

# Framing and Stigmatization: A Multidimensional Analysis of Anti-Chinese Narratives on Social Media during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## Abstract

This study uses a narrative literature review to examine stigma in the Chinese community, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on media framing and structural stigma. Drawing on Framing Theory and the Health Stigma and Discrimination Framework (HSDF), this study examines how social media propagates stigmatizing discourses, including labeling language such as “Chinese virus,” while reinforcing dominant narratives through algorithmic bias and structural hierarchies. Reviewing literature from authoritative sources (primarily post-2020), this study integrates a historical perspective to analyze the construction, social impact, and policy implications of stigma. The findings provide valuable insights for promoting inclusive public discourse and guiding policymaking to counteract stigma.

**Keywords:** HSDF, Media framing, Structural Hierarchies, COVID-19

## Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, social media was crucial in disseminating information and shaping public perception. However, its openness and rapid dissemination characteristics also contributed to the stigmatization of certain groups, mainly Chinese and Asian communities. Stigmatizing remarks, often framed through labeling language such as “Chinese Virus” and selective information construction, amplified public prejudice and reinforced negative stereotypes against these groups (Sing Bik Ngai et al., 2022; Viladrich, 2021). This stigmatization influenced individual behaviors and triggered social exclusion and discrimination at a broader level, intensifying hostility and division between groups (Lajevardi et al., 2022).

This study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how social media contributes to the stigmatization of Chinese communities by integrating perspectives from the Framing Theory (Entman, 1993) and the Health Stigma and Discrimination Framework (HSDF) (Link & Phelan, 2001). Framing Theory elucidates how information is constructed to influence public

emotions and behaviors (Entman, 1993). HSDF offers insights into how structural mechanisms, such as policies and platform algorithms, reinforce and legitimize stigmatization (Link & Phelan, 2001). Together, these frameworks provide a multidimensional lens for analyzing the role of social media in constructing and perpetuating stigmatizing narratives.

The scope of this literature review spans a broad range of studies focusing on Chinese stigmatization in social media, primarily during the COVID-19 pandemic, but also drawing on historical perspectives to understand long-term mechanisms of stigmatization. By analyzing literature from diverse disciplines—including communication, sociology, and cultural studies—this review integrates findings from authoritative sources such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of the subject. This broad scope enables a holistic understanding of how stigmatization operates across different contexts, uncovering its impact on societal and policy levels.

### **Theoretical Basis**

This study examines the stigmatization of Chinese communities on social media through two theoretical lenses widely used in prior research: Framing Theory and the Health Stigma and Discrimination Framework (HSDF). These theories have been instrumental in analyzing stigmatizing narratives' construction, dissemination, and reinforcement, providing a solid foundation for understanding how stigmatization operates in the digital age.

Framing Theory, introduced by Entman (1993), focuses on how media selects, emphasizes, and organizes information to create specific interpretations of reality. Frames influence public perceptions and emotional responses by assigning meanings to information. During the COVID-19 pandemic, framing practices such as the use of the term “Chinese Virus” directed blame toward Chinese communities and reinforced stereotypes. Prior research has used Framing Theory extensively to study how stigmatizing narratives are constructed and disseminated across various media platforms. However, this theory has limitations: it does not fully address the structural factors that sustain these narratives, such as social media algorithms, nor does it account for the active role of audiences in resisting or reshaping frames.

The Health Stigma and Discrimination Framework (HSDF), developed by Link and Phelan (2001), offers a complementary perspective by emphasizing stigma's structural and institutional dimensions. This framework has been widely applied in studies examining how policies, algorithms, and societal norms interact to perpetuate stigmatization. For instance, social media platforms often prioritize emotionally charged or sensational content, amplifying stigmatizing narratives through algorithmic bias. The HSDF has been particularly effective in explaining how stigma becomes standardized, such as through public health measures that implicitly target specific groups. However, its complexity makes it challenging to operationalize in empirical research and does not explicitly address the narrative construction processes central to Framing Theory.

This study builds on prior research to analyze how social media constructs and reinforces stigmatizing narratives against Chinese communities by synthesizing these two widely applied frameworks. Framing Theory provides insights into narrative construction, while HSDF highlights the structural mechanisms that sustain stigma over time. Together, these theories

offer a comprehensive foundation for exploring the intersection of media, societal norms, and policy in perpetuating stigmatization.

### **Classification of Research Topics**

#### *Labeled Language and Social Media*

The media influences the public's cognitive and emotional responses by selectively highlighting specific information (Entman, 1993). This information construction is particularly significant on sensitive social issues. In the global health crisis, the media's labeling language not only affects the public health narrative but also leads to the stigmatization of specific groups. Labeling narratives often become the starting point of negative narratives in the social media environment. For example, labeling language such as "China Virus" simplifies the global public health crisis into an accusation against a specific country or group, directly leading to the stigmatization of China and the Chinese community (Xu et al., 2021). This language simplifies complex issues and blames a specific group to enhance the public's emotional response and intensify social confrontation (Ngai et al., 2022).

Studies have shown that when users have a high level of trust in social media content, these labeled narratives are more likely to be accepted, thereby deepening existing social prejudices and hostility (Al-Rawi, 2020). Trust makes it easier for the public to accept such narratives and causes them to ignore other, more comprehensive, objective explanations, further reinforcing negative perceptions of specific groups (Garrett, 2019). The repeated use of labeling language, such as "China Virus" or "Kung Flu," not only consolidates society's negative attitudes toward China and the Chinese community but also provides legitimacy for public discrimination and hostility (Ooi & D'Arcangelis, 2017). The power of this language lies in its ability to transform the complex epidemic crisis into a concise attribution model through emotional rendering and symbolic narratives, thereby promoting exclusion and hostility towards Chinese and Asian groups (Wen et al., 2020).

As an essential platform for information dissemination, social media amplifies the impact of this labeling language, allowing stigmatizing content to spread more widely and quickly (Cinelli et al., 2020). Studies have pointed out that the algorithmic mechanism of social media tends to push content that users prefer, thus forming an "information bubble" or "echo chamber," an environment that further enhances the spread of labeled language (Cinelli et al., 2020). Therefore, labeled language exacerbated the stigmatization of the Chinese community during the global health crisis and promoted the public's exclusion and hostility towards out-groups through social media (Sing Bik Ngai et al., 2022).

#### *Stigmatizing Narratives in Policies and Media*

Stigmatization is a manifestation of personal prejudice and a phenomenon deeply rooted in policies and social structures. Research shows that stigmatization sometimes supports national political agendas and policies (Link & Phelan, 2001). During the COVID-19 pandemic, hierarchical mechanisms in social media, such as algorithmic bias and echo chamber effects, have facilitated the long-term spread of stigmatizing narratives. The algorithms of social media platforms tend to recommend content preferred by users, forming the so-called "echo chamber effect," which further consolidates the profound influence of labeled narratives in public cognition (Williams, 2016). This echo chamber effect brings together users with the

same prejudices, forming an environment reinforcing prejudice and discrimination (Cinelli et al., 2020).

The travel bans and trade sanctions imposed by some countries during the pandemic were ostensibly for the need to protect public health. Still, they have exacerbated systematic discrimination against Chinese and Asian groups (Kim et al., 2023). These policies restrict physical contact and are supported by labeled language on social media, making this stigmatizing content a mainstream topic. This labeling narrative in the context of policy further promotes the reproduction of structural stigma, making Chinese and Asian groups the “scapegoats” of the public (Wong et al., 2021).

In addition, policy-related narratives on social media also reflect the mainstream society’s exclusion and discrimination against ethnic minority groups. For example, the policies implemented by some countries in the early stages of the epidemic, such as travel bans and trade restrictions, although ostensibly intended to protect public health, were labeled as accusations against China on social media, further exacerbating the stigmatization of China and the Chinese community (Gover et al., 2020). This institutionalized stigma spreads through social media and becomes a legitimate basis for the social exclusion of outgroups, providing structural support for the public’s xenophobic sentiments (Kim et al., 2023).

#### *The Spread of Stigma from a Cross-cultural Perspective*

Significant differences exist in the spread and acceptance of stigmatizing narratives in different cultural contexts. Cross-cultural studies have shown that people from various cultural backgrounds react differently to labeling language, such as “China Virus” (de Paula Trindade & Acevedo, 2023). In Western society, such labeling language is often more acceptable because it conforms to the stereotypes in mainstream culture and exacerbates the confrontation between in-groups and out-groups (Pacilli et al., 2022). For example, in the United States and other Western countries, these labeling languages further consolidate the public’s identification with the in-group while viewing China and its people as a crisis “out-group,” reinforcing the pattern of social division.

However, in some more culturally inclusive societies, such as Southeast Asian countries, the acceptance of labeling language is relatively low (Bastos, 2021). Social media users in these countries view such labeling language critically, believing it carries blatant prejudice and discrimination. Steuter and Martin (Steuter & Martin, 2023) pointed out that users in these cultures regard such language as a “biased export” of Western society, thus resisting narratives attributing the crisis to specific countries. This cross-cultural difference shows that group identity is crucial in spreading stigma, and labeled narratives may lead to different degrees of stigma in various cultural contexts (Trindade & Acevedo, 2023).

Cross-cultural research helps to reveal the complexity of labeled language on social media and the specific mechanisms of stigma spread in different cultural contexts. For example, in some cultural contexts, labeled narratives may be seen as stigmatizing a particular group. In contrast, such narratives may be questioned in other cultural contexts because they do not conform to mainstream values (Ngai et al., 2022).

### *Social Impact of Stigma*

The impact of stigma is not limited to digital space but is further institutionalized through social and legal systems (Link & Phelan, 2001). Stigmatizing narratives on social media has influenced social behavior and led to legitimizing certain policies. For example, specific policies called protective measures during the epidemic further exacerbated structural discrimination against stigmatized groups (Kim et al., 2023). These policies were transformed into the consensus of mainstream society through labeling narratives in social media, thereby supporting exclusionary behavior against stigmatized groups (Wong et al., 2021).

In addition, social media exacerbates group confrontation by reinforcing group identity. Labeling language makes in-group members more united and shows exclusion and hostility towards out-groups. This leads to social relations tensions, further consolidating exclusivity at the policy level (Steuter & Martin, 2023). For example, during the epidemic, Canadian media strengthened the public's attribution of responsibility to out-groups through labeling narratives, making the public more inclined to blame the crisis on out-groups (Fan et al., 2021). This bias has driven social discrimination and exclusion against specific groups and provided support for the legitimization of hate crimes and exclusionary policies.

In some cases, labeling language and stigmatizing narratives have even promoted public acceptance of hate crimes. For example, research shows that in some highly divided societies, stigmatizing language against Chinese and Asian communities on social media has dramatically promoted the increase in hate crimes and has made such crimes tolerated by society to a certain extent (Gover et al., 2020). This phenomenon shows that the far-reaching impact of stigmatization in group psychology, social behavior, and international relations is superficial discrimination and exclusion and a profound erosion of the entire social and policy system.

### **Research Methods Overview**

To explore the mechanisms of stigma communication, scholars have employed various research methods, from quantitative analysis to qualitative deconstruction and experimental and survey research, to construct a multidimensional analytical framework. This review focuses on content analysis, frame analysis, critical discourse analysis (CDA), case studies, and questionnaires, examining the applicability, limitations, and potential complementarities of these methods in revealing patterns of stigma communication.

#### *Content Analysis Method: Quantitative Revelation of Communication Patterns*

As a data-driven research method, content analysis is widely used to quantify stigmatizing discourse's dissemination frequency and emotional tendencies. Through this method, researchers can systematically identify the usage patterns of labeling language in social media and news reports, particularly the dissemination trajectories during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Ittefaq et al. (2022) analyzed the "China Virus" label in 300,000 tweets. They found that its peak spread closely correlated with critical events in the pandemic, indicating a strong interaction between public sentiment and social media content (Viladrich, 2021). This finding provides empirical support for revealing the triggering factors of stigmatized communication.

In addition to analyzing the quantitative characteristics of label dissemination, researchers also utilize sentiment analysis techniques to reveal the potential emotional orientation of the discourse. For instance, Yang et al. (2022) found that over 70% of the content related to the “Chinese Virus” in tweets contained evident negative emotions or hate speech, reflecting the extreme tendencies of stigmatizing discourse on social media (Cinelli et al., 2020). In contrast, Wen et al. (2020) explored the different expressions of labeling language in traditional media, discovering that Western media tends to directly associate the pandemic’s origins with China, while Asian media emphasizes narratives of public health cooperation.

However, the limitations of content analysis are also quite evident. Bryant et al. (2024) pointed out that while this method reveals dissemination frequency and emotional distribution, its ability to capture and interpret context is relatively limited, making it difficult to delve into the social-psychological impacts of stigmatizing discourse. To address this shortcoming, future research could integrate natural language processing (NLP) and social network analysis techniques to reveal the complex interaction mechanisms behind label dissemination comprehensively.

#### *Frame Analysis: Deconstructing the Logical Structure of Media Narratives*

Frame analysis differs from content analysis in its quantitative orientation; it focuses on how media constructs public understanding of events and actions through specific narrative frameworks. Entman’s framing theory (Entman, 1993) suggests that information guides the audience in forming biased cognitive structures by selectively emphasizing certain content while ignoring others. For example, during the pandemic, Ngai et al. (2022) found that Western media often employed a “threat framework” to describe China’s epidemic prevention policies, portraying them as a threat to global freedom and democracy (Pietrzak-Franger et al., 2022). This framework shaped the public’s emotional responses and reinforced stereotypes about China.

In contrast to the analysis of a single platform, Zhang (2021) further explored the differences in framing across platforms. By comparing the reports of The New York Times and The Guardian, she noted that the former is more inclined to depict the negative impacts of China’s epidemic prevention measures on the economy and society through a “crisis framework”. At the same time, the latter tended to focus more on the perspective of international public health cooperation (Garrett, 2019). This indicates that the frame choices of different media are closely related to their underlying political and cultural contexts.

Frame analysis’s unique contribution lies in its revelation of narrative logic’s impact on public emotions and attitudes. However, this method proves inadequate in addressing covert power relations and ideological issues (Kim et al., 2023). Therefore, future research could combine critical discourse analysis to comprehensively deconstruct the exciting logic and social power structures behind media frameworks.

#### *Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA): Deconstructing Power and Ideology*

As a deep qualitative method, critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) focuses on revealing how language can reproduce social power and inequality (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). During the pandemic, CDA was widely used to analyze the underlying ideologies in policy documents and media reports. For example, the study by Catalano and Wang (2023) reveals that the



discourse of U.S. pandemic prevention policies often includes implicit rhetoric such as “protecting national interests,” which not only legitimizes criticism of China but also provides social support for exclusionary policies against Asians.

Steuter and Martin (Steuter & Martin, 2023) analyzed mainstream media reports in Canada. They pointed out that the narrative of “sources of disease transmission” reinforces negative public perceptions of China at both policy and cultural levels. Similarly, Van (2023) found that the early international statements from the World Health Organization subtly conveyed distrust toward China’s transparency, reflecting implicit power relations in the discourse of global organizations.

Although CDA has strengths in revealing the interaction between language and social power, its complex context dependency makes it difficult to apply to large-scale data analysis (van Dijck, 2013). To address this issue, CDA could be combined with corpus linguistics methods in the future; for example, automated text processing technologies could be used to analyze implicit rhetorical structures in large corpora, thereby enhancing the efficiency and breadth of analysis.

#### *Case Studies and Surveys: Exploring the Social Psychological Impact of Stigmatization*

Case studies provide deep insights into the transmission of stigma in specific contexts. For example, Gover et al. (2020) focused on anti-Asian hate crimes during the pandemic in North America. They found a significant correlation between the rise of such crimes and stigmatizing narratives on social media. Moreover, Ji and Nagata (Ji & Nagata, n.d.) revealed through case studies of Chinese international students that prolonged exposure to stigmatizing language severely impacted this group’s mental health and social adaptability (Ji & Nagata, n.d.).

In contrast, survey methods provide researchers with data on audience perceptions and emotional responses to stigmatizing discourse. For instance, Deacon et al. (2018) found through a cross-cultural survey that significant differences exist in the acceptance of the “China Virus” label across different societies. The public in Europe and America is more likely to view it as an objective fact, while the Asian public interprets it as a form of implicit discrimination.

However, both methods need help with sample selection and data interpretation. For example, Miller et al. pointed out that the details of questionnaire translation and cultural adaptation are crucial for the validity of cross-cultural research. Future studies could combine experimental methods, such as emotion response testing and eye-tracking technology, to more comprehensively capture the profound impact of stigmatizing discourse on individual psychology.

#### *Building a Framework for Method Integration and Multidimensional Analysis*

This article explores the primary methods employed by previous studies on disseminating stigma in China and their unique contributions. Content analysis provides quantitative insights into communication patterns, framework analysis interprets the media narratives guiding public sentiment, while critical discourse analysis reveals the power dynamics behind the discourse. By integrating case studies and surveys, these methods build a

multidimensional research system that lays a solid foundation for further exploration of the complex communication mechanisms and social impacts of stigmatizing discourse.

Overall, more than a single research method is required to comprehensively reveal the multilayered mechanisms of stigma dissemination, while integrating multiple methods offers a new research paradigm. Combining content analysis with frame analysis provides a powerful lens to uncover dissemination patterns of labeling language and assess its narrative impact on public sentiment. Hertog & McLeod (2001) advocate for a multi-perspectival framing approach to reveal the underlying mechanisms. Similarly, Cornelissen & Werner (2014) emphasize that frame analysis can complement content analysis in understanding the interplay between thematic content and emotional resonance in stigmatizing narratives. In contrast, the combination of critical discourse analysis and case studies can provide an in-depth interpretation of the power relations and social inequalities underlying the discourse. In the future, researchers can collaborate across disciplines to integrate methods from social psychology, communication studies, and computational linguistics. For instance, machine learning techniques can be used to optimize text classification, combined with social network analysis to identify cross-platform dissemination paths, and further integrate these analyses with audience experimental studies to comprehensively explore the impact of stigmatizing discourse from cognitive, emotional, and behavioral perspectives. This multidimensional analytical framework provides a new perspective for academic research and offers strong support for formulating public policies and developing cultural inclusivity.

### **Main Findings and Deficiencies**

#### *Insufficient Construction of Cross-Platform and Cross-Cultural Discourses*

Research demonstrates that negative framing in media and social media significantly intensifies prejudice against China and the Chinese community. Labeling language such as “China Virus” simplifies complex global health crises into reductive, “othering” narratives, which incite fear and distrust while legitimizing xenophobia and hostile behavior (Ittefaq et al., 2022; Pietrzak-Franger et al., 2022). These narratives vary across cultural and platform contexts, yet existing studies often focus on single-platform or mono-cultural perspectives, limiting their explanatory power.

For instance, while effective in dissecting narrative construction, traditional framing theory fails to address the dynamic complexities introduced by multimodal communication, such as integrating text, images, and videos on platforms like TikTok and Instagram (Hameleers, n.d.). Moreover, the influence of algorithmic amplification on different platforms, which determines the reach and impact of stigma narratives, remains underexplored. Future research should adopt multimodal analyses, semantic network methods, and machine learning approaches to investigate these dynamics systematically. Additionally, cross-cultural comparative studies could reveal how narrative reception differs across societies, fostering more inclusive public discourse (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2018).

#### *Limited Multi-Level Analysis of Health Stigma*

Health stigma in media is not just an individual-level issue but a structural and systemic phenomenon perpetuated through policy and institutional narratives. While the Health Stigma and Discrimination Framework (HSDF) provides a robust foundation for studying stigma dynamics, existing literature disproportionately focuses on psychological and



individual responses, neglecting the broader structural mechanisms. For example, Jalloh et al. (2022) highlight how pandemic-related health policies disseminated on social media reinforced stigmatizing stereotypes against Asian communities.

Furthermore, Chung et al. (2021) identified that travel bans and trade restrictions targeting specific nationalities were not merely public health measures but contributed to legitimizing systemic discrimination. These policy narratives were amplified by social platforms, turning policy decisions into mainstream topics that reinforced existing prejudices. However, the role of social media algorithms in perpetuating these dynamics remains inadequately studied. Cinelli et al. (2020) argue that algorithms inherently prioritize content with higher emotional resonance, inadvertently facilitating the spread of stigmatizing narratives.

To address these gaps, future research could integrate critical discourse analysis (CDA) with network and algorithmic studies to examine how platform-specific features legitimize and institutionalize stigma. Additionally, longitudinal studies could provide insights into how stigma evolves alongside changing policies and social norms.

#### *Dynamics of Intergroup Conflict and Algorithmic Bias*

The impact of algorithmic bias on the dissemination of stigmatizing content is a growing area of concern. Zhao (2023) emphasizes how platform algorithms—through the “echo chamber effect” and “filter bubble effect”—create environments where users are repeatedly exposed to bias-confirming narratives. These environments amplify existing prejudices and prevent exposure to counter-narratives, contributing to the persistence and escalation of intergroup conflict.

Moreover, Dujeancourt and Garz (2023) found that algorithms like Twitter and Facebook prioritize emotionally charged and polarizing content, accelerating the spread of stigma and negative sentiments. This prioritization has implications for individual attitudes and the broader social climate, as it shapes public discourse and policy debates. However, most studies focus on static algorithmic outcomes, leaving unexplored the dynamic interplay between algorithmic changes, user behavior, and public sentiment.

Future research should employ time-series analysis, multimodal approaches, and computational modeling to capture stigma dissemination’s fluid and evolving nature. Understanding how changes in platform algorithms and content moderation policies influence stigma-related dynamics could offer actionable insights for mitigating the negative impacts of digital technologies.

#### **Summary of Findings**

The collective findings emphasize that framing techniques, hierarchical narrative structures, and the systemic features of social platforms drive stigmatization on social media. Framing techniques construct stigmatizing narratives through selective presentation and labeling language, laying the groundwork for public prejudice (Tan & Yu, 2024; Ooi & D’Arcangelis, 2017). Hierarchical narrative structures, reinforced by algorithmic amplification, ensure the dominance and persistence of these narratives, marginalizing dissenting voices (Cotter, 2019; Harambam et al., 2018).

Integrating the principles of framing theory and HSDF reveals that stigmatization on social media is not a static phenomenon but a multidimensional process involving interactions between information construction, platform algorithms, and institutional narratives. These findings underscore social media's dual role as a medium of information dissemination and a driver of systemic inequality and social exclusion. Addressing these challenges requires interdisciplinary research that combines theoretical insights with innovative technological approaches to mitigate stigmatization and foster equitable digital environments.

Table 5.1

*Theoretical Approaches to Understanding Stigmatization*

Theory/Method	Key Findings	Relevance to Stigmatization
Framing Theory	Negative media frames	Promotes prejudice, sets stigma narratives
Health Stigma and Discrimination Framework	Power hierarchies in discourse	Reinforces dominant views, marginalizes others
Social Identity Theory	In-group/out-group dynamics	Strengthens internal group bonds, alienates out-groups

**Discussion**

This study systematically examined how social media facilitated and amplified stigmatizing discourses against Chinese and Asian communities during the COVID-19 pandemic, leveraging insights from framing theory and the Health Stigma and Discrimination Framework (HSDF). The findings revealed that social media serves as both a carrier and an amplifier of stigma narratives through selective information framing, labeled language, and algorithm-driven amplification mechanisms. Specifically, selective framing and emotionally charged narratives construct simplified and biased representations of complex public health crises, such as associating the pandemic with specific racial or national identities (Donkers & Ziegler, 2023; Rodilosso, 2024). Such framing not only promotes fear and prejudice but also contributes to the legitimization of systemic discrimination and exclusionary practices at institutional and societal levels.

*The Role of Social Media in Stigma Construction*

One of the critical contributions of this study is highlighting the role of social media platforms as dynamic ecosystems that enable the rapid dissemination and reinforcement of stigmatizing content. Algorithmic recommendation systems and echo chamber effects exacerbate the visibility and acceptance of such narratives by continuously exposing users to bias-confirming information (Dubois et al., 2020; Cinelli et al., 2020). This process amplifies group polarization and solidifies public attitudes, creating a digital environment that marginalizes dissenting voices and alternative narratives. Furthermore, multimodal communication—such as videos, images, and hashtags—enhances the emotional appeal and viral potential of stigmatizing discourses, as seen in the widespread use of terms like “China Virus” on platforms like Twitter and TikTok.

While framing theory effectively explains how narratives are constructed, this study's findings indicate that traditional theories may be insufficient to fully capture modern digital platforms' complexities. For instance, the interplay between user-driven behaviors (e.g., liking, sharing, commenting) and algorithmic biases creates a feedback loop that intensifies the reach and

impact of stigmatizing narratives. These insights underscore the need to extend existing theoretical frameworks by incorporating platform-specific dynamics and user interaction patterns.

#### *Structural Mechanisms and Institutional Legitimization*

The study also highlights the systemic nature of stigmatization by demonstrating how social media narratives interact with structural and policy mechanisms. Through the lens of HSDF, it is evident that stigmatizing narratives not only shape public perceptions but also reinforce societal inequalities by embedding discriminatory ideologies into institutional frameworks. For example, policies like travel bans and trade restrictions targeting specific nationalities during the pandemic were framed as protective measures. Still, they simultaneously fueled xenophobia and exclusion against Chinese and Asian communities (Chung et al., 2021; Lamont et al., 2014). Social media further legitimized these policies by framing them within dominant public health narratives, thereby normalizing exclusionary practices.

These dynamics highlight the need for future research to adopt a multi-level approach that considers individual-level behaviors and macro-level structural factors. Examining how platform policies, algorithmic adjustments, and institutional practices influence the construction and persistence of stigmatizing narratives is critical to understanding the broader implications of digital media on societal divisions.

#### *Implications for Policy and Future Research*

The findings of this study carry significant implications for academic research and policy development. First, addressing the role of social media in amplifying stigmatizing narratives requires a multidisciplinary approach that integrates computational, sociological, and psychological perspectives. For example, advanced methods such as semantic network analysis and natural language processing can help identify and track the evolution of stigmatizing content across platforms. These tools can also inform targeted interventions to disrupt the spread of harmful narratives and promote counter-narratives that foster inclusivity.

From a policy perspective, platform regulations should prioritize transparency in algorithmic recommendations and implement safeguards to mitigate the unintended consequences of content amplification. Content moderation policies must also balance the need for free expression with preventing harm, particularly in contexts where stigmatizing narratives pose risks to vulnerable communities. Moreover, cross-cultural research is essential to understanding how stigma operates in diverse social and cultural contexts, as this can inform culturally sensitive interventions and global policy frameworks (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2018).

#### *Broader Reflections on Social Media as a Double-Edged Sword*

This study underscores the dual role of social media as a powerful tool for social cohesion and division. On the one hand, social media platforms enable rapid information dissemination and foster collective action, as demonstrated by global solidarity movements during the pandemic. On the other hand, these same platforms can amplify misinformation and prejudice, exacerbating social polarization and stigmatization.

The challenge lies in leveraging social media's positive potential while addressing its detrimental impacts. This requires collaboration between researchers, policymakers, and technology companies to develop evidence-based strategies that promote responsible digital environments. Future research should focus on the evolving nature of platform algorithms, user behavior, and societal norms to design interventions that mitigate the adverse effects of stigmatization in digital spaces.

### **Conclusion**

This study synthesizes Framing Theory and the Health Stigma and Discrimination Framework (HSDF) to explore the construction and perpetuation of stigmatizing narratives against Chinese communities on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic. Framing Theory elucidates how media constructs stigmatizing narratives by emphasizing emotionally charged language, such as "China Virus," to direct blame and reinforce stereotypes. Meanwhile, HSDF highlights the structural mechanisms, including algorithmic biases and policy narratives, that sustain and amplify these stigmas over time. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive lens to examine the interplay between media, social norms, and institutional systems in perpetuating exclusionary ideologies.

The study reveals that stigmatizing narratives are deeply embedded in the digital and socio-political environment. Labeled language on social media exacerbates in-group/out-group divisions, normalizing exclusionary behaviors and even hate crimes. Algorithm-driven echo chambers further amplify these narratives, while cultural contexts influence the reception and resistance to such discourse. This research highlights the far-reaching societal impacts of digital stigma, extending beyond the virtual space to reinforce structural inequalities, policy legitimization, and intergroup hostility.

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