Social Representations and Symbolic Coping: A Cross-Cultural Discourse Analysis of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Newspapers

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Social Representations and Symbolic Coping: A Cross-Cultural Discourse Analysis of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Newspapers

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ABSTRACT

This study used a framework grounded in social representations theory to investigate cross-cultural variation and consistency in the discursive construction of the COVID-19 pandemic by the mass media, in the week following WHO's declaration of a global pandemic in March 2020. News reports from media outlets in the United Kingdom and China were sourced, with articles from the most popular media sources selected for analysis. Four discourses were identified to be the most prominent representations present throughout these accounts: war; other illnesses; a general emergency; an unknown situation. The findings demonstrated consistency with past research, highlighting how the sociogenesis of social representations in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic followed a similar pattern to other novel infectious disease outbreaks. Consistency between UK and Chinese media accounts was identifiable throughout the construction of these discourses; however, variation was detectable regarding use of culturally relevant anchors for existing illness representations, along with Chinese media accounts constructing images of a comparatively optimistic local situation, whilst depicting the rest of the world as in the midst of a global emergency. Future research has the potential to build on these findings by going beyond media representations to explore actual lay population beliefs, attitudes, and opinions, considering how they compare to the representations portrayed in mass-mediated news reports.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic, declared on March 11th (World Health Organization, 2020a) has had a profound and seismic impact across the world, affecting almost every individual on the planet, with the virus spreading to over 190 countries (BBC, 2021), infecting over 170 million people, and directly responsible for 3.5 million deaths worldwide, as of 6th June 2021 (World Health Organization, 2021). As well as an extreme level of human loss, responses to combat the spread of COVID-19 has led to worldwide social restrictions, including the introduction of national lockdowns; "stay-at-home" guidance and enforcement; physical distancing requirements; and mandatory mask-wearing (International Monetary Fund, 2021). Continued global press coverage is a feature of contemporary society, with news reports surrounding the risks of infectious diseases historically considered sensationalist, exemplified by terms such as "Fearbola" (Blakey et al., 2015; Eckert et al., 2018) circulating throughout contemporary discourse. Past research demonstrates how media discourse surrounding illness and disease can create panic and concern within the general population, despite the risks and threat of a global pandemic as low in these historically reported cases (Brannstrom & Lindblad, 1994; Butler, 2014; Skinner et al., 2022). In contrast, the COVID-19 pandemic is unique in modern history regarding its disruptive impact on the day-to-day lives of individuals across the globe (Hornik et al., 2021). The focus of the present study is on how this real threat was represented by the media in the early stages of the pandemic, specifically in the days immediately following the WHO declaring a global pandemic. Traditional media sources from different two cultural contexts, the UK and China, offer a window into how the mass media represented the unfolding pandemic to these populations, providing the chance to observe the variation and consistency between these contexts, with the present study using a framework informed by literature on social representations theory to offer insight into how lay opinions, knowledge, and understandings of COVID-19 have been developed.

Social representations

Social representations are defined as *"systems of values, ideas and practices with a twofold function: first to establish an order which will enable individuals to orientate themselves in their material and social world and to master it; and secondly to enable communication to take place among the members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual and group history"* (Moscovici, 1973, p. xiii). In short, social representation is about how communities and groups make sense of their social world by constructing meaning from the communications available to them. The world of the individual is only meaningful to the extent that social representations give it meaning (Moscovici, 1984). Social representations are embedded in communication processes and are an outcome

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of *"an unceasing babble and a permanent dialogue between individuals"* (Moscovici, 1984, p. 950). Social representations also provide a mechanism for defining groups that are essentially collections of people with shared social representations. Social representations additionally provide a code for communication through a common language. In terms of the COVID-19 pandemic, social representations are reflected in communications, define groups based on shared representations, and provide the language through which it is understood. In other words, this new phenomenon of COVID is communicated through various sources such as public health messages, news bulletins, etc., defines groups who share representations (e.g. those who opposed restrictions and vaccines (anti-vaxxers) and those who conformed), and evolved a language of terms such as lock-down, face masks, etc. The public were open to the same messages but clearly produced different representations of these in either negative or positive terms. Those who acted in accordance with social restrictions framed the information as positive and beneficial, while those who framed the messages as state control or conspiracy reacted against the social restrictions.

News media are in a dual role of both creating and communicating social representations. In contemporary research, SRT has been expanded beyond its initial foundations in that it has been applied to a plethora of topics, including gender roles, bullying, the economy, and eating behaviors (Wagner, 1998; Wagner et al., 1999; Young et al., 2017). SRT also has an extensive history of being applied to understandings of illness and disease (Briseniou et al., 2020; Joffe, 2002, 2011; Murray & Flick, 2002).

Central to the present study are the concepts of anchoring and objectification, offering insight into how social representations are generated and adopted as part of common-sense thinking through discourse (Wagner et al., 1999). *Anchoring* is defined as using existing, familiar representations and applying them to the object to make sense of the new phenomena. *Objectification* is the construction of a culturally relative icon, metaphor, or trope that comes to stand for a new phenomenon. Fundamentally, social representation is about making the unfamiliar, familiar through anchoring and objectification. Anchoring is about taking something new and unfamiliar and finding an existing construct within which it can fit. Through anchoring the construct is then objectified by giving it meaning and making it real. An example of anchoring and objectification is "*in the 1990s genetic engineering was anchored in the notion of "cloning" and objectified in the figure of "Dolly the sheep"* (O'connor & Joffe, 2014, p. 621).

The present study uses this epistemological foundation and framework, focusing on the role of the mass media as a key source of representations (Wagner et al., 1999; Washer, 2004), and considers how "collective symbolic coping" can be seen in varying and consistent ways in media discourse across cultures related to COVID-19.

At this point, it should be noted that this perspective means the present study is somewhat detached from a realist understanding of the virus, moving beyond an epidemiological and medical perspective, which is the subject of an extensive literature in its own right. Instead, the present study identifies and treats the COVID-19 virus as a social object (Anwar et al., 2020). Importantly, this stance does not underplay the objective reality of the devastation and immense human suffering and loss that has been caused by the disease. It is also important to note that it is not the goal of the present research to directly measure the attitudes and beliefs of the general population, rather, as with previous SRT-based research, the focus is on the representations that are created and reinforced by the media. This is appropriate due to the prominent role of mass-media communication in the process of collective symbolic coping considered the core method by which representations are developed and spread rapidly among social groups (Wagner, 1998; Wagner et al., 1999; Wakefield et al., 2010).

Discourse analysis

A criticism of SRT and how it has been applied in the past relates to the assumption of shared representations as cognitive images (McKinlay & Potter, 1987). These authors argue that the key weakness of the theory is its failure to explicate the role of discourse in social representation consensus. To overcome this, McKinlay et al. (1993) present a strong case for the use of discourse analysis with SRT. Discourse analysis is the study of relationships between language-in-use and the social world (Johnson & McLean, 2020). It fits with SRT which proposes that social reality is constructed through language in the form of social representations (McKinlay & Potter, 1987). Based on the criticism of SRT (McKinlay & Potter, 1987), and the case made for the use of Discourse Analysis (McKinlay et al., 1993) the data in this study were treated as constructions and analyzed as discourse. Discourse analysis has been applied to both written and spoken language and seeks to identify meaningful themes (Shaw & Bailey, 2009).

SRT and COVID

Current literature applying SRT to illness and disease is extensive, however, due to the recency and ongoing nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of this literature is related to emerging infectious diseases that failed to have an impact on Western society that is comparable to COVID-19. Washer (2004, 2006) uses an approach grounded in SRT to examine the role of newspapers and mass media in infectious diseases, analyzing the discursive construction of SARS (Washer, 2004) and mad cow disease (Washer, 2006). These pieces of research offer insight into how social representations are generated and constructed by media accounts, tracked across various intervals as the respective epidemics unfold. The SRT framework has also been used successfully relating to Ebola (Moodley & Lesage, 2019), with a discourse analysis of South African newspapers highlighting the prominent discourses present within these accounts, those were, threat to humanity, predation, invasion, and conspiracy. Moodley and Lesage (2019) used the keyword Ebola to search an online news database and through a process of screening identified a sample of articles that covered social representations of Ebola. Applying discourse analysis, they found four key discourse themes as outlined above and their main finding was the way in which media created an emotive response in which Ebola was seen as an intruder and a predator in human terms. This is an example of

a study that has been applied to the SRT analysis of other illnesses and allows us to extrapolate the methodology to the current COVID-19 pandemic. The present study builds on the current literature, focusing specifically on the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, whilst going further through considering cross-cultural, as well as Western representations, within the same body of research, allowing insight into how a global phenomenon is constructed and represented in varying and consistent ways across cultural contexts.

Less extensive is the literature relating specifically to applying SRT to COVID-19. Research from Páez and Pérez (2020) applies the SRT concept of anchoring to the COVID-19 pandemic, showing consistency with previous findings, highlighting how typical infectious disease representations, such as the creation of "the other," and the "foreignizing" representation, emanate from Western discourse in relation to COVID-19, with a similar pattern found in Italy, with discourse centered around "blame" and othering' (Silvana de Rosa & Mannarini, 2020). Othering creates division by generating the classic them versus us thinking. It enables blame to be placed on others and a self-congratulatory perspective on the self thereby reducing responsibility. Effective public health behavior should be based on accepting blame and taking responsible action. Both pieces of research highlight how the Western media has constructed the pandemic, showing representations that are largely consistent with those drawn from historical infectious disease research (Washer, 2004). The present study goes beyond these findings by not simply focusing solely on Western media discourse, also considering discourse that emanates from a context which could be considered as "the other" in relation to COVID-19. Thus, this research aims to explore how media discourse contributes to the development of lay representations, as well as itself embedded and situated within specific social contexts. Through looking at this key source of representations, it is possible to gain insight into how symbolic coping occurs, and further examine the processes by which knowledge becomes embedded within lay thinking.

The present study is therefore built upon a well-established framework, utilizing a clear schemata and theoretical underpinning gleaned from previous research (Wagner et al., 1999), having been extensively and successfully applied to prior cases of infectious disease. The insight offered by this study, as well as shedding light on how COVID-19 has been constructed by the media in the early stages of the pandemic, can also draw attention to the role of the media in contemporary society, highlighting the influence mass-mediated communicative methods can have on influencing lay attitudes, beliefs, and opinions when new phenomena are encountered. Using a framework derived from social representation theory, the question addressed in this study relates to how media representations of COVID-19 show variation and consistency cross-culturally between the UK and China. Government Policies and public health messages are enacted in a population through their representation in the media, which has practical implications for how people behave in response to a pandemic. Understanding cross-cultural similarities and differences can inform both theory and practice. The Coronavirus seems to have originated in China and spread quickly to other areas across the world. China is considered to have an authoritarian one-party system of Government which on the face of it appears to be the antithesis of the liberal Western Democracy claimed by the UK. In hindsight, China reacted quickly and was quite successful in establishing control over the spread of the virus. The UK was much slower to react, and the virus had spread quite widely before serious attempts were made to bring it under control. The interesting question is whether the social representation of COVID-19 in each location can provide any useful lessons for future epidemics.

Method

Sample and procedure

The present study uses discourse analysis to analyze representations that are constructed within existing newspaper reports relating to COVID-19. The process outlined below was repeated systematically for each of the six selected sources, with each search conducted independently. A systematic search was conducted of the *Nexis* database, using the keywords "COVID-19" OR "CORONAVIRUS" due to the mixed use of these terms within media reports. Initial filters were imposed on the results, and articles containing <500 words were excluded from the search, which filtered out a portion of the more general news articles on the topic allowing editorial content to be surfaced where representations can be more readily identified. The "group duplicates" function of the *Nexis* database was used at this stage, removing a small number of results. The remaining articles were read, with general narrative trends within the corpus identified and noted. The results were then screened, with articles removed that did not explicitly relate to the discursive and cultural construction of COVID-19, manually excluding general news articles that purported epidemiological data, or cases of celebrities contracting the virus. Following this, a secondary screening was conducted to confirm the results of the first screening and identify articles with very similar content. Eventually, the two articles from each source that best reflected a social representation of COVID-19 were selected for detailed analysis, providing a manageable and balanced corpus. The 12 selected articles were then imported into NVivo 12 to facilitate analysis.

Written media from the UK and China were selected for analysis. The interesting question is whether the social representation of COVID-19 in each location can provide any useful lessons for future epidemics in terms of public health practice. Clearly, the behavior of the population in response to public health messaging is fundamental to health outcomes.

The final refined sample consisted of 12 news reports, sourced from the *Nexis* database. Articles were found from six newspaper journals. From the United Kingdom, the following three media sources were used: The Metro, The Times, and The Independent. These were chosen due to their respective rankings of first, second, and third place in a YouGov classification of the UK's most popular papers (YouGov, 2018). From China, the following three media sources were used: China Daily, People's Daily Online, and XinHuaNet General News Service. These were chosen due to their high positioning on the International Media and Newspapers ranking of China's top newspapers (World Newspapers Rankings & Reviews | 4imn.

com, 2019), along with the availability of the articles in English, to avoid translation errors which could have compromised analysis. This decision was guided using the adopted SRT framework, where previous literature indicates the centrality of homogamic communication, with individuals seeking media that confirms their own beliefs (Wagner et al., 1999). Therefore, by selecting the most popular mass-mediated news sources from the cultures of interest, this research assumes access to the representations circulating most prominently within these social contexts.

To focus attention on the early stages of social representation formation relating to COVID-19, a decision was made to restrict the inclusion criteria to contain articles dated up to 1 week after the WHO made the declaration of a global pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020a, 2020b); therefore, results were limited to articles published between 11th and 18th March 2020. This decision was partially driven by pragmatism, with broader initial searches surfacing an overwhelming number of results, however, also allows more specific contextualization and framing of the findings, using the globally recognized sequence of events from the WHO to provide consistency across the research. Following the procedure outlined below, 12 articles, 2 from each of the six newspapers, were analyzed.

Ethical considerations

Full ethical approval was sought and granted before the completion of this research. Using archived articles from the *Nexis* database that were already in the public domain means a principal ethical consideration for this research pertained to copyright issues, with this report fully referencing and disclosing the sources used. Given the cross-cultural nature of this research, specific considerations were given to ensure respect for communities and individuals represented within the corpus. In line with this, the interpretations and conclusions drawn from the research are transparent in order to uphold scientific integrity, with statements supported by textual evidence. A reflexive section is also contained within the discussion section of the report to aid this transparency.

Data analysis

Guidance from Goodman (2017) was used as a basis for analysis, with a focus placed on the SRT concept of "symbolic coping" (Wagner et al., 1999). Articles were combed for discursive features, specifically relating to examples of "anchoring" and "objectification" within the headlines and full text. Each article was analyzed independently by a single researcher, with acknowledgment of the potential for subjectivity in interpretations. Findings were then compared to identify consistency and variation in constructions within the texts between cross-cultural contexts. Fundamentally, social representation is about making the unfamiliar, familiar through anchoring and objectification. Anchoring is about taking something new and unfamiliar and finding an existing construct within which it can fit. Through anchoring the construct is then objectified by giving it meaning and making it real. An example of anchoring and objectification is "*in the 1990s genetic engineering was anchored in the notion of "cloning" and objectified in the figure of "Dolly the sheep"* (O'connor & Joffe, 2014, p. 621). In the analysis to follow the impact of COVID-19 is anchored in terms such as battle, conflict, and fight and objectified in the concept of war.

Results

Four discourses were selected for inclusion in this article. These discourses focus on the sociogenesis of social representations, outlining how representations are generated and constructed through the processes of anchoring and objectification. Attention is placed on the varying and consistent ways the pandemic is depicted in media discourse across cultural contexts.

War

The most commonly occurring discourse throughout the reports relates to constructing the COVID-19 pandemic as a war against an invisible enemy, with constant rhetoric about "fighting" and "combat" identifiable throughout the accounts. In both UK and Chinese media accounts there is evidence of anchoring to this representation, conveyed through language such as "fight," "battle," "confront," "combat," and "defeat." Built on this, there are overt references to being at "war" against the virus in both Chinese and UK media accounts:

> "We are at war," Mr Macron said in a TV address to the nation (Binns, 2020).

> Make no mistake, we're fighting a war (Aldrick, 2020)

> Made-in-China supplies reinforce world's war on COVID-19 (Xinhua General News Service, 2020a).

> Fight side by side to achieve the final victory for the entire human race (Xinhua General News Service, 2020b).

This anchoring of the COVID-19 pandemic to war representations, as well as presenting a "battle" against "a common enemy," also surfaces the issue of attributing "blame" for the pandemic, creating a multi-layered conflict, against both the virus and between affected nations. This blame is apportioned to China from UK media accounts, developing an "us" and "them" dichotomy between the West and China, establishing an "othering" representation. This tension is overtly exacerbated in Chinese media, with accounts rebuking these claims, escalating the conflict through spreading doubts regarding the integrity of Western leaders, questioning the claims made in Western accounts:

> The head of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said that some coronavirus deaths had been misdiagnosed as influenza in the US, suggesting that the virus has probably existed in the United States for some time (Xinhua General News Service, 2020b).

> The international community should work together instead of blaming each other, which is thoroughly unconstructive (Xinhua General News Service, 2020c).

> A spokesman for China's foreign ministry, Zhao Lijian, tweeted on Friday that "it might be the US army" that brought the coronavirus to China (People's Daily Online – English, 2020, March 16)

> These unfriendly remarks have created panic, spread rumors and prejudice and undermined global efforts to fight COVID-19 (People's Daily Online – English, 2020, March 16)

Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic can be seen as represented both in terms of a global "war" against the virus itself, anchoring to familiar lay understandings of such events, as well as connected and intertwined with the wider ideological and political "war" between China and the West. This ideological "war" is highlighted in the People's Daily Online, overtly anchoring to representations related to the historical Cold War:

> By breaking international rules, certain American politicians have actually been spreading a Cold War mentality represented by beggar-thy-neighbor unilateralism, which will only lead to a lose-lose situation (People's Daily Online – English, 2020, March 16)

While the war analogy helps to identify an enemy and thus a common purpose it also brings with it a political authoritarianism where Governments are empowered to create emergency laws which control and restrict people. The downside of that is that it enables individuals to relinquish personal responsibility and place it firmly on authority figures. Following public health messages becomes a matter of what the laws say. It also creates resistance as we have seen in the anti-vaccine demonstrations.

Other illnesses

Within the texts continual reference was made to "previous outbreaks," "pandemics," "epidemics," and "existing viruses" that form an established part of lay consciousness, anchoring the unfolding situation to these existing representations. Articles from the United Kingdom consistently anchored to "flu" or "influenza," associating the posed level of threat to historical cases, referencing the unfolding situation as "the most serious seen in a respiratory virus since the 1918 influenza pandemic" (Lintern, 2020), as well as referring to "the 8,000 who die of flu annually" (Smyth, 2020). These accounts also anchor to existing illness representations in constructing vaccinations as central to ending the pandemic, akin to the previous eradication of other viruses:

> Sir Patrick said that in the long term "vaccines are the answer to this" (Smyth, 2020).

> The only real salvation will be the development of a vaccine (Lintern, 2020).

> The UK could face an indefinite period of lockdown without a vaccine (Lintern, 2020).

Chinese media accounts show consistency with Western accounts in anchoring to previous outbreaks of other illnesses, referencing "H1N1 flu;" MERS; Ebola; and Zika. However, the language used presents a more clinical and factual depiction used as a political tool amidst calls from certain politicians for the Chinese government to "apologize" for COVID-19:

> The H1N1 flu that broke out in the United States in 2009 spread to 214 countries and regions, killing 18,449 people that year. No one asked the U.S. to apologize (People's Daily Online, 2020b, March 17).

Further variation in Chinese media accounts is the comparative lack of reference to vaccinations. Instead, images of the success of social measures to control the pandemic are presented in terms of their efficacy in lessening the potential catastrophe of the virus with these measures constructed as an adequate solution. Thus, vaccination is not depicted as central to ending the pandemic, instead seen as desirable rather than essential. There is no doubt that a strong focus on creating a vaccine has allowed the delay of implementing social restrictions in the UK, which in turn enabled the virus to spread rapidly.

General emergencies

The novel nature of the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic means media accounts constructed virus using representations from more generalized "emergency" situations. In UK media accounts, there is a focus on societal disruption depicted throughout with images of "sporting cancellations" and "economic disruption," using sensationalist language to emphasize the seismic impact on everyday life. Fictional media is also utilized, anchoring the pandemic to representations related to popular media genres such as disaster movies:

> We've seen the disaster movies and we know all too well how this could play out (Hall, 2020)

> It feels as though we are watching a Netflix series (Hall, 2020)

> We've seen the trailers already, as people rush to stockpile (Hall, 2020)

Comparatively, the accounts identified in Chinese media show consistency in depicting the pandemic as a global emergency and threat, in some instances utilizing similarly sensationalist language:

> The virus poses a common threat to mankind (People's Daily Online, 2020b, March 17)

Notably, variation in Chinese media accounts relates to the comparatively optimistic tone of the discourse regarding the local situation. There is no indication of the country in a "state of panic," in contrast with UK media accounts, with the discourse instead depicting the successes of China in responding to the virus. Instead, the "emergency" representation is constructed related to the global situation:

> The rate of spread in Europe and America is rapid and society is in a state of massive panic (People's Daily Online, 2020b, March 17)

> People are in a panic and quarreling with each other over petty issues (People's Daily Online, 2020b, March 17)

This construction by Chinese media therefore anchors to existing representations of general emergencies, constructing images of a global state of emergency, whilst distancing this from the local situation within the country. There are a number of ongoing studies looking at the mental health effects of COVID-19, and the early evidence is that it has had a big impact (Javed et al., 2020). In addition, there are some suggestions of cultural differences (Dean et al., 2021; Furlong & Finnie, 2020; Miconi et al., 2021). The different levels of fear or optimism represented in news media may play a role in these cultural experiences.

Unknown situation

As well as anchoring to existing representations of general emergencies and previous experiences of illnesses, the COVID-19 pandemic is constructed in the media as an entirely unknown situation. UK media accounts place emphasis on the unknown aspects of the unfolding events. When considering this representation, several repertoires are utilized, including emphasis on the role of statistical modeling from "experts" (Lintern, 2020), as well as focusing on the recent experiences of other countries in tackling the virus:

> It also became clear that more intensive care beds would be needed because oxygen alone wasn't working for patients in Italy, China and Britain (Smyth, 2020).

Chinese media accounts similarly report on the global situation, however instead of considering the experiences of other countries, there is an inward focus on the positive contribution of China when considering the encountered unknown situation:

> China is hailed by the international community for its efforts made to contain the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) epidemic, and is said to have made a great contribution to all mankind (China Daily, 2020)

> China was the earliest victim of COVID-19, and the largest contributor to efforts to curb it. It is the hard work from all walks of life in Chinese society that has earned precious time for countries around the world to prevent and control the epidemic (People's Daily Online, 2020a, March 18)

> With openness, transparency and a high sense of responsibility for global public health security and people's well-being, we will continue information-sharing with the international community (Xinhua General News Service, 2020c)

> "In the face of a previously unknown virus, China has rolled out perhaps the most ambitious, agile, and aggressive disease containment effort in history," praised the WHO (China Daily, 2020).

This highlights how the COVID-19 pandemic is represented as an unknown situation, emphasizing how UK media accounts establish representations through comparisons with other countries who are experiencing the same previously unknown phenomenon, with Chinese accounts comparatively more inwardly focused on the success of their own experiences. The internal comparisons with measures of their own success in China represent a positive comparison strategy, whereas external comparisons with other countries in the UK represent a negative process. The latter is based on not doing as badly as other countries and is less effective in learning lessons.

Discussion

The social representation of COVID-19 in representative news reports in China and the UK shred some similarities and also exposed some differences. In both a strong "war" discourse anchored and objectified the pandemic, enabling a useful familiarization and understanding of experience. Arguably this created a unity of purpose that allowed a defensive response, but because it enable an authoritarian approach to control, it also allowed a diminution of personal responsibility and the emergence of resistance. The blind following of Government imposed laws and guidelines was clearly damaging in the UK when the Government decided to remove restrictions for the Christmas period in 2020. A resistance to restrictions movement emerged led by a few celebrities who refused to wear masks and take up vaccinations.

The "war" discourse was also identified in other countries, for example, in South African media representations of Ebola, where discourses of "invasion" and "threat" were shown to be prominent (Moodley & Lesage, 2019). The current literature depicts how utilizing combative language can be used discursively within health promotion and disease prevention strategies, highlighting a case study of this happening in relation to swine flu, where the use of "war" within illness discourse induced fear, increasing a sense of individual "proximization" to the disease (Cap, 2016). Using this as a basis, through constructing the COVID-19 pandemic as a "war" it is possible that this stimulates individuals to gauge the relevance of the phenomena to their personal situation, increasing perceptions of proximity to the unfolding situation. It can also be postulated that the "wartime" rhetoric identifiable throughout media accounts generates a sense of preparing populations for the societal responses and restrictions that are traditionally more familiar with "war" representations.

Secondly, within the identified war discourse, as well as depicting a war against the virus, there is reference to the "ideological war" between China and the West, conveyed through assigning "blame" for the pandemic, exemplifying the othering representations constructed throughout the text. This is consistent with findings from British newspaper accounts of SARS and mad cow disease (Washer, 2004, 2006), where blame was similarly apportioned to the Chinese authorities and people, directly mirroring the construction of the "other" seen in the present study. This is highlighted by past research, with the role of othering noted as central upon the appearance of a novel infectious disease within a community (Washer, 2006). Notably, a difference seen in the current study is the intertying of this "othering" with the discourse of "war." Indeed, this is representative of the contextual macro political climate, with tensions between China and the West becoming increasingly strained, particularly when compared to the advent of the SARS pandemic nearly 20 years previously, with the blame identified in the present study potentially regarded as a "political mechanism" (Joffe, 2011). This blame aspect of war discourse is also consistent with that seen in the current literature on social representations and COVID-19, with Western discourse shown to focus on "othering" and "foreignizing" representations (Páez & Pérez, 2020; Silvana de Rosa & Mannarini, 2020). Therefore, the findings from the current study are consistent with the current literature, highlighting the anchoring of illness representations to war discourse, whilst also surfacing features such as blame attribution and instances of "othering" which can be seen in historical cases of novel infectious disease outbreaks.

The identification from the present study regarding the anchoring of the COVID-19 pandemic to previous illnesses, evident in both Western and Chinese media accounts, is also consistent with the current literature. British media accounts of mad cow disease show how illnesses and pandemics are typically anchored to previous outbreaks, a mechanism that is used

to aid attempts to make the encountered phenomenon familiar to the lay population (Washer, 2006). Within the present study, the anchoring of the COVID-19 pandemic to "flu" or "influenza" mirrors this. The discourse of a general emergency also shows similarity with the "threat" discourse that is exemplified in the previous research. In accounts from South African media sources related to Ebola, this is particularly prominent, with discourse surrounding the construction of the virus characterizing the disease as a "threat to humanity" (Moodley & Lesage, 2019). In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, it could be argued that this construction is justified due to the profound impact of the virus upon society. Similarly, the use of sensationalist language is demonstrated throughout the identified news reports, showing consistency with research related to previous infectious disease outbreaks, where sensationalist discourse has been utilized through terms such as "Fearbola" (Blakey et al., 2015). Again, however, this discourse may be justified when related to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly when considering the comparatively destructive impact of the latter pandemic in Western society. Therefore, the discourse identified within Western and Chinese media accounts shows consistency with the current literature regarding the application of social representation theory to illness and disease, with the anchoring of COVID-19 to previous outbreaks, coupled with images from UK accounts of a general emergency, corroborating with findings from previous research into representations of historical novel infectious disease outbreaks.

The findings show that Chinese news reports anchored the pandemic to war representations in the same manner as UK media accounts, similarly, constructing blame and ascribing "othering" representations. In the case of Chinese media, this is identifiable as a two-stage process, firstly by rejecting the accountability apportioned by the West, followed by constructing blame to other groups. Similarly, there is evidence of Chinese media accounts anchoring to existing illness representations, as well as depicting a general global emergency, showing consistency with UK news reports.

A key difference between the two sets of media representations was the strong emphasis on developing a vaccine in the UK, while this was secondary to a focus on social restrictions in China. In China, the emphasis on social restrictions limited the spread of the virus and brought it quite quickly under control, resulting in fewer deaths. The UK was slow to develop guidelines and introduce restrictions enabling the virus to spread, resulting in a very high number of deaths. In both regions, vaccines eventually became the main line of defense. A further difference identified was the focus on their internal successes in China as opposed to a focus on social disruption in the UK. This reflected a greater construction of fear in the UK. In addition, comparisons in the UK press were with other countries measuring success in terms of doing better than a comparison target. While this may have played a role in the relative success of social restrictions, the longer-term impact may be felt in terms of mental health.

The present study therefore provides useful insight into the application of a schematic depiction of SRT in relation to modern mass mediated discourse, offering the opportunity to observe how illness representations surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic are informed by the consistent and varying constructions contained within media accounts from both the UK and China. There are however shortcomings to this research. The understandably extensive media discourse surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic during the beginning of the outbreak resulted in an overwhelming number of articles surfaced during the initial search process, with results for each newspaper numbering in the thousands. To reduce the size of the corpus, the present study focused on the week following the WHO's declaration of a global pandemic. Whilst this may have been successful in providing a more manageable dataset for analysis, as well as offering a singular reference point for cross-cultural comparisons to take place surrounding a globally recognized event in the pandemic, it is possible that this impacted the findings. It was thought that the first week might reflect an immediate reaction, but this could have been extended to 2 weeks in hindsight. Also, it is possible that due to manual screening of the final corpus by a single researcher, there may be bias in the final sample of articles selected for detailed analysis, despite the use of a systematic and transparent search strategy. Furthermore, it is important to note that the COVID-19 virus spread across the globe at various speeds, with each country encountering the virus at different times. The COVID-19 virus was officially first identified in China in December 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020a) with the first social restrictions in the country implemented in Wuhan on 23rd January 2020 (Xinhua General News Service, 2020a). Comparatively, in the UK, the first COVID-19 case was identified on 31st January 2020 (Binns, 2020) leading to widespread social restrictions beginning in March 2020.

Throughout this research, reflexivity and transparency have been considered fundamental to ensure scientific integrity. It should be noted that the researcher is situated within a Western cultural context, hence there is intrinsic familiarity with media sources from the UK compared with Chinese media. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic was experienced by the researcher from a Western perspective, with understandings grounded in this position. To address possible bias, there was a focus on transparency and openness throughout the research process. Furthermore, contextual factors should be considered relating to the data corpus. Specifically, the nature of the media sources selected for analysis across cultures is an important contextual consideration. Media sources in China are heavily regulated by the government and largely considered state-affiliated (Human Rights in China, n.d.), compared with the often-asserted free press of the UK media (News Media Association, n.d.). Although the focus of the present study relates to the cross-cultural sociogenesis of representations, the role of propaganda is an important consideration that is highlighted in historical social representation research, with such propaganda aiming to impose ideas and representations from a system onto social groups (Wagner et al., 1999). Hence, the identified representations from the present study should be considered with this contextual climate in mind.

Conclusion

The present study highlighted the variation and consistency present in the construction of representations within and

between these two cultural contexts. News reports from both the UK and China showed evidence of constructing the pandemic through war discourse using rhetoric that depicts a war against the virus as well as constructing othering representations to apportion blame for the spread of the virus within the context of an ongoing ideological conflict between China and the West. Both Chinese and UK media accounts demonstrated consistency in anchoring COVID-19 to other illnesses to aid familiarity with culturally dependent selection of viruses that act as a comparison. Finally, both UK and Chinese media sources drew upon representations of a global emergency, highlighting the virus as a global level threat. UK accounts emphasized the unknown nature of the encountered phenomena as pessimistic and grounded in sensationalist discourse whilst Chinese news reports constructed a more optimistic picture inwardly focusing on local success particularly when compared to the depicted chaos unfolding across the rest of the globe. The findings from the present study reinforce the existing literature around the generation of social representations related to illness, whilst demonstrating the differing and consistent ways the COVID-19 pandemic was constructed cross-culturally. This offers insight into how a novel infectious disease, such as COVID-19, can gain familiarity among the lay population, identifying the powerful role of mass mediated discourse on the construction of lay beliefs, attitudes, and representations.

A key theoretical and practical implication of the findings here is the need for an early and immediate response to focus on the behavioral response of the population. In the UK, the emphasis on the vaccine as the way out of the pandemic distracted initially from the need to engage in wearing masks, and social distancing, and may have even influenced the eventual take up of vaccine when it arrived. In the year or more before a tested vaccine was available, earlier social and behavioral restrictions may have saved many lives, as was demonstrated in China where this was the case.

Mass media communication is likely to play a continuing and growing role in public health (Institute of Medicine (US) Committee on Assuring the Health of the Public in the twenty-first Century, 2002), and is essential in informing health decision-making (De Jesus, 2013). Understanding how social representations of illness is constructed in and by the media is essential both in promoting positive health behavior and also in preventing or ameliorating damaging myths that work against best health practices.

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Ethical approval

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Informed consent

All participants gave informed consent by signing a consent form.

Data availability statement

Transcripts are held by the author

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