

Xenophobia in Newspaper Coverage: A Case Study of COVID-19 in Chinese, American and British Newspaper Articles

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Abstract

Xenophobic stereotyping in the media is a common and increasing phenomenon. This contrastive study examines xenophobia presence in the newspapers articles that are published by the American New York Times newspaper, the British Independent newspaper and the China Daily newspaper on COVID 19. The study essentially combined critical discourse analysis and the moral panics theory to explain the language used and subsequent impact of the media in shaping xenophobia. The study reveals that newspaper coverage have different levels of xenophobia. The study suggests a scale to measure the xenophobia in coverage which can be applied on all case studies not only on COVID 19 articles.

Keywords:

Xenophobia, Critical Discourse Analysis, Moral Panic, News Coverage, COVID 19

Introduction

The outbreak of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has formed a health crisis that had a deep influence on the way we perceive our everyday lives especially when the newspapers with its powerful forces play a pivotal role in framing, stereotyping and

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consequently causing xenophobia between people.

At the past, the word xenophobia was commonly attached to the race and ethnicity, however it was sometimes found in the health reporting especially when the disease started from a certain country. That is why the rise of racism and xenophobia that we are seeing during the COVID-19 public health crisis is both old and new.

Professor Erika Lee, an award-winning American historian and director of the Immigration History Research Center at the University of Minnesota, says “Public health crises feed on xenophobia and racism. [Immigrants] have been likened to parasites or an invasive population, a plague, and ‘an invisible threat,’” (Regents of the University of Minnesota, 2020).

Because of the U.S. President Donald Trump’s statements, the press discourse throughout the world is fueled with xenophobia as the Chinese was labeled by being the cause of the killing Virus.

The main objective of this study is to examine the presence of xenophobia in news coverage in American, British and Chinese newspapers articles.

Research Problem:

Since xenophobia is gushing through the attitudes of today’s world, the research problem is addressing the lack of awareness about xenophobia’s presence in the newspapers coverage, therefore the research will address this problem considering the Covid-19 as a case study in the Chinese, American and British newspapers.

Research Objectives:

The current study aims to investigate how the American, British and Chinese newspapers coverage will use xenophobia in their newspaper articles concerning COVID-19 finding out till what extent do the coverages differ than each other.

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Literature Review

Studies about Xenophobia has not yet been well-researched and not all its aspects are clarified like the credibility or bias and so on, that is why in this research xenophobia's presence in news coverage has been investigated.

The previous studies suggest that important incidents may lead to negative media representation, resulting in increased xenophobia towards specific group of people.

Several studies have shown how the newspapers has uncritically used xenophobic language and statements in its coverage. The newspapers have undoubtedly been complicit in inspiring xenophobic attitudes among the people such as in (Pineteh 2017) study which aimed at figuring out the role of the print newspapers in shaping people's beliefs and attitudes towards foreigners (African migrants) and whether this caused the xenophobia between the people after post-apartheid South Africa. Results showed that the "tactical populist political discourse and the framing of newspaper captions have continued to shape many South Africans' perceptions of Africans and their responses to the deepening culture of xenophobia".

Few of these studies attempt to explain the causes of xenophobia in the press and when it is present, those media researches have simply highlighted how the media presented and portrayed xenophobia, migrant related issues to the countries.

According to (Lindqvist 2016) study, the researcher examined the presence of the xenophobia in the Swedish newspapers. The research highlighted that the "xenophobia has been more accepted in the Swedish media during the last decades" giving an example with the high usage of the "refuge" and other words in the same context which created a negative impact.

Also, (Vanyoro and Ncube 2018) study examined the presence of

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xenophobia in the South African newspapers coverage from 2008 till 2013 especially on the xenophobic attacks that occurred during the period under study. It was applied on the Mail & Guardian and the Sowetan newspapers. Results revealed that the two newspapers indirectly became involved in a political agenda that chooses specific knowledge to “reconsolidate state autonomy, political power, order and preserve the reputation of the ‘rainbow’ nation”. That’s beside the “uncritically” choosing of the articles which was published without a solid research.

In addition, (Chapeyama 2016) worked on the South African and the Zimbabwean newspapers coverage and questioned the aspects of xenophobic violence which are considered newsworthy by the Sunday Times and Sunday Mail newspapers in their reportage of the violence in 2015. Also, it tried to find out the ways the two newspapers constructed the frames of xenophobic violence in 2015. Results showed that the coverage was not insulting the foreigners portrayed in the coverage, however there was a negative framing for them in the coverage “to express the urgency of fighting wrongdoing” and constructing their image as being “out-group”.

About the 2015 violence attacks, another study (Asakitikpi and Gadzikwa 2015) examined the news coverage in The Herald in Zimbabwe and The Guardian in Nigeria online newspapers. Findings showed that The Herald in Zimbabwe concentrated on showing how their citizens were suffering in the hands of the South African at the time of the attacks and consequently pushing the public to stop thinking about migrating to South Africa as they are xenophobic and to encourage who are there to return to their homelands. On the other hand, The Guardian in Nigeria’s news coverage was mainly playing on the regret and disapproval of the xenophobic activities and nothing more and that returns back to the political history between both countries as Nigeria was supporting South Africa in their “fight for

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liberation under the Apartheid Regime”.

Still researches that is related to xenophobia is conducted on the South African newspapers and still on the immigrants, but in this study on the black Africans especially where (Mbetga 2014) study aimed at analyzing how the blacks were portrayed in the news coverage of the Daily Sun, a South Africa tabloid during the period of February 2008 till December 2008. The textual discourse analysis revealed that the blacks were negatively presented in the news coverage and that occurred by using negative language as the newspaper expresses the huge problem they believe they do in the country on the papers.

Also, (Bakare 2013) study investigated the usage of the South African press code and till what extent they are applied in the newspapers articles. These ethical codes include “reporting the news truthfully, accurately, fairly, objectively, avoiding discriminatory references to people’s race, colour, or other status” at the time of 2008 xenophobic attacks. Findings explained that the newspapers under study (Sowetan and Daily Sun newspapers) reported according the South African press code, however the researcher highlighted that the newspapers should be more careful when using the words in their articles and headlines as sometimes it causes “unnecessary misinformation or misrepresentations of facts”.

Even when looking at the history in (McDonald and Jacobs 2005) study where it analyzed the South African, Zimbabwean, Batswana, Namibian and Zambian news coverages. Findings showed that the “press in southern Africa is largely xenophobic” when compared to the other coverages and that is because more immigrants travel to them. The press is “highly polarized, with a large bulk of articles being “pro-immigration in their orientation and/or analytical in their discussion of migration issues””. Also, it was shown that in the Namibian news coverage, they addressed the immigrants by being

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illegal and connected them with the crimes that was committed in the country. In addition to Zambian news coverage which does not differ from the others, it keeps repeating “anti-foreigner rhetoric by government officials”. The literature review needs to clearly pinpoint the knowledge gap which this study is going to fill.

Xenophobia may not exist in all mediums and if it exists, the levels of its presence may vary from a channel to another, as in (Muswede 2015) study, the researcher explained that the radio in South Africa did not have a role in spreading xenophobic discussions as the researcher highlighted that the community radio’s potential had a role in encouraging grassroots descriptions for “reflective anti-xenophobia dialogue” through programs.

Previous studies on gender stereotypes in the news coverage of women have usually shown that newspapers tend to cover women in a traditional gender frame.

As in (Elias 2018) study, the researcher explored the presence of gender stereotypes especially towards the females studying two Tanzanian newspapers by using the Critical Discourse Analysis and Semiotics Frameworks. Results showed that the stereotypes are present revealing that newspapers deal with women as sexual objects in the society and as dependent human beings on the men. In addition to (Arendt and Northup 2015) study assumed that there are stereotypes present in the media and the researchers aimed to find the extent of its presence impact on the American and Austrian readers. Results showed that its presence created “negative implicit attitudes which, in turn, alter explicit attitudes”. In the United States, the African Americans – the Blacks – are usually stereotyped as being criminals and the results showed that it altered “negative implicit and explicit attitudes” and in Austria, there are a category of people whom they call “foreigners” are also stereotyped as criminals and it causes the same impact.

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However, in (Theneaud 2016) study, the researcher aimed to find out the in a comparative study the presence of the stereotypes in the news coverage towards female political candidates in Taiwan at 2012 and 2016. It was found that when the female candidate won the elections, the gender was not from the top-rated information written in the news articles as winning position came at the top. Moreover, the Taiwanese newspapers did not frame the women in the traditional gender stereotypes.

Also, there are various studies that were conducted on the presence of frames in the newspapers coverage such as in (Schultz and Achtenhagen 2013) study which questioned the usage of frames in the US newspapers towards the ethnic minority entrepreneurs. Results showed that frames were present positively towards the minority entrepreneurs describing them as independent and being able to “secure financing to start and expand their businesses”.

Theoretical Framework:

The study adopts both theory of moral panics and Social Responsibility Theory.

Theory of Moral Panics:

In the context of this study, theory of moral panics is used. The origin of the theory returns to Stanley Cohen as in his book “Folk Devils and Moral Panics” (Cohen 2011) which was published in 1972, he referred to the reasons why a moral panic occurs. Cohen assumes that the moral panic occurs when an individual or group of people or even a condition is “defined as a threat to societal values and interests” where people starts and begins to be afraid of. Cohen argued that when the news coverage on deviant behavior they construct a story which features a clear villain: the folk devil. In his study, the folk devils were the violent youth subcultures. The folk devils’ creation can kickstart a moral panic.

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This theory is relevant to the study as Cohen believed that the media can be a cause for making people fear through their news coverage. That is why the extent of benefit from this theory will explain how media through its coverage can cause fear which is the xenophobia.

Cohen categorises four sets of mediators as vital and critical to the development of a moral panic which are mass media, moral entrepreneurs, the control culture and the public. The most important of them is the mass media. Hence, the emphasis on “understanding the role of the mass media in creating moral panics and folk devils” (Cohen 2011).

There are three steps done by the media, the first is exaggeration and distortion, of who did or said what; second is prediction, the dire consequences of failure to act; and the third symbolisation, the words Mod or Roker signifying threat. The source is not a conspiracy amongst journalists but the usual preparation of news making.

Moral Panic theory was explored further by Martin Barker and Julian Petley in their 1997 book ‘Ill Effects: The media/ violence debate’.

Social Responsibility Theory:

The origins of this theory appeared starting from the second decade of the twentieth century and it reached the peak at the end of World War II when the Commission on Freedom of the Press was formed to prepare a study on the American press. It was funded by the grants from Time, Inc., and Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc. The commission was also referred to as the Hutchins Commission. The general report of the Commission, A Free and Responsible Press, was published by the University of Chicago Press in 1947. This report was also published in a book entitled “The Commission on Freedom of the

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Press, A Free and Responsible Press”.

The press social responsibility concept grew over a long period of time. Various factors have affected its development. The social responsibility theory is an outgrowth of the libertarian theory.

In McQuail’s Mass Communication Theory Book, (McQuail 2010) explored this theory in depth and showed that press must not be biased to a side against the other. He believed that the press must carry out its duties towards the society. To work out those duties, it must organize itself subjectively. McQuail refereed back to the main reason of its evolving as the American newspapers was hardly criticized at that time because of “sensationalism, commercialism, political imbalance and monopoly tendencies”. Robert Hutchins, Chancellor of Chicago University conducted a commission at 1947 where other factors were also present where it was a must for the development of the social responsibility theory. The commission supported the objectivity and truthfulness, etc... Also, it highlighted the importance of mirroring the society as it is and “serving as a forum of exchange of comment and criticism”.

Also in the book, McQuail focused on the media ownership and how it would look like as he believed that it must be a “form of public trust or stewardship rather than as an unlimited private franchise”.

The main principles of the theory are that the media must be accurate, fair, objective, and report the truth. It must mirror the society and its ownership must be a public trust. That means that the media must be self-regulated in order to be free from all the limitations. Also, the media should follow “agreed codes of ethics and professional conduct”.

According to the Four Theories of the Press, Siebert et al at 1956 (Severin and Tankard 2010) stated that this development was due to economic factors, growing professionalism and the self-righting

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process. He stated that what is forbidden is the “serious invasion of recognized private rights and vital social interests”. In addition to the assumption that the media must be social responsible towards their audiences.

It adopted a concept opposite of that of absolute freedom. This theory states that freedom is not an absolute right, but it is a right, duty and responsibility at the same time. That is why media is asked to fulfil certain obligations towards the society. The media must establish and develop professional standards which must include truthfulness, objectivity, balancing, accuracy, diversity which reflects the diversity of ideas and opinions, respecting public values, taking care of public interests, avoiding all that may affect it negatively and respecting the privacy of the individuals.

Methodology:

To achieve the study objectives, a couple of newspaper articles are collected from the newspapers under study. The articles are collected electronically from the website of the above-mentioned newspapers.

This study applies a CDA (Critical Discourse Analysis) approach to selected media texts of newspapers. The aim is to study how these newspapers presented the xenophobia in their reporting about COVID 19.

It is also going to be a contrastive study on more than one level as it aims to find the similarities and differences within each newspaper and between the newspapers under study themselves.

Study Time Frame

The data of the study encompasses newspapers electronic version articles for a period of five months from January 2020, the time of the outbreak of the disease, to May 2020, after the world started ending the quarantine and people started returning to their daily life routines.

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Study Sample

The New York Times, The Independent and The China Daily electronic newspapers were analyzed in this study.

The selected newspapers were chosen because of the conflict between the United States and China regarding Covid-19. Noting that China was the virus origin and the United States President statements created xenophobia for people, while the British newspaper was chosen because it was highly ranked in the audience readability.

Study Questions

This study seeks to address the following questions:

- (1) Is the news coverage towards Covid-19 xenophobic or not?
- (2) Are there any notable differences or similarities about how the xenophobia was addressed in the three newspapers who are from different countries towards Covid-19?
- (3) How the presence of xenophobia violates the media ethics?

Results

For months, the coronavirus has been covered by newspapers around the world. News Discourses have been flooded with information about the outbreak that originated in China. China's response to Trump's complaints was through its international media as their newspapers worked on correcting their image that the U.S President was trying to distort.

The China Daily newspaper published an article titled "Virus slur against China rejected" where its body expressed that "to stigmatize a country or a location by associating the virus with that place is improper," said K. Srinath Reddy, president of the Public Health Foundation of India.

It is not only anti-science, but is **xenophobic** ... (The world needs to) move to shared values of respecting countries and

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respecting ethnicities and adopting a fully respectful non-discriminatory attitude toward all populations, and not encouraging **xenophobia** in any way that links any ethnic group in a negative association with any disease. (Wilson, Han and Sarmiento, 2020).

It is clearly shown that the word xenophobia was used in a rejection discourse where the newspaper was trying to share with its readers throughout the world that encouraging xenophobia is the disease itself not the COVID 19.

Also, another article titled “COVID-19 is 'world virus' Leading UK businessman” where the newspapers addressed the “Critics worry Trump's language could potentially fuel a sense of **xenophobia** in the country and a narrative of hate against the Chinese community as a whole, but also increase the tension between the two countries”.

Again, The China Daily newspaper highlighted that Trump’s chosen words are causing and fueling xenophobia focusing on the consequences that will happen even after this health crisis ends.

Looking at the article titled “Outbreak a crisis, not a blame game”, the China Daily newspaper pointed out US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo actions explaining that he has a main role in the xenophobia the Chinese are facing stating that there is a reason why US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has on several occasions referred to the novel coronavirus as the "Wuhan virus" ignoring the advice of Beijing and global health officials to avoid using terms that could incite **xenophobia**.

The China Daily used to express clearly their rejection towards what’s happening to the Chinese explaining that xenophobia will not cure the disease and being xenophobic won’t help people to save their lives from the virus. This was shown in the article titled “Sinophobia won't help Britain defeat epidemic” where it included

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In this context, an Ipsos survey showed that one in every seven persons has avoided people of Chinese origin or those with mongoloid features since the virus started spreading in the UK. But **xenophobia won't save anybody from the virus**, especially when it's highly possible that a non-Chinese brought the virus to the UK ... Therefore, **xenophobia needs to be dealt with head on**. And if Sinophobia has a long history, and Chinese people have faced discrimination even before this pandemic broke out, the UK too has a long history of fighting racism in all its forms. People opposing Sinophobia, or xenophobia in any form, number many times more than those who indulge in such nefarious activities, and nowhere is this more true than in London where global cohesion will bring people together to tackle this awful virus. (Qureshi, 2020).

The China Daily newspaper was working its international role in correcting their image between the world after the accusations they faced since the outbreak of COVID 19.

The Independent newspaper was not far away from the China Daily newspaper, but its coverage was based from being ethical and professional. They did not take the role of correcting the image, but they took the role of doing their job correctly without being biased or without blaming anyone and at a point, they were against who covered negatively.

As reported in The Independent Newspaper, in the article titled "Coronavirus: Hundreds of Asian Americans have been violently attacked over last month because of 'China virus' racism, activists say", it was written in the article body that "Hundreds of Asian Americans have been violently attacked in the last month because of 'China virus' racism voiced by Donald Trump and others, activists have claimed" ... Amid criticism that repeated use of the phrase 'China virus' to refer to coronavirus by Mr Trump and some of his top

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officials was racist, activists said they had seen violent attacks on Asian Americans increase in ‘leaps and bound’ over the last three weeks ... This was in addition to verbal abuse, slurs and other racist rhetoric that members of the community have suffered”.

Also, it was shown in other different articles titled “Fauci says he would never use the term ‘China virus’ as he reveals frustrations working with Trump White House”, “Coronavirus: Trump defends using name ‘Chinese virus’: It’s not racist – it comes from China”, “Coronavirus: The truth about the conspiracy theories and fake news on China’s outbreak” and “Coronavirus: Mike Pompeo insists G7 use ‘Wuhan Virus’ - but world officials refuse”.

On the contrary, the New York Times newspaper fueled the crisis and it was like they found another weapon to demonize China, calling it “racist” and “xenophobic”.

One of the examples that proves this, an article titled “As Coronavirus Fades in China, Nationalism and Xenophobia Flare”, where the article body included

as China tames the coronavirus epidemic now ravaging other countries, its success is giving rise to an increasingly strident blend of patriotism, nationalism and **xenophobia**, at a pitch many say has not been seen in decades ... Last month, China barred virtually all foreigners from entering, even though it **had criticized other countries** for closing their borders. Officials emphasize that most of China’s new cases are now imported — **often without mentioning that many are Chinese citizens returning home** ... Fear of imported infections has at times exploded into, or provided cover for, **xenophobia**. (Wang and Qin, 2020).

Several of the key characteristics of moral panics are evident in the articles published in the New York Times. For instance, the widely

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accepted belief that the Chinese are the main cause, have a negative effect on American society and maybe all the readers worldwide and subsequent hostility towards them. The newspapers can perpetuate moral panics and this study argues that regarding xenophobia, the New York Times has played an important role.

It is interesting to note that from all the above-mentioned findings, the researcher conducted a scale that can measure the xenophobia presence in the newspapers coverage.

It is a 3-dimension scale where it represents the positive, neutral and negative coverage. Noting here that there is no neutral, so the researcher considered it a mid-point between the positive and the negative.

Positive Coverage (+)	Mid-Point (No Neutral)	Negative Coverage (-)
It supports the xenophobic coverage.	This can be the country who is facing Xenophobic coverage – As its media will try to defend its country of origin.	It is against the xenophobic coverage.

By applying this scale on the newspapers under study, it can be rated as the following:

Positive Coverage (+)	Mid-Point (No Neutral)	Negative Coverage (-)
The New York Times Newspaper	China Daily Newspaper	The Independent Newspaper

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Results related to the Study Research Questions

One possible lane by which the beginning of COVID-19 may relate to increased Xenophobia is through news and social media.

This study was questioning the presence of xenophobia in the news coverage in the Chinese, American and British newspapers. The results showed that not all news coverage include xenophobic information and if it is present, it varies according to different levels. Also, this study revealed that the presence of the xenophobia in the news discourse violates the media ethics. Therefore, the newspapers needed to check the ethics of journalism to reinforce ethics, improve the quality of journalism to be free from xenophobia, stereotypes and even hate speech.

Results related to the Theoretical Research Framework

By applying this the theory of moral panics to the results, it can be concluded that the newspapers whose coverage included xenophobia can be a cause for making people fear. Also, by applying the social responsibility theory to evaluate the newspapers' responsibility by not presenting any piece of information that violates the media ethics. The results found that two of the newspapers under study did not consider the social responsibility in its news coverage as the discourse included xenophobic information.

Conclusion

The investigation of the presence of Xenophobia in the news coverage has shown that it is undoubtedly clear that the newspaper should be on a side, either a positive, negative or even a mid-point side. This shows that the Xenophobia did not only exist in the case of COVID 19, but it is present in all the crisis especially when there is someone who is different or someone who is to be blamed for a crisis, etc....

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That is why there should be a greater awareness of this topic to promote for media literacy as well as careful consideration of how health discourse may affect involved people.

In closing, Aidan White, General Secretary of the International Federation of Journalists said that “media should be encouraged to positive action in order to remove stereotypes, prevent fueling racism and sensationalist reporting” (European Commission and the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia).

Funding details

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Acknowledgments

Manuscript formatting service supplied by Taylor & Francis Editing Services.

Declaration of interest statement

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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