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The effects of misleading media reports about COVID-19 on Chinese tourists’ mental health: a perspective article

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**Abstract**

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has been declared a public health emergency of international concern by the World Health Organization. This pandemic has since saturated the headlines of major international media channels that disseminate information to global citizens. However, some media coverage of COVID-19 has negatively influenced Chinese travellers’ mental health due to the outbreak having been labelled “Chinese virus pandemonium.” Key world leaders have also parroted such sensationalism; for example, President Donald Trump called COVID-19 the “Chinese virus”. This discriminatory labelling has resulted in violent attacks on Chinese international travellers and students. This perspective article explores how misleading and discriminatory media reports may affect the mental well-being of ethnically Chinese travellers during the global COVID-19 pandemic.

**Keywords**

COVID-19 outbreak; misleading information; media coverage; mental health; psychological well-being

**Introduction**

The 2019 coronavirus outbreak (COVID-19) in Wuhan, China (Huang et al., 2020) has sparked a global pandemic. To date, more than 132,000 COVID-19 cases have been reported across 123 countries and territories, and roughly 5,000 people have died from the disease; these figures are only expected to rise in the coming days and months (BBC News, 2020; World Health Organization, 2020). On 31 January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a public health emergency of international concern – only the sixth time the organization has identified an emergency of this scale (ABC News, 2020). Just as the Chinese rufous horseshoe bat was responsible for the 2003 SARS outbreak (Shi & Hu, 2008), the suspected source of COVID-19 is a virus found in wild animals (Liu & Saif, 2020; Ying et al., 2020).

The sudden emergence of this disease has sparked many questions, particularly as it spreads rapidly across the world: What are the symptoms? Who is most at risk? How can we best protect ourselves and our loved ones? Health experts and laypeople are seeking answers, and the media is keen to share information to alleviate uncertainty. Yet such eagerness may come at a price, namely to the Chinese who some believe are effectively “to blame” for COVID-19. Following the work of Wen et al. (2020), which highlighted how misleading and biased media coverage of COVID-19 could lead to perceived discrimination against Chinese individuals, the current perspective article seeks to explore how such misleading media reports might influence Chinese tourists’ mental health.
health. These insights are intended to encourage related research efforts to advance knowledge about tourists’ mental health in times of public health crisis.

Misleading and biased media coverage towards Chinese travellers

News coverage plays a central role in daily life, but perhaps no more than during times of crisis; the public depends heavily on the media to remain abreast of current events. The COVID-19 outbreak has elicited growing media attention and public interest around the world. Certain media channels have reported on this catastrophic event using misleading labels such as “Chinese virus pandemonium,” inherently tying COVID-19 to race. Headlines such as “China kids should stay home” only exacerbate the risk of racial discrimination against individuals of Chinese descent (Wen et al., 2020). Such language could easily bring adverse effects to the Chinese community via ostracization; some members of the public may mistakenly believe that the Chinese are to be avoided during (and potentially after) the COVID-19 outbreak (Zhao, 2020). Biased media coverage can also worsen social stigma, which may affect individuals’ mental health in the long term (Goudsmit & Howes, 2017).

Mental health of Chinese travellers

Mental health is a common topic in the psychology and tourism literature. According to World Health Organization (2005), mental health refers to “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community” (p. 2). From a psychological perspective, six elements constitute mental well-being: 1) self-acceptance, 2) purpose in life, 3) autonomy, 4) positive relations with others, 5) environmental mastery, and 6) personal growth (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Although not all of these would necessarily be influenced by COVID-19–related discrimination, being labelled a “dangerous Chinese virus carrier” could certainly compromise Chinese travellers’ mental well-being to an extent. For instance, their ability to establish positive rapport with others will be crippled if they feel unwelcome when visiting a foreign country.

Such race-based tensions have already spurred violent attacks against individuals who simply appear to be Asian or Chinese in countries such as Australia, America, Italy, France, and the UK (Zhao, 2020). Chinese travellers’ opportunities for personal growth may also be hampered in the current social environment, as these tourists may be reluctant to participate in new experiences when others’ attitudes or behaviour seem unpredictable. This perceived lack of freedom can in turn temper one’s autonomy. Collectively, bearing in mind the facets of mental well-being, skewed coverage of COVID-19 provides tourism and psychology researchers chances to explore how media conversations can influence travellers’ mental health – especially for ethnically Chinese visitors travelling overseas in today’s social climate.

Conclusion

Misleading and biased media information about COVID-19 and its Chinese origins could put ethnically Chinese travellers at risk of perceived racial discrimination, social isolation, unequal treatment, and resultant stress or anxiety when overseas. Travellers of Chinese heritage may be personally bothered by misleading media coverage to the point that they experience reduced self-acceptance, lower autonomy, compromised relationships (e.g., with peers of other backgrounds), and other psychological effects (e.g., poor self-esteem, hopelessness, or helplessness), some of which could persist over time.

This timely perspective article highlights the need for accountability in the media: journalists should provide objective, accurate, fair news reports, especially when the world is in the grips of public health crises and other disastrous events. More balanced and responsible coverage could minimize well-being–related consequences among pertinent demographic groups. We urge media
channels to avoid sensationalism and instead prioritize factual information so as not to stigmatize Chinese travellers through the “China virus” label as the world battles COVID-19. Future empirical studies are thus encouraged to investigate how misleading and biased media coverage may affect Chinese travellers’ and others’ mental health in the short and long term. Relevant theoretical models can also be developed to guide in-depth analyses of topics related to psychological well-being.

**Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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