

# Media Response to Health Emergencies: An Analysis of International Newspapers Coverage of Early Days of COVID-19 Breakout in China

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This study investigated the dominant perception triggered among the foreign residents in China by international newspapers' coverage of early months of COVID-19 outbreak in China. In total, 12 leading newspapers from USA, UK, Malaysia, Nigeria, Australia, and Tanzania, with two selected from each country; and 10 samples are taken from each newspaper, totalling 120 samples. Two focus groups of seven members each were created and each of the groups separately discussed the samples listing their perception of the newspapers' articles. A control group of 13 participants was also created. Also, the views of 247 foreigners resident in China during the outbreak were sampled. Results from the study showed that in the early months of COVID-19 newspapers from USA, UK, and Australia sensationalized most of their news while some of their reports showed some political slant. However, most news reports from Nigeria, Tanzania, and Malaysia were less sensational. The results from the study and control groups were also backed by the results from the survey sample where most of the respondents said the news reports created fear and panic among them while containing less educative information. This study recommends prioritization of media social responsibility in the coverage of health emergencies.

*Keywords:* COVID-19 in media, coronavirus outbreak, health reporting, newspapers coverage, China

## Background

As China geared up to celebrate its most popular festival, the Spring Festival, the City of Wuhan in central China Hubei Province began to witness deaths from a strange respiratory condition. On 20 January, 2020, China Disease Control Agency confirmed that it belonged to the coronavirus disease family. The World Health Organization (WHO) later named it COVID-19, reflecting its virus strain and year of outbreak. Experts say coronaviruses are responsible for some acute and chronic zoonotic respiratory infections that are harmful to the central nervous systems of humans (Zhu, Wei, & Niu, 2020).

Reacting to the outbreak, European Centre for Diseases Control and Prevention informed that the genetic analysis of the disease indicated its close links to the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) that emerged in 2003; and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) which could be traced to wild animals, such as bats, though the agency admitted that the origin of the virus remained unclear. This is similar to findings on the virus

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by Xu et al. (2020) who asserted that in comparison to SARS, COVID-19 showed similar manifestations in patients, such as fever, fatigue, and dry cough as well as nasal congestion, runny nose. Gorbalenya et al. (2020) alluded to this when they advanced that the present outbreak of the lower respiratory tract infection was the third in recent times following the two outbreaks mentioned earlier. As the cure for the disease remains and vaccines elusive, WHO released a raft of preventive measure which include wearing of face masks, regular washing of hands, use of sanitizers and non-touching of the face, in addition to social distancing.

### China on a Lockdown

Consequently, economic experts have projected that the virus will not only has monumental impact on the China's economy, but also the entire global as it continues to spread. The Geneva-Based World Economy Forum speculated that China's economic growth would slow down to 4.5% in the first quarter of 2020, the rate the economic think tank group, quoting Reuters poll of economists, said it will be the slowest pace since the financial crisis of 2008. It also projected similar slumps in energy market as Chinese factories close down for moths due to the lockdown.

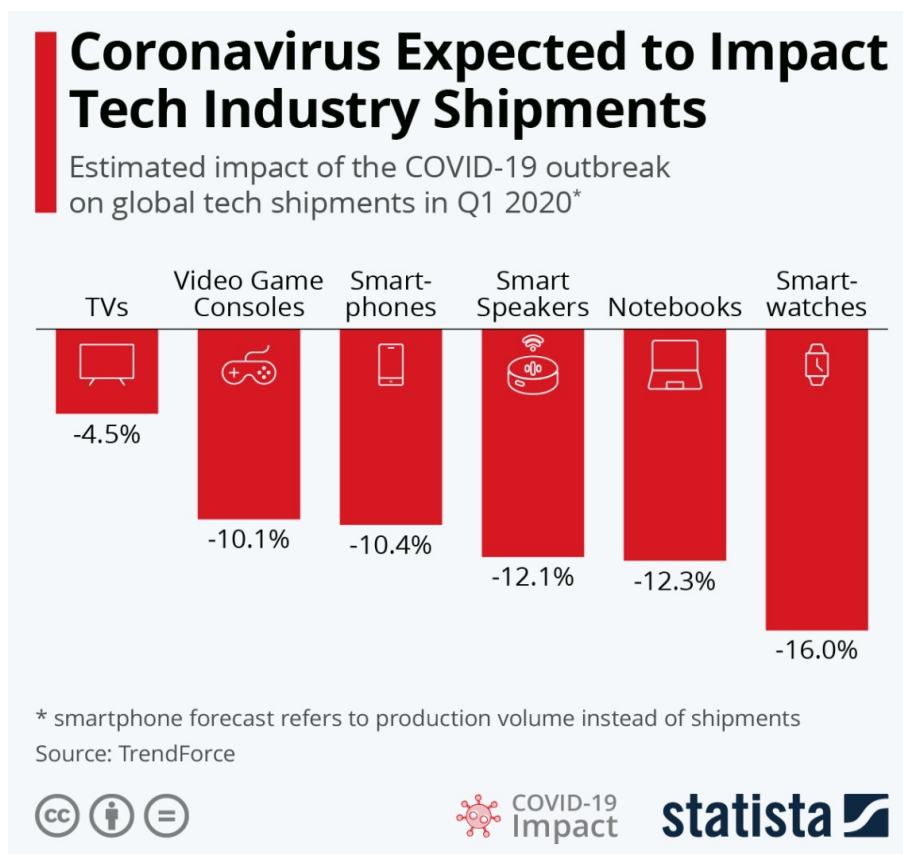


Figure 1. The projected impact of COVID-19 on tech industry shipment (Source: Statista, 20 February 2020).

Air travel is another area that has taken a big blow from COVID-19, with the International Air Transport Association (IATA) initially announcing that a 13% full year loss of passenger demand for Asia-Pacific region. Again, this figure is expected to multiply as the virus spreads, infecting tens of thousands globally and more cities apply movement restrictions and countries announce travel bans, even as WHO on 11 March, 2020

declared the infection a pandemic in acknowledgement of its global spread leaving thousands death on its trail put at more than 6,000 deaths from more than 16,000 cases according to WHO.

### **COVID-19 Outbreak in Newspapers**

The media, and with particularly reference to this study, newspapers expectedly outbreak have given COVID-19 a huge coverage. In the reports, they have highlighted key areas such the infection rates, casualties as well as socio-economic implications. On daily basis, the virus continues to attract special attention from the media both. For instance, a search in the online editions of most leading newspapers across the world indicate that special spaces have been created for the virus, while in many instances, news about the virus dominate the front pages of the newspapers. This is true of such newspapers as *The Guardian*, *The Sun*, *The Metro*, *The Telegraph*, *Daily Mail*, among other newspapers in UK. The virus has also received similar prominence in such newspapers in the US as *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Daily News*.

The same could be said of the visibility given to the virus in *Sunday Times*, *City Press*, *Sowetan*, all of South Africa; to list but a few international newspapers. It is doubtful if there is a more event that is given more attention both in terms of strategic placement and number of published materials than COVID-19. The UK-based *Telegraph*, in its online edition of 16 March 2020 in addition to leading with the coronavirus crisis also had more than 12 other headlines and photos, a major conveyor of priority symbol which facilities quicker and easier access by readers, said Serdalia, Ashirbekovab, Isaevaa, and Adievaa (2016). In addition to all the stories in the upper part of *The Guardian* of 16 March 2020 all being about coronavirus, the newspaper also runs an update on the virus.

In addition to the placements and frequency of usage, international newspapers deployed different discourses in their coverage of the virus. Cremades (2007) also held that this strategic placement of news about the virus by the newspapers, including what to leave out and what to include in the text in mobilizing public responses is a statement about what the newspapers think about outbreak. Where metaphors are used in the coverage of the virus outbreak, they are meant not only to shape public attitudes but also pave the way for material actions to be taken (Hart, 2015). Their use of texts in the coverage of COVID-19 outbreak by the international newspapers is essential because, according to Fairclough (2003), texts have the potential to change what we know about something, alter our beliefs, attitudes, and values. Kelsey (2018) argued that any style or language adopted by any medium in the presentation of an issue to the public is reflection of the medium's ideological stand used to connect its audience to accept such ideologies.

### **Research Objective and Questions**

The objective of this study is to use the samples from the selected newspapers, ascertain how international newspapers reported first one month of the outbreak of COVID-19. Our aim is to the perception the public has about the coverage with a view to recommending a better journalistic approach if the coverage fall short of public expectations and perceptions.

### **Literature Review**

COVID-19 is a new virus outbreak; consequently media-related literature on it is scanty. However, the media response to similar outbreaks in the past has not escaped the attention of media and communication scholars. While some scholars have examined the framing of the outbreaks, others were concerned with ethical

issues; while others focused on the effects of media fatigue on public health campaigns. UK newspapers' representation of the 2009 swine flu was the subject of an investigation by Hilton and Hunt (2010), in which they did a quantitative analysis of 2,374 newspaper articles published in eight UK national newspapers for the period covering 1 March 2009 and 28 February 2010. The authors found that the newspapers had more articles about the swine at its outset as a result of scientific uncertainties surrounding it. They found that subsequently, the articles declined as more facts emerged even as their research showed no over-hype by the sampled newspapers. They concluded that the UK newspapers reporting of the outbreak was important, particularly in the area of risk perception well as emphasized the need for news media to always disseminate factual health information.

Following the outbreak of meningitis in Ghana in 2015, Smith and Tietah (2017) studied how two leading online news platforms in Ghana, Graphic Online and MyJoyOnline framed the news, the degree of prominence it attracted in their publications, sources of news information and surveillance through independent investigation. The investigation relied on combined 60 publications over a four-month period dating 1 December 2015 to 31 March 2016. Their study revealed that the media houses relied mostly on government functionaries as their source of information. They also found that the stories were not strategically placed on the platforms where they would easily attract readers' attention despite promoting multimedia contents. The authors counselled that health reporters be properly trained on effective coverage of disease outbreaks and educated on the key role they are expected to play in health communication.

Similarly, Collinson, Khan, and Heffernan (2015), while investigating the effects of media reports on disease spread and important public health measurements, found that mass media fatigue has the potential to dampen moral and reduce effects of public health campaigns among target audience. Using stochastic agent-based model to quantify mass media reports on important health measures using data compiled by Global Public Health Intelligence Network Report on 2009 H1N1 pandemic, they found that the report rate and the rate at which individuals relax their healthy behaviours greatly affect the variability of public health measurements. Relying on quantitative analysis, Vellek (2016) investigated how international media framed their coverage of Ebola outbreak in some parts of Africa in the period 2000 to 2001; and 2014 to 2015. The author used samples from BBC, *New York Times*, *The Daily Telegraph* (UK), and *The Straits Times of Singapore* as a case study. The result of the investigation indicated that despite posing a global threat, the international media framed the virus as distinctively African with the coverage further showing politicization of the outbreak, with such frames having a bearing on the global perception of the virus. Collier (2010) found that though online health news alerts have the potential to enhance public response to disease outbreaks, there is need for systematic evaluation of health aberrations in health news reporting in order to highlight challenges, such as textual understanding.

Researching on media ethics and disease outbreaks, Hooker, Leask, and King (2012) established that traditional news media an essential part the system for protecting the public from the risk of infectious diseases. They found that in many instances, news media had succeeded in disseminating the right information that have aided members of the public in taking the right decisions, including commitment to required civic actions such as quarantine compliance as in the case of COVID-19. Similarly, in a "A qualitative analysis of newspaper response to the Ebola outbreak in central Africa", Tshiswaka, Whembolua, and Conserve (2017) discovered that the newspapers framed the outbreak as a warfare where the general population was depicted as war victims and public institutions were framed as heroes fighting the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD), the evader.

### **Research Method and Scope**

We investigated a total of 12 leading newspapers selected from six countries with two newspapers chosen from each country. Using purposive selection method, the newspapers were chosen based on their national appeal and circulation. From USA, we selected the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* and, from the UK, we selected *The Sun* and the *Daily Telegraph*. We also selected *The Financial Review* and *The Australian* from Australia and picked *The Nation* and *The Punch* from Nigeria; as well as *The Citizen* and *The Guardian* from Tanzania; while from Malaysia, we selected *The Star* and *New Straits Times*. In all, 120 publications were studied, with 10 publications selected from each newspaper. The sampled articles and headlines were published between 25 January and 29 February, 2020, roughly the first one month of COVID-19 outbreak.

We created two focus groups of seven members each drawn from different countries. We assured the group members of their anonymity in the course of their participation in the study. We also had a 13-member control group. Members of both the focus and control groups are educated up to postgraduate level. This is to ensure that they are literate enough to read and understand media texts. The groups had two sessions with each session lasting one hour. Members of the groups were presented with the newspaper articles as downloaded from the newspapers' official websites. They were told write down their perceptions of the headlines and the feeling they trigger in them. These perceptions were later grouped into 10 broad thematic areas: chaos, information politicization, neutral, fear, re-assuring; stigma, tolerance, accuracy, and sensationalism. We asked them to reconcile their impression about the samples with their understanding of media social responsibility.

The focus group met three times during which the 60 selected publications were discussed. We also created a control group of 13 participants also drawn from different countries and regions. Through the WeChat, China's instant messaging platform, we sent the newspaper samples individually to the members of the group. This is to ensure that no member of the control group influenced the judgment of one another. We, however, provided them with the thematic areas as identified and grouped by the focus groups. They were also told to select as many perceptions as possible that they have about any particular headline and accompanying article or news story in the event they feel it triggers more than one emotion. In addition to using the feedback from the control group to validate that of the focus groups, we also used the feedback to calculate the frequency and percentage ratio of each of the perceptions. Our conclusions were drawn from results generated from these approaches among other grounds advanced by media and communication scholars. Furthermore, 247 foreigners living in China within the period under review were sampled in a survey.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The media plays a major role in the society. At no time is that role more important than in crisis situations such during disease outbreaks. The COVID-19 outbreak presented a challenge to the media to provide the public with the type of information that would guide them in taking the right decisions. This is as encapsulated in the media social responsibility theory. In this case, the media is expected to deploy its position and influence to deliver the factual information to their audiences (Middleton, 2009). The author however, cautions that responsibility should not be mistaken for the journalist being accountable and liable for actions or inactions in professional duties. Some scholars have argued that in many instances, the journalists' hands are tied by editorial, but Zhang, Li, and Zhang (2017) posited that such should not be the case as both the medium and the journalist are obliged to abide by the theory be it in the social media or mainstream media. Social responsibility

theory is that it requires media professional to be objective in their reports and display sincerity and transparency, said Oluoch, Agalo, and Day (2017). This is because, according to them, to do otherwise could lead to escalation or de-escalation of situations such as a health crisis.

But in some instances, this sacred responsibility is threatened by some factors, such as commercial interest and media ownership. The media ought to be socially responsible by disseminating news free rather than selling them. Mass media are tools for mass communication which responsibilities to keep members of the society informed, educated and entertained, said Oberiri (2016). Bardoel and d'Haenens (2004) explained that media social responsibility could be interpreted from two perspective, one from the point of media's responsibility to the society; secondly from the perspective of its responsiveness, a reflection of how the media pays attention to and consider the yearnings of the society. They identified four level of responsibility to include being accountable for the assigned, self-assigned and denied (based on legal grounds); social and moral dimensions.

The theory of media social responsibility, according to Piontek (2016), is based on the assumption that the mass media owe the society the responsibility of diligent service by raising the bar on information, truth and precision, objectivity and balance, all of which it is expected to meet by self-regulating, even as it acknowledged that under certain dispensations, the media and media professionals could come under the control of the state, through the instruments of the law; while journalists are expected to bear the social consequences of their professional failings. Some other scholars such as Bajracharya (2018) argue that any debate about media social responsibility is incomplete without recognizing "the obligatory" component of the divide, which the author points demands that the ethically, it puts the burden of obligation to the environment, society, culture, and economy on not only the journalist but also the media he or she represents.

Media social responsibility has been framed as a morality and ethics torchbearer, radiating professionalism, uprightness, and agent of social change; and an outlet for media houses to scrutinize governments but some critics its critics think otherwise. Topic and Tench (2018) informed that some media and communication scholars view the theory as an authoritarian view of how the media should function; rather than an instrument that seeks to liberate the media from unwarranted expectations and public pressure. Ravi thought (2012) that commercial considerations and media ownership reveal the underbelly of media social responsibility, exposing the manipulative nature of commerce over the theory and the reality of its applicability; whereby some of its critics perceive it, in practice, as merely a myth and largely an academic enterprise.

But given the importance of the health sector and the key role the media is expected to play in promoting public wellbeing, Oyama and Okpara (2017) contended that it is necessary for media to consider public interest over commercial, political, and social interests or ideologies and cautioned that all health communication messages and campaigns should conform to ethical and journalism codes. Understanding societal health and other needs hold the key to fashioning the right way to communication the message to the public if the media would succeed in delivering that social responsibility to them, said Heldman, Schindelar, and Weaver III (2013), who argued that "now is the time to define, implement and evaluate a public health communication (social) media engagement approach that is research based". Reporting disease outbreaks such as COVID-19 pose a great challenge for the media as far as ethics and social responsibility is concerned as international media with different editorial leanings, political ideologies and media culture strive to meet their audience's expectations.

## Results and Discussion

We created two seven-member focus groups, 14 members in total. Each focus group met twice. Discussion lasted for one and half hours. Members of the groups were asked to evaluate randomly selected 120 headlines and articles from leading newspapers in USA, UK, Malaysia, Nigeria, Australia, and Tanzania. Specifically, we asked members of the group to indicate which emotion or feeling any of each of the headlines and the articles that accompany them trigger. The study group reported that international newspapers gave a wide coverage of the outbreak in its early days in China.

However, members of the groups identified a wide range of reactions and perceptions. They are chaos, informative, politicization, neutral, fear, re-assuring, stigma, tolerance, accuracy, and sensationalism. While most of the information they communicated to their readers were informative, displayed measure of neutrality on the part of the newspapers, most of their reports triggered a sense of chaotic situation, fear, sensationalism, politicization of the disease outbreak and stigma against Chinese or those living in China as the time of the event.

We summarized those reactions into three dimensions with the first dimension reflecting chaos, fear and stigma, second dimension reflected sensationalism and politicization and the last dimension reflected assurance, tolerance, informative, accuracy and neutrality of reports. To obtain a wide range of viewpoints and to ensure internal validity of the study is well measured, the pattern matching method by Alebeek and Wilson (2019) was adopted to rank and compare the revealed perceptions from focus groups using a 13-member control group. Here we summarize our finding on international newspapers coverage of the first one month of COVID-19 breakout in China. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of participants in the study.

### Chaos, Fear and Stigma

Sasha, an international student in China, said, “After going through most of the headlines I feel scared, seems like I will die here, it even makes me to think of going back home”. For instance, on 15 February 2020, *Daily Telegraph* carried a news under the headline: “Bill Gates warns of 10 million deaths as coronavirus spreads to Africa” and Anna, a Ph.D. student from West Africa, said “This is very terrifying heading for me, because my family is in Africa, so this makes me scared a lot”. Besides, many respondents revealed that many headlines created chaos, fear and stigma among them, to Jack a foreigner in China, being in China during the outbreak of COVID-19 enabled him to experience several measures taken by the government of China to control the spread of coronavirus. He stated that, “Many headings I read are creating fear, but are not creating fear to me, because I’m living in China and I know the really situation here. But I think is creating fear for those who are outside of China”. Reading the headline “China expands chaotic dragnet in coronavirus crackdown of 13 February 2020 as published by *New York Times*”, not only trigger a fear and panic in me but also shows confusion and lack of direction and loss of confidence in Chinese system”, said Sophia, another participant. Similarly, Ahmed, found “Plague province: Coronavirus: China puts 58 million in lockdown indefinitely as towns and villages ‘sealed shut’ to stop spread”, a headline in *The Sun* newspaper 17 February 2020 not only stigmatizing but also “insensitive to the plight” of Chinese citizens.

### Sensationalism and Politicization

The two focus groups also identified politicization of the outbreak by some international newspapers in their coverage of the early days of the outbreak. According to John, the headline “China’s Xi gives his No.2 a rare chance to shine in coronavirus fight” was published by *Wall Street Journal* of 27 January 2020 as a

manifestation of sensationalization and politicization of the crisis. Similarly, Ahmed identified “Cracks appear in the cult of Xi”, a headline by the 22 February 2020 by the *Financial Review* of Austria”, the politicization of the outbreak by some newspapers; same as “Politics comes first in China’s agony”, a headline carried same date by the same newspaper. Other political and sensational headlines identified by the participants include “virus exposes the risk of doing business in China”, of *Financial Review*, 24 February 2020; and “Fear of coronavirus pandemic grows”, *The Australian*, 24 February 2020.

### **Assurance, Tolerance, Informative, Accuracy and Neutral**

However, the focus group members also said some the articles and their headlines triggered sense of assurance, a tolerant society, informative, accuracy and neutrality in them. Joyce found “Xi confident China will after chairing a leadership meeting on coronavirus”, a headline on *The Star* if 3 February 2020 very re-assuring and confidence building, even as Danny found “Coronavirus: How to stay safe”, published by *The Nation* on 10 February 2020 as informative on how to avoid contracting the virus. Mike had a similar feeling going through the article under the headline: Reporting on the coronavirus: Spreading the truth, not panic, a 13 February 2020 article on *New York Times*; “What we do know, and what don’t we about the coronavirus”, published same newspapers, same dateline; “Coronavirus symptoms: What to look for, who to contact and how to treat it”, *The Telegraph*, 21 February 2020.

### **Control Group**

Table 1

*Shows the Frequency and Percentage Ranking of the Emerged Themes*

S/No	Emerged themes	Frequency	Percentage
1	Chaos	105	13.1
2	Informative	74	9.2
3	Politicization	88	11.0
4	Neutral	65	8.1
5	Fear	167	21.0
6	Re-assuring	59	7.4
7	Stigma	75	9.4
8	Tolerance	6	0.7
9	Accuracy	53	7.0
10	Sensationalism	105	13.1
Total		797	100

To further valid the reactions from the focus groups, were created a 13-man control group. Using WeChat, China’s instant messaging app, we sent same newspaper headline and thematic groups as identified and analysed by the focus groups. We told the participants to make multiple choices given that each headlines and articles can convey as many feelings as possible with 21% fear topped the list of their choices. Fear is closely followed by chaos and sensationalization which made up of 13.1% of the perceptions as indicated by members of the control group. Conversely only 0.7% of the choices reflected tolerance for the situation in China while 7.0% of the choices reflected that the reports were giving accurate information of the situation in China. Figure 2 provides details of the control group’s ranking of the identified themes and perceptions.

Similarly, as seen in Figure 2, 145 of the international residents in China during the early days of the outbreak surveyed during this study said they found the reports in the foreign media disturbing, with while only



57 of the 247 respondents said they found the reports reassuring that China’s health system was on top of the situation

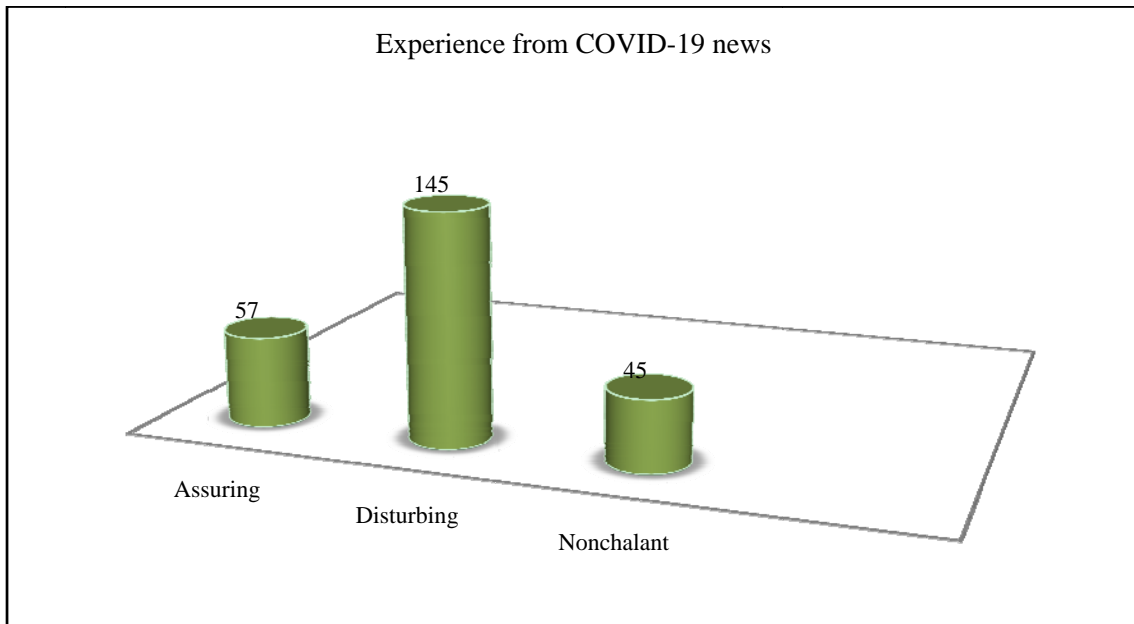


Figure 2. Foreigners experience from international newspapers coverage of COVID-19 outbreak in China.

As further indicated in Figure 3, most of the respondents, 38% of them said they found the reports to be sensational, while 33% said they were informative and 28% said the news reports were educative to them.

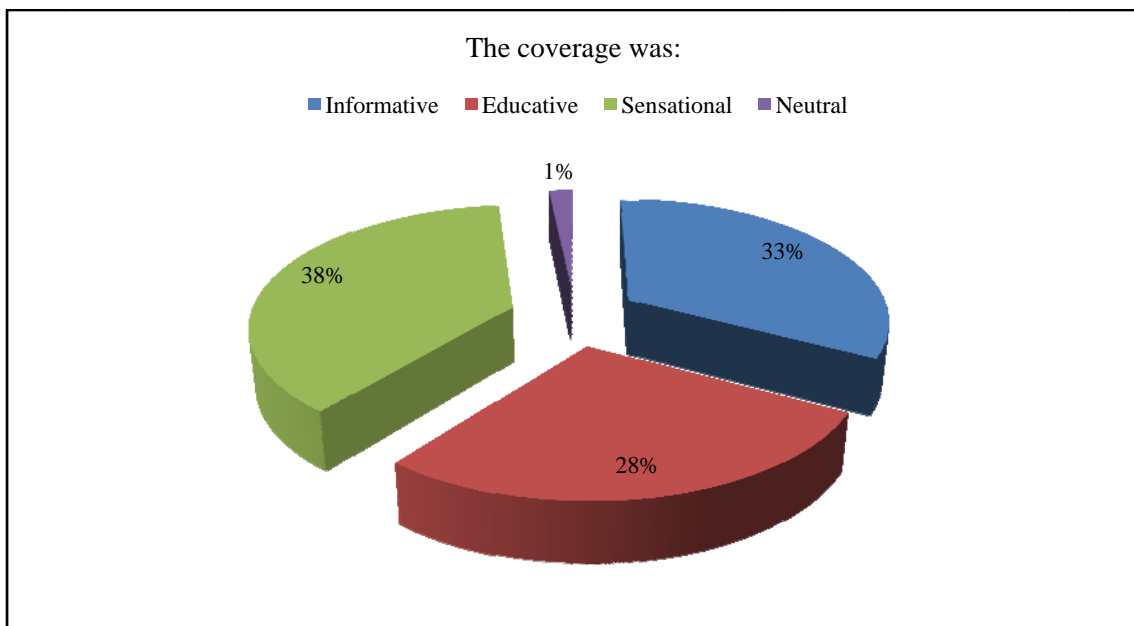


Figure 3. Values attached to the news reports by respondents.

When asked to express their greatest concern about the news coverage, 28% of the respondents said such reports had the potential to cause panic which could result in various forms of social disorder. This group is tied with those who said they had the potential to question the professional competencies of Chinese medical

workers and scientists; and 16% of the respondents said they cause stigma against China as a country and people resident in China as at the time of the outbreak. However, only 14% said the reports had the potential to cause fear, which could trigger other health challenges, such as high blood pressure.

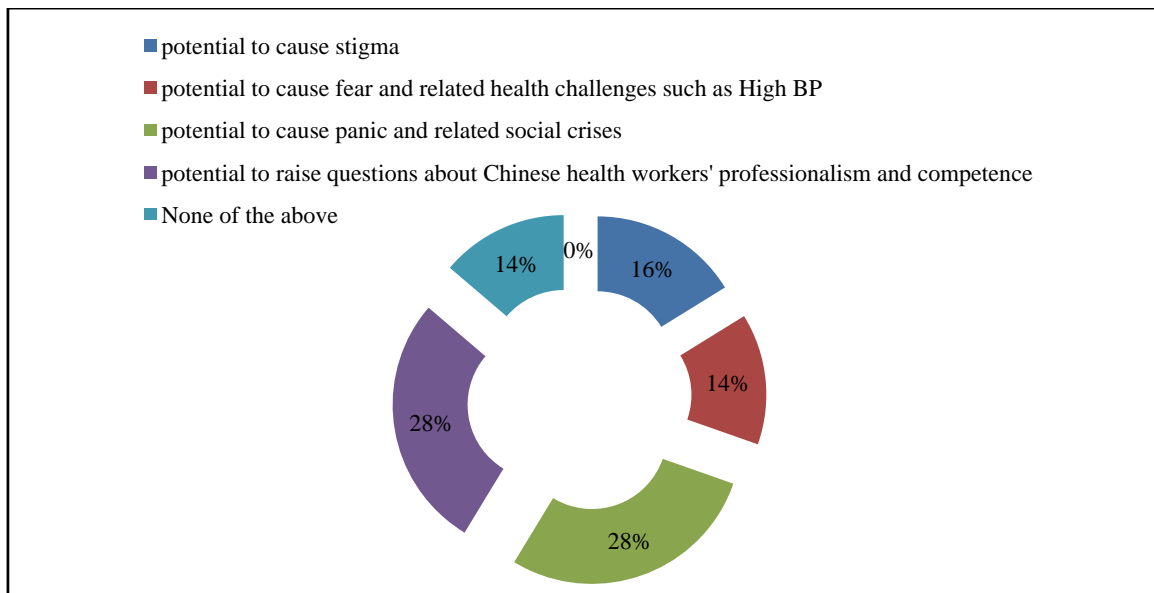


Figure 4. Greatest concern about the coverage.

### Conclusion

Both the sampling and group methods applied in this study showed that the international newspapers investigated, particularly, those from the US, UK, and Australia sensationalized the early days of COVID-19 outbreak in China, which some of the reports even politicizing it and using frames which could cause fear, anxiety and stigma. Scholars say in the face of emergencies such the COVID-19 outbreak, the media should apply utmost caution and professionalism in view of this role in guiding the society to make informed decisions (Wakefield, Loken, & Hornik, 2010). It is therefore imperative that the media deploys the appropriate language in the processing of information available to them; and where in doubt, seek the right information from the appropriate authorities to ensure that the information they are sending to their audiences are factual and educative.

This is in line with the views of Schwitzer et al. (2005) who argued that in order to effectively discharge their social responsibilities in health communication media professionals should partner with governments, health professionals other stakeholders in seeking the right information. However, in discharging their professional responsibilities it become obligatory on media to guarantee that their messages are crafted and delivered in a manner that they engender desired positive change in such situations as the outbreak of COVID-19. From our results, we deduced that most of the published materials did not show enough tendency to deliver positive reaction among the audience as most productive strategy was to consider health communication on a continuum from strictly individual changes strategies to strictly social changes strategies (Maibach & Holtgrave, 1995). We also conclude that most of the reports did not adequately educate their audiences about COVID-19 the risks and challenges it portends but rather displayed sensationalism in what Zikmund-Fisher, Fagerlin, and Ubel (2010) considered a failure in health communication.

Health communication scholars are still concerned with the role the media framing of such diseases as HIV/AIDS, Ebola, SARS, and MERS had in the spread of these diseases; and as COVID-19 infection continues to increase worldwide (as at the time of writing this paper), this paper recommends that newspapers and media houses in general be concerned with the type of change their messages are driving among their audiences. As Uittenhout (2012) put it, the essence of health communication is to improve disease prevention, health promotion and other businesses of healthcare delivery towards the enhancement of life and health of the individual and the society at large. Our conclusion finds support other communication scholars, such as Klemm, Hartmann, and Das (2019) who found that evidence from journalism and media effects research provide support for the common belief that an emotional tone of coverage increases fear and perceived risks. The influence of the media coverage of the early days of COVID-19 outbreak on the global spread of the pandemic presents an interesting area of study for health communication scholars.

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