</u>… from <u>terrible virus</u>, <u>the invisible enemy</u>.

2.2 Rhetoric of Nationalism, Patriotism, and Americanism

Trump relied heavily on political rhetoric loaded with national identity, patriotic duty, and cultural memories of WWII. Themes of sacrifice occupied a central position in Trump's framing of political messaging on Covid-19. He securitized the Covid-19 pandemic by constructing the virus as a 'present yet invisible enemy' that assisted him in enacting border closure policies. Through reliance on cultural memories of WWII, inferences to historical and cultural victories, and heroization of essential workers, he reminded Americans of their patriotic and national duty to ensure the supply of medical equipment such as testing kits, ventilators, PPEs, and masks. Critically, wartime political rhetoric prepared people to sacrifice some of their

fundamental freedoms under the pretext of national and patriotic duty, and reference to sacrifices and veneration of healthcare workers and veterans made their deaths in the line of duty more palatable, no matter how ill-equipped they were.

On March 18, 2020, Trump said: "We want to draw on the strength of our history......workers refused to go home and slept on the factory floor to keep the assembly lines going… What they were able to do during WWII and now it's our time. We must sacrifice together because we are all in this together and we'll come through together." Rhetorical themes of American exceptionalism and national identity appeared to be dominant and recurring in Trump's Covid-19 addresses. His political rhetoric harkened back to the roots of Americanism in a similar bellicose style he adopted during his election campaign with the help of sloganeering such as, 'make America great again.' He reminded Americans what made America a great nation; it was the times of hardship and great adversity that the true strength of American character shone through and made Americans the strongest people on the face of this earth. He glorified the great legacies of American heroes who overcame insurmountable difficulties with an indestructible spirit. Similarly, he reminded Americans of their status as a global power destined to lead the world. On March 12, 2020, he noted:

> In times of hardship. The true character of America always shines through. We live in the company of greatest heroes and most inspiring citizens anywhere in the world…Americans are the strongest and most resilient people on Earth. And in the coming weeks, we will have to make changes and sacrifices…Just as generations of Americans before us faced down the most difficult trials, set their sights on the highest summits and overcame the biggest obstacles, America will meet the moment.

Trump referred to the nationalist core of the American identity as a pioneer nation and relied heavily on the discursive iterations of the American way of life while arguing in favor of opening up the country and reigniting the economic engines. Reminding Americans of their military might, which in

hindsight proves insufficient when facing an invisible enemy, Trump ensured Americans that they would be victorious. He militarised the production of Covid-19 vaccines by constructing it in military terms "operation warp speed" (military operation style) mission and claimed to be leading the world in this field. He stated on May15, 2020:

> We have the <u>mightiest military</u> in <u>the long history of mankind</u>. We have the <u>best and most devoted workers ever to walk the face of the world</u>. And now we're combing all of the amazing strength for the <u>most aggressive vaccine project in the world</u>…The spirit and the will of our nation is unbreakable. We will <u>defeat this threat</u>. When <u>America is tested, America rises</u> to the occasion…<u>No nation is more prepared</u> or <u>more equipped</u> to face down the crisis… As you know, <u>we are rated number one in the world</u>. We're also helping other nations. Many of the nations, we're helping them a lot…To <u>resume the American way of life </u>we will reignite our economic engines.

4. Federalism and consolidation of Power

Trump's political rhetoric uncovered his proclivity to the consolidation of power and authority in his own hands. With the declaration of war on Covid, he declared a 'state of national emergency that empowered the central government to surpass the barriers of oversight and accountability constituted by democratic and institutional supervision in democratic governments. Trump invoked 'The defense Production Act of 1950,' acquired emergency powers, and activated Federal Emergency Agency (FEMA) to manufacture and procure emergency healthcare supplies and equipment. The enactment of the Emergency Act empowered him to surpass the national response framework under the department of homeland security. March 12, 2020, he said: "To <u>unleash the full power of federal government</u> in this effort today, I am officially declaring a <u>National Emergency</u>." Trump's declarations of his dislike for 'barriers of oversight' in his public statements seemed to give away a disregard for accountability and power-

sharing. He repeatedly complained about being restricted due to the previous system in place for the U.S. disaster response mechanism and how it worked against a centralized control. Rhetorical proclamations of the acquisition of 'tremendous powers' in his speeches uncovered his authoritative inclinations. On March 18, 2020, he noted:

> Tremendous power actually…it gives the kind of power that we need to get rid of this virus…We are invoking it to use the power of federal government to help the states get things that they need like the masks, like the ventilators…To those families and citizens who are worried and concerned for themselves and their loved ones, I want you to know that your federal government will unleash every authority…We'll remove or eliminate every obstacle necessary to deliver our people the care that they need that they're entitled to...... the authority to waive rules that severely restrict where the hospitals can care for patients within the hospital itself .....Immediately wave revisions of applicable laws and regulations to ensure maximum flexibility.

In his May 2020 address, Trump claimed that the U.S. was leading the world in manufacturing the Covid-19 vaccine and was ready to test it on January 11, 2020, within hours of the release of the genetic code of the coronavirus online. To fast-track human trials, Trump claimed to have suspended and overruled every restriction and red tape in rules and regulations. In addition to the assurance of 'unmatched federal government support' and recourses to accelerate the process of 'human trials,' the Trump administration decided to invest in the manufacturing of 'preapproved' vaccine contenders.

> Through operation Wrap Speed, the federal government is providing unprecedented support and resources to safely expedite the trials........the federal government will invest in the manufacturing all of the top vaccine candidates before they're approved…Then my administration cut through every piece of red tape to achieve the fastest ever, by far, the launch of a vaccine

trial for this new virus, this very vicious virus…To battle the virus, <u>my administration marshaled every resource</u> at our nation's disposal, public, private, military, scientific and industrial all at your disposal…<u>My administration is fighting relentlessly</u> to protect all citizens of every color and creed from <u>this terrible virus</u>, <u>the invisible enemy</u>…The urgency orders I'm issuing today will also confer <u>broad new authority</u> to the secretary of Health and Human services..... to <u>immediately wave revisions of applicable laws</u> and regulations to doctors, hospitals all hospitals and healthcare providers, <u>maximum flexibility</u> to respond to the virus and care for patients.

5. Blame Game and Shifting Responsibility

Trump relied heavily on the political rhetoric of the blame game and shifting responsibility as a discursive strategy to counter the criticism he faced on his Covid-19 response. Noticeably, China became a prominent target of his public ire for unleashing Covid-19 onto the world. He shifted the responsibility for his delayed Covid-19 response to previous administrations, the obsolete disaster management systems, and scarce recourses allocated to the emergency response system. Trump stated on May 15, 2020:

We took over very, <u>very empty cupboards</u>, I say, medically. We also <u>had empty cupboards in a military sense</u>. Our <u>military was in sad shape</u>. It was <u>depleted</u>. We now have the <u>strongest military the Unites States has ever had</u>, so far…When we started we didn't have ventilators. I <u>inherited nothing</u>. I <u>inherited nothing</u> from the <u>previous administration</u>, unfortunately…Just so you know, just for the <u>probably a hundredth time</u>, I, this administration, <u>inherited an obsolete broken old system</u> that wasn't meant for this…No, <u>I don't take responsibility</u> at all because we were given a set of circumstances, and <u>we were given rules, regulations</u>, and specifications from a different time. It wasn't meant for this kind of an event with the kind of numbers that we're talking about.

Trump's insistence on allegations of bias in traditional new media appeared to be a recurring theme in his political rhetoric. He openly confronted left-wing media for misrepresenting his Covid-19 response and misleading the general public. He lashed out at reporters for asking critical questions regarding his Covid-19 approach and complained about not being given due credit for his crisis leadership. He hurled a barrage of accusations at the media for being corrupt and colluding with China to undermine his leadership and tarnish his reputation and credibility by asking nasty questions. On March 18, 2020, he stated: "It's corrupt news... They're saying we're doing a great job, everybody's saying, then you'll read this phony story... The press is very dishonest, they are siding with China… things they shouldn't be doing." And on May 15, 2020, he stated again:

> We fixed it and we've done a great job, and we haven't been given a credit that we deserve, that I can tell you…I think it's a nasty question because what we've done is.... and Tony had said numerous times that we've saved thousands of lives because of the quick closing...I think I came up with this term, Fake News. It's corrupt news... They're saying we're doing a great job, everybody's saying, then you'll read this phony story... The press is very dishonest, they are siding with China, they are doing things they shouldn't be doing.

Trump refused to acknowledge his administration's unpreparedness and failure to anticipate the severity of the threat that manifested in the unavailability of testing kits and critical care equipments. Consequently, a reiterative blame game between Trump and state governors ensued. He cleverly evoked straw man fallacies and engaged in argumentative rhetoric about the previous administration's Swine flu response instead of dealing with direct questions on his Covid-19 strategy. He stated on May 15, 2020: "If you go back to swine Flu, it was nothing like this. They didn't do testing like this. And actually, they lost approximately 14,000 people. And they didn't do testing. What we have done, we've done it very early.

We've <u>gotten it very early</u>; we've <u>also kept a lot of people out</u>." And on March 24, 2020, he said: "<u>Why didn't we prepare for ventilators</u>, well, we knew. It <u>depends</u>. It <u>depends on how it goes</u>. Worst case, absolutely, a best-case, not at all, so <u>we're going to have to see where it goes</u>...."

Trump is one of the few world leaders who blatantly blamed China for the outbreak of Covid-19 as a global pandemic, without any substantial proof. His reference to Covid-19 as a 'Chinese Virus' stands out in his political rhetoric. Trump not only insisted on using the term but also refused to accept that it could be qualified as a racist slur offensive to Chinese Americans. Trump stated on March 18, 2020: "It's something that nobody expected. It <u>came out of China</u>, and it's one of those things that happened…No, No, no. I think they probably agree with it 100%. It comes from China. There's nothing not to agree…. It comes from China. It's not racist at all. No, not at all. It comes from China, that's why. It comes from China. I want to be accurate."

President Trump's political rhetoric is infused with the blame game and shifting responsibility. He seemingly directed the anger and frustration of his voters towards China, the media, and the previous administrations. He assured his voters that Covid-19 was a Chinese ploy, and corrupt media was working at the behest of China to discredit his achievements. Trump rhetorically created an enemy, gave it an identity, and successfully provided an outlet for his voters' ire. On April 27, 2020, he stated:

> We'll <u>never forget loved ones</u>. We'll <u>never forget these great people that sacrifice</u> for a reason of <u>incompetence</u> or <u>something else</u> other than incompetence, what happened at a point where they could have protected the whole world. Not just us, the whole world…. We <u>aren't happy</u> with <u>China</u>, we <u>are not happy</u> with the whole situation. Because we believe <u>it could've been stopped</u> at the source, it could've been <u>stopped quickly</u> and it <u>wouldn't have</u> <u>spread</u> all over the <u>world</u>…. <u>It could have been stopped</u> and it <u>could have been stopped short</u>,

but somebody a long time ago, it seems <u>decided not to do it</u> that way and <u>the whole world is suffering</u> because of it<u>. 184 countries at least.</u>

6. A Disregard for Scientific Advice

A disregard and skepticism of scientific community (CDC) guidelines on Covid-19 emerge as a dominant theme in President Trump's political rhetorics. Differences between Trump and CDC grew throughout his Covid-19 leadership. Trump's political rhetoric is replete with unscientific suggestions such as 'sauna baths' and 'injecting disinfectants' in addition to overtly questioning, contradicting, and violating CDC guidelines. On March 11, Trump stated:

> <u>Young</u> and <u>healthy people</u> can expect to <u>recover fully</u> and <u>quickly</u> if they should get the virus…Some of the <u>doctors say it will wash through </u>and <u>will flow through</u>, in interesting terms, <u>very accurate</u>…And in <u>many cases</u>, they don't have a vaccine and <u>a virus or a flu comes</u> and <u>you fight</u> through it. We haven't seen anything like this in 100 and some years, 1917, but <u>you fight through it.</u> And people sometimes, I guess, we don't know exactly yet, but it looks like <u>they become immune</u> for at least a short while and maybe for life. <u>But you fight through it.</u>

He boasted about his intuition instead of being guided by scientific advice leaving little room for educational approaches that appeal to the rationality and reason of the citizens. On March 18, 2022, he said: "No, <u>there was instinct to know</u>... I <u>made a decision to close off China</u>....<u>Call it luck</u> or call <u>talent,</u> it doesn't matter, <u>we made a great decision</u>." And on March 24, he said: "Actually, this year we are having <u>a bad flu season, we lose thousands</u> and <u>thousands of people a year to flu</u>. We <u>don't turn the country off.</u>" Trump rhetorically constructed mask-wearing as a feminized practice. He persistently expressed apprehensions on the viability of CDC's guidelines vis-a-viz mask-wearing; insisted on the 'voluntary nature' of the guidelines; and refused to wear mask:

> In light of these studies, the <u>CDC is advising the use of nonmedical cloth face</u> covering as <u>an additional voluntary public health measure</u>. So it's <u>voluntary,</u> you <u>don't have to do it</u>. They suggested for a period of time, <u>but it's voluntary</u>... So with <u>masks</u>, it's going to be, really, a <u>voluntary thing</u>. You <u>can do it; you don't have to do it</u>. <u>I'm choosing not to do it</u>.... it's <u>only</u> a <u>recommendation, it's voluntary</u>.

7. Economic Considerations

Economic considerations make up the most dominant theme of Trump's political rhetoric. He constructed the Covid-19 pandemic as a huge hurdle in his economic achievements. He discussed the devastating impact of Covid-19 on the economy of the U.S. repeatedly in his speeches. Trump perceived the recovery from Covid-19 entirely in economic terms and assured financial relief and support (coronavirus aid packages, direct payments, debt suspensions etc.) for businesses and households. His political communication inadvertently betrayed an apathy towards Covid-19 related deaths by engaging in masculine rhetoric of unmanliness of letting the coronavirus, a bad seasonal flu, shut down the economic engines of the great American nation. In a virtual town hall meeting on March 24, 2020, he stated:

> Actually this year we are having <u>a bad flu season</u>, but <u>we lose thousands of people a year to the flu</u>… Look <u>we lose thousands</u>, I brought some numbers here, and <u>we lose thousands</u> and <u>thousands of people a year to flu</u>. We <u>don't turn the country off</u>. I mean <u>every year</u>. Now when I heard numbers, <u>we average 37,000 people a year</u>......We've <u>lost as many as 78,000 people in a year to flu</u>…We <u>lose much more to automobile accidents</u>. We didn't call up automobile companies, say, <u>stop making cars</u>. We don't want cars anymore.

Trump constructed the economy as a primary victim of the Covid-19. With a reiterative insistence on "reigniting the economic engines," his political rhetoric is resplendent with the

aforementioned nationalist references to resorting to the American way of life. In his eagerness to restart economic activities, Trump advised the American public to accept the harsh reality of losing people to 'the flu' because the alternate choice of shutting down the country would have far worse consequences, such as economic depression or recession that might cause socio-political instability and result in thousands of deaths by depression, suicide, and drug abuse. On March 24, 2020, he noted:

> Shutdown, that causes massive depression. It causes massive depression. It causes drugs, it causes suicide... No, our country has to get back to work again...Look we are going to lose a number of people to flu, but you're going to lose more people by putting a country into a massive recession or depression, you're going to lose people. You're going to have suicides by the thousands...To resume the American way of life we will reignite our economic engines.

And on April 27, 2020, he stated: "Ensuring the health of our economy is vital to ensuring the health of our country.

Discussion

In summation, the political rhetoric employed during the Covid-19 pandemic presents an interesting case study to uncover manifestations of leaders' identities in their responses under high-stake human security situations. Feminism argues that state and discourses of politics are masculinized constructions that constitute and perpetuate gender power hierarchies through discursive means of text and talk. The hegemonic nature of identities is rooted in the assumption that instead of appearing as some form of dominance, they seem commonsensical, largely consensual, and organic in socio-political and communal practices. Masculinized political discourse that ascribes political agency to the 'male' compels or requires national leaders to portray a persona or acquire a hegemonic identity of a strong man.

Aroobah Sarfraz Lak & Tasawar Hussain

An overview of Trump's political rhetoric and leadership responses during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic from March to May 2020 portrays a perfect manifestation of his identity as a 'strong man.' There is a significant period between WHO's declaration of Covid-19 as a global pandemic and its eventual outbreak in the U.S. that should have given the Trump administration ample time to prepare. Nevertheless, when the pandemic finally hit, the U.S. was caught unprepared and ill-equipped. Trump's construction of his gendered identity as a fearless warrior dictated his refusal to acknowledge the threat posed by Covid-19 and manifested in his rhetoric of downplaying the threat of the virus.

Post-positivist feminists argue that the gendered identities of male leaders compel them to assert their violent agency and display a fearless warrior facade when faced with a threat. And naturalization of social and discursively constructed masculinized identities of male leaders as strong men and agents of political violence creates a subliminal proclivity towards militarism in their language and responses. Through the clever articulations of rhetorical tools, they present their nations with a simple and present enemy and portray themselves as the only champions against them.

Trump's masculine identity as an agent of political violence reflects his proclivity to an overt declaration of war and an eagerness to assume the coveted role of a wartime president. This warrants contextualization of the feminist critique on masculinized nature of war discourse and its association with the social and discursive construction of the identity of hegemonic masculinity. Trump's engagement with wartime political rhetoric indicates the internalization of the masculine identity of the male warrior and uncovers the inter-subjectivities of social and discursive identities of manliness with militarism.

The U.S. history of "declaring war" over social issues indicates the pervasiveness of war discourse as a 'hegemonic narrative' or 'master narrative.' This, in turn, creates a predisposition to assume the 'great role' of 'wartime president', an image highly

revered and venerated in U.S. political culture, which symbiotically links subdiscourses of militarism and hegemonic masculinities with the U.S. presidency. Ashley argues that subjects (states and political agents) have no existence prior to their political practices; Trump's eagerness to declare himself a wartime president appears to be a performative constitution of his hegemonic presidential identity.

War discourse and militarised war semantics are based on the naturalization of power asymmetries and binaries of 'in group' and 'out group' identities where the 'success of one comes as the defeat of other.' However, in the case of 'an invisible microscopic enemy,' the traditional rhetorical arsenals available to strong men, such as delegitimizing their enemy, fails. Therefore, Trump appeared to be grappling with the idea of fighting a microscopic enemy. At first, he tried to undermine it by downplaying its threat followed by an outright declaration of war against this 'invisible enemy.' Eventually, his political rhetoric went full circle, reducing the invisible enemy to a simple flu. These reiterative inconsistencies and ambiguities in his political rhetoric arguably materialized into a disastrous Covid-19 leadership response that eventually proved quite costly on both political and healthcare fronts.

Trump's masculinist identity manifested itself in his disregard and dislike for barriers and restrictions. His political rhetoric constructed rules—an intrinsic organ of the democratic system—as hurdles that restrict him. He boasted about overruling and revising laws of over-sight previously in place to achieve maximum flexibility and control over the system. In retrospect, the rhetorical act of divulging his dislike for rules and regulations within the broader perspective of his political rhetoric seems aligned with his public persona and identity as an assertive alpha male. Contextually, the inherent danger in naturalization and mainstreaming of wartime political discourse is that it can become a tool in the hand of political leaders to consolidate their political authority, dispel opposition and logic, and eventually suspend democratic processes.

Trump's rhetorical strategies of shifting responsibility and blame attribution when contested with the realities of his pandemic response appear to be in sync with a reflection of his identity as a populist leader. Like the U.S. presidency, the intersubjectivities of populism with social and discursive identities of masculinity and male as an agent of politics are naturalized and accepted in the U.S. Conventionally, populist leaders construct their political discourse based on their identities as 'outsiders,' which resonates with their vote base. As an 'outsider,' Trump blames previous administrations for his failures and lack of preparedness, engages in a war of words with left-wing media, and displays an overt skepticism toward the guidelines of the CDC.

With the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic within the same timeframe as the upcoming presidential elections, Trump's populist tendencies appear to be at their peak. Most pronounced was his attempt to blame China for unleashing a global pandemic as a ploy without any substantial proof. His reiterative insistence on declaring Covid-19 as a 'Chinese virus' and a sign of Chinese incompetence left a lasting legacy of anti-Asian sentiment among his voters. Similarly, his populist masculine identity materialized in his refusal to wear a mask, connoting mask-wearing as a feminine activity. Trump discursively associated 'mask-wearing' with femininity, something weak that a strong and powerful man will never do. Trump's insistence on the voluntary nature of mask guidelines and public refusal to wear one directly impacted his voters' behaviors vis-a vis CDC guidelines and Covid-19 positivity ratios.

Trump, in his presidential tenure, reinforced and reinvigorated the image of a strong man, hyper-masculine, authoritative, and resistant to suggestions and institutional oversights. His rhetoric constructed him as 'a warrior' who 'powered through Covid-19' and did not require a 'mask' to protect him from the virus. Trump's actions based on his masculine identities displayed how hegemonic gender identities get perpetuated through discursive tools with a constant re-enactment and

circulation of ideological assumptions in practice and discourse of politics.

Overall, Trump's political rhetoric displayed hegemony of a particular way of performing male gender identity and leadership. The hegemonic nature of these social structures is such that the agent benefiting from such hegemonic discourses fails to understand or realize their sexism or power within the gender power structure. These gendered hegemonies are most dominant in inscriptions of 'masculine hegemonies' imbued in political identities and discourses of male heads of states, portraying the dominance of a particular way of doing and expressing the male gender and leadership. In retrospect, the political rhetoric of leaders is rooted in, mediated, and influenced by their social and discursive ideologies and intrinsic dispositions of the subject of politics, claimed to be gendered by the feminists. This social acceptance and perpetuation of the systemic hegemonic structures established by discursive tools with a constant re-enactment and circulation of ideological assumptions in discourse is a permanent feature of the subjects of politics and leadership. A leader's placement in gender hierarchies affects his/her interactions, rhetoric, perceptions, and leadership styles.

A critical discourse analysis of Trump's political rhetoric informs how hegemonic gender identities of a man as the agent of politics and violence inform and construct male/presidential identities and constitute a dialectical relation between discourse, gender, and politics. Overall, Trump's gendered identities, socio-political context, ideological structures, and discursive processes that construct his identities and are perpetuated and reiterated in his speech acts, also dictated his Covid-19 response.

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