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HIV stigmatization in Chinese media discourse and responses from people living with HIV in China

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Mass media plays a crucial role in influencing people's perceptions of certain illnesses and diseases, including HIV/AIDS. Despite the positive role media play in reduce stigma, literature also documented that media could reinforce HIV stigma in media discourse. In China, serious HIV stigmatization has been identified in newspaper coverage of HIV/AIDS. We conducted two quantitative content analysis studies to examine Chinese newspaper articles about HIV/AIDS published in each of the eight Chinese news outlets one week before and one week after World AIDS Day every other year from 2000 to 2010. After the two studies, we conducted study three to explore how people living with HIV (PLHIV) in China responded to HIV stigmatization in media discourse.

Study one showed that Chinese media play two distinct roles in HIV/AIDS reporting. On one hand, Chinese media played an advocacy role by promoting anti-stigma efforts. Nearly one out of every five of these news stories addressed HIV/AIDS stigma by reporting stigma stories experienced by PLWHA or by promoting anti-stigma efforts. On the other hand, study one showed that nearly one out of every three HIV/AIDS news stories contained either overtly or covertly stigmatizing language. The content of these articles indicate that the Chinese media frame HIV/AIDS in stigmatizing terms, even when they discuss anti-stigma efforts. The journalists' selection of metaphors, photos, and terminology serves to further demonize the disease rather than disseminating current medical knowledge about the transmission and treatment of the disease. In addition to overtly stigmatizing language, covertly stigmatizing content was present in more than 10% of all articles included in the study.

Study two extends previous research by exploring how HIV transmission was portrayed in Chinese media discourse, particularly how the media framed HIV transmission for people living with HIV (PLHIV) and affected groups. The results suggest that Chinese newspaper articles label PLHIV and stereotype certain social groups to reinforce an "us versus them" dichotomy. Chinese media promote two different views of PLHIV that are dependent on the manner in

which people contracted HIV. Individuals who contracted HIV through socially acceptable means (e.g., blood transfusion) were worthy of being featured. In contrast, individuals who contracted HIV through socially unacceptable means (e.g., intravenous drug use) were less likely to be identified as individuals and were instead devalued as nondescript members of a deviant and dangerous group. This dichotomy reinforces HIV stigmatization and will mitigate China's anti-stigma efforts.

Study three is a continuation of the first two content analysis studies. Given that it is unknown how PLHIV in China responded to the media's stigmatizing practice, our study three, using a rare opportunity for access, interviewed individuals living with HIV in China, and explored their perspectives on HIV stigmatization in media. Perspectives from PLHIV confirmed the notion that Chinese media tend to reinforce the dichotomous relationship of *health moral us and diseased immoral them*. Specifically, this study found that PLHIV reported that media stories about HIV/AIDS tended to stereotype and overstate threats to the non-affected population, caused PLHIV to curtail their own media consumption, and acted as barriers to seeking adequate healthcare. Stigmatizing news stories may interfere with anti-stigma efforts and creating barriers to better health policies in China. Overall, the findings provide health communication experts and anti-stigma advocates new evidence of HIV stigmatization in the media context.

Speaker Biography

Ren teaches skills and lecture courses in public relations, including PR principles and practices, PR research methods, PR writing, PR case studies and PR campaigns. He has worked for 10 years in the PR industry, including five years at Weber Shandwick Beijing serving as a senior consultant and later account supervisor for clients with a global presence. His major clients included Pfizer, Bayer Healthcare, Merck, P&G, Novartis, Nestle, BMS, L'Oreal, IKEA, Electrolux, Intel, Ericsson, Juniper Networks and NVIDIA. His research concentration is health communication and mass media processes and effects. His research has consistently focused on strategic health communication approaches to prevent disease and reduce disease-related stigma, particularly HIV/AIDS stigma.

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