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The Effect of Media Reports on the spread of COVID-19

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Abstract

The coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, China has sparked a global epidemic, which the World Health Organization declared a public health emergency of international concern on 31st January 2020 (Beijing time). This crisis has attracted intense media attention. Recently, some media outlets inappropriately labeled the coronavirus by race, using such headlines as “Chinese virus pandemonium” and even suggesting “China kids stay home.” The biased and misleading coverage presented via Western media channels has incited anger throughout the Chinese community and has placed undue stress upon Chinese individuals living outside China. This post-published review takes a tourism-focused perspective to examine findings from a quantitative study (Rodriguez-Seijas, Stohl, Hasin, & Eaton, 2015) published in 2015 in JAMA Psychiatry. The current paper highlights the potential impacts of misleading and biased media coverage on Chinese individuals’ mental health. Specifically, this work considers perceived racial discrimination stemming from coronavirus as a public health crisis and the effects of such discrimination on individuals of Chinese heritage. Similarly imperative is pertinent effects on country image and destination image concerning tourism marketing and tourist behavior during times of crisis. By considering racism in the context of the coronavirus outbreak, this paper identifies potential avenues for relevant research in tourism and hospitality.

Key words: Coronavirus, Effects, Epidemic

INTRODUCTION

Corona Virus (COVID-19) can be described as a severe respiratory illness that is caused by a newly discovered virus known as Corona. It was first discovered in December 2019 at Wuhan City, the People’s Republic of China. The disease causes respiratory illness (like the flu) with symptoms such as a cough, fever, and in more severe cases, difficulty in breathing. Since the emergence of COVID-19 we have seen instances of public stigmatization among specific populations, and the rise of harmful stereotypes. Stigmatization could potentially contribute to more severe health problems, ongoing transmission, and difficulties controlling infectious diseases during an epidemic (W.H.O, 2020).

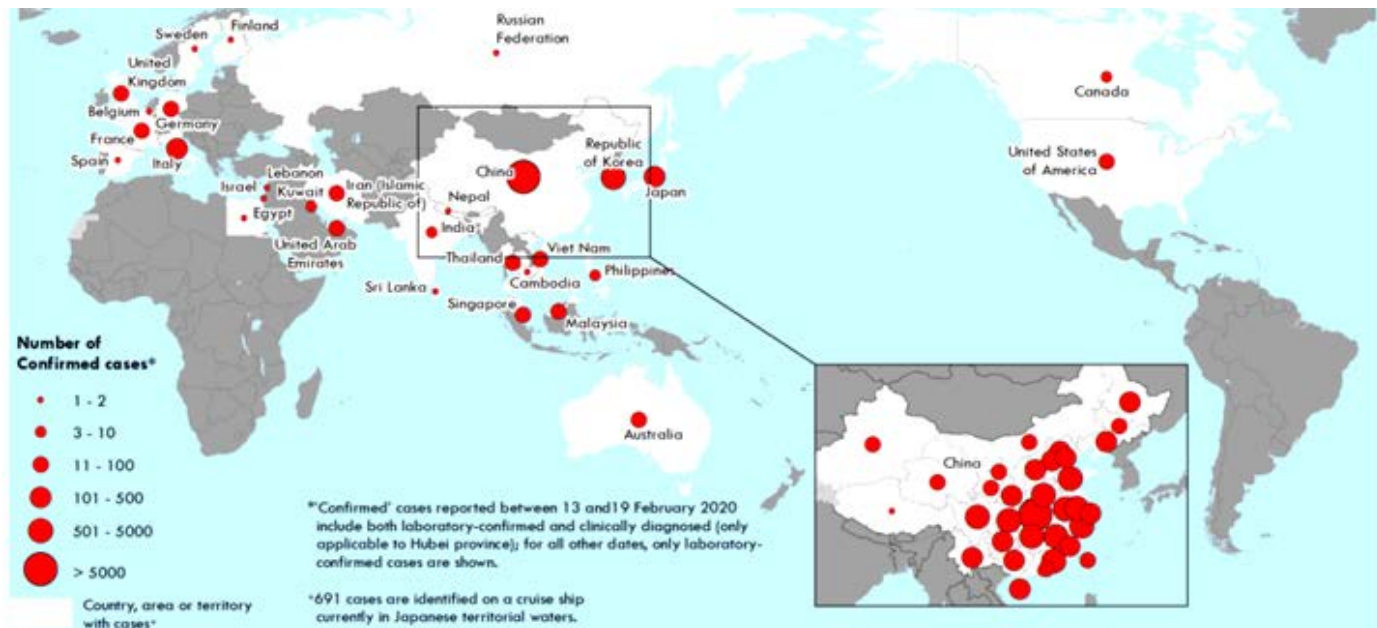


Figure 1.0: Distribution of COVID-19 cases as of February 24, 2020 (Source: W.H.O, 2020)

The virus emanates from the family of coronaviridae which have been found in mice, rats, chickens, turkeys, swine, dogs, cats, rabbits, horses, cattle and humans. Figure 1.0 illustrates the spread of COVID-19 cases as of February 24, 2020.

I. EFFECTS OF THE MEDIA ON COVID-19

The proliferation of networks and social media in the digital era has drastically altered information delivery. Today, media outlets are essential in providing the public with timely news coverage. These channels are expected to report on public crises or disasters professionally and promptly. Social media plays an important role in the public’s perceptions of such events (Schultz, Utz, & Göritz, 2011). A case in point is the 2019 coronavirus (2019-nCoV) outbreak in Wuhan, China (Huang et al, 2020).

The disease has become a global epidemic, claiming 724 lives in China thus far among 34,941 confirmed cases across Japan, Thailand, the U.S., Australia, and France (World Health

Organization, 2020). On 31 January 2020, the World Health Organization declared the new coronavirus strain a public health emergency of international concern, only the sixth of its kind

(ABC News, 2020). On 8 February 2020, the National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China (2020) renamed the new coronavirus "novel coronavirus pneumonia" (NCP).

The NCP outbreak in China has generated global concern, as evidenced by growing media coverage and public interest. Some media channels initially reported NCP as "Chinese virus pandemonium" before China confirmed the condition's official name, inappropriately labeling the disease by race. Even bolder headlines, such as "China kids stay home" and "China is the real sick man of Asia" have misled members of the public and increased racial discrimination against individuals of Chinese descent outside mainland China. The media's perspective on NCP could thus affect the well-being of Chinese individuals.

Rodriguez-Seijas et al. (2015) came to poignant conclusions regarding the association between racial discrimination and mental health among African Americans and Afro Caribbeans. In a similar vein, the media's publication of biased headlines could presumably bring adverse effects to focal communities, namely through inequitable treatment and misperceptions. In the case of NCP, such coverage could affect Chinese people living overseas. Individuals could also develop mental health conditions that may persist in the current social climate. Unfortunately, Rodriguez Seijas et al. (2015) did not consider how media coverage conveying racial discrimination may have affected their nine discrimination scenarios. The broader literature has also largely neglected the media's role in such situations, hence our decision to address the potential impacts of misleading media coverage on perceived racial discrimination. Biased reporting could be associated with unique consequences during times of public crisis.

Virus outbreaks can result in lost lives, negative impacts on businesses, and general stress. China has taken several steps to control the spread of NCP and, by extension, the aforementioned consequences. Relevant actions include the emergency establishment of two quarantine hospitals (Huoshenshan Hospital and Leishenshan Hospital) within 10 days. Other protective measures have been enacted as well: Wuhan Hongshan Sports Centre, Wuhan Living Room, and Wuhan International Convention and Exhibition Centre are functioning as temporary isolation areas, capable of accommodating up to 6,300 patients in total.

Medical workers and soldiers from other provinces are traveling to Wuhan to treat patients. Given that NCP poses a major threat to international public health, all countries must cooperate to combat it (Hui et al., 2020). Media channels should ideally deliver objective reports to increase support and understanding instead of presenting biased information; such coverage may only serve to divide individuals and stoke fear. Misleading media coverage around NCP has led people of Asian heritage, especially Chinese nationals and individuals of Chinese origin, to face

intense discrimination. Tourists and others returning from China are being quarantined and sprayed with antiseptic upon arriving in their destination.

Although this precaution may initially appear logical, such treatment could give rise to prejudice. Even Chinese people who have not traveled to their home country or who reside elsewhere are likely to encounter discrimination in their everyday lives at this time. For example, some schools and colleges are requesting that Chinese students not attend classes. Many Chinese-owned establishments have been plagued by the slow business since the outbreak. Anti-Chinese and anti-Asian xenophobia has also been reported in several countries including the U.S., Canada, the UK, Europe, Malaysia, and Australia. Many Chinese customers have been refused entry into restaurants in Japan, South Korea, and Vietnam; in Indonesia, Chinese hotel guests were asked to leave the country entirely (Amnesty International, 2020). These reactions are blatantly discriminatory and may negatively influence Chinese individuals' well-being (e.g. poor mental health related to social isolation and perceived distrust).

Racial discrimination represents a violation of human rights; all human rights legislation seeks to uphold each person's right to coexist without discrimination, no matter their country of residence. News reports regarding racial discrimination against the Chinese during the NCP outbreak could have far-reaching effects beyond a personal level. For instance, negative news coverage could greatly compromise China's national and destination image. In the tourism literature, the constructs of country image and destination image are commonly applied to understand tourism marketing and tourist behavior.

Mossberg and Kleppe (2005) identified image objects related to country image and destination image as parallel research tracks in tourism. Specifically, concepts related to the country image are organized within a hierarchical framework in which country image encompasses an image pool for product-related image concepts, whereas destination image serves as an umbrella concept for numerous geographical units that constitute a vertical framework. By combining these frameworks, Mosseberg and Kleppe (2005) identified a substantial overlap between country image and destination image concerning referent objects.

Studies have also considered the effects of tourism satisfaction on a country's image, destination image, and travelers' post-visit intentions. Other work has compared the country image and destination image in Turkey (Martinez & Alvarez, 2010). However, no tourism research appears to have explored the associations among perceived racial discrimination, country image, and destination image, particularly in terms of how media coverage can influence daily life.

II. CONCLUSION

In our review, we have drawn from key findings of Rodriguez-Seijas et al (2015) to critically consider China's NCP outbreak. We are particularly interested in how NCP-related discrimination has pervaded Chinese communities, a phenomenon partially attributable to misleading and biased media coverage. Greater awareness of this topic may promote better informed media consumption as well as careful consideration of how news reports may affect involved parties. More interdisciplinary studies are also needed that examine the antecedents and consequences of racial discrimination relative to tourism marketing and tourist behaviour during public health crises and other large-scale events. Several tourism-related research gaps discussed

herein will hopefully encourage researchers to delve more deeply into topics such as the impact of racial discrimination on destination image.

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