

**Online News, Public Health and Misinformation: Their Impact on Foreign
News Consumers Living in China**

Weinan Yuan

Beijing Normal University, Hong Kong Baptist University, & United International College

Abstract

This article explores online news consumption patterns among foreign news consumers living in China, with a particular focus on the correlation between public health and misinformation. During a public health emergency, like the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for accurate and timely health information has become more urgent, especially as the increasing amount of misinformation on digital platforms (e.g. WeChat, Weibo, websites) has complicated the situation and continues to create cultural barriers for its audience. By examining how foreigners in China develop and live their news consumption habits, this study aims to investigate the impact of misinformation on their perceptions and actions regarding public health. The findings are expected to serve as references for organizations and policymakers with the purpose of improving communication strategies to better support foreign communities in China during public health crises.

Keywords: China, media consumption, foreigners, misinformation, public health

Research on the consumption of online news and the spread of misinformation has seen a significant surge over the past decade (Zhang et al., 2024). This surge is largely due to the global shift towards digital media and the increasing concerns about the reliability and credibility of news outlets (Bhattacharjee, 2022; Fletcher & Park, 2017). This dynamic is not merely a technological shift, but also a cultural transformation that is deeply intertwined with audience's national identities and social paradigms of the place where they live (Abrar et al., 2023; Borkovich & Breese-Vitelli, 2014).

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically reshaped news consumption habits of expatriates living in China. They increasingly relied on digital platforms for timely and accurate information. One expatriate highlighted the urgency and anxiety surrounding access to medication: "A lot of people are posting on social media right now, asking, 'How do I get medication?' How do I get fever medication? It's not available in the pharmacies. That makes it much scarier for them" (Inskip, 2022, para. 16). Another expatriate expressed the psychological toll of constant exposure to distressing news: "The greatest challenge to me this time was that I feel a lot of psychological pressure because whenever I turn on the computer and look on the Internet or sometimes watch TV, all the news is heartbreaking" (Nam et al., 2022, p. 6). These experiences underscore the double-edged nature of digital news consumption during a public health emergency, where access to information was vital for survival but also anxiety-provoking.

People living in China grapple with this shift, expressing an ambivalent relationship with news digestion. On the one hand, they rely on digital media for timely and relevant information, but on the other hand, they express concerns about misinformation and media censorship (Lu et al., 2020; Wu, 2021). This ambivalence is shaped by various factors such as language barriers, cultural norms, and attitudes towards information sources (Lai, 2021; Sun, 2014; Xue & Xu, 2021). Also, concerns have been raised about the role of algorithmic curation in shaping narratives, reinforcing the "status quo" of a controlled media environment, and perpetuating the spread of misinformation (Lee & Wei, 2022; Raza & Aslam, 2024; Shin, 2024). These concerns underscore the power dynamics inherent in the digital media landscape and the cultural implications of these dynamics.

Many foreign news consumers in China, however, possess the technical know-how to navigate this complex media landscape, which is not merely a matter of individual choice, but is also shaped by cultural identities, societal structures, and power relations (Geers, 2020). One strategy is to use Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) and other technologies to access international news sources, bypassing the constraints erected by existing media censorship (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024). This strategy, while technologically driven, also reflects cultural and social motivations, such as the desire for cultural connection, the need for multidimensional narratives, and a general resistance against content censorship (Andi, 2021; Martin & Nightingale, 2019)

To date, however, comprehensive data on how foreign news consumers in China develop online news habits, especially during public health crises, is limited. Therefore, this research seeks to

address these knowledge gaps by exploring how foreign news consumers in China interact with online news during public health crises. By conducting in-depth interviews with participants from 13 countries, this study examines the extent to which they (1) trust or distrust online news sources, (2) adopt strategies to access the information they need, and finally, (3) show an association between the use of these strategies and their perceptions of health-related misinformation.

Literature Review

Digital innovation has reshaped global news consumption, creating a challenging atmosphere for audiences from different cultural backgrounds (Liu & Yang, 2022; Lu et al., 2020). This review discusses how online news platforms (e.g., WeChat, Weibo, websites) and public health events impact the news consumption habits of expatriates in China. Factors such as digital platforms, trust in media, and misinformation can significantly influence this engagement, especially during public health crises (Nguyen & Catalan-Matamoros, 2020; Park, 2024).

The reliance of foreign news consumers in China upon news platforms highlights their indispensable role in bridging the information gap (Ang & Martin, 2024). Given the dynamic media environment in China, a deep understanding of the relationships between migrant information needs and news accessibility in China becomes increasingly vital. To achieve this, research of this specific population is thus necessary.

Media Environment and Online News Consumption

Before the advent of the Internet, mainstream media dominated the media landscape, disseminating information and shaping public opinion (Deacon et al., 2024). Media ownership and business decisions aligned with the trend of journalism convergence, leading to the concentration of media cartels in the market (Yuan, 2011). Some media outlets served as mouthpieces for powerful economic interests (Coyer et al., 2007), often neglecting the voices of minority groups. One of the most evident phenomena here is that biased media coverage during the pandemic in the US exacerbated race discrimination against Asian Americans, leading to a significant rise in anti-Asian sentiment and hate crimes at the time (Gover et al., 2020). This kind of neglect partly led to the rise of internet-based media (Sandoval & Fuchs, 2010), and platforms such as forums, blogs, and social media continued to gain credibility as they integrate user-generated content into news publishing and dissemination (Pentina & Tarafdar, 2014).

In today's era of constant connectivity, social media have become integral to online news circulation, with media organizations promoting content diffusion on these platforms and enabling user redistribution (Singer, 2014). About 93% of U.S. adults consume news online, with 67% via social media (Shearer & Gottfried, 2017), a proportion even higher in Southern Europe and Latin America (Newman et al., 2017). The convenience and immediacy of digital platforms make them popular among news consumers (Mu, 2024), serving as conduits for news and curating information through algorithms.

However, as consumers juggle information from various outlets, AI-driven personalization by news platforms has raised renewed concerns regarding “filter bubbles” or “echo chambers” (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2001), which neglect diversity, fragment public debate (Tewksbury et al., 2008) and confront users with stereotypes and biases related to gender, politics, religion, nationality, and social class (Saran, 2023). Algorithm-driven news feeds, while increasing usable information, can contribute to information overload and decision-making impairment, leading some to limit or cease social media use, a phenomenon known as *digital disconnection* or *digitox* (Aldoory & Van Dyke, 2006; Bucher, 2020; Foot, 2014; Hampton, 2010; Syvertsen, 2020; Woodstock, 2014; Wilcockson et al., 2019). Disconnection, coupled with misinformation exposure, polarizes public debate and impacts political understanding and social consciousness (Dhanani & Franz, 2020; Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2001). Despite declining trust in news, journalists and audiences navigate these platforms, relying on various factors to evaluate news trustworthiness (Arguedas et al., 2023), fundamentally reshaping information access strategies.

In China, media is governed by strict regulation, with rigorous controls over the spread of information, which limits the diversity of viewpoints (Ditlhokwa et al., 2023; Tai, 2014; Tang & Iyengar, 2011). Particularly, mainstream media are under tight control by the Chinese government, with the party-state imposing authority over official information (Zeng et al., 2017). More recently, this control also extends to social media like WeChat and Weibo, which often serve as alternative sources of information and a less regulated zone for discourse (Zeng et al., 2017). The government heavily censors social media through intermediary liability, relying on private companies to implement content controls (Ruan et al., 2020). Algorithmic platforms like Jinri Toutiao, a news application developed by ByteDance, are forced to manage a complex relationship with the regulatory body and public expectations (Kuai et al., 2022). Also, WeChat’s news-sharing functionality demonstrates how platform affordances enable and constrain user participation in news distribution, reflecting the interplay between commercial interests and state regulations (Xu, 2022). This regulatory framework heavily impacts the availability and credibility of news sources and creates an environment where state-sanctioned narratives dominate, often weakening the credibility of news outlets that do not align with government perspectives (Yin et al., 2023). Also, China’s censorship practices often impact upon foreign websites without official notice, making it challenging to access them through legal means (Chu, 2017). Consequently, foreigners in China often resort to VPNs to access news they need, which can be inconsistent and unreliable due to censorship fluctuations (Xu et al., 2011). Officially, the use of VPNs is prohibited, but this prohibition is rarely enforced.

For foreigners in China, finding reliable news is therefore challenging, mostly due to language barriers and censorship. Language proficiency is crucial for comprehending and evaluating local news sources, and many expatriates grapple with the nuances of the Chinese language, leading to potential misinterpretations or limited access to critical information (Liu et al., 2023). Moreover, the Chinese government’s censorship policies restrict the availability of foreign news outlets, often distorting or suppressing information widely accessible outside of China (Chen, 2023). These barriers often restrict audiences from relying on local platforms for news (Hilbig & Riaz, 2023; Ling et al., 2019). Despite these challenges, empirical studies indicate that many users often use VPNs to access international news, thus staying informed about

global events using a broader base of news bouquets (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024). The limited availability of international news in China can worsen this reliance, making consumers feel disconnected (Lissitsa et al., 2024). There is also a fear that reliance on local platforms can limit exposure to more diverse perspectives, leading to a narrower understanding of global issues (Geniets, 2010).

Furthermore, the clash between China's actions regarding Internet control and its goal of opening up to foreign investment and trade creates a paradox that also influences the foreign diaspora in China (Endeshaw, 2004). As stakeholders in both their resident countries and homeland, they find themselves at the intersection of these conflicting points. (Tan et al., 2021). As a result, this has repercussions for their decisions regarding study, employment, business, and even personal ties with China.

Trust in Media, Misinformation and Public Health

Trust in media plays a pivotal role in shaping public health narratives and the spread of misinformation, particularly in the context of online news consumption. A significant body of research has explored the relationship between media trust and news consumption, suggesting that trust can influence the acceptance and spread of information, including misinformation (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014).

Historically, trust in news media in the US exhibited a steady decline following a period of high confidence from the 1950s to the 1970s (Ladd, 2012). While global trust in news remains relatively stable at 40% (Newman, 2024), the factors influencing media trust have become increasingly complex.

Research also indicates that demographic characteristics, media consumption habits, and perceived credibility of news sources significantly impact trust levels (Coninck et al., 2019; Hameleers et al., 2022). Younger audiences tend to favor non-mainstream news outlets, while those with lower levels of news interest are also more likely to consume alternative news sources (Fletcher & Park, 2017). The proliferation of digital media has further complicated the trust landscape. Consumers are more inclined to use non-mainstream news sources than ever before (Newman et al., 2017). Social media, while offering increased access to information, are often associated with lower levels of trust compared to traditional media due to the rapid dissemination of oftentimes unverified content (Dhanani & Franz, 2020; Fletcher & Park, 2017 ;Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019). Consequently, individuals who primarily rely on social media for news tend to exhibit lower trust in news overall (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019).

The relationship between trust and news consumption is bidirectional. While trust influences media choices, news consumption patterns also shape trust levels. Fletcher and Park (2017) found that individuals with low trust in traditional media are more likely to turn to non-mainstream sources and engage in online news participation. Conversely, continued consumption of trusted news outlets can reinforce trust over time (Lee, 2010). However, the perceived increasing prevalence of misinformation has eroded public trust in factual

information. In the “post-truth” era, personal biases, anecdotes, and popular opinions often outweigh evidence-based arguments (Cooke, 2017). Developing critical thinking skills and media literacy is crucial for discerning credible information from misinformation (Rosenbaum et al., 2008; Stanovich et al., 2013).

The Chinese media environment presents unique challenges and opportunities for trust-building, as well as an exclusive context for studying media trust. State control and censorship can lead to both high levels of trust in official media sources, due to their perceived authority, and skepticism due to perceived propaganda (Shirk, 2011). While research on trust in media among foreign consumers in China is limited, studies on Chinese citizens’ trust in media suggest that credibility, transparency, and perceived neutrality are key factors influencing trust (Lee, 2010). These factors may also be relevant for foreign consumers, although their effect may be moderated by other factors such as cultural background, language proficiency, and political attitudes.

During the H1N1 pandemic, information used to improve protection and prevention was difficult to find on the Internet (Gesualdo et al., 2010). Almost a decade later, polarization in politics and media can facilitate the diffusion of misinformation, and one of the countries where such a situation occurred was the US during COVID-19 (Allcott et al., 2020; Motta et al., 2020).

China’s controlled media environment has significant implications for the flow of information, including health-related news. Studies have shown that cultural norms and values shape individuals’ trust in news sources and their susceptibility to misinformation (Baqir et al., 2024). In this context, foreign audiences in China may exhibit unique patterns of trust and vulnerability to misinformation compared to other populations. While domestic media outlets adhere to official narratives, foreign news consumers often rely on international sources for information (Lu et al., 2022; Wei, 2013). This reliance, however, can lead to exposure to both accurate and misleading information, complicating public health communication efforts (Wang et al., 2023).

The production of health news is often influenced by information subsidy, in which external sources provide pre-packaged information by professional individuals or organizations to journalists (Len-Ríos et al., 2009). This practice is particularly prevalent in science and health reporting due to the specialized nature of its topics (Berkowitz & Adams, 1990). The reliance on information subsidy can expedite news production but can also increase the potential for misinformation to enter the news cycle. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the devastating consequences of misinformation on public health. Literature indicates that media have responded to it in various manners. While some media have focused on disseminating evidence-based facts about COVID-19, others minimized the severity of the virus, spreading rumors and misinformation, and accusing China of the outbreak (e.g., Chiu, 2020).

These contrasting messages not only caused deep divisions within the public but also led to dangerous behaviors such as non-compliance with reasonable COVID-19 prevention policies (Mervosh et al., 2020), violence against those attempting to implement such practices

(MacFarquhar, 2020), and discrimination against Asians who were accused of being the source of COVID-19 (Ruiz et al., 2020). Conversely, in China, the US was accused of introducing the virus to China (Brito, 2020). Thus, the spread of misinformation contributed to public confusion, mistrust in health authorities, and harmful behaviors (Acemoglu et al., 2023; Rocha et al., 2021).

From a technical standpoint, the role of digital platforms has been significantly influenced by the spread of misinformation, which was accelerated by AI-driven algorithms prioritizing engagement over accuracy (Ferrara et al., 2020). The dissemination of viral content, which can inadvertently prioritize misinformation, can result in widespread public health risks (Pathak et al., 2023). The role of technology in public health misinformation is evident in the spread of fake news during health crises. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, misinformation about vaccines and treatments proliferated on social media, undermining public health efforts (Dhanani & Franz, 2020; Nutbeam & Lloyd, 2021). The persistence of misinformation can make it difficult to debunk, as it shows that such opposition can undermine one's worldview (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). For foreign news consumers in China, the use of VPNs increased their exposure to international social media platforms and such content, but it also heightens the risk of encountering misinformation on health prevalent on such platforms (Xu et al., 2011).

Moreover, news consumers may also suffer a psychological impact from health misinformation which can lead to anxiety, fear, and mistrust in health authorities, hindering effective public health responses (Rocha et al., 2021). These negative effects are intensified by the social distancing and quarantine foreigners experienced, making them even more susceptible to outside misinformation (Stewart et al., 2024).

Research indicates that repeated exposure to misinformation can create false beliefs and resistance to corrective information (Baqir et al., 2024). For foreign news consumers in China, the psychological toll of navigating a complex information landscape can be significant. Therefore, public health strategies must address the psychological dimensions of misinformation by providing clear, consistent, and trustworthy information to mitigate its impact. Bridgman and colleagues (2020) argue that if efforts to minimize the spread of misinformation on social media are not successful, this could potentially compromise the large-scale social efforts needed to combat public health emergencies. Similarly, Donovan (2020) suggests that the spread of misinformation on social media poses significant threats to public health and calls on social media platforms to focus more on reducing the flow of misinformation.

In response to the research gap, this research explores how expatriates in China deal with health-related information amid public health emergencies, thereby contributing to the existing knowledge on news consumption in the Chinese context. The following research questions will guide the study:

RQ1: How does the media environment in China influence foreigners' online news consumption during a public health emergency?

RQ2: How does cultural background affect foreigners' trust in media and interpretation of online news during a public health emergency in China?

RQ3: How does cultural background impact foreigners' responses to misinformation related to public health in China?

Methodology

The overarching aim of this study is to explore the online news consumption habits of foreigners living in China. A total of 13 interviews were conducted, with nationalities of the interviewees being Filipino, Singaporean, Malaysian, Indonesian, Indian, American, Italian, French, and Irish. The ages of the interviewees ranged from 17 to 56, and their education levels went from high school to PhD.

Research Design

This research project employs an in-depth interview approach, targeting foreigners who lived in China during the COVID-19 pandemic. The qualitative method is particularly suitable for generating new perspectives and evidence on emerging, complex, and relatively under-researched phenomena, as noted by Miles and Huberman (1994). This aligns well with the current study's focus. Additionally, the project adopts an inductive approach to understanding news consumers' preferences, anticipating common patterns from participants' responses.

Compared to quantitative methods, in-depth interviews foster closer connections with participants, capturing the emotions intertwined with their speech. This qualitative edge is crucial for research related to COVID-19, human emotions, and behaviors. Antunovic and colleagues (2018) highlight those quantitative methods "lack the depth that can be gained from qualitative approaches" (p. 6). In-depth interviews enable a deeper conceptual understanding of participants, especially in natural settings relevant to this project's public health context. Finally, rather than collecting static data through quantitative methods (Bryman, 2016), this research aims to explore the dynamic communication processes with fewer participants, but with more in-depth investigations.

Sampling Strategy

A snowball sampling strategy was employed due to the sensitivity of the research topic. The trust established through acquaintances and interconnectedness helped alleviate participants' concerns, encouraging them to share their thoughts during interviews. This approach did not aim for representativeness. Additionally, a cross-sectional study design was used to examine how public health influences participants' news consumption habits.

Data Collection

Participants were invited to participate in a one-on-one interview lasting approximately one hour, conducted either in-person or online, considering their schedules and health concerns during COVID-19. Participation was voluntary, and participants signed an Information Sheet and Consent Form to fully protect their rights. Additionally, before the interviews, a Concept Explanation Sheet was provided to help participants understand certain concepts and better prepare for the interview questions.

Based on the research questions, the interview was divided into six sections:

- *Personal Information*: Interviewees were asked to provide basic personal information, such as nationality, age, highest level of education, and occupation.
- *Background Mapping*: A generic question was used to map the background: “Could you please describe how COVID-19 has affected your life?”
- *Pre-COVID-19 News Consumption*: Interviewees discussed their news consumption habits before COVID-19, including their daily news consumption routine, preferred news media, news elements and categories, trust in various media, interaction with news, corresponding feelings, and how they interacted with others regarding the news they consumed.
- *During COVID-19 News Consumption*: Similar to the third section, interviewees were asked about their news consumption habits during the COVID-19 outbreak.
- *Post-COVID-19 News Consumption*: Interviewees were asked about their news consumption habits after the COVID-19 outbreak, mirroring the questions from the third section.
- *Comparative Analysis*: Two questions were used to compare the news consumption habits as COVID-19 developed.

Data Analysis

Specifically, coding was used to examine news consumption habits through several key dimensions:

- *Preferred Media Channels and Frequency*: This includes the types of media consumers favor (e.g., mainstream media, social media) and their typical usage patterns (e.g., morning, night).
- *Valued News Elements*: The aspects of news that consumers find most important (e.g., immediacy, proximity, prominence, oddity, conflict, suspense, emotion, and consequence).
- *Preferred News Categories*: The genres of news that attract readers (e.g., health, science, politics, China, world, fashion, food).
- *Media Interaction*: How consumers engage with news content (e.g., forward, share, ignore, skim).
- *Attitudes and Feelings*: The emotional responses elicited by news consumption (e.g.,

sad, worried, anxious, fear, fine, happy, joy, frightened).

Results

To explore how the pandemic has impacted foreigners living in China regarding access to news, we first asked interviewees a background-mapping question: “Could you please describe how COVID-19 has affected your life?” This question aimed to uncover changes in their daily lives, work, study, and communication, and how these changes influenced their news consumption habits. The responses were categorized into several aspects:

Travel

The COVID-19 outbreak and subsequent government policies, such as home quarantine and social distancing, severely restricted expatriates’ travel. Border control policies and quarantine concerns prevented them from flying home, while domestic travel was hindered by the need to register multiple health codes, often without clear guidance. Early in the pandemic, severe outbreaks in parts of China and government lockdowns further discouraged travel. Additionally, the lack of procedures for foreigners to register health codes limited access to malls and restaurants. Public transportation restrictions led many to rely more on taxis, e-bikes, and bicycles.

Work and Study

While few interviewees changed jobs, many transitioned to working from home. Initially, they struggled with the blurred boundaries between work and life but eventually adapted. Due to the shrinking job market, many became more cautious and serious about their work, often working extra hours without overtime pay. Some focused more on COVID-19 due to professional sensitivities, seeking opportunities to contribute to combating the pandemic. The shift to online activities also posed challenges for teachers and students. Teachers reported decreased interaction with students and spent more time adapting to online teaching tools. Students faced visa uncertainties and discomfort with online education, preferring face-to-face learning and struggling with group work across time zones.

Social Life

Distancing policies and travel restrictions moved social interactions online. Families separated by the pandemic had to adjust to long periods apart, often relying on digital communication, which sometimes increased misinformation. Those who socialized in person took precautions like wearing masks and using hand sanitizer. Over time, many interviewees reported maturing in their relationships with family and friends.

Discrimination

Interviewees reported increased incidents of discrimination during COVID-19, often related to

race. The China Foreign Affairs Bureau was frequently mentioned as a resource for help, indicating the government's recognition of the need to protect foreigners' rights. However, there is still much to be done to raise awareness of openness and tolerance and reduce discrimination against foreign communities.

From Mainstream to Social: Consume to Survive

The media environment significantly influences news consumers' online habits, as examined through two distinct periods: before and during COVID-19. Prior to the pandemic, most interviewees reported accessing media primarily through the Internet, spending considerable time on mainstream media and social media, with the latter being more frequently used. This shift to digital news consumption is a result of the rapidly evolving media landscape driven by the Internet. Popular platforms mentioned by interviewees included websites, news apps, social media, streaming platforms, and blogs.

The devices used for accessing news have also transitioned from print newspapers and magazines to digital devices such as cell phones, tablets, laptops, and desktops. Mobile devices, in particular, have enabled news consumption anywhere and anytime, although some interviewees preferred consuming news at night when they had more free time. Despite the digital shift, many interviewees continued to follow recognized mainstream media through the Internet, such as BBC, CNN, and the *South China Morning Post* newspaper. This reflects mainstream media's efforts to expand distribution channels in the era of convergent journalism. However, some legacy media, like the *South China Morning Post*, have implemented paywalls on their websites. While some interviewees, particularly media professionals, subscribed to these services, others viewed them as overly commercial and not focused on improving reporting quality. Attracting news consumers' attention continues to remain a challenge for legacy media.

Generally, interviewees reported positive experiences with social media algorithms, enjoying a continuous stream of news tailored to their interests, especially younger users. Social media was also used for receiving and sharing news with online friends. However, issues such as misinformation and digital disconnection were also noted. Some interviewees preferred to consume news through multiple channels simultaneously, combining social media with traditional media like TV. Interviewee #4 (Indian) said,

“While using social media, like WeChat, I also watched traditional media, like TV, to watch BBC, CNN, or just let it run in the background.”

Also, interviewees favored news elements such as proximity, conflict, and immediacy, indicating that dramatic, self-interest-related, and timely news is more likely to capture their attention. However, these elements also make misinformation more likely to spread. There was no clear trend in preferred news categories before COVID-19, though interviewees living in China showed more interest in Chinese news due to proximity. Interaction with media was higher for news seen on social media, especially if it related to their home countries or interests.

Most interviewees felt neutral about the news they consumed, but proximity and conflict-related news were more likely to evoke emotions and trigger further engagement, such as sharing and commenting.

During COVID-19, most interviewees engaged more on social media due to the need for social interaction. Media outlets set agendas for reporting COVID-19 cases, preventative measures, government actions, and related outcomes. Interviewees emphasized the urgent need for immediate and accurate COVID-19 statistics for decision-making. Although their media consumption habits did not change significantly, they spent more time on COVID-19-related news to make essential survival decisions. Increased time on social media also led to more frequent commenting and sharing of news, partly due to the need to verify sources amidst rampant misinformation (Diddi & La Rose, 2006; Katz et al., 1973; Rubin, 1983).

Also, interviewees expanded their local news sources, such as China Central Television and China News Agency, to understand the situation in China, given the potential bias in Western media reports. News categories that gained more attention during the pandemic included health, China, science, and politics, reflecting a prioritization of survival. Initially, interviewees read news stories carefully, driven by survival instincts. However, information overload led some to skim news to avoid fatigue.

Interviewee #6 (Italian) stated, “Sometimes skimmed it, just got tired.”

Interactions with media reached a high level during the pandemic. Interviewees frequently refreshed news apps and social media, spending significant time and energy identifying misinformation due to its impact on their lives. The need for social interaction drove social media usage and engagement much higher.

Consequently, all interviewees indicated that news consumption during COVID-19 caused their emotions to fluctuate, with attitudes toward news being closely related to its content due to the media’s COVID-19 agenda. More than half of the interviewees experienced negative emotions such as arrogance, cynicism, hostility, distrust, depression, and suspicion during COVID-19 news consumption. This underscores the significant influence of the media environment on news consumers’ perceptions of events.

Dilemmata Arising from the Variety of Cultural Backgrounds

Trust in media significantly impacts news consumption habits, influencing how people perceive, digest, and interact with news. This section examines this influence across two time periods: before and during COVID-19.

Prior to COVID-19, all interviewees expressed a preference for mainstream and social media, despite varying levels of trust in these sources. They typically consumed news online during their spare time, such as evenings and weekends. Notably, no interviewee claimed total trust in a single media outlet, indicating a degree of media suspicion. Overall, trust in mainstream

media was higher than in internet-based media (e.g., social media, blogs, forums, streaming platforms). Interviewee #1 said,

“Anyone can post anything (on social media).”

Interviewees with higher education levels preferred to consume news in their own ways, regardless of the media channel, and tended to trust news circulated within their small social groups (e.g., small WeChat groups). Interviewee #3 stated,

“I always doubt everything first.”

More than half of the interviewees indicated they would verify news if genuinely interested or relying on it for decision-making, employing critical thinking skills. They typically used search engines (e.g., Google) or social media search functions (e.g., Meta, Twitter) to investigate key terms related to certain incidents or writers. Interviewee #11 explained,

“If someone shares a story with me, and I’m thinking I’ve never heard of this organization before, then I would look it up.”

However, especially those few interviewees who preferred consuming news through word of mouth (e.g., friends, colleagues) rather than print or digital media, might not bother to verify news, feeling they had more important tasks and thus avoiding spending too much time on news digestion. Most interviewees paid attention to proximity, conflict, and immediacy, with no clear preference for news categories due to their diversity. This indicates that news consumption habits are relatively fixed and not easily changed. Interestingly, low trust in news could lead to negative attitudes and high-frequency news participation. For example, some interviewees shared or commented on fake news to warn friends or family about its authenticity, often with anger. This finding aligns with Fletcher and Park’s (2017) observation that negative feelings of low media trust can trigger higher news participation.

During COVID-19, interviewees continued to prefer mainstream and social media, consistent with responses to RQ1. However, they consumed news more frequently and preferred sources with higher trust levels. Since the outbreak, almost all interviewees reported a decline in media trust, especially in social media. They performed more cross-checks on news sources to uncover the truth behind various incidents, challenging their media literacy and critical thinking abilities. Trust in legacy media remained higher than in internet-based media, particularly social media:

Interviewee #7: (I) partly trust them (media), (I want to) not to stay neutral ... (legacy media are) more reliable than social media, (I) want to hear more different voices.

Interviewee #1: Social media got lots of different or extreme opinions regarding COVID-19. People got affected a lot by biased news, so (I decided) not to trust a lot of social media websites.

Most interviewees used social media primarily for the latest news, emphasizing immediacy and proximity. However, this also exposed them to a higher likelihood of encountering fake news. They admitted encountering misinformation on almost all aspects of the pandemic, including the virus's origin, the true number of cases, and politically polarized news coverage. These issues impeded the flow of correct information, intensified echo chambers and filter bubbles, and sharply declined media trust.

Regarding biased news, some interviewees shared their perspectives on Chinese and Western media's COVID-19 coverage:

Interviewee #1 (Indonesian): Outside of WeChat, there was much news in China, but seems to be Americanized/biased, a lot of Western news at that time was very biased, anti-China, which very frustrated me... (The) Western media underreported events a lot in the East, and other countries that within the atmosphere.

Interviewee #4 (Indian): Dad's in India ... We are already here in China, where the situation was not so bad, but he was still very anxious which made us very crazy ... Dad sent me news articles which both drives me and my mom crazy, because the news articles could be very disappointing. So we had to told him to stop sending news articles. As a result, I received less. Felt better and happier.

More than half of the interviewees focused more on health, science, and China news during COVID-19. Despite decreased media trust, there was a tendency to pay more attention to political news. Interviewee #9 (Malaysian) explained:

Sometimes politics can play as a rule in making this event better or worse, as you know that some governments would take some measures to prevent it (COVID-19), so we have to look at the politics' system or environment in the country.

Additionally, continuing changes in media trust also influenced news consumers' attitudes and feelings about news stories, altering their behavior accordingly. Two interviewees expressed negative feelings regarding COVID-19 news:

Interviewee #9 (Malaysian): When reading news, (I) felt disappointed, because some countries could not tackle this problem efficiently, and affect every aspect of our lives, making our activities restrained, not as free as ever.

Interviewee #10 (French): Sad about what's happened in my country.

As a result, some interviewees reported changes in their attitudes influenced by these emotions. A young interviewee #1 (Indonesian) noted that, "(I) became more sceptical, because of news quality varies."

Another interviewee #2 (American) who had family in her home country stated,

“(I felt) uncertain, I could not literally trust the news, my worry was brought up by kids and family.”

Meanwhile, some interviewees tried to control their news consumption or lost interest in following current events:

Interviewee #9: (I) don't feel anxious, because I am mature enough, as an adult I know what to know.

Interviewee #2: (I feel) less stressed, but still a little bit worried about family in the US.

An interviewee said she would look for more positive news from reliable news sources, such as the development of the COVID-19 vaccine:

Interviewee #1: (I felt) relief about the vaccine.

These two statements clearly show that when it came to reassurance, more traditional (home) media were preferred.

Evolving Dynamics on Responses to Misinformation Related to Public Health

The COVID-19 pandemic was defined by the World Health Organization (2020) as “a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC)” (para. 1). It affected people's news consumption habits over different time periods.

During the early COVID-19 outbreak, heightened health awareness led most interviewees to consume more news on social media, particularly about COVID-19. This increased both their interaction with news and their communication with others. Also, they indicated a preference for news categories related to the development of COVID-19 and their survival, such as health, science, China, and the world. These categories are commonly constructed by news elements such as immediacy, proximity, emotion, consequence, and conflict. They consumed such news with increased intensity and duration, making them more likely to encounter misinformation related to COVID-19. Interviewee #11 (American) said:

And then another group of people who were maybe sharing other information that I didn't agree with, like articles from news organizations, like do trust about how maybe wearing a mask is not so helpful or not even good for you or the coronavirus is a hoax, you know.

In the context of COVID-19, more than half of the interviewees said they consumed news in a more comprehensive, lengthier, and engaging way. They actively searched and digested information for specific purposes such as personal communication, self-protection, safety of family members, and travel arrangements:

Interviewee #10 (French): Tell friends about my situations and city that I stay...China is well-organized. Show them that I am well off.

Interviewee #11 (American): Um, I was hoping to influence their behaviour in terms of wearing masks. That was a thing they would wear masks and do all the things that we know that are helpful to control the coronavirus, because I was worried about them.

However, some interviewees preferred to stay calm and avoid contributing to the chaotic flood of information. When asked about the action of disseminating news, interviewee #3 (Irish) said that he “not really” shared news, because “I didn’t want to transmit any false information.” Having consumed a substantial amount of news, every interviewee reported learning how to take preventative measures, such as wearing masks and using hand sanitizer. This finding aligns with Lo and Wei’s (2002) research that higher exposure to news is likely correlated with higher consumption effects on oneself and others. Later, as the COVID-19 situation evolved in China, most interviewees reported reading more news on mainstream media instead of social media due to their previous experiences. Compared to the early COVID-19 outbreak, their frequency of news consumption dropped dramatically. Several interviewees reported suffering from information overload, a condition that began to surface approximately one year after the COVID-19 outbreak. As a result, their news-reading performance decreased in both intensity and duration, and their interaction with news content was notably reduced:

Interviewee #4: (I) initially read it a lot and got scared, but after getting more and more, (I) just ignored it because way too many, or skimmed through it, contents were very repetitive, because already seen or read it on WeChat or TV.

Interviewee #3: In the early months I followed the spread of COVID-19 but after a few months I stopped.

Later on, during the crisis, at least some interviewees returned to their original news consumption habits, considering they no longer needed to search for survival information and gradually resumed their original rhythm of life:

Interviewee #11: I would say I’ve kind of gone back to my previous habits of looking at articles that others recommended on social media and occasionally looking things for myself ... I’ve kind of reverted away from just being glued to the statistics of what’s happening, especially with COVID all the time.

Interviewee #3: I don’t really check the news. I hear from friends or social media.

However, news consumers who cared about their friends and family still shared COVID-19 news to warn of potential threats. Consequently, some interviewees focused more on their own countries rather than China:

Interviewee #11 (American): Because the situation has improved there, I guess. I think

my practice for sharing on Facebook has not changed because I still have so much concern for my friends and family and others who live in my homestay.

Interviewee #10 (French): Two months ago (October, 2020), I became more interested in my countries' situations. I care about my family and friends, and want to find relevant topics to talk with.

Another striking scenario in the interviews was that the categories of news consumed by the interviewees changed. While they still kept a close eye on health news for future preparation, they paid more attention to political and world news as the situation of COVID-19 outside of China worsened. As one interviewee explained,

“Since July (2020), (I) mainly focused on the rest of the world.”

News elements such as conflict and emotion caught the eyes of most interviewees. Countries, notably the United States, were perceived to have failed to respond effectively to the dramatic spread of the coronavirus due to various factors such as political polarization (Jacobs, 2021). The U.S. also experienced one of the most turbulent presidential elections in history:

Interviewee #1 (Indonesian): American politics, because a lot of riots at that moment, thus (was) reading a lot on American politics during that time.

Interviewee #11 (American): A lot of politics, a lot of US politics, especially with the election and this last period, there was a lot of politics. Um, and then also health news because of COVID.

Meanwhile, a few interviewees in China had been continuously monitoring China's political environment, believing it would involve many policy changes that concerned them, such as visa policy and border control policies:

Interviewee #6 (Italian): China's conflict with other countries in terms of politics, races, vaccine, border policies... Trying to be aware of what is going on in China and the rest of the world, because as foreigners I don't belong to this country, keep an eye on the possibility of staying in or out of China, because I am here on a visa, worried about the visa procedure.

Nearly every interviewee began seeking news regarding the efficacy of the vaccine, the timing of vaccination, and the vaccination procedure. This shift meant they consumed similar news messages with more positive emotions like relief, gratitude, and hope. Interviewee #2 said:

Now (I) have a good understanding of this virus, and instead of finding how to stay safe, (I) check more on what's going happen next, when do we get vaccine, which vaccine is good, do I want to get a vaccine.

As the pandemic progressed, information overload led to decreased news engagement and a shift towards mainstream media. However, the evolving global situation has rejuvenated interviewees' interest in news, particularly regarding developments in their home countries and medical progress against COVID-19.

Discussion

This research investigated how foreigners in China consumed news before and during COVID-19, focusing on three factors: media environment, trust in media, and the public health emergency.

Results indicated that the Internet had significantly shaped the media landscape, with over 90% of interviewees consuming COVID-19 news on digital devices. This aligns with Johnson and Harihara's (2017) findings the general public's knowledge and attitudes towards health risks during pandemics are influenced by the accessibility and dissemination of information through digital media platforms. Despite this digital shift, legacy media remained influential through digital distribution. However, more than half of the interviewees faced issues like information overload, echo chambers, and filter bubbles. Consequently, many shifted their focus to specific news categories to mitigate these drawbacks.

Also, Casero-Ripolles (2020) noted that increased news consumption during COVID-19 did not boost media trust. This research found a significant decline in media trust due to misinformation. Some interviewees abandoned previously favored media outlets for more reliable sources. Despite relying heavily on social media for news, trust in these platforms was notably low. Interviewees with higher education levels showed lower trust in media and were more proactive in seeking news and taking preventive measures. Younger interviewees with only high school diplomas were more confused about finding trustworthy media. This aligns with Rosenbaum et al.'s (2008) findings on the role of media literacy and critical thinking, that individuals with higher media literacy are better equipped to critically evaluate information sources, discern misinformation, and make informed decisions about the media they consume.

Similarly, COVID-19, the most severe global health crisis since the 1918 Spanish Flu, altered news consumption patterns. Interviewees shifted their news focus based on survival instincts. They consumed more health, science, China, world, and political news as the pandemic evolved. Older age group showed a higher consumption of COVID-19-related news, similar to Casero-Ripolles' (2020) findings that in the group of 65+ US adults, COVID-19-related news consumption increased by 16%. Considering this, news consumers' various concerns, such as health awareness, the safety of their friends and family members, and communication with others, can be seen as the driving factors behind their consumption behaviors.

Regarding the COVID-19 outbreak, Dhanani and Franz (2020) highlighted the link between news consumption habits and misinformation. As the situation in China improved, interviewees focused more on developments in their home countries, interacting with overseas friends and family to share timely and accurate news. This behavior is consistent with a report showing

that 30% of Americans believed COVID-19 was lab-developed, and many felt news reports exaggerated the risks (Mitchell & Oliphant, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic reconnected even the least engaged individuals with public health news, reducing inequality in news consumption and fostering informed communities.

The research also revealed that public awareness of and strategies for COVID-19 prevention was high in the sample, but that it was limited in size and its retrospective nature, potentially introducing bias. Qualitative research captures dynamic attitudes, but it always begs for further studies to generalize findings. Future research should explore more dynamic aspects of news behavior, such as forwarding and selection, to help news organizations attract niche audiences. Thus, before the pandemic fades from our collective consciousness, further analysis is needed to understand changing news behaviors and misinformation impacts in detail.

Despite reporting that the pandemic significantly impacted their daily lives, affecting travel, work, social interactions, and mental health, some interviewees exhibited unexpected resilience and adaptability in the face of adversity, highlighting their capacity to overcome challenges in a completely different cultural background.

Interviewees from diverse cultural backgrounds revealed distinct patterns in how they perceived and interacted with health-related information. Interviewees from a more individualistic culture (e.g. US American) were proactive in seeking out news, often relying on personal subscriptions and social media. Thus, US American interviewee #11 was critical of media sources, preferring established, reputable outlets, and actively verified information to form independent opinions. During the interview, she expressed strong emotions, including frustration and concern, particularly regarding the political climate in the US.

In contrast, collectivist interviewees, primarily from Confucianism-influenced cultural backgrounds (e.g., Indonesian, Singaporean, Malaysian), relied more on social networks and word-of-mouth for news. They shared news within their social groups, influenced by community opinions and concerns, and trusted familiar sources like family, friends, and local media. This group was more susceptible to groupthink and social pressure, sharing news to maintain social harmony and support their community. Conversely, their behavior thereby demonstrated obedience to authority, adhering to China's anti-COVID policies by staying home, wearing masks, and maintaining social distancing.

Additionally, it was surprising to find out that foreign news consumers in China who have experienced COVID-19, especially those from non-Western countries (Indonesia, India, etc.), sometimes perceive China's COVID-related news covered by Western media as biased. They have taken actions to resist this perceived bias, such as reducing the time spent reading and sharing Western media news feeds, and actively sharing their experiences in China with friends and family in their home countries to provide a more accurate picture and reassure them.

In the later stages of the COVID-19 development, political news was at the forefront of interviewees' minds. Interviewees expressed concern about President Trump's labeling of

COVID-19 as the “Chinese Virus” and his speeches in the 2020 U.S. presidential election, which fueled virus-related discrimination and violence against Asians, exacerbating existing systemic biases (Riechmann & Tang, 2020). In response, when interviewed, many Asians conveyed strong negative emotions, such as anger, fear, and sadness.

Conversely, Western interviewees expressed concerns about a potential backlash, including rising Chinese nationalism, which could result in discriminatory treatment against foreigners in China. They described examples of such discrimination happened to them or their friends or families, and urged the Chinese government to intervene to prevent further escalation. Particularly, interviewees focused on the statements and policies of the newly elected U.S. president and his administration, as these would impact U.S.-China relations, local pandemic control measures, visa policies in host countries, and the attitudes of their local communities towards them. All these unpredictable changes may bring new shocks to their diaspora life, so they need to keep an eye on it and prepare in advance.

In the face of similar situations encountered by expatriates, solutions have been proposed and implemented by multiple stakeholders like organizations, private sectors and policymakers from previous experience (Aïmeur et al., 2023). These solutions, supported by academic research and practical participation, can help create a systematic framework to counter misinformation and empower individuals to make informed decisions.

One effective solution is the implementation of AI-powered instantaneous translation software, which helps bridge language barriers and ensures accurate information dissemination (Siu, 2023). Baidu and ByteDance, two of the leading Chinese Internet companies, have integrated AI-powered translation into their instant message services and smart devices. These tools can automatically translate documents and news articles, helping users quickly access and understand important information (Donnelly, 2024).

Additionally, fact-checking mechanisms and AI-driven content moderation tools are other two critical components for debunking fake information (Salma et al., 2024). By collaborating with news agencies, social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, TikTok and YouTube utilize generative AI, to scan and flag potentially false information, providing users with verified facts and debunking myths in real-time (Kamboj, 2024; Manish, 2024; Washington, 2023). These tools not only prevent the spread of false information but also provide users with context and corrections, ensuring a safer and more reliable online environment.

Although technology can mitigate the sudden impact of public health crises, long-term preparedness and prevention are essential for strategic and sustainable approaches. To effectively combat misinformation, it is crucial to hold platforms and individuals accountable for spreading false information by developing and enforcing legal policies. Governments can collaborate with tech companies to create policy frameworks that promote transparency and accountability, ensuring the swift addressing of misinformation (Vanden Abeele et al., 2024)

The lesson to be learned from this is that digital literacy programs are essential in educating

people on identifying credible sources and debunking misinformation. Considering that designing and implementing such programs require substantial resources and time to see results, these initiatives are typically launched by governments, educational departments, or schools (Digital Literacy Accelerator, 2022). They often target school-aged children to ensure they acquire good digital literacy before entering society (Digital Literacy and Technological Skills, 2023). One specific example is an evidence-based digital literacy program developed by the Canadian Ministry of Education. This program includes topics selected from seminal work in digital literacy education, aiming to enhance digital skills among vulnerable groups (Buchan et al., 2024). Likewise, similar programs can be delivered through workshops, online courses, and community outreach, targeting vulnerable or minority groups such as the elderly or those from different cultural backgrounds (Wedlake & Bugre, 2023).

Furthermore, the Internet has become a crucial source of health information, emphasizing the need for local health organizations to provide preventive advice online. Tailored online health communication campaigns, which utilize a mix of traditional media, social media, and community engagement are vital in disseminating accurate health information. This is particularly evident in China, where there is a tendency to favor a collectivist approach to propaganda and a policy preference for majority rule (Gao & Zhang, 2021; Perry, 2024).

Since the mid-1980s, the evolution and practices of health communication in China have prominently featured the use of mass media and community engagement in public health campaigns (Dang et al., 2021). During COVID-19, social media is the most powerful tool for mobilization (Ban, 2020). A health campaign on Sina Weibo, initiated by a celebrity, promoted mask-wearing. The hashtag “#national mask campaign#” became highly popular, with millions of users participating. For foreigners in China, understanding their news habits during the pandemic can help provide timely, accurate information, minimizing information gaps during health crises, which still remain relevant post-pandemic. This campaign effectively used social media to promote health behaviors and build trust within communities, which is a good way for foreigners settling in China to learn how to access local healthcare resources effectively (Jiang et al., 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic not only challenged the daily lives of expatriates in China but also prompted a reevaluation of China’s media establishment and operations. Interviewees noted changes in their news consumption to counter rising prejudice and discrimination from polarized media. The study highlights how diverse media have stigmatized foreigners, prompting social judgments and discriminatory behaviors. This affects China’s international image and suggests a need for media authorities to curb discriminatory news.

The data from the interviews also revealed that most participants utilized social media as a common source of news, although trust in it varied. They heavily relied on foreign media for information, even if it required using VPNs, while local news was primarily obtained through social media or word-of-mouth. They rarely consulted Chinese media for two main reasons: the inherent distrust of state-owned media in China and the difficulty in finding timely and comprehensive English-language news from Chinese media, which predominantly

disseminates information in Chinese.

Recent events, such as the three-month lockdown in Shanghai in 2022, have contributed to a continued decline in the number of foreigners in China (Bickenbach & Liu, 2022). Despite the Chinese leadership's emphasis on stabilizing foreign trade and investment policies (Chu & Ferenczy, 2023), the diverse challenges brought about by the pandemic highlight the need for a more nuanced and inclusive approach to media. Given the stringent regulation of media in China, this situation may prompt the Chinese government to reassess its external policies to better accommodate the needs of foreign residents and improve their confidence and convenience in living and working in China.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Usage Statement

During the preparation of this work, the author used ChatGPT to review the manuscript. The use was limited to the Literature Review of the manuscript.

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Corresponding Author: Weinan Yuan

Email: weinanyuan@uic.edu.cn