A Critical Discourse Analysis of Canadian News Media Coverage of Immigration and Multiculturalism during the First Wave of the 2019 Global Pandemic (COVID-19)

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine how Canadian news media framed immigration and multiculturalism during the first wave of the pandemic, between January and July of the year 2020, focusing on determining and identifying patterns in the media coverage of three different major Canadian news outlets (CBC, the National Post, and the Globe and Mail). This study utilized critical discourse analysis (CDA), employing media framing as one of its theoretical frameworks, to deconstruct underlying meanings in the selected articles, conceptualize thematic descriptions, and better understand the representation of ethnic and racial minorities in Canada within the construction of the text.

Keywords: immigration, multiculturalism, critical discourse analysis, covid-19

Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 as a pandemic on March 11, 2020—noting the rapid spread of the virus and the alarming number of infected individuals throughout the globe (Labbé et al., 2022, p. 1). Alongside the rise in the infection rate, a notable increase in ethno-racial exclusion and anti-immigration sentiments has been observed as multiple countries noted the significant rise in the number of hate crimes and racialized attacks directed towards members of specific ethnic populations. Canadian news media coverage of incomplete statements from government officials and medical experts regarding the then-novel coronavirus outbreak, in addition to easily accessible false information circulating online, impacted public perception and people's attitudes and behaviours (Reedy et al., 2023, p. 248). Mass media heavily influences the narrative formation regarding racialized communities; it plays an active role in helping the public disseminate crucial information and shaping collective sentiment toward marginalized populations, particularly people who were racialized as Asian. By exploring how Canadian news media framed immigration and multiculturalism during the initial wave of the pandemic, we can determine how and to what extent mass media had shaped the social realities of impacted ethnic and racial minorities during the health crisis.

Literature Review

Barreneche (2020, pp. 20-21) points out that the pandemic has given space to political narratives that promote the "othering" of ethnic and racial minorities and condemn them for external health threats such as the coronavirus, which was infamously dubbed as the "Chinese virus," "Wuhan virus," and "Kung Flu" by various politicians. Political actors such as the former Alberta Premier Jason Kenney (Ritchie, 2021) and U.S. Republican Senator John Cornyn both made public statements indicating the pandemic stemmed from the tendency of "the Chinese"—a

constructed collective identity to denote individuals with East and Southeast Asian features—indulging in cultural habits and practices such as ingesting "bat soup" (Barreneche, 2020, pp. 27-28). In a study done by Chan, Kim, and Leung (2022), they discovered the negative influence of the elites' direct association of the Asian community with the COVID-19 virus on the public, stating that repeated expressions of blame incentivizes and makes it socially acceptable for people to 'express and act on anti-Asian sentiments' online and offline (Wang & Catalano, 2023, p. 5).

Mass media also amplified anti-Chinese sentiment by reinforcing specific media frames that consistently associated the global pandemic with China (Lyu & Takikawa, 2022, pp. 1-2). As Van Dijk (1991) claims, the language used in media is not neutral. Instead, it is intentional and designed to evoke certain emotions and facilitate the shared comprehension of text between the writers and their audience (Nabi, 2022, p. 62). By labelling and asserting the culinary habits of "Chinese" nationals, such as wildlife consumption (bats in particular) and the allegedly unhygienic wet markets as being the source of the outbreak, it creates a false narrative that members of the Asian community are a threat to public health and delegates the blame for the pandemic on their supposed cultural practices.

Following Goffman's *framing theory*, Entman (1993) discusses how framing serves as a mediating mechanism that selects aspects of our social reality through emphasis or ignorance, which allows us to simplify and make sense of the information we have received through media sources (Reedy et al., 2023). Moreover, repeated exposure to frames that paint migrants and ethnocultural minorities as disease carriers can invoke a cognitive default that establishes a causal relationship between the current health crisis and previously constructed schemas regarding their cultural practices (harmful and generalized stereotypes) in their interpretation and

comprehension of perceived information. Such instances are then likely to be internalized by news consumers, affecting their attitudes towards members of particular racial and ethnic groups, leading to the increase of Xenophobic and Sinophobic incidents all over Canada and the U.S. (Gao, 2021, p. 473).

Labbé et al. also studied the blame attribution and the process of "othering" ethnic minorities, particularly those of Chinese and other Asian descent, by analyzing editorial cartoons from Canadian news media outlets (2022). Through their findings, they determined a historical ascription and pattern of blame that shifts the responsibility for the occurrence of emerging diseases to immigrants (2022, p. 4). The stigmatization of those of Chinese descent and the application of scapegoating tactics are, therefore, often present in the dominant discourse regarding pandemics—whether it is the 2003 SARS outbreak or the more recent COVID-19 pandemic.

Additionally, scholars have identified the occurrence of a cross-race effect, which makes differentiating members of out-groups more challenging (Huang et al., 2023, p. 683), therefore implicating other ethnocultural minorities mislabelled as Chinese also to become targets of the collective blame. Xenophobia, the fear of those designated as 'others,' therefore affects the interpretation and the way an event is presented and framed in media. Mahr (2020) observed the linguistic technique of 'othering' through news articles released at the beginning of 2020 when scientists had yet to confirm the presumed origin of the outbreak but had already had news outlets publishing unverified information regarding the novel coronavirus strain. Semiotic choices such as repeated lexical choices and the inclusion of photos of individuals with typically 'Asian' features when covering the coronavirus outbreak further intensified problematic assumptions about China and promoted negative perceptions of other ethnocultural minorities

(Nabi, 2022, p. 66). With the use of these semiotic mechanisms, particular tags and assumptions such as "dirty," "unhygienic," and "primitive" have been linked to particular imagined communities (the collective actors' the Chinese') (Barreneche, 2020, p. 20) due to cultural practices that the dominant group deemed socially inferior and in need of correction (Gozdecka et al., 2014, p. 54) which further propagates discriminatory behaviours towards them.

Furthermore, Wang and Catalano (2023) also discuss Ekman's (2019) frame analysis which examines how racialized sentiments are established through interactivity between actors. They referred to the concept of *cumulative and ambient racism*, which builds on the idea that racialized views get integrated into the societal perception of ethnocultural minorities and become acceptable when mainstream discourses increasingly target marginalized groups in particular ways.

Previously mentioned literature considers how the perception of those who identify as members of ethnocultural minorities, particularly those who are racialized as Asian, has been influenced by the framing and portrayal of the COVID-19 pandemic in media and political narratives leading to the question of how mass media had shaped the social realities of impacted ethnic and racial minorities during the initial wave of the global health crisis.

Methodology

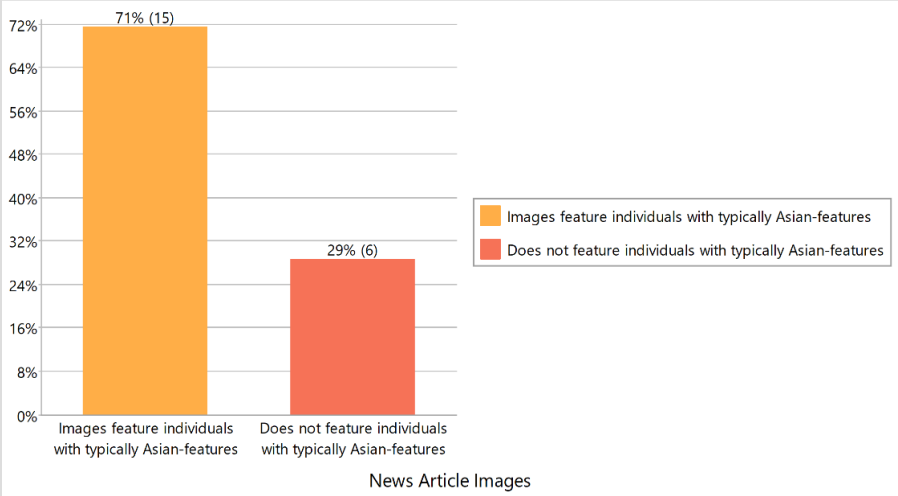
This qualitative research paper utilizes critical discourse analysis (CDA) to deconstruct underlying meanings in the selected articles, conceptualize thematic descriptions, and acquire a better understanding of the social context being relayed through the implicit and explicit language of the selected news article (Starks & Trinidad, 2007, p. 1377). In addition, this paper employed media framing as a theoretical framework to understand the role of mass media and its role in furthering specific objectives and shaping societal perception (Wodak & Meyer, 2011b)

regarding immigration and multiculturalism during times of crisis. As Wodak and Meyer discuss in their study, the language of mass media could also be a site of struggle between varying discourses and ideologies regarding social structures. Therefore, examining the depiction of immigrants and members of ethnocultural minorities in Canadian news media will allow us to understand the power relations present within media sources and their impacts on the societal perception of multiculturalism (Wodak & Meyer, 2011a).

The analytical process began with a complete reading of the sampled articles followed by the preliminary coding in the MAXQDA program, which sorted the contents of the selected articles based on the portrayal of migrants and the perception of members of ethnocultural minorities, focusing on recurrent themes and the denotative-connotative message. The qualitative data used for analysis were taken online from three primary Canadian news sources (CBC News, The National Post, and the Globe and Mail) published between January 2020 and July 2020. I used purposive sampling, which refers to sampling strategies typically used in qualitative research that select instances containing information relevant to the research objective or question (Schreier, 2018, pp. 2 and 10). I then used a series of search terms to find news articles corresponding with the following keywords: (im)migration, immigrant(s), multiculturalism, ethnic minority, marginalized population, or racialized minority. The previously mentioned keywords were used alongside the [AND] function in the Google search engine to isolate results, including the terms Canada and COVID (OR) coronavirus. One news article was collected from each news source for each month of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in the selection of 21 articles in total. Focusing on the text and visual content, I applied content-thematic analysis and visual semiotics to the selected news reports to disseminate the denotative

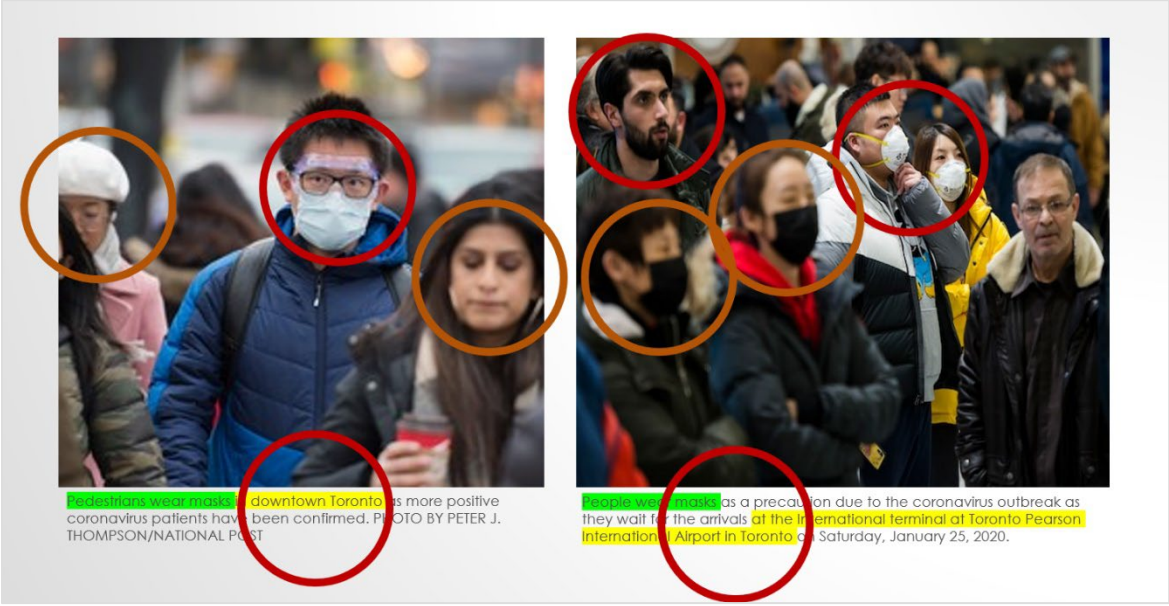
and connotative messages of the articles regarding immigrants and ethnocultural minorities and determine the frames used to shape the dominant discourse surrounding impacted communities.

Results and Discussion



By using Van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Discourse Analysis Model to understand how social cognition and dominant discourses can mutually reinforce or shape each other, we can understand the influence of media coverage on how others perceive the Asian community. I then applied Barthes' theory of Order of Signification to divide the content analysis into denotation, which refers to the literal and explicit meaning of the content, and connotation, which refers to the implicit sociocultural message that it conveys to its readers (Moldez & Gomez, 2022, p. 4); I have observed that while most of the selected articles linguistically portrayed support for immigrants by denouncing racialized attacks directed at ethnocultural minorities and emphasizing the integration of diversity to the Canadian identity, a pattern of attaching images of individuals of Asian origin (or at least those that possess physical attributes that are commonly referred to as Asian features) to articles that mentioned the pandemic remains prevalent, without regard to the location of where the photograph was taken and the subject of the report. Articles

that did not feature Asian-"looking" individuals were limited to news reports involving political actors and government representatives



Instances of the text and image relation not reinforcing the same connotative message regarding ethnocultural minorities were highly present during the first two months (January and February) when medical personnel and healthcare organizations had not verified information regarding the outbreak. While the textual content of the article disparages the circulation of false information regarding COVID-19 and the subsequent anti-China sentiment—most articles about the virus feature an image of a person of Asian descent, accompanied by repeated lexical choices that perpetuates the idea of the rapid, out of control spread and severity of the novel coronavirus. Through the analysis, it is observed that all of the selected articles for January have one thing in common: the presumed origin of the virus and how the eating habits of the Chinese allegedly caused the outbreak despite the samples collected by WHO not revealing the association of a particular animal during the period of the study.

Although the denotative message of the selected articles cautions individuals from expressing discriminatory behaviours based on ethnicity and race, the sheer quantity and

publication frequency of articles continuously referring to the outbreak and the subsequent anti-Chinese sentiments it created continues to solidify the association between China and the pandemic. Such association forms a connotative message that they do, to a certain degree, have a relation, often mistaken for a causal relation that leads to the further development of blaming and stigmatizing discourses targetting people of Chinese or Asian descent (Labbé et al., 2022, p. 2).

As previous studies point out, the discursive construction of the 'Other' has a narrative role in forming perception and refining comprehension (Banerjee et al., 2020, p. 29). It helps individuals to make sense of the circumstances that may appear out of the ordinary and simplifies complex realities and functions (Entman et al., 2009, p. 184) into digestible pieces. Someone must be blamed because narrativity implies causality and agency (Barreneche, 2020). In the case of the COVID-19 outbreak, the imagined collective actor, 'the Chinese,' and their assumed responsibility for spreading the infection had become the 'scapegoats' in the dominant narrative (Banerjee et al., 2020, pp. 26-29).

Nevertheless, all of the selected Canadian news sources do not outwardly express anti-Chinese sentiments nor textually support racialized discourse regarding ethnocultural minorities in their published articles; instead, signs of 'othering' are implicitly inserted and stealthily integrated into its content. Kymlicka (2021) discusses how the incorporation of multiculturalism into the Canadian identity and Canada's liberal-democratic political system primes for a preference for a "polite level" of racism, in which loud, aggressive, and direct declarations of anti-immigration and anti-multiculturalism sentiments are frowned upon. Instances of what can be referred to as selective multiculturalism, similar to Islamophobic multiculturalism (Kymlicka, 2021, pp. 125, 127-129), occur when the dominant group within Canadian society accepts and tolerates ethnocultural minorities as long as they are not framed as a threat. Whereas

Islamophobic multiculturalism occurs when traditional values and norms posit a challenge to "Canadian" values, recent xenophobic sentiments are the results of framing immigrants and the Asian population as a health risk and potential vectors for the COVID-19 virus (Reedy et al., 2023, pp. 246-249).

Conclusion

The scapegoating of people of Chinese origin and mislabelled other ethnocultural minorities has been a prominent component from the beginning of the pandemic. Because the new coronavirus was first documented in China, people of Chinese ethnicity were first considered suspicious, if not dangerous (Barreneche, 2020). Certain cultural practices and Chinese culinary habits, notably the consumption of wildlife and the alleged roles of "wet markets" in the initial transmission of the disease, were deemed by many Westerners as "unhealthy" and "primitive" and had, therefore, been the target of criticisms leading to the exclusion, expulsion, and justification for the negative attitudes and discrimination against members of the Asian community (Anwar et al., 2020; Labbé et al., 2022; Nabi, 2022; and Reedy et al., 2023). Persistent media coverage that links the global pandemic to an ethnocultural population, particularly those of Chinese and Asian origin, establishes a false association between the two and poses members of such communities as potential public health risks and targets of racialized attacks. The construction of Sinophobic discourses began with the naming of the coronavirus, further fuelled by the distribution of misinformation/false news regarding the pandemic and recurrent anecdotal reports from political and media actors that promote anti-China rhetorics (Huang et al., 2023, pp. 682-683). The use of linguistic and visual repetition to link the outbreak to a negative stereotypical image of the Chinese community, with an emphasis on the presumed origin and fast spread of the virus being a consequence of cultural practices,

compels the readers to change their cognitive perception of ethnocultural minorities; therefore, replicating the language and connotative message of blame and othering within the news media into the public discourse regarding the COVID-19 global pandemic.

Appendix: News Articles

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