Article

Reporting Strategy and Gender Perspective in Chinese Media Coverage of COVID-19 News

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Abstract: This article examines the reporting strategy and gender perspective in Chinese media coverage of COVID-19 news. The article employs a mixed-method approach to analyze news reports, using quantitative statistics and qualitative semantic materials that complement each other. The study found that the media construct a stereotypical image of female healthcare workers absent from public participation. Media reports on the actual number of female healthcare workers involved in treating COVID-19 patients are lower than those about men. Reports focusing exclusively on female staff tend to focus on their private affairs, that is, on their non-professional identities and characteristics, and show an excessive gaze on the female body. To understand this phenomenon prevailing in Chinese media, it is necessary to highlight the predicament of Chinese women in society as well as acknowledge the work of contemporary Chinese feminism in raising awareness on Chinese women's experiences.

1. Introduction

An ongoing outbreak of novel coronavirus pneumonia, called COVID-19, was first identified in Wuhan, Hubei province, China, at the end of 2019. By the end of January 2020, China had recorded numerous confirmed cases of coronavirus, and on January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the outbreak a public health emergency of international concern (WHO 2020).

Since it was first announced in December 2019, news on the coronavirus disease outbreak has dominated the headlines of the world's major media outlets. In the first month after the coronavirus outbreak (January 2020), over 41,000 English-language news media reports were retrieved from Google by searching for 'coronavirus.' Nearly 19,000 of these articles mention the disease in the title. Globally, journalists are eager to understand the origin, trajectory, and impact of the virus, in addition to conducting real-time broadcasts, disseminating scientific knowledge on the disease, and publishing related information or refuting fake news.

The media in mainland China collectively set its sights on healthcare workers on the frontline for many follow-up reports. Female healthcare workers had been at the battlefront in this war with no gun smoke. The China Women's News found that over 50% of the doctors fighting on the frontline were women and more than 90% of the nurses were women (China Women's News 2020). There is a dialectical relationship between news discourse and social structure, wherein the power relations behind the social structure shape the news discourse. Through the operation of text, mass media construct the images of different groups, which may affect the public's cognition, attitudes, and emotion towards a certain group and even the direction of public policy.

This study analyzes the reporting framework and gender perspective of Chinese media coverage of COVID-19 news. On the one hand, it presents how female medical staff are constructed in news texts and what characteristics they have in terms of the number of reports, the main image, and the structure framework of the news. On the other hand, it

compares the differences in the image construction of medical staff of different genders and discusses the interaction between female news texts and the social structure. Finally, it provides information and ideas for future discussions on the gendered perspective in media culture.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Female Voices in the News

Mass media play a powerful role in how society views men and women. Scholars have lamented the systematic and apparently very persistent underrepresentation of women in television news (Hooghe and De Swert 2009; D'Heer et al. 2019). According to Tuchman et al. (1978), the underrepresentation of women in the media should be considered a "symbolic annihilation" of the female perspective and of women in society in general. The Women's Media Center (WMC) found that men still dominate print, broadcast, and digital media (WMC 2014). An in-depth literature review shows that women, despite their increasingly prominent roles worldwide, continue to be persistently underrepresented and stereotyped in news media (Vandenberghe 2019). Other studies quantitatively measure the number of women quoted in news reports, analyze source selection among professional reporters, or analyze gender in various journalistic genres (Ross et al. 2013). Feminist news researchers have long agreed that in the macho culture of most newsrooms, journalists' daily decisions about what is newsworthy remain firmly based on masculine news values (Ross and Carter 2011).

Moreover, women are often stereotyped and limited to traditional 'female' topics (De Swert and Hooghe 2010). Stereotyping is the process of ascribing characteristics to people based on their group memberships. According to the social cognitive theory, most researchers have well-developed stereotypes of women and men (Beam and Cicco 2010), which link women and men to certain generalized behaviors characteristics. Research shows that gender stereotyping in media still prevails despite the change in the roles of men and women over the years (Ashmore and Del Boca 1981; D'Heer et al. 2019). Men are often consulted in the news to provide an informative, authoritarian perspective as spokespersons or experts, whereas women are often consulted for a personal perspective as eyewitnesses or vox pops (Collins 2011). In a word, women are often portrayed in the media as part of the domestic or private sector, and men are portrayed as having public lives.

There is no doubt that the patriarchal structure of media organization has a powerful negative impact on women's gender equality. In recent years, many researchers have been working on tackling this media underrepresentation of women. For example, a study confirmed that a higher share of female actors in all kinds of news stories had a significant positive effect on gender equality as well as on attitudes on gender roles in the society (Djerf-Pierre 2011). For over two years now, journalists and producers across the BBC have been rethinking whom they put in front of the camera, with the goal of achieving gender equality every month (Rattan et al. 2019).

2.2. Media Representation of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 crisis has posed new challenges to journalism. Many studies have focused on and are still focusing on media coverage of COVID-19. Media representation of the pandemic has varied by country, time period, and media outlet. Research has suggested that the mass media news coverage of COVID-19 was highly politicized in the US (Hart et al. 2020), which was anticipating a major presidential election. A recent analysis of media coverage focusing on reference newspapers also finds that the COVID-19 pandemic has been highly politicized in Spanish and Italian media (Tejedor et al. 2020).

During the COVID-19 outbreak, news media have simultaneously kept viewers informed about current events related to the pandemic and contributed to misinformation or fake news. A study performed a comparative analysis on five social media platforms (Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Reddit, and Gab) to assess user engagement and interest

about the COVID-19 topic (Cinelli et al. 2020). It suggested that social media play an increasingly important role in spreading both accurate information and misinformation. In this vein, scholars suggest that newsrooms should be working collaboratively to deliver consistent messages related to false and inaccurate information by choosing headlines, wording, and images carefully (Bastani and Bahrami 2020). Pandemic-related stories can cut across many aspects of society, permitting reporters to use different news frames (such as science, health, policy, politics, society, and gender) to report on the pandemic. Based on the above research results, this paper examines the representation of female medical workers in Chinese media coverage in relation to large-scale public health emergencies, China's social structure, and the social ordering of gender. By examining the different portrayal of female and male medical staff in news reports, this paper seeks to address the following questions:

> What is the degree of female healthcare workers' presence in COVID-19 news reports? What roles do the female healthcare workers presented in the news reports play? What kind of gender traits do these roles portray? How do medical workers of different genders perform in terms of 'reporting themes' and 'reporting positions'? Why does news reporting not reflect the reality of women's roles in the COVID-19 fight?

3. Data and Methodology

As Peter Larsen pointed out, 'Arguing that the principle modes of address are biased in terms of gender—especially that the structuring of content which is characteristic of most media and genres presupposes a male audience—these studies have served to differentiate further the notion of ideology and of the nature of ideological impact in qualitative content analysis' (Larsen 1991, p. 131). This study utilizes a mixed-method approach in analyzing news reports; it uses quantitative statistics and qualitative semantic materials to complement each other. The study gives a quantitative description of the number of news reports on, media images of, and reporting structure of female medical workers. It also connects the news text with the broad social background and explains the deep meaning and causal logic behind the quantitative data.

3.1. Sample Selection

In this paper, we obtained keywords and the corresponding occurrence numbers for Twitter-like Sina Weibo reports on the COVID-19 outbreak by combining word frequency statistics and data mining techniques. The web crawler module refers to a bot that systematically browses the Internet for web indexing. Web crawlers recursively visit webpages according to predefined policies. They copy and save information on the webpage in the process. In this paper, we used a focused web crawler that concentrated on collecting reports on COVID-19 and healthcare workers involved on the frontline as published on Sina Weibo. The following keywords were used: 'doctor', 'female doctor', 'female nurse', 'female medical worker', and 'female doctors in white robes'. To improve the accuracy of the crawler, the program retrieval range was set as title and text, and the retrieval time was from 1 January to 31 June 2020. Further screening was carried out to exclude stories that were not related to female healthcare workers, as well as comments and text ads. Finally, we obtained 695 reports that constituted the data repository for the modules that followed. The category coding analysis of this study was based on 695 valid samples and took a single news report as the analysis unit. In the event that there was more than one character image meeting the requirements in a report, the one with the most vivid character image was selected for the sample.

3.2. Coding Scheme

Web crawler technology was adopted to capture the news about female medical workers reported by Sina Weibo from January 2020 to June 2020. The specific number of news shows the proportion of female medical staff in the overall news coverage with

medical staff as the theme during the COVID-19 epidemic. This part of the study was conducted in a quantitative manner, showing the extent and changing trend of the mass media's attention to the issues concerning female medical workers; therefore, no special coding was required.

We followed the Complementary Explorative Data Analysis framework in developing our coding scheme (Sudweeks and Simoff 1999). Issue-specific frames were extracted from the content and refined during the discussions among the authors. Based on the news published on Sina microblog between 1 and 14 February 2020, we used the keywords 'female doctor', 'female nurse', and 'female medical worker' in the course of our big data mining process. By further screening, we eliminated irrelevant reports and collected 342 news. The coding categories analysis in this study was conducted based on the 342 valid samples. The unit of analysis for the content analysis was each single news report, and if there were multiple characters in a report that meet the requirements, the one with the most vivid image was selected as the sample.

Female medical workers, as the main object of the reports, were portrayed in two dimensions: in terms of their 'behavior image' and in terms of their 'value image'. According to the detailed description of the report, the 'personal images' of female healthcare workers were divided into the five following categories: (1) Family images; (2) Personal images; (3) Professional images; (4) Social images (Table 1); (5) Value image, presented in Table 2, which shows the positive, negative, or neutral evaluation of various behaviors of female medical workers by the mass media.

Table 1. Codes of behavior images of female medical works.

Behavior Images	Codes
Family images	1. Mother 2. Daughter 3. Wife 4. Girlfriend
Personal images	1. Looks 2. Speech 3. Deportment 4. Clothes
Professional images	1. Popularize medical knowledge 2. Curing and treating patients 3. Service to society 4. Concerned about the welfare of patients
Social images	1. Hard-working 2. Devoted 3. Unselfish 4. Warm-hearted 5. Kind 6. Trusting others

Table 2. Codes of value images of female medical works.

Value Image	Codes
Positive feedback	1 Praise 2. Approbatory 3. Appreciative 4. Support
Negative feedback	1. Criticizing 2. Belittling 3. Opposing 4. Questioning
Neutrality	1. Non-prejudiced 2. Egalitarian

3.3. Inter-Coder Reliability

Throughout the research, we used the two-people-code technology; the two authors conducted the coding process. One hundred news reports were randomly selected from valid samples to be encoded independently, and the two-people-code's intercoder reliability was tested using Scott's pi. The coder's reliability was found to be between 0.91 and 1.00. Since the mutual trust between coders was quite high, formal coding began after the coder's reliability was verified.

4. Results

4.1. Changes in the Number of News Reports

We collected big data on the news using the keyword 'doctor,' which does not mention gender. We also examined other statistics of high-frequency words posted on the Sina microblog during the peak of the epidemic from 1 to 14 February 2020. We found that male doctors appeared 152 times in the reports, which is far higher than the number of times (74) that female doctors appeared in the news.

The people protested the one-sided portrayal of men in the medical field through the media. On 27 January 2020 at 12:44, the CCTV microblog account released a piece of news titled 'Top support! The doctors have all arrived in Wuhan . . . ' with nine pictures (the largest number of images allowed to be sent in a single tweet) presenting the resumes of the nine male doctors who participated in the support task. The report left the reader with an intuitive sense that the team in this mission was entirely or overwhelmingly composed of male doctors. However, the astonishing truth is that of the 30 doctors in the team, 21 were women, and there were no names or photos of these doctors in the media. The report raised great doubts among netizens.

4.2. News Images of Female Medical Workers

Reports focusing exclusively on female staff tended to focus on private affairs, their non-professional identities, and characteristics. Some reports emphasized the feelings and moods of female healthcare workers in their capacity as 'mothers' and 'wives' being involved in the fight against the epidemic and used phrases such as 'will worry about the child being left unattended' and 'whether the elderly at home agree'. Many reports focused on individuals supporting working women within their families, especially husbands and fathers. In a widely circulated news video, Zhao Yingming, a nurse in the respiratory department of the First People's Hospital of Guangyuan City, rushed to the frontline with the medical team, and her husband who saw off the car that transported her, cried out in tears: 'You must come back safely, and I will take care of the housework for a year!' The report circulated quickly on the Internet and has been hailed as the 'most moving lover's prattle' of Valentine's Day 2020 (The Paper. Cn 2020).

Apart from performing housework, the cultural view is that women are naturally obliged to take care of children. Fighting the pandemic in hospitals and staying behind in wards means that these women have to leave their families and are temporarily unable to take care of their children. Some reports have focused on how children embrace this and understand what their mothers must do. Liu Fan, the mother of a girl in junior school, named Chen Qifang, is a doctor in Wuhan Children's Hospital (designated as the only hospital that treats children infected with the coronavirus in Wuhan). Chen Qifang said in an open letter to a patient, 'Hold on! I will lend you my mother!' This incident hit the state broadcaster CCTV news on 6 February 2020. Song Caiping, a female army doctor, helped fight the Ebola epidemic in Africa and engaged in active support during the outbreak of the coronavirus. China Global Television Network reported on 1 February: 'In 2014, Song Caiping was deployed to Liberia to help with the fight against Ebola. Her son was only 11 years old at the time, and saying goodbye to his mother left him in tears. Five years later, Song was ordered to lead 48 medical staff to Wuhan. Her son, now 16, was more reserved and less expressive, though he could not help but hold on to his mother while saying goodbye to her.' (CGTN 2020). The report also carried two photos of Song and her son, which were taken when she left home.

The media tend to use female medical personnel's sacrifices as a tool for propaganda. For example, The Wuhan Evening News reported that a nurse in her twenties had suffered a spontaneous abortion less than two months after her pregnancy, and just 10 days after her operation she had joined the fight against the epidemic. This was accompanied by the nurse's statement that 'It's my fault that I failed to take good care of you, my baby; I would like to be your mother in the afterlife' (Wuhan Evening News 2020).

On 15 February 2020, the Gansu Daily Microblog account posted a news release titled 'Nurses fighting coronavirus shave their heads,' and talked about female healthcare staff who had collectively shaved their heads in Hubei. Hospitals arranged for women nurses to have their heads shaved in front of the cameras. The media wanted to present it as though the nurses were making a sacrifice. This immediately sparked fierce public opposition and protests, especially among women, because the video footage showed some nurses weeping while their hair was being cut. The provincial medical team focused on how all the female nurses had haircuts to prevent their hair from carrying the virus but showcased

it as a loss of their long hair and offered an appearance evaluation to the effect of 'short hair looks really beautiful' (The Yangtze River Daily 2020).

5. Discussion

5.1. Absence of the Female Image in Public Participation

In China, nursing is largely deemed a 'female profession'. Despite equal opportunity legislation, nursing has continued to remain a female-dominated profession. Based on information from The First Hospital of Nanchang in Jiangxi Province, it appears that the proportion of men in nursing is far less than 1%; they are indeed rare: except for a few male nurses in psychiatric hospitals and some specialized hospitals, it is almost impossible to see male nurses in general hospitals, let alone grassroot ones (Xinhua News 2005). At a news conference in 2017, China's National Health Commission made it clear that 'there are more than 3.5 million registered nurses in China, and the sex ratio of nurses is a problem', showing evidence that women constitute a majority of the workforce in the nursing profession (News East Day 2017).

The frontline nursing team for the treatment of the coronavirus is almost entirely composed of women. For example, on 4 February 2020, the medical team comprising nursing professionals sent from Yunnan to Hubei had 102 nurses aged between 20 and 39 years. Only two male nurses were included in the medical teams sent by the Guizhou province. The Shanghai Medical Team comprised 50 women nurses.

However, many healthcare reports have treated male personnel as the main constituents of the healthcare teams, and these reports have especially singled out and featured individual men from medical teams that otherwise comprise a majority of women. Of the more than 3000 comments in microblogging platforms, the comments receiving the most thumbs up were 'In this outbreak, the number of female healthcare workers on the frontlines is immense, but the news carries only pictures of men. Have these heroes been ignored? Isn't it unfair? Is it appropriate?' 'Then, you really only put the nine men? Please do not ignore the efforts of women healthcare providers at such times!' 'Obviously, the proportion of women doctors is higher; the previous nine introductions are all men! It is even harder to cure sexism that is rooted in your bones. Such things still occur in an official account!'

Tuchman et al. (1978) used the term 'symbolic annihilation' to describe the underrepresentation of certain groups and the promotion of stereotypes and denial of specific identities in mass media. Women are marginalized in the society and in the media, and this phenomenon has a long history. Despite the gradual improvement in the status of women at the present day, this inertia continues to exist. The media, as indicated above, engage in the symbolic annihilation of women, as their distorted and unfair reporting obliterates the merit and honor of these hard-working women.

5.2. Media-Constructed Stereotypes

In communication studies, an image is a cognitive message. Walter Lippmann proposed in his book 'Public Opinion' that an image reflects one's perception of the characteristics of another individual or group (Lippmann 1991). The term 'media image' refers to the image that is shaped by the media. It is symbolic and cognitive information of the objective existence of people or things through the construction of mass media.

The media describe women doctors and nurses by emphasizing their feminized roles at the family level. As a special group engaged in the fight against the epidemic, the image of female medical staff in the news is highly stereotypical. The media tend to portray them as 'great mothers,' 'brave daughters,' and 'ideal wives' (China Women's News 2020). Although some reports give women the attention they deserve, the women in these wards are repeatedly portrayed as wives, daughters, and mothers in their homes in a way that reinforces gender stereotypes (CGTN 2020; Netease Video News 2020). Men, however, are portrayed in an entirely different manner. While interviewing men, journalists are more likely to ask about their work, their views on the epidemic, and their judgment, and rarely

involve their private lives (Chutian Metro Daily 2020; Wenzhou Evening News 2020; Hubei Daily 2020; Tencent Video News 2020). While interviewing female doctors or nurses, the media prefer to focus on their personal, family, or emotional lives.

As a result, brave and selfless working women who are highly educated, professionally qualified, and engaged in the public space have been situated exclusively in traditional and patriarchal frameworks in the society, and ideas pertaining to them present them as being typically confined to their families. The gender stereotypes involved in the social framing of women is the result of the distinctive gender bias and male-centric gender consciousness. As a result, the focus is seldom on their real contributions to society. The idea that presents women as nurturing, mothers, daughters, and wives also reduces them to nothing more than their bond with the men in their lives. In these news reports, women are portrayed through the lens of a patriarchal society, and this showcases their marginalization and highlights the significance of an approach that thinks about the gendered and power relationships in society.

5.3. An Excessive Gaze on the Female Body

News is a kind of narrative text, regardless of whether the narrator describes events in subjective or objective terms. Irrespective of the narrative grammar and discourse, processed news texts have different effects.

The use of phrases such as 'most beautiful' to describe female healthcare workers, an expression that is barely used for men, indicates that the goal of such media reporting was to highlight the charm and characteristics of the female healthcare workers rather than their serious professional image. Male doctors appear as doctors, but female doctors are presented as women (Chinanews.com 2020; Taihainet.com 2020). The professional knowledge of doctors' contribution in rescue operations and their sense of professional ethics are not related to the adjective 'beautiful' (The Yangtze River Daily 2020). However, there is a misconception in the media and society at large, and the highest appreciation for a woman is that she has a beautiful appearance and not industrious virtue or an intelligent mind. Women cannot be considered as guardians and workers in this field. The media's praise of a female doctor's appearance is not only unnecessary but also disturbing and weakens the attention and recognition that female doctors themselves and the profession deserve. This influences and constructs the impressions that the public has of men and women.

The media overgeneralized female healthcare staff in China and stereotyped them. The media made prejudicial and ignorant assertions built on gendered and sexist grounds and were reluctant to reconsider their attitudes and behaviors. They continued to highlight women's 'weaknesses', 'tenderness', and 'beauty' as seen in their choice of words. They also exaggerated the behavior of women and employed a traditional lens, highlighting their gender identity in line with what they deemed as desirable female roles. The media do not treat women as independent professionals. Women must be beautiful, a mother, a partner, and then make sacrifices in these large public health events. These sacrifices might be beauty, care for the child (born and unborn), or emotion. Only then will they be considered great. Professionalism, faith, loyalty, strength—these are all qualities worth being proud of. Women are not capable and great just because they are shaving off their beautiful long hair. In other words, women should be praised for their performance at work, without focusing on their female characteristics.

6. Conclusions

The examination of COVID-19 news reports and manifestations of public opinion through a gender lens revealed that both the absence and the presence of women are clear. Presence refers to the scenario wherein Chinese female doctors and nurses are actually present in the fight against the coronavirus disease. Confronted with an unknown virus and a potential disaster, they did not choose to escape or retreat from the call of duty; instead, they stayed on in the frontline with intrepid courage and selfless spirit, dedicating their

efforts and life, alongside their male compatriots. Absence refers to the lack of inclusion of women in the mainstream view of China's coronavirus disease news reports. Women turn despair into hope while bravely striving to preserve the dignity of life, but they are deliberately or unintentionally ignored by both the media and their readers (Byerly 1995; Hanitzsch and Hanusch 2012). Under the hegemony of a male-dominated discourse in the media, women are treated as a silent group that lacks subject-matter expertise or are treated as mute objects in narratives (Laura 2019). Women's voices, once rare in all kinds of news reports, have been either lost entirely or obscured for various reasons. In sectors where women make up much of the workforce, such as nursing, it is not, as we may think, that women have an advantage in terms of numbers. Social attention and honor are more likely to be given to men, even if they are fewer in number.

The media engage in perpetuating bias against women and placing men in the limelight (Martinson et al. 2012). Although both men and women have their own roles and qualities in both public and private spheres of life (Knoll et al. 2011; Kay 2014), as well as different values, the media represent the two sides through different lenses. Media reporting around women, because of their natural physiological structure, has been closely linked to the family. In the quest to affirm the contribution and labor of doctors in the rescue operation, reports should acknowledge and address female professionalism and professional ethics fairly. However, the Chinese media apply narrative focus expansion, non-linear narrative, and other methods to present the female image with her family relationship as the core focus. What matters more is not the level of knowledge and competence of women, or the social value they create, but the physical appearance of these women and how they make difficult choices in their families and careers. In the process of 'routinization' of news writing on women (Hyun et al. 2007), it also deepens the public's incorrect perception of women's image, thus causing a variety of problems such as the misunderstanding of women and the inadequate self-identity among women groups.

Cross-cultural studies show that media portrayals of women are influenced by sociocultural factors. For instance, Sengupta (1995) found that women in U.S. advertisements were more likely to appear in working roles, while women in Japanese advertisements were more likely to be shown cooking, cleaning, and doing other household chores. The social role of women and men has changed dramatically in China over the past few years. However, Chinese media still depict women and men in tradition-bound roles. In traditional Chinese culture, to be a filial woman, a dutiful wife, and a good mother is a woman's highest life value and standard of moral excellence.

The media can properly express women's discourse and highlight the progress and contribution of the women's movement. They should give importance to a fair reportage on women's contributions and present positive and independent images of women truthfully. They should strive to reverse the prevailing misconceptions of gender in their reports. Media reports can influence and construct the impression of men and women in the public mind. Since the press is a part of the social culture, the absence and the limited but stereotypical representation of female doctors and nurses in the media can augment gender discrimination. Under such a system of gender inequality, the absence of women from media reports and presentations not only fail to give women medical workers equal honor and respect but also makes Chinese women lack positive role models. The light radiated by every woman or every professional woman can be neither annihilated nor ignored; custom is no excuse to acquiesce to gender inequality. To address this contradictory phenomenon, besides calling for a review and introspection in the field of news media, it is also necessary to call attention to the full grasp of the contribution and predicament of contemporary Chinese women in society, as well as to the self-awakening and healthy development of contemporary Chinese women.

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