

# News on Covid Patients in Weibo: A Comparative Analysis of Media Frames and Audience Frames of Public Crisis Events

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**Abstract:** Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020, the epidemic has had a great impact on the lives and health of the public, and the issue of discrimination among people recovering from COVID-19 has become a major issue of public concern. In the new media era, Weibo have become the main platform for news dissemination and opinion diffusion. For this reason, this study adopts the content analysis method and selects the content of Peng Pai News' reports on the issue of coronavirus and its discrimination and the hot search comments on the Weibo platform as the research object. The study also analyzes the factors influencing the framing effect in the new media environment and draws out methods to enhance the framing effect of new media in public crisis.

**Keywords:** Framing effect, Media frame, Audience frame, Coronavirus.

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## 1. Introduction

The unprecedented outbreak and continuous spread of the COVID-19 affected the public health and pace of life, especially for recovered covid patients, even having recovered from disease, it is still important to help them get back into normal life. New media has become an important channel for the public to get information about the epidemic, and the message it sends will affect public opinion to a certain extent. The media's coverage of the COVID-19 and the recovered covid patients are constantly refreshing their image in public level, and it is worth studying how the new media can help the people recovering from the epidemic to return to their normal lives through the influence of the framing effect on the audience.

Current frame studies on COVID-19 crisis news mainly focus on how to construct epidemic itself, or the image of government and healthcare workers, but less on the image of covid patients, who are most directly affected by the epidemic. The media should take on the responsibility and mission of guiding public opinion and building a correct image of recovered covid patients to help them get back to normal life.

The issue of discrimination against recovered covid patients was first brought to the public's attention on 30 May 2022, when blogger "I'm a goblin" posted her experience of losing her job due to her history of covid-19 infection, which went viral with high discussions. Between 30 May and 12 August, the media reported on the current situation of recovered covid patients and relevant government guidelines.

Peng Pai News is a new media platform with original news basing in Shanghai and radiating nationwide. It provides targeted original news coverage on the issue of discrimination against recovered covid patients and continues to publish news related to this issue. Therefore, our study selects 57 reports on recovered covid patients and 150 popular comments on the related Weibo hot topics page as the research object. Based on the framing theory, this paper analyzes the

differences between the news reports and hot comments in order to explore the responsibility and mission of future media reports to help recovered covid patients return to society.

## 2. Literature Review

"The concept of 'framing' was first introduced in 'A Theory of Play and Fantasy'(G. Bateson's, 1955). In the 1980s, framing theory was introduced into the field of journalism and communication studies, giving rise to the academic concepts of "media frame" and "news frame". [1] (CAO Qinyu, 2020)The media frame is the organizational framework for the informational processing of media organizations, and when applied to the study of the process of selecting, processing and constructing news texts and meanings, it is referred to as the news frame. [2] (SHEN Aijun, 2016)

In the process of news dissemination, news frame produces a framing effect on the audience after being filtered through the audience frame, which has an impact on the audience's cognition and attitude. [3] (CHEN Bin, 2014)Based on the content of the current study, it is found that the comparative analysis of frames generally focuses on the comparison of media frames or news frames, and less attention is paid to the similarities and differences between media frame and audience frame. Therefore, this paper selects the entry point of the comparative analysis of media frame and audience frame to further investigate the effect of framing on news coverage of public crisis events.

## 3. Method

The article selects the employment issue of recovered covid patients as a public crisis issue for research, and selects the related news posted by Peng Pai News and comments below covid-related Weibo hot research as news frames and audience frames respectively. Through the comparative analysis of the two frames, the similarities and differences in covid patients image building were identified, and the

influence of the two on the framing effect was further analyzed.

The study uses content analysis selecting 57 reports published on Weibo from 22 May to 12 August by Peng Pai News and the 150 most popular comments under the topic page of Weibo's covid discrimination hot search during the period mentioned above were used as the subjects of this study. They serve as a media frame and an audience frame for the topic of discrimination among the recovered covid patients respectively to investigate the factors influencing the effectiveness of the frames behind the differences.

## 4. Frame Comparative Analysis in Coronavirus Communication

### 4.1. Media Framing: The COVID-19 and the image building of the Recovered Covid Patients

Of the 57 relevant stories selected by Peng Pai News, 41 were related to the COVID-19. According to the research statistics, negative news accounts for about 80%, including domestic infection cases(34%), severe outbreaks abroad (20%), latest research on negative impact of coronavirus (15%), and government epidemic prevention measures (12%). Positive news only made up 20%, which are related to medical

support (10%), epidemic protection (7%) and epidemic relief (2%).

Based on the results, it can be seen that the media frame has a negative bias towards the image building of the COVID-19, reinforcing the severity of the epidemic in the country and the harm it has caused. The image of the epidemic as a threat to people's health and safety and to their normal lives is reinforced.

Of the six articles directly related to the issue of discrimination against covid patients, three were on employment discrimination, two on government policy and one on isolation. Those news as a whole portrayed covid patients and those recovered as vulnerable and in need of government assistance, or even as marginalised people who are not accepted by society. In particular, the article "Fen, who hid in a Hongqiao bathroom, found a job" uses compelling images to create an image of "Fen" as a socially disadvantaged person in need of help.

### 4.2. Audience framing: presentation of attitudes to issues in the comments section

The results of the content analysis of the 150 comments on the selected Weibo pages of the discrimination against recovered covid patients are shown in Table 1:

**Table 1.** The audience attitude towards discrimination of people who recovered from COVID-19

Attitude	Active encouragement	Health concerns	Criticism and questioning	Advocating for equality	Suggestions
Content	Agree with government policy, sympathise with discrimination	worry about health	question policy implementation, questioning the privacy protection	Criticising discrimination	Making reasonable suggestions
Percentage	20%	5%	59%	15%	1%

*Source: questionnaire result*

From 30 May to 12 August, a total of three top trending Weibo hot research related to the topic of discrimination against the recovered covid patients were collected. The 50 most popular comments on each topic page were summarized and analyzed, resulting in Table 1. Table 1 shows that the audience, influenced by their own perceptions and acceptance of the same news frame, showed a variety of attitudes and opinions, including positive encouragement, healthy consideration, criticism and questioning, advocacy and equality, and feedback.

At the same time, the most popular comments with high likes were generally negative and skeptical about the issue of discrimination against recovered covid patients, and distrustful of the government and the epidemic control authorities. This was amplified by user discussions in the comments section, which showed a clear divide between public attitudes and the direction the news wanted to take. And this also shows the uncertainty of public opinion.

### 4.3. Framing effect analysis comparing media frame with audience frame

#### 4.3.1. The framing effect is not only influenced by the media frame under a specific topic

Through content and statistics analysis, it can be seen that in Table 1, nearly 60% of the audience expressed criticism and doubts, including distrust of government policies and doubts

about the loopholes in collection of personal data, which is contrast with the media frame's intention trying to lead the public to positive encouragement by creating an image of the marginalized under the issue of discrimination. However, overall media frame of the coronavirus epidemic reveals that the image building of the recovered covid patients affected by not only the articles directly on covid patients, but also the whole coronavirus epidemic. The negative image of the coronavirus epidemic that media build also contributes to the audience's attitudes and negative feelings towards the issue of recovered covid patients, and the media framing of the whole epidemic also influences the audience frame of discrimination against the people recovering from Covid-19.

The media should consider the multidimensional influences of their media frame when reporting the event, and try to be comprehensive and objective to avoid unnecessary negative impacts on other related subjects.

#### 4.3.2. The picture symbols in the media frame facilitates the influence of the frame effect on the audience

There information on media are massive and even overloaded in current era, so it is essential for the media to consider how to stand out from the mass of information on the media platform and thus successfully capture audience interest. Compared to words, images are naturally more conducive to the dissemination and influence of media frames. An analysis of the audience frame of the article "Fen, who hid

in a bathroom, found a job" mentioned above shows that the public comments on this story were mostly positive and encouraging, as opposed to the negative and questioning audience frame of the overall issue. The use of picture symbols can therefore be seen to help the framing effect.

The media can enhance the impact of the framing effect by choosing compelling images in their news reports, guiding public opinion in the right direction.

#### **4.3.3. Audience framing weakens the framing effect especially in new media environment**

In Weibo, the dominant social media platform, audiences can participate in discussions and even initiate issues, amplifying the dynamism of audience framing. [4] (LI Chang & CHEN Xueqi, 2016) The comments are a measure of users' willingness to participate and interact positively, and the amount of comments shows the popularity of the topic. The content of comments with negative attitudes under the hot topics related to the topic of discrimination are all emotional venting. [5] (YANG Rongjun, 2015) The strong interactivity and short message of Weibo comments make it easier to transmit emotions than fact-based and rational information, and more likely to resonate. Most Chinese citizens are increasingly inclined to choose to vent their emotions through social media for online virtual platform with its advantages of feasibility, risk, realistic cost, and effectiveness. As a social media with instant interaction and a large number of users, people tend to express their personal emotions on it, while officials also disseminate relevant information on this platform, reinforcing the political emotional identification between different groups through the delivery of content, while further strengthening the original perceptions and attitudes of the audience, weakening the influence of the framing effect and strengthening the convergence, negotiation or confrontation between the media frame and the audience frame. [6] (HUANG Wenjing, 2016)

The media should pay more attention to public opinion and make good use of the opportunities provided by new media platforms to interact with audience frame, grasping the dynamics of public opinion to make timely adjustments to news communication strategies.

## **5. Conclusion**

Through a comparative analysis of media frame and audience frame, it can be found that the effect of frames in the new media era is wholeness of being which is influenced by three factors: media frames, audience frames and the new media environment. For the issue of coronavirus discrimination, the media should consider the construction of media frames comprehensively, grasp the characteristics of the new media platform and pay attention to audience frames in order to guide public opinion in the right direction and enhance the acceptance of the covid patients in society.

## **6. Author Contribution**

This paper was jointly completed by Liu Peilun, Shao Zhiping. Everyone has made equal efforts in the research of this topic, and their contribution to the paper is average. It is hereby explained.

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