A Study on the Characteristics of Media's Stigmatizing Reports related to Experts from the Perspective of Frame Theory

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Abstract: Under the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, social issues are emerging more frequently, and the guidance of experts on public social life is becoming increasingly important. However, on the Internet, media outlets tend to quote experts out of context, stigmatizing the experts and causing their credibility to decline constantly. This study selected media reports about experts that appeared in the Weibo Hot Search Topics from mid-2022 to early 2023, using frame theory as theoretical support and combining Fairclough's discourse analysis theory with other text research methods to compare and analyze the reported texts and the original experts' statements from multiple dimensions. The study finds that the media constructed an aggressive persuasive framework, shaped a dualistic oppositional conflict perspective by adapting texts and contexts, and stript experts of their professionalism and academic nature, which created a parental, provocative, and unprofessional media image of experts as a result. This is closely related to the pursuit of interests and social ecology of online media under the "Eyeball Economy," posing challenges and obstacles to building trust between experts and the public.
Keywords: Frame Theory, Discourse Analysis, Eyeball economy

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

In contemporary media, experts rely on their professional knowledge and skills to profoundly and extensively involve themselves in various media and provide professional opinions on related issues. Their opinions play a leading role and have a persuasive effect on the audience. In recent years, with the frequent occurrence of social issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the pressure to resolve unemployment, the public's demand for experts' professional knowledge has gradually increased. However, media reporting on experts' opinions has increasingly deviated from the real lives of ordinary people, resulting in statements that run counter to public needs, such as "Expert says 80% of college students plan to have a second child" and "Expert says rising oil prices have no impact on ordinary people." This not only provokes public sentiment but also raises doubts about the credibility of experts, leading to a severe trust crisis between experts and the public. In this regard, our curiosity has been sparked: How are people's attitudes towards experts' opinions influenced by media reporting, and to what extent? What factors contribute to

the decline in experts' credibility?

2 literature review

2.1 Literature Review on Media Frame Theory

Different scholars have different definitions of "Frame". This term was first used by Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman in communication contexts. He published "Frame Analysis" in 1774, defining a frame as a cognitive structure used to understand and interpret social life experiences. It is "a set of rules upon which an individual relies when transforming social life experiences into subjective cognition." In domestic research on media reporting, frame theory is often used as a tool, and studies are mainly conducted from three perspectives:

First, from the perspective of news production, researchers examine how journalists use frames in their news gathering and editing activities. For example, Zhao Tiange (2018) analyzed the reporting framework of the Wall Street Journal on Tencent in the context of Gamson's "interpretive package theory," revealing that the newspaper's characteristics and ideological conflicts are significant factors influencing journalists' use of frames.

Second, from the perspective of reporting content, researchers analyze what elements constitute a frame in the media report and its characteristics. For example, Luo Yicheng and Chen Gang (2008) used Zang Guoren's three-tier frame theory to quantitatively analyze controversial events in media reporting, focusing on the issues within these reports. Zhang Jing (2020) explored different frame characteristics in various media reports through the perspectives like reporting sources, tendencies and topics on organ donation, offering suggestions for optimizing communication strategies.

Third, from the perspective of reporting effects, researchers investigate how media reporting influences the cognition of audience and the extent of this influence. For example, Feng Qian (2022) found that negative online media reporting on preschool teachers not only hindered parent-teacher cooperation and public perception but also lowered teachers' professional identity, affecting their daily work. In the three types of researches, the analysis of the reported texts is always the core.

However, while these studies have examined many aspects of media application, they have not focused on the detailed analysis of frameworks of media reporting for experts' opinions, which warrants further exploration.

2.2 Literature Review related to Experts in Media Reporting

Research on experts in media reporting in China mainly focuses on three aspects:

First, analyzing the interaction between experts and the media. Liu Weijie (2009) argued that experts, as "opinion leaders" in media communication, should serve the public and help determine effective and advantageous directions for media agenda-setting. Furthermore, researchers examine the modes of experts' involvement in media, such as Meng Tao (2010), who took the news of people's livelihood as the research object and explained the three-way interaction model of

"expert-television-audience" in TV news.

Second, exploring the changes in experts' credibility in the media. For example, Liu Ying (2012) argued that although experts carry the characteristics of intellectuals, the credibility of experts in contemporary Chinese media is always affected by a combination of subjective and objective factors, including the influence of media, pseudo-experts, and the politics as well as the economic environment.

Third, investigating the risk perception gap between experts and the public. Wang Juan and Hu Zhiqiang (2014) proposed that knowledge is not the only influencing factor, and the risk perception gap is also affected by values, life experiences, the social roles of experts, and their biases. Liu Zhongyi (2022) studied this gap in the context of gender imbalance as a social risk and suggested that effective management of such risks requires enhanced risk communication between experts and the public.

However, these studies have not quant itatively analyzed the media's portrayal of experts to explore the characteristics of expert reporting. As a result, they have not addressed how to improve media reporting to enhance expert credibility.

2.3 Research Questions

Based on frame theory, this study attempts to answer the following questions: In media reporting on expert opinions, what factors cause changes in the original statements of experts? How does the media construct reporting frames to take experts' opinions out of context? What factors influence media's practice of taking experts' opinions out of context?

3 Research Design

3.1 The Method of Text Analysis

The research system of this paper is based on the frame theory and focuses on the report texts related to experts as the core content of analysis. It combines previous research and mainly refers to Fairclough's discourse analysis theory. The words, metaphors, grammar, conjunctions and non-verbal features used in experts' statements and media reports will be analyzed to compare the report texts with the original experts' statements in multiple dimensions, in order to reveal the economic reasons, social reasons and other reasons behind stigmatizing reports.

3.2 Definition of Media Reports related to Experts

The "media reports related to experts" discussed and studied in this article (also referred to as "expert reports" in this article) refers to the reports in which experts rely on their professional knowledge and skills to express professional opinions on a certain event, phenomenon or problem, and then enter the public's view through new media platforms in the form of media reports.

3.3 Research object

This study selects media reports that sparked discussions in the Weibo Hot Search Topics as the research object, examining the diachronic contents of experts' statements in the Hot Search Topics from October 2022 to March 2023. The contents modified the original experts' statements, resulting in severe differences in meaning between the reports and the original experts' statements, with the indication of "garbling." In the examination, the keyword "Expert" will be used for retrieval and selection in the historical Hot Search Topics.

3.4 Discourse Analysis Table

This study will compare and analyze the media reports and original experts' statements in the Weibo Hot Search in terms of titles, discourse subjects, discourse obejects, descriptive text, metaphor, and non-verbal symbols. It will describe the expression methods in the process of text production, as well as the context of text production, in order to explore the changes in experts' statements at different dimensions after being taken out of context by the media. The constructed discourse analysis table is as follows:

Table 1 Discourse Analysis of the original statements and the reports

	Expert's original statement 01	report 01
Title and Introduction		
Discourse Subject		
Discourse Object		
key Descriptive Text		
Changes in the Meaning of Descriptive Text		
Implied Metaphor(Implication)		
Non-verbal Symbols and the Meaning		
Context		
Contextual Meaning		

In this table, "Discourse Subject" refers to the initiator of the discourse content, that is, the communicator of the report theme. "Discourse Object" refers to the audience targeted by the report, that is, the communication object of the report. "Descriptive Text" mainly focuses on words, coherence, grammar and text structure. "Non-verbal Symbols" focuses on exploring whether experts' statements and media reports have undergone changes in reporting forms (such as graphics, videos, etc.) and whether these changes affect the meaning."Context" adopts the context definition proposed by Polish anthropologist Malinowski in 1923, which divides context into situational context and cultural context. Situational context refers to the specific situation in which the statement takes place, specifically referring to the context formed by the expert's quoted words in this study. Cultural context refers to the social and cultural background in which the speaker lives.

For example, in the Weibo Hot Search Topic "Experts says that salary should not be the first standard of employment", the comparison between the media report and the original experts' statement that sparked the topic discussion is as follows:

Table 2 01="Expert said salary should not be the first standard of employment",Zhongxin Jingwei

	Expert's original statement 01	report 01
Title and Introduction	Title: Addressing the Puzzles on the Job Hunt Introduction: With over two months left before graduation, what are the common dilemmas faced by graduates, and what kind of help and guidance do they seek? Subheadings: Employment should prioritize compatibility / Majors are more than talent factories / The best time to intern is in junior and senior years / Strive to become a specific type of talents	Title (Weibo topic): "Expert says salary should not be the primary standard for employment" "Expert says compatibility should be the top priority in job hunting" Introduction: What should job seekers prioritize? Is salary the top standard?
Discourse Subject	Guangming Daily reporter, the related expert	The related expert
Discourse Object	College students with divergent employment expectations between low salary expectations and high comfort-seeking	College students
key Descriptive Text	"Includes not only benefits such as salary, but also personal growth, spiritual needs, working environment, job stability, and other factors."	"Includes not only benefits such as salary, but also personal growth."
Changes in the Meaning of Descriptive Text	Coherence: The report omitted many aspects, such as spiritual needs, causing the sentence led by "not only" and the sentence led by "but also" to evenly divide the focus of the discourse. However, The original discourse conveyed the meaning of "employment standards cover a wide range and should be carefully considered" by juxtaposing nouns in the latter clause, which was weakened in the report to "employment standards are not limited to salary."	

Implied Metaphor (Implication)	Salary is important, but giving up everything else for the sake of it, especially the compatibility, may lead to resignation due to job stress. To find a more long-term and stable job, graduates should regard compatibility as a more important employment reference standard.	Salary is not as important as graduates imagine.
Non-verbal Symbols and the Meaning	The report used a video, which was absent in the original statement. The video showed a dense crowd of graduates moving through a job fair, emphasizing the anxiety of competing with many others and the fear of becoming cheap labor. Through this contrary video, the expert seemed to be "completely out of touch with reality," which reinforced the negative perception of "not valuing salary" among readers.	

Context	Situational Context: Prior text: "The current generation of college graduates, mainly born in the 1990s and 2000s, pay more attention to the match between education and employment, the satisfaction of personal spiritual needs, the harmony of intimate relationships and so on, which cannot be measured by a simple salary." "The report shows... students are willing to lower their salary expectations, but they have higher requirements for job stability, working environment, and harmonious interpersonal relationships than before." Subsequent text: "A highly compatible job can bring great sense of achievement, making one the master of their work. Even with high pay, a low compatibility job will only turn a person into a work machine." Cultural Context: Contemporary college graduates seek a job that meets their expectations in all aspects, but reality is often different. For example, if the salary is high, there may be shortcomings in spiritual needs or personal growth, and the widespread confusion about finding a balance permeates among graduates. The confusion of unbalanced permeates among graduates.	Situational Context: "Is salary the first criterion?" Cultural Context: "It's spring recruitment season again, and graduate employment continues to be a topic of social concern."

Contextual Meaning	Combining real-life observations and data shows that young people nowadays need more comfortable working environments and personal growth factors than just salary. Emphasizing this is an expression of young people's proactive attitude towards employment, rather than being led by salary levels as in the past.	Work is meant to satisfy spiritual needs, and young people who have just graduated should not solely value salary without higher pursuits,we should oppose "laying flat".

4 Analysis of the Stigmatization Framing Characteristics in Expert Reporting

In this study, we selected expert-related reports from October 2022 to March 2023, a six-month period, from the Weibo Hot Search List. A total of 27 reports with characteristics of "stigmatizing reports" were identified, originating from various media outlets and covering different social issues. The majority of these reports came from commercial media outlets such as "Phoenix New Media" and "Zhongxin Jingwei," with the most common topic being the "COVID-19 pandemic." This analysis focuses mainly on the framing characteristics of stigmatization in these reports, and the specific research results and analysis are as follows.

4.1 The Aggressive Persuasion Framework: Constructing a Paternalistic Experts

In media reports related to experts, experts often appear as "persuaders." However, stigmatizing reports dissimilate experts' persuasive discourse, constructing an aggressive persuasion framework that directs the expert image towards a constraining and authoritative parent-like role. This process of dissimilation can be seen in changes in the text, context and the subsequent impact on the reporting theme. We find that these changes are closely related to the media's manipulation of essential elements in the communication process. Therefore, this part will focus on discussing the characteristics of this persuasive framework from the perspective of the communication process.

4.1.1 Replacement of the Communicator: Removing the Q&A Identity and Strengthening the Persuasion Motive

Unlike opinion leaders in the new media era, experts represented by researchers and front-line workers do not take the initiative to participate in the media. Instead, they are consulted by media outlets on issues and phenomena, or their discussions on third-party platforms are extracted by the media. This reflects the passive involvement of experts in the media, which means they do not possess a proactive persuasion motive. However, in the media's retelling of expert discourse, the

media removes the interview or forum context, obscures the questioner, and only quotes parts of the interview content, causing the original text genre and article structure to lose meaning. Such a practice transforms the expert from an "answerer" to a "proposer," making the expert assume the role of communicator instead of the media worker, thereby strengthening the expert's persuasion motive.

4.1.2 Replacement of the Communication Object: Changing the Explanatory Object and Strengthening the Persuasion Relationship

As far as interviews are concerned, media reports on expert discourse should develop from interpersonal communication to mass communication. However, the communication object of the stigmatizing reports do not develop from the interviewee to the general public. Instead, they fabricate the general public as the original object of the interviews by rewriting the text or omitting the discourse context. For example, in a report on "Expert recommends staggered return home during Spring Festival travel season," the expert's intention, when considering the context, was that "the government should issue relevant policies to guide returning home during the Spring Festival, and staggering travel times is a viable option." However, to fit the cultural context of "people's anxiety about returning home during the Spring Festival," the media omitted the context when retelling the expert's words and highlighted the difficulty of "returning home." It hid the original communication object, which was the government, and fabricated the report audience as the original communication object, thereby strengthening the persuasion and persuadability relationship between the public and the expert.

4.1.3 Replacement of the Communication Effect: Transforming into a Controversial Context, Making Persuasion Aggressive

In terms of communication effects, this is mainly reflected in the media replacing the expert's "guidance and advice" attitude with a "targeted and critical" attitude in the report, changing from "leaving the initiative to the receiver" to "making decisions on behalf of the receiver," thus making the expert' s persuasive discourse offensive. This mainly includes the following aspects:

First, adapting the text to equip metaphors with aggressiveness. Media reports alter the gist of the expert's original statement by changing words, phrases and grammar. In the report "Expert claims that not being fluent in English is equal to not having learned at all," the report replaced "foreign languages" with "English" and "unable to communicate" with "not fluent." The meaning then shifted from "students need to learn to communicate in foreign languages" to "students need to improve their English exam levels." The metaphoric aspect lied in the criticism of the target audience's "level and ability."

Second, changing the discourse context to transform the intention of exploration into an intention of attack. Compared to the multi-perspective consciousness of the original statement, reports often place the expert's words in a cultural context more closely aligned with controversial phenomena and social anxiety. The expert's expression is shifted from "what aspects should we consider comprehensively" to "the views of ordinary people are always wrong." This gives the

expert discourse a coercive and restrictive nature, turning the original intention of exploration into an intention of attack.

4.2 Conflict Perspective Based on Dualistic Opposition as "Bait": Shaping the Expert's "Contradictory Pusher" Position

Experts often express their opinions in interviews, speeches, or forum discussions.In order to lead to multi-directional discussions, the situational context should be more important than the cultural context in this situation. The reason why stigmatizing reports are covert is that experts' opinions can be seamlessly embedded into the conflict-driven cultural context required by the media, thus obscuring the original situational context and the discussion environment. This part focuses on the media's methods of catering to the dualistic opposition in cultural contexts.

4.2.1 Pre-setting Results: Constructing Dualistic Titles

The most straightforward manifestation of the conflict in the cultural context is the title. Stigmatizing report titles often adopt a result-forward approach, placing the central argument after dissemilation at the forefront, along with hot topic labels, so as to arouse the interest of the audience. The pre-set results in the title are often controversial, but they adopt a definitive discourse, conveying an "either/or," "good or bad" implication, which prematurely decides the expert's position. For example, "Expert says ordinary COVID-19 infections do not require fluid infusion" actually aimed at the rural areas only, and "Experts say home quarantine can alleviate bed shortages" when alleviating bed shortages was not the purpose of home isolation. In the study, we also notice the characteristics of non-stigmatizing report related to experts in titles, such as "Experts interpret whether home quarantine for infected people is feasible." Compared to the stigmatizing report titles, this title did not definitively conclude experts' opinions, but rather left room for discussion, guiding the audience to read the detailed content of the report.

Due to the primacy effect, audience's judge and interpret information base on what they first encounter, which means they hold a "preconception" of media reports. The titles take advantage of this. Therefore, even if the expert's situational context is mentioned in the report content, it is likely to be ignored by the audience.

4.2.2 Extracting Dualistic Characteristics from the Supporting Details and Converting Them into Arguments

A common mistake in stigmatizing reports is the removal of words such as "for example" and "if," which treats illustrations (including narrative experiences) as original viwpoints. In fact, examples are for argumentation purposes and do not inherently have room for discussion. When they come into contact with the cultural context, they can become powerful aids for the media to express dualistic opposition. For example, in the report "Expert says Genshin Impact showcases China's high modernization level," the expert discussed the topic of "how young people can tell Chinese stories well." They used Genshin Impact as an example, regarding it as one way

Chinese games can tell Chinese stories. However, the report took the example out of the context and presented it as the expert's main viewpoint. In the cultural context where "Genshin Impact" is controversial among the public, the expert's intention becomes that "Genshin Impact has no shortcomings." As a result, in the dualistic opposition of "supporting" or "opposing" the game, the expert is pushed by the media to the side of "fully support."

4.2.3 Enforcing Dualistic Opposition in Topics to Cater to Audience Emotions

Although the content of reports may originate from experts' statements, media can distort the focus of experts by altering the structure, premise, and the context of the text. For example, a report quoted an expert's saying, "The U.S. dollar is the only central currency, and if the U.S. is not stable, the world will not be stable too." After stripping away the context, the expert might be perceived as an accomplice to "American imperialism" in the current situation that most people regard the relationship between the United States and China as a confrontation. Besdies that, the reports targeting young people, such as "Expert says men are more likely to suffer from pain after catching coronavirus" or "Expert says sincerity is key in relationships," capitalized on dualistic conflicts like "gender opposition" and "dating for oneself vs. for others," which constructed a cultural context that beyond discussion and put experts on the opposing side of young people.

4.3 Emphasizing Descriptive Meaning Over Argumentative Meaning to Foster Equality Between Experts and the Public

Media can perform a constructive function based on its own characteristics in addition to reflecting the discourse of experts. However, in stigmatizing reports, media does not reflect and construct through easily understandable language. Instead, it strips away the professional and theoretical value of expert discourse, constructing descriptive meaning with emotions and lower the experts' views to forcedly make them more "approachable", thereby enhancing the readability of the report. In this way, "Foster" means "Force".

4.3.1 Removing the Academic Nature of Expert's Statement

The removal of academic nature in media reports is mainly manifested in two aspects: On one hand, expert discourse is built on strong logical reasoning, indispensably combining practical observations and theoretical research. However, media disrupts this logic by breaking the context and text, and even reestablishing connections between discourses. On the other hand, academic terms in expert discourse are generally the theoretical summaries of several phenomena or discoveries and do not inherently carry any descriptive meaning. However, media distort these terms, assigning emotional connotations to them. For example, in the report "Expert says that clinically most people have slight symptoms", the "slight symptoms" in the original statement meant "this symptom belongs theoretically to the category of slight symptoms from the clinical diagnosis", while "slight" was given the emotional tone of "not serious" in the media report that conveyed to the audience the meaning of "feeling serious is because of the personal inability to

endure pain" in the "Common Cold" context constructed by the media.

4.3.2 Flattening the Expert's Macro Perspective

The experts' speeches often address a wider audience, and their perspectives are not limited to personal issues, but rather point to problems manifested by the government or system. As mentioned, media can covertly shift the focus of criticism, directing the experts' aggression towards the public, and by changing the context, media can misrepresent the original macro perspective to suit the emotional logic of the masses.

In the report "Expert says many universities will close down in the future," the expert originally pointed out the impact of population decline on the entire education industry, especially early childhood education. The possibility of universities closing down was a derivative of that impact. However, the media singled out the part involving "universities" and formed it as an independent article□ignoring the critical perspective on the education industry, and fabricated the expert directly addressing public anxiety. The lack of logical coherence lead to a reduction in the expert's own professionalism.

4.3.3 Performative Non-Verbal Symbols

The study has shown that when media retells expert discourse, it often alters the original visual presentation. For instance, media might add short videos to their reports. Some of these videos had no connection to the expert discourse and were simply included for visual diversity. And other videos conveyed information that was contrary to the expert discourse but catered to the cognition of the public. By positioning the expert on the opposing side of the public while reaching the consensus with the public, media utilizes experts' "objective" facade to perform. This indicates that the media are not concerned with the quality of the experts and have, to some extent, lost the authenticity of news.

5 Discussion and Conclusion on the Stigmatization of Experts in Media Reports

In this study, we finds that media's garbling of the expert discourse is essentially a fixed-pattern textual game. Due to the absence of a necessary connection between the signifier and the signified, media assign the new meanings to experts' statements by adapting text, altering context, and using non-verbal symbols. We discovered that the fabricated meanings often cater to the audience's negative emotional inclinations and contradict their cognition of the objective world. This reflects that the media, in pursuit of the "eyeball economy," often employ "conflict perspectives" and "aggressive discourse" to stimulate emotions or curiosity, resulting in wider dissemination. "Expert" has become a weapon and tool for media to cater to a "click-only" news production orientation, which is a manifestation of moral misconduct among media workers.

With the current development of the Internet, we can also see that, on one hand, new media

does not truly strive for the authenticity of news valued by traditional media but instead exhibits the characteristics of "opinion leaders," reflecting the psychological needs of communication objects with more freedom while wearing the mask of "news authenticity." On the other hand, as communication channels expand and the number of media outlets increase, the journalistic literacy and professional capabilities of media workers have diminished. The forced match between experts and the public is a indication of media's inadequate ability to construct the objective world and reflect the understanding of it today, making it difficult for media to bridge the knowledge gap between experts and the audience objectively.

The role of experts should be to fill the knowledge blind spots of the audience, instead of amplifying their "rational ignorance". In the age of new media, only through returning to authenticity and objectivity in media discourse can the guiding role of experts in public social life be truly realized. This still remains a long road which is worth reflecting upon.

Furthermore, due to the relatively macro perspective of stigmatization, this study cannot comprehensively and detailedly summarize all the textual and contextual characteristics of stigmatizing reports or uncover more micro framework features. It is hoped that in future research, scholars in the field of media may need to pay more attention to the framework construction of expert reports from various angles and expand the research and practice of framing theory.

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