

Framing of China country image in COVID-19 period: A comparative analysis of Sin Chew Daily and People's Daily

Fangfang Jin¹, Abdul Latiff Ahmad^{2*}, Shamsiah Abd Kadir³

Abstract

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak (COVID-19) is a pandemic on March 11, 2020. This study aims to explore how Sin Chew Daily and People's Daily report China in this special period. Based on the five generic frames (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000), the study identifies the news frames used by each newspaper. The findings present three topics of Sino-US political and diplomacy, international politics and diplomacy, and Special region politics are most frequency in politics news by two newspapers. For the COVID-19 news, they emphasized the news topics of China anti-epidemic measures and epidemic dynamics. In social news, they paid more attention to the Nature disaster and Eastern Airline Crash. Besides, the study also reveals that both newspapers predominantly use the conflict frame on political news, and the human-interest frame on social news. For COVID-19 news, People's Daily mainly employs the governance and reassurance frames, while Sin Chew Daily prefer to use the science frame, followed by reassurance, fear and tension frames. Furthermore, the study also showed the extent and types of news coverage by two newspapers. This study emphasized Chinese and Malaysia-Chinese media, which provides new empirical materials for the research area of China's media image.

Keywords: *China, Country image, News frame, COVID-19, News coverage.*

Introduction

In times of globalization and mediatization, humanity has achieved global dissemination, setting off a wave of national development and communication. In the context, country image (CI) is seen as an important form of soft power (Zhao et al., 2022). The image of a country is becoming crucial, and the focus of competition between countries has appeared the battle of soft products, namely country image and reputation (Buhmann, 2016). For instance, a positive country image and reputation represent a stronger national brand, which enhances various aspects such as domestic product consumption, attractiveness for tourism, and international influence. The relationship between the media (especially mass media) and country image has been an important research topic (Zhu et al., 2022). From the perspective of how the country image is formed, including the personal perceptive image and the media projected media (Li & Tang, 2009). Media take a significant role in the construction of country image and influence public perception (Jain & Winner, 2013). More and more countries are utilizing media communication technologies to shape their country image. Media coverage constructs a country's image according to specific media frames (Ju et al., 2023). From the perspective of media communication, country image is multidimensional, encompassing various aspects of a country, such as its history, culture, politics, economy, and more, as portrayed positively or negatively in the media (Saleem, 2007). Based on media frames, the media highlights certain events and then places them in specific contexts to encourage or discourage certain interpretations (Entman, 1993).

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic (WHO). Because China caught the coronavirus early, it has responded by locking down cities and wearing face mask which attracts considerable attention at home and abroad. It worthy to mentioned when global public events such as wars, epidemics, and world sports events occur, the image of a country often changes (Chen et al., 2021). Similarly, in 2003, the SARS epidemic severely affected China's country image (Lin, 2012).

Starting in 2020 and lasting for a long time, the COVID-19 pandemic is a hot topic in the media and people's lives around the world. It is worth noting that countries and peoples have shown different responses for COVID-19, and they have diverse perceptions with other countries, especially China. As a

¹ Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, 43600, Malaysia; P118451@siswa.ukm.edu.my

² Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, 43600, Malaysia; alba@ukm.edu.my (Corresponding Author)

³ Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, 43600, Malaysia; shamkadir@ukm.edu.my

result, mainstream media in China and other countries tracked and reported the incident, but media coverage was impacted by various factors, such as national interest, social ideology, news frame, market profits and so on. Certainly, after the outbreak of COVID-19, China's image has faced major challenges, especially in Western media reports, and China has been labeled with many negative labels (Mu et al., 2021). In this period, China's country image is extremely special and diverse from different countries and media.

However, most of the study researched mainstream media of Western and Chinese, and only focuses on the frame of epidemic news. There are very few comprehensive countries image studies on China by the media of other countries, especially the Malaysia-Chinese media. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Malaysia on May 31, 1974, bilateral relations have developed smoothly overall. In addition, Malaysia's Chinese-language media, including influential publications like *Sin Chew Daily*, *Nanyang Siang Pau*, and *Guang Ming Daily*, reach a substantial audience.

To fill this gap, this study makes a comparative study of Chinese media in China and Malaysia (*Sin Chew Daily & People's Daily*). The focus of the study is to identify the news topics and news frames used in coverage about China from the perspective of country image construction. The study attempts to answer the following three research questions:

1. What was the extent of coverage of Sin Chew Daily and People's Daily in reporting China?
2. What was the topics distribution of coverage involved China by Sin Chew Daily and People's Daily?
3. What news frame were used by news coverage related China by Sin Chew Daily and People's Daily?

Literature Review

Framing Theory

The concept of framing was first put out by Bateson (1972), who described a psychological frame as "a spatial and temporal bounding of a set of interactive messages." Goffman (1974) defined frames as "schemas of interpretation" and claimed that frames are cognitive structures that guide the representation of daily life events. However, in the field of journalism and communication, two scholar present new descriptions. Tuchman (1976) described frames as a useful tool for journalists to edit and disseminate news information. According to Entman (1993), framing is the process of "selecting out particular aspects of a perceived reality and highlighting them in a communication context." In other words, Tuchman (1976) and Entman (1993) introduced framing into communication and news fields (Arandas, 2019). Nowadays, the development of frame theory research shows diversity, which is manifested in various aspects such as concept application, research theme and research method (XueYong et al., 2024). In the discipline of communication, framing studies reveal how media can shape public perceptions of events and issues by focusing on content or framing effects (Ting, 2020).

Country Image

Since the 1950s, the research on country image has been carried out in many fields from different perspectives and has attracted more and more attention in recent years. Country image has been an important construct in international communication and public diplomacy (Sevin et al., 2021). Country image is variable, especially when mega-events occur, the country image usually changes, such as the Olympic Games, warfare and public crises (Chen et al., 2021). In the field of media, particularly mass media, and the national image has always been a significant research topic (Zhu et al., 2022). The country image has different dimensions in other studies. For example, Countries' media portrayal is also considered to be composed of four key dimensions: political, economic, social, and cultural (He et al., 2012). Country image depends on the country's response to major events, such as the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic, which can affect the country's reputation and perception internationally (Wu, 2021). In addition, the media's construction of the country image is strongly ideological and stereotypical (Tang, 2021). News frame plays a crucial role in shaping and communicating country image. The main reason is news frames determine

how information is presented, what is emphasized, and what is ignored (An et al., 2023). With the development of globalization, China pays more and more attention to the construction and communication of country image. However, since the outbreak of the epidemic, anti-China and anti-Asian sentiments have emerged in several countries, including the United States, Canada, and Australia (Wen et al., 2020). One study found that the Wall Street Journal's metaphor for the virus was negative, which further contributed to a negative image of China (Mu et al., 2021). Besides, Huang (2021) and other scholars found that Cuba, Malaysia, and Venezuela had a positive attitude, while France, Canada, and the United Kingdom had a negative one.

News Frame

Media frame refers to the words, images, phrases, and presentation styles used by the media to convey information about an issue (Rajaratnam et al., 2020). There are two basic types of definitions for frames. The first defines frame in very general terms, "a central organizing idea or storyline that provides meaning to an unfolding series of events." The second definition genre explains the typical functions of frames, particularly issue frames (Entman et al., 2009). It is necessary to distinguish between specific issue frames and generic frames. De Vreese(2005) believes that specific issue frames are only relevant to certain issues or events, but generic frames extend beyond topic limits and can appear in different problems and contexts. Specific issue frames reflects that each issue has a different specific issue frame, and the attributes in secondary agenda setting can also be understood as specific issue frames (Entman et al., 2009). In term of generic frames, Iyengar's (1991) episodic and thematic frames are prime instances of generic frames. Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) offered a different perspective on the generic frames that conflict, human interest, economic implications, morality, and responsibility. The study uses the generic news frame and specific issue frame to make a comparative analysis of People's Daily and Sin Chew Daily to identify the news frames used in news reports about China. The theory was proposed by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), who examined the frequencies of five frames employed in previous framework studies.

Method

This study aims to identify the news frames of news coverage China by two newspapers of People's Daily and Sin Chew Daily, based on the five generic frames established by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000). The study employed Quantitative Content to identify the news frames used by newspaper and assisted description and interpretation.

Sampling

Regarding the sample period of the newspaper, the known cases of Covid-19 were discovered in the Chinese city of Wuhan in December 2019, and it has captivated the world's attention. From January 8, 2023, the Chinese law-mandated preventive and control actions for top-Class A infectious diseases will no longer apply to COVID-19 (China's National Health Commission, NHC, December 26, 2022). Certainly, different countries have had varied pandemic situations in recent years, but for the purposes of this study, a full three-year timeframe of 2020/2021/2022 is more appropriate.

In terms of sample method, two sampling approaches are employed: constructed week sampling and purposive sampling. The cyclical nature of newspaper is best represented by stratified samples of constructed weeks (Connolly-Ahern et al., 2009) and it can minimize cyclical biases (Luke et al., 2011). The samples of two constructed weeks can provide a reliable reflection of news stories in a full year (Riffe et al. 1993). Since People's Daily is closed on Sunday, but important events are reported on the following Monday. Therefore, the data of Sunday in People's Daily will be changed to next Monday. In this study, by applying constructed week sampling, three years' worth of data can be sampled to six weeks (Table 1)

Table 1. Sampling of constructed week

	Mon.	Tue.	Wed.	Thur.	Fri.	Sat.	Sun.
Week1	2020.1.13	2020.2.18	2020.3.4	2020.4.9	2020.5.8	2020.5.30	2020.6.14
Week2	2020.7.6	2020.7.28	2020.8.19	2020.9.17	2020.10.9	2020.11.21	2020.12.13
Week3	2021.1.11	2021.2.23	2021.3.24	2021.4.15	2021.5.7	2021.6.12	2021.6.27
Week4	2021.7.12	2021.8.3	2021.9.1	2021.9.30	2021.10.15	2021.11.27	2021.12.19
Week5	2022.1.10	2022.2.15	2022.3.23	2022.4.28	2022.5.13	2022.6.11	2022.6.26
Week6	2022.7.11	2022.8.2	2022.8.31	2022.9.15	2022.10.14	2022.11.12	2022.12.18

After sampling of constructed week, the samples still need to be selected artificially. Because the nature of the two newspapers is different, the news coverage of China is also different. For example, People's Daily has all news about China, but Sin Chew Daily has only two pages mainly about China. Therefore, rules need to be formulated to further select samples (Table 2). After strict sampling standards, this study finally identified 69 articles from People's Daily and 64 articles from Sin Chew Daily.

Table 2. Control Criteria and Condition on Sample

No.	Item	Condition
1	Time of news	Above six constructed weeks and its date
2	Edition of newspaper	Sin Chew Daily: Two pages of “International news” and “World affairs” People’s Daily: The first four pages marked as “main news”
3	Type of news	news report and Special feature
4	Issue of news	Issues reported by both two newspapers

Background of newspapers

In terms of the background of newspaper, the national edition of Sin Chew Daily and the overseas edition of People’s Daily were sampled in the study.

People’s Daily (PD), founded on June 15, 1948, in Pingshan, Hebei Province, it is the longest-running daily newspaper in China. It is an official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and People’s Republic of China (Li & Hovy, 2014). In addition, it is the most comprehensive and influential official media (Pan et al., 2022) in China and published worldwide (Guan & Liu, 2019), with an approximate circulation of 3.5 million worldwide (people.com 2021). The People’s Daily has two different print versions including the domestic Chinese edition and overseas edition (published in more than 80 countries in different regions) targets Chinese readers living outside China (Guan & Liu, 2019). The study focused on the overseas edition.

Sin Chew Daily (SCD): Sin Chew Daily was established on 15 January 1929, and its purpose is to inherit Chinese culture (sinchew.com.my). Sin Chew Daily as the newspaper is the highest circulated Chinese language newspaper and the highest circulated newspaper across all languages in Malaysia (Luan & Beng 2018). The West Malaysian version is mainly divided into the National Edition and Regional Edition. In this study, the national edition of Sin Chew Daily is selected to research.

Coding and data analysis

The generic news frames include the responsibility frame, human interest frame, conflict frame, morality frame, and economic consequences frame (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000).

The following are the operational definitions for the news frames:

(1) Conflict frame. This frame emphasizes conflict between individuals, groups, or institutions as a means of capturing audience interest.

(2) Human interest frame. This frame brings a human face or an emotional angle to the presentation of an event, issue, or problem.

(3) Economic consequences frame. This frame reports an event, problem, or issue in terms of the consequences it will have economically on an individual, group, institution, region, or country.

(4) Morality frame. This frame puts the event, problem, or issue in the context of religious tenets or moral prescriptions.

(5) Responsibility frame. This frame presents an issue or problem in such a way as to attribute responsibility for its cause or solution to either the government or to an individual or group.

In addition, based on previous studies on COVID-19 news frames and actual sample data from the study, the researcher provides some specific issue frames for COVID-19 events and explain operational definitions.

(6) Science frame. News agency or/and journalists attempt to collect scientific evidence to support their opinions, for instance, to introduce science knowledge about the viruses and their possible impact (An et al., 2023).

(7) Cooperation frame. It is also a popular frame in global news reports on the COVID-19 pandemic, where quite several news pieces called for global cooperation in this struggle (An et al., 2023).

(8) Governance frame. Government and official agencies take various measures to deal with COVID-19 (Ju et al., 2023).

(9) Reassurance frame. Reassuring the public, the news reassured the public not to panic by conveying the information that "the epidemic is under control, vaccines and medical supplies are sufficient" (Shih et al., 2008).

(10) Fear and tension frame. The news content shows the public's anxiety about the epidemic and the tense situation of human response to the epidemic.

In the coding process, the scores obtained ranged from "0" to "1", representing the visibility of the frame. When the coder believes that the news shows a news frame, a "1" score is given for that news frame, and a "0" score is given if it does not match the news frame. The study rigorously examined the reliability and validity of these attribute items. The calculation will use Holsti (1969) measurement formula to ensure the simple agreement level on all variables. The intercoder reliability will be implemented by two coders. Certainly, for codes that are different after coding, the two coders negotiate to re-code. Finally, the reliability coefficient was more than 0.9 (high level of consistency).

When exploring the construction of China's country image in the two newspapers, the research should not only identify the news frame and news topics, but also present the scope of news coverage. It mainly consists of two elements: Number of articles and Types of articles. The number of articles refers to the number of news samples in each category, such as politics news, society news, health news, economy news, culture news.

Article types include News report and Special feature:

(1) News report: Reports that present basic and factual information without analysis or opinion. It tells people the five basic elements and it has a simple, concise tone, with no flourishes in style or any mark of authorship.

(2) Special feature: Special feature articles use many quotes and emotional cues, focusing more on showing the reader what's going on instead of telling. Namely, in-depth articles that provide detailed analysis or a broader perspective on a issue.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents some basic information about the frequency and percentage of variables, including extent of news stories, distribution of news topics and news frames of news coverage on China. This information provides a comprehensive overview on how Sin Chew Daily and People's Daily reported on China and pandemic-related news during the COVID-19 period. It's worth noting that the two newspapers are not in opposition. Therefore, the characteristics of their news coverage show not only differences but also many similarities.

Extent of Coverage

This study explores how People's Daily and Sin Chew Daily report and construct China's overall image, not limited to specific themes. He (2012) identified four dimensions of a nation's image in media coverage: political, economic, cultural, and social. Given the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, this study adds a health dimension to capture news related to the pandemic.

Table 3. The number of news topics

	People's Daily (n=69) %	Sin Chew Daily (n=64) %
Politics	52.2	50
Health (COVID-19)	30.4	32.8
Society	13.0	12.5
Economy	4.3	4.7
Culture	0	0

The Table 3 reveals that both newspapers share similar characteristics in their coverage of China, focusing primarily on political news, followed by COVID-19 news. Due to the specific context of the study, as the results showed, the news coverage of COVID-19 news makes up around one-third. The sampling focuses on news events covered by both newspapers. Therefore, there are no lots of differences, but similarities. The study believes these news issues can be seen higher value. Notably, there were no jointly reported cultural news events.

Table 4. The number of news types

	People's Daily (n=69) %	Sin Chew Daily (n=64) %
News report	69.6	64.0
Special feature	30.4	35.9

The Table 4 shows that both People's Daily and Sin Chew Daily mainly use News report in their coverage of China, with Special feature as a secondary focus. This result indicates that both newspapers prefer to convey timely and accurate information through direct and brief news reporting. Additionally, the special features also hold a certain proportion, suggesting that both newspapers believe the importance of providing in-depth analysis on key issues to help readers better understand complex events.

New Topics

Due to the specific sampling criteria of this study, the selected news issues were covered by both two newspapers, ensuring consistency in the news events and themes. While there may not be significant differences in the news themes, this highlights the importance of these topics. The fact that these events were reported by both newspapers suggests that they were considered highly significant, whereas events reported by only one newspaper were deemed less important. The following information presents the distribution of news topics, and these news topics covered by both two newspapers.

Table 5. News topics on politics news

Politics news:	People's Daily(n=36) Sin Chew Daily(n=32) Total (n=68) %
Sino-US political and diplomacy	26.5
International politics and diplomacy	26.5
Special region politics	20.6
Taiwan and Cross-strait relations	16.2
Others	10.3

Table 5 provides an overview of the political news topics covered by People's Daily and Sin Chew Daily. The table reveals that the coverage is relatively balanced across several key topics. Firstly, the two topics of Sino-US political and diplomacy, and international politics and diplomacy are the most frequently covered topics, accounting for 53% (total) of all political news in two newspapers. This indicates a strong focus on China's international relations, particularly its interactions with the United States in both Sin Chew Daily and People's Daily. The main news issues of this topic are the political exchanges and cooperation between China and other countries, such as Britain, Canada, Thailand, and North Korea. This focus reflects the importance of the China-US. relationship in global politics, as well as China's growing role on the international stage. Due to the large amount of news on diplomatic relations between China and the United States, it is labeled as a separate topic. Secondly, the news topic of Special Region Politics is the third most covered, comprising 20.6% of the political news. This suggests a significant emphasis on issues related to specific regions within China, which may include areas like Hong Kong, Macau, Xin jiang or regions with unique political statuses. News related to Taiwan and the Cross-Strait relations accounts for 16.2% of the political coverage. This reflects the ongoing importance of Taiwan in China's political discourse and its relevance in both domestic and international contexts. At last, the remaining 10.3% of political news falls into the "Others" category, which might include various less frequent but still noteworthy political events or issues.

Table 6. News topics on health (COVID-19) news

Health (COVID-19) news:	People's Daily(n=21) Sin Chew Daily(n=21) Total (n=42) %
China Anti-epidemic and epidemic dynamics (including Hong Kong)	50.0
China's COVID-19 vaccine	26.2

Debate on virus source	11.9
Global anti-epidemic cooperation	7.1
Others	4.8

Table 6 provides an overview of the health-related news topics, specifically focusing on COVID-19 coverage in People's Daily and Sin Chew Daily. The most prominently covered topic, making up 50.0% of the articles, is China's anti-epidemic efforts and the dynamics of the situation, including developments in Hong Kong. This indicates a strong emphasis on how China managed the pandemic and the ongoing situation within the country. The second most common topic, accounting for 26.2% of the coverage, is China's COVID-19 vaccine, highlighting the significance of vaccine development and distribution in the media narrative. The debate on the virus's source constitutes 11.9% of the coverage, reflecting ongoing discussions and controversies surrounding the origin of COVID-19. This issue has caused widespread interest in international public opinion, particularly in claims and arguments between Western and Chinese governments. As a result, the topic receives more attention from both media outlets. Global anti-epidemic cooperation is discussed in 7.1% of the articles, showing a lesser focus on international collaboration in fighting the pandemic. Lastly, 4.8% of the news falls into the "Others" category, likely covering various related but less prominent topics. Overall, the data reveals that both newspapers prioritize reporting on China's internal efforts and developments related to the pandemic.

Table 7. News topics on Society news

Society news:	People's Daily(n=9) Sin Chew Daily(n=8) Total (n=17) %
Natural disaster & Ecological environment	41.2
China's Eastern airlines crash	35.3
China Aerospace	23.5

In the society news, the news of Natural disaster & Ecological environment takes up a very important position, with 41.2% (Table7). Actually, the two newspapers both covered the news issue of "China Henan Flood", the issue caught most attention on media of China and overseas. In addition, in the past few years, the Chinese government has attached great importance to environmental protection, such as saving resources and being green and low carbon, so this kind of news has been reported. On March 21, 2022, China Eastern Airlines Flight 5735 crashed, officially referred to as the "3·21" Eastern Airlines MU5735 Aircraft Accident. This event received significant public and media attention, and both Sin Chew Daily and People's Daily extensively covered it (35.3%). The coverage included the causes of the accident, the search and rescue process, and the support for the victims' families. People's Daily also reported on China's initiatives to improve aviation safety through education and inspections. Besides, both newspapers have also focused on China's space technology developments (23.5%). This includes news about the lunar soil samples collected by China's Chang'e-5 lunar probe and the launch of the Shenzhou-13 spacecraft carrying female astronauts. News on this topic has promoted the development of China's space and set up a positive image for China's space industry. These three topics are the main news events in the social news coverage by People's Daily and Sin Chew Daily.

Table 8. News topics on economy news

Economy news:	People's Daily(n=3)
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	Sin Chew Daily (n=3)
	Total (n=6)
	%
Economic conference and policy	33.3
Domestic economic recovery	33.3
Sino-US trade and cooperation	33.3

Table 8 shows the distribution of news topics about China's economy. The three main topics are evenly distributed, each making up 33.3% of the coverage: "Economic Conference and Policy," "Domestic Economic Recovery," and "Sino-US Trade and Cooperation." It is worth noting that both newspapers also reported on other economic news related to China, but the events and topics they both covered primarily focused on these three areas. This balanced distribution highlights the multi-dimensional focus of both newspapers on China's economy.

News Frames

Table 9. News frames of People's Daily

	Politics (n=36)	Health (n=21)	Society (n=9)	Economy (n=3)
	%	%	%	%
Conflict	63.8	9.5		33.3
Human interest	11.1	4.8	55.6	
Morality				
Economic consequence	5.6	4.8	22.2	66.7
Responsibility	19.4		22.2	
Cooperation		4.8		
Governance		33.3		
Reassurance		28.6		
Science		14.3		
Fear and tension				

Note: Values are rounded; blank cells indicate "0."

In People's Daily, political news is primarily framed using the conflict frame, with a frequency percentage of 63.8%, followed by the responsibility frame at 19.4% (Table 9). From the above the results of news topics, we can know that China's political news covers issues like China-US relations, national diplomacy, regional politics, and Taiwan and cross-strait relations. Therefore, the high frequency of the conflict frame is reasonable, as both newspapers often use this frame when reporting on China-US relations, regional politics (such as Xinjiang and Hong Kong), and Taiwan and cross-strait relations. Additionally, in news about the news event of China's international politics and cooperation with other countries, the responsibility frame is commonly used. COVID-19-related news mainly employs specific issue frames, such as the governance frame (33.3%), reassurance frame (28.6%), and science frame (14.3%). The most common topics in China's COVID-19 news are "China Anti-epidemic and Dynamics" and "China's COVID-19 Vaccine." People's Daily frequently uses the governance frame when reporting on China's anti-epidemic measures and pandemic dynamics. They also use the reassurance frame to guide public opinion and reduce public anxiety. Social news is predominantly framed with the human interest frame, accounting for 55.6%, followed by the economic consequence frame (22.2%) and responsibility frame (22.2%). From these results of news topics, we can see that social news mainly covers natural disasters, the China Eastern Airlines crash, and China's space achievements. These types of events are more likely to highlight the human interest frame. Economic

news involves only the economic consequences and conflict frames. Notably, none of the news uses the moral frame and the “fear and tension” frame.

Table 10. News frames of Sin Chew Daily

	Politics (n=32) %	Health (n=21) %	Society (n=8) %	Economy (n=3) %
Conflict	56.3	4.8		33.3
Human interest	6.3	9.5	50.0	33.3
Morality				
Economic consequence	6.3		25.0	33.3
Responsibility	31.3	4.8	25.0	
Cooperation		4.8		
Governance		14.3		
Reassurance		19.0		
Science		23.8		
Fear and tension		19.0		

Note: Values are rounded; blank cells indicate "0."

Similar to People's Daily, political news in Sin Chew Daily is mainly framed using the conflict frame, with a frequency percentage of 56.3% (Table10), followed by the responsibility frame at 19.4%. However, the framing of COVID-19 news shows different characteristics between the two newspapers. People's Daily primarily uses the governance frame, followed by the reassurance and science frames. In contrast, Sin Chew Daily mainly uses the science frame (23.8%), followed by the reassurance (19.0%) and "fear and tension" frames (19.0%), with the governance frame ranking fourth (14.3%). From the analysis results of the news topics, the most common topics in China's COVID-19 news are "China Anti-epidemic and Dynamics," "China's COVID-19 Vaccine," and "Debate on Virus Source." Sin Chew Daily frequently uses the science frame when reporting on these topics, especially in spreading knowledge about the virus and vaccines. When covering the control measures and developments related to the pandemic, Sin Chew Daily also uses the "fear and tension" frames to convey the information, the frame did not appear in People's Daily. Social news is primarily framed with the human interest frame, reaching 50%. Economic news involves the economic consequences, human interest frame and conflict frames in equal frequency (33.3%). Notably, none of the news uses the moral frame.

Similarities and differences on news frames

The above findings reveal similarities in the content reported by both newspapers but also highlight differences in their application of news frames, particularly in the framing of political and health-related news.

The study found that both People's Daily and Sin Chew Daily focused heavily on political news, with particular attention to Sino-U.S. relations and international diplomacy. This focus not only reflects China's crucial role in international politics but also reveals the different roles each newspaper plays within their respective social contexts. People's Daily, frequently employed the conflict frame (63.8%) in political news, while Sin Chew Daily used this frame slightly less frequently (56.3%). As the official voice of the Chinese government, People's Daily is tasked with conveying national policies and maintaining China's image. In issues such as Sino-U.S. relations and Cross-strait relations with Taiwan, the paper extensively utilized the conflict frame to present China's firm stance in international affairs. Besides, it responds to domestic readers' concerns about national sovereignty and interests. Additionally, People's Daily used the responsibility frame in 19.4% of its political news, whereas Sin Chew Daily applied it more frequently (31.3%), indicating that while Sin Chew Daily is a Malaysian Chinese-language newspaper, its broad Chinese readership remains concerned about China's political developments. Particularly, due to China is global

power, Sin Chew Daily paid more attention to the relationships between China and other countries and used more responsibility frame in news of international diplomacy.

In their COVID-19 coverage, the frame choices made by the two newspapers reflect their strategic considerations and audience needs. People's Daily primarily used the governance frame (33.3%), followed by the reassurance frame (28.6%), aiming to show the Chinese government's efficient leadership and organizational capabilities in fighting the pandemic. Through the reassurance frame, People's Daily strengthen domestic confidence in the government and alleviated public fear. These news frame helped to portray a positive image of China's governance model on the international stage during a global health crisis. On the other hand, Sin Chew Daily favored the science frame (23.8%), focusing on scientific data and public health knowledge related to the pandemic. This frame choice reflects its audience's need for pandemic information and emphasizes Sin Chew Daily crucial role as a bridge of information during the crisis. Additionally, Sin Chew Daily used both the reassurance (19.0%) and fear and tension frames (19.0%), which not only helped to calm readers' anxiety but also reflected the tense situation during the early stages of the pandemic.

The differences in reporting between People's Daily and Sin Chew Daily are closely related to their respective media roles. People's Daily has traditional propaganda functions of press (Wang et al. 2018), and it has been recognized as the media that best represents mainstream Chinese political parties and society (Yang 2021). In contrast, Sin Chew Daily, which exists in a multicultural culture, must find a way to connect with its readers by balancing coverage of global powers and events with reader interests. When two newspapers cover the same news event, their separate viewpoint results in both similarities and differences in reporting ways. Notably, the study found that neither newspaper used the moral frame. This might be related to the editorial policies of both papers, which aim to avoid moralizing and subjective interpretations in sensitive political and social issues. Particularly in coverage involving national policies and international relations, using a moral frame could introduce bias and impair the objectivity of the news. This choice reflects a shared commitment by both newspapers to remain objectivity and professional in their reporting, especially when dealing with highly political international and domestic events.

Conclusion

During the COVID-19 pandemic, newspapers played a crucial role in spreading information and shaping public opinion. China became a central focus of media coverage during this time. Now, although the pandemic has passed gradually, this period remains significant and extreme special experience for China. This study examines Chinese and Malaysian Chinese-language media to analyze how they reported on China and constructed its image. The study is not limited to specific issues but considers a multidimensional view of country image, categorizing news into five areas: political, economic, social, culture, and health. A descriptive analysis and interpretation was conducted on the news topics and the news frames used in each media. From the results, the study found similarities and differences between the two newspapers. For example, both show a strong interest in political news about China and primarily use the conflict frame. However, there are differences in how they frame COVID-19 news of Sin Chew Daily mainly uses the science frame, while People's Daily focuses on the governance frame. By examining the number of news articles, topic frequency, and the use of different frames, we can understand that the two newspapers are not in opposition. The characteristics of their news coverage show not only differences but also many similarities.

In conclusion, this study not only reveals how the two newspapers shape public perception through different news frames in the specific context, but also highlights the long-lasting influence of traditional media in major international events. Even as social media becomes more widespread, traditional newspapers still play a crucial role in information dissemination due to their authority and objectivity. By using different news frames, both newspapers impact readers' understanding of China's image and contribute significantly to broader international discourse.

The limitation of this study is the relatively small sample size of 133 news articles. However, the study aims to explore how news coverage constructs a comprehensive image of China and to identify the frames used across various categories. Therefore, the sampling principle focused on news events covered by both newspapers, resulting in a small but precise sample. To address this limitation, the research believes the research area should add a qualitative content analysis of news with the same theme in future research. Moreover, future research could expand the sample size and include media from more countries and regions to further explore how news frames influence the construction of country images in different contexts.

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