
Miscellaneous

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Framing people with intellectual disabilities: A content analysis of official and commercial Chinese news outlets

Abstract

People with disabilities, as a vulnerable group in society, have consistently been the subject of public concern. With the media's pivotal role in shaping public consciousness and societal norms, its portrayal of specific groups can contribute to the creation and reinforcement of stigma, particularly concerning illness and disability. Guided by framing theory, this study examines how people with intellectual disabilities are constructed in the Chinese official (*People's Daily*) and commercial (*Southern Metropolitan Daily*) news media over three years from 2021 to 2023. A content analysis of 220 news articles revealed that coverage of people with intellectual disabilities was predominantly presented as hard news and significantly more prevalent in the *People's Daily* than in the *Southern Metropolitan Daily*. Employing Clogston's (1990) and Haller's (1995) disability frames, the analysis revealed a predominant portrayal of people with intellectual disabilities as vulnerable and in need of assistance, highlighting a stigmatizing representation within the media coverage.

Keywords

People with intellectual disabilities, Chinese media, stigma, framing theory, content analysis.

1. Introduction

People with disabilities, as a vulnerable group in society, have consistently been the subject of public concern. However, most people's perception of disability is limited to visible impairments such as being wheelchair-bound or blind. Among the various types of disabilities, individuals with intellectual disabilities are particularly vulnerable due to their often limited or non-existent ability to express their will (Flynn & Arstein-Kerslake, 2014). The evolving definitions and growing international interest in intellectual disability underscore the need to understand societal structures (Schalock et al., 2021). In 2006, the China Disabled Persons' Federation issued the Practical Evaluation Standards for Persons with Disabilities in China (State Council, 2006). The document defines intellectual disability as significantly lower intelligence than the general population, coupled with impairments in adaptive behavior. While formal recognition of this definition has likely contributed to increased societal awareness regarding the living conditions and challenges faced by individuals with intellectual disabilities, research indicates that

despite these advancements, they continue to be a socially disadvantaged group, relegated to the bounds of society and long neglected and misunderstood (Bollard, 2009; Li & Ren, 2024).

As a powerful social institution, the media strategically shapes public consciousness and societal norms (Entman, 1993). Throughout history, media have evolved from traditional platforms like newspapers, radio, and television to encompass digital media's vast and rapidly changing landscape, including social media, blogs, and online news sites (Kaul, 2012). This evolution has dramatically transformed how information is disseminated and consumed, making media more influential in public discourse. Altheide (2016) emphasizes that our life experiences today are extensively filtered through media channels. Therefore, the influence of the media can transcend personal experience when forming perceptions of social groups (Clarke, 2011; Philo, 1996).

However, research suggests that news media portrayals of specific groups may contribute to creating or reinforcing stigma. In some contexts, these representations are particularly impactful around issues of illness and disability (Corrigan et al., 2005; Pescosolido et al., 2008; Wahl, 1995). For instance, individuals with disabilities are frequently depicted as 'evil' or 'monsters' (Barnes, 1992). This phenomenon is especially pronounced in the digital age, where the rapid dissemination of information through online media platforms can amplify biases and stereotypes, leading to misrepresentations and the promotion of misconceptions about people with disabilities. The media's selective production and presentation of information can lead to a distorted view of reality (Heuer et al., 2011; Smith, 2007). These selective and biased narratives can lead to discrimination, exclusion, and marginalization, thus making it challenging for individuals with disabilities to access opportunities equally (Tang & Bie, 2016; Wilkinson & McGill, 2009).

The framing theory, a concept widely used since its introduction into journalism and communication (Gitlin, 2003), provides valuable insights into how mass media constructs social reality. In the day-to-day routine practices of journalism, news media often select specific frames for some fixed subject matter, which subconsciously construct particular images (Entman, 1993). While much research on news framing has focused on people with disabilities (Dahl, 1993; Devotta et al., 2013; Haller, 1995; Lin et al., 2024), autism (Huws & Jones, 2011; Kang, 2013; Tang & Bie, 2016), and mental illness (Ma, 2017; Sieff, 2003; Stout et al., 2004), studies on the representation of intellectual disability in the news media remain scarce. One exception is Chen et al.'s (2012) study, which systematically classified the images of individuals with intellectual disabilities in Taiwanese print newspapers and quantitatively assessed the relative proportions among these classifications. However, China's news industry has undergone a profound digital shift since then. By December 2021, 771 million Chinese netizens regularly accessed online news, making web-based platforms a primary source of information for a vast portion of the population (Zhou & Yang, 2024). Industry reports confirm that Chinese news outlets have transformed into an "era of deeper integration with digital and intelligent technologies," reshaping how stories are selected, framed, and disseminated (China Daily, 2024).

With the shift to online news consumption and media's substantial influence on public perception, understanding media portrayal of people with intellectual disabilities is crucial. Guided by framing theory, this study aims to build upon existing knowledge by assessing the representation of intellectual disability in Chinese online news media. This analysis can inform practices and policies aimed at decreasing stigma and fostering a more equitable and understanding society, particularly for individuals with intellectual

disabilities. To this end, this study employs content analysis to examine news articles about intellectual disability from official (*People's Daily*) and commercial (*Southern Metropolitan Daily*) media between 2021 and 2023. Specifically, it investigates the extent of coverage and the framing strategies these news outlets use to portray intellectual disability.

2. Literature review

2.1. Intellectual disability in China: An overview

In 1987, the State Department of China promulgated a definition and standard for the intellectual disability, that was consistent with the international definition proposed by the 8th American Association on Mental Retardation (AAMR) in 1983 (Grossman, 1983). This move signaled a recognition of the importance of defining and addressing people with intellectual disabilities within a domestic context. Subsequently, the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD) further refined the understanding of intellectual disability with the 12th edition of the definition of intellectual disability in 2021 (Schalock et al., 2021). This update harmonizes the definition of persons with intellectual disabilities. The definition emphasizes that intellectual disability is a condition that manifests before age 18 and is characterized by significant limitations in intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior, encompassing cognitive, language, motor, and social abilities (Schalock et al., 2021). The publication of this manual marks a significant paradigm shift in the field of intellectual disability. More scholars have made the intellectual disability population the focus of their research. For example, Gleason et al.'s (2021) research examines the multifaceted impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on individuals with intellectual disabilities. Glencross et al. (2021) explore Internet use among people with intellectual disabilities, identifying types, risks, and benefits of usage. Evolving definitions and increasing scholarly attention to intellectual disability reflect a concern for individuals with intellectual disabilities within a global context.

However, the majority of individuals with intellectual disabilities are found in developing countries (Scior, 2016). As one of the world's most populous nations, China exemplifies this trend. According to the National Basic Information Database of Persons with Disabilities published by the China Disabled Persons' Federation (2021), as of December 31, 2021, the total number of people with disabilities in China who have applied for a disability card is approximately 38.04 million. Of these, the number of persons with intellectual disabilities in China is about 5.54 million. Although China has made efforts to safeguard and respect the rights of persons with disabilities through a range of initiatives, individuals with disabilities in the country still face considerable challenges regarding education, employment, and overall quality of life (Campbell & Uren, 2011; Li & Ren, 2024).

Historically, individuals with intellectual disabilities have occupied a lower stratum of society for extended periods (Barnes, 1992). Influenced by their physical and external environmental factors, they become socially disadvantaged, experiencing below-average access to education, employment opportunities, and welfare systems (Scior, 2016). Wu et al. (2010) point out that overall, intellectual disability special education is not meeting the needs in China, indicating a gap between existing services and the actual needs of this population. Furthermore, the Chinese Labor Market Developmental Report revealed relatively little specific policy and support for employment opportunities for persons with intellectual disabilities (Lai et al., 2017). While there have been international advancements

in defining intellectual disability and increased scholarly attention to the field, research focusing specifically on China reveals a concerning reality. Barnes (1992), Chen et al. (2012), and Li and Ren (2024) highlight that individuals with intellectual disabilities in China constitute a large and easily neglected population, where social discrimination is a significant factor contributing to their disadvantaged position.

2.2. Stigma and media

Research on stigma focuses on the discrimination and social exclusion of specific groups by the broader society. Goffman (1968) defined stigma as a discrediting attribute, while Link and Phelan (2001) proposed that it comprises labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination. Some conditions, such as mental illnesses, tend to be more stigmatized than physical illnesses (Smith, 2007). Because of the mass media's technological capabilities, stigmatization now expands to the online world. Blissett (2022) observes that "while the ground is fertile with knowledge, it also allows the weeds of myths to grow." This highlights how the promotion of negative ideas through media can create attitudinal barriers, often stemming from misinformation and misunderstandings about the lived experiences of people with disabilities. This media-driven stigma significantly affects people with intellectual disabilities. Scholars have observed that the news media tend to depict people with intellectual disabilities in negative stereotypes, portraying them as needy and pathetic (Chen et al., 2012; Renwick, 2016; Wertheimer, 1988). Consequently, news reports on intellectual disability can inadvertently perpetuate stigmatization. This trend of portraying individuals with intellectual disabilities as vulnerable or victims appears to be increasing, further contributing to the perpetuation of stigma within society (Pardun, 2005).

The experience and impact of stigma can vary across cultures. Research suggests that the association of stigma may be more pronounced in China compared to other cultural contexts (Mak & Cheung, 2008). Corrigan (2004) categorized stigma into public stigma, involving negative stereotyping by the general public, and self-stigma, which entails internalized loss of self-esteem and self-efficacy. In addition, Chiu et al. (2015) identified affiliative stigma, mediated by emotional stigma, as a significant factor in Chinese society. This cultural context significantly impacts both individuals with disabilities and their caregivers. For the Chinese, disabilities are often perceived as negative signs or consequences of past misbehavior, leading not only to the concealment of affected individuals from the public eye but also to familial shame (Campbell & Uren, 2011). Such stigmatizing views likely contribute to the marginalization of people with intellectual disabilities in China, as seen in their significantly low rates of education and employment (Li & Ren, 2024).

2.3. Chinese news media system

The transformation of China's news media has changed the country's information landscape. Before the reform and opening in 1978, China's news media was a propaganda tool for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (Shirk, 2007). However, since the late 1970s, the CCP has launched sweeping reforms in the media industry and relinquished its monopoly on information provision to promote economic modernization and openness. This transformation of China's media landscape has been spurred by various factors, including political upheaval, technological advancements, and economic shifts (Winfield & Peng, 2005), resulting in a transition from a state-subsidized to a commercially driven media model (Chan, 1993; Zhao, 1998). Consequently, competition among news outlets has

intensified, with some outlets aligning with the Party's interests to maintain the status quo. In contrast, others leverage market forces to expand their audience and diminish state control, thereby advocating for liberalization (Chan, 1993).

The emergence of the Internet has provided modern media and information dissemination with an open and free society called the network society (Stalder, 1998; Van Dijk, 2012). China, recognizing the importance of this digital landscape, actively promotes the development of Internet infrastructure (Gang & Bandurski, 2011) and boasts many users. According to the latest data from the 52nd statistical report on the Internet in China, as of June 2023, the number of Internet users in China has reached 1.079 billion, and the Internet penetration rate has also reached 76.4%. Modern media and communication technologies are transforming the news industry with unprecedented patterns of development (Wang, 2020). However, the advent of new technologies has not weakened censorship in Chinese media; media censorship is rather strict. The Chinese government censors the Internet through technical means and pressures journalists to self-censor using tactics like dismissals, lawsuits, and arrests (Xu & Albert, 2017). While the Chinese government exerts significant control over the news, some citizens have developed creative ways to bypass censorship, such as using proxy servers, VPNs, microblogs, and other social media platforms (Tai, 2014; Xiao, 2011; Xu & Albert, 2017).

Among the major online news outlets in China, *People's Daily* and *Southern Metropolitan Daily* hold significant influence. *People's Daily*, originating from a newspaper, represents the Party and the government (Wang et al., 2018) and enjoys a discursive advantage both domestically and internationally. On the other hand, *Southern Metropolitan Daily*, part of the Southern Media Group, boasts an average daily circulation of 1.75 million, the largest among national daily newspapers (Wang, 2012). While *People's Daily* focuses on substantial articles featuring hard news and official sources (Wang et al., 2018), *Southern Metropolitan Daily* is known for its investigative reporting, which sometimes exceeds official restrictions and leads to conflicts with the government (Tong, 2007). Recognized as the most 'liberal' daily newspaper in China (Wang et al., 2018), *Southern Metropolitan Daily*, like *People's Daily*, has embraced digitization and new media trends by launching comprehensive interactive websites that publish news in various formats, including text, pictures, animation, audio, and video.

When the audience lacks firsthand experience with an issue, their understanding relies heavily on news media narratives (Entman, 1993). Scholars have extensively analyzed Chinese news coverage of disadvantaged groups. Lin et al. (2024) found that although media representations of people with disabilities in the *People's Daily* have increased over time, stereotypical perceptions persist. Tang and Bie (2016) examined autism coverage in major Chinese newspapers over the past decade, revealing an increase in negative portrayals and a lack of positive images, which may exacerbate stigma and discrimination. Research on media coverage of individuals with intellectual disabilities primarily focuses on foreign contexts, encompassing traditional and social media. Wilkinson and McGill (2009) investigated British newspaper portrayals of intellectual disability in 1983 and 2001, noting a focus on children while overlooking adults and those with complex conditions. Winterbotham et al. (2023) analyzed Australian media representation during the rollout of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), determining whether media portrayals improved or preserved stereotypes amid significant policy changes.

2.4. Media framing

Framing theory, a multidisciplinary field, explores how individuals construct social and political realities by examining the construction, organization, and unfolding of discourses, issues, and meanings (De Vreese, 2005; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Framing theory elucidates how social realities are constructed and understood from diverse disciplines such as psychology, sociology, economics, cognitive linguistics, communication, and media studies. Psychologist Bateson (1972) developed the concept of schemata, which refers to the basic patterns of human cognitive behavior. Schemata allow people to subconsciously judge and act on past experiences when exposed to environmental changes (Bateson, 1972). According to sociologist Goffman (1974), frames, on the one hand, originate from previous experiences, and on the other hand, they are frequently shaped by social and cultural awareness. Gitlin (2003) argues that news discourse cannot be produced without the role of framing theory, and the scholar sees framing as a tool used by the media for rapid information sifting and news reporting. Pan and Kosicki (1993) use framing analysis to analyze news discourse to reveal the elements, settings, and types of frames and how these frames affect public perceptions of events and attitudes toward events and issues.

Framing theory suggests that the media not only brings attention to specific issues and events but also has the potential to shape how individuals perceive and understand them (Chong & Druckman, 2007). If the audience is unfamiliar with an issue and its framing, information can offer the basis for a connection (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2019). To some extent, news framing can bridge the gap between marginalized groups and mainstream discourse and give a voice to marginalized and disadvantaged groups (Jamil & Dutta, 2012). However, even when the frame is known, presenting it in a news story may negatively affect it. News invisibly uses frames to select parts of facts or subjectively reorganize partial facts or certain news elements, thus influencing the perception and understanding of objective reality (Scheufele, 1999). Research conducted by Seate et al. (2010) revealed that messages are more likely to lead viewers to perceive the suspect as guilty when framed with an accusatory tone. Similarly, Entman (1992) conducted a study comparing news stories that involved either black or white suspects. The findings indicated that news stories framing black suspects were less likely to incorporate pro-defense sound bites, thereby implying the guilt of the black suspects.

In framing analysis, several elements were used to explore the patterns of news coverage across media outlets and over time (Vliegenthart, 2012). One such element refers to the type of news. Journalists have always found it helpful to distinguish between hard news and soft news in the news production process. Tuchman (1973) is always credited for introducing this fundamental distinction of the type of news. Hard news is essentially the latest top stories of the day, and they usually make up the newspaper's front page or the top portion of the news website. Soft news, conversely, is less immediate and can be reported later. These stories are imbued with a human-interest dimension and appeal to human emotions. Most print and online news outlets devote a separate feature section for stories about health, arts, entertainment, opinion pieces, and education. Unlike hard news, which is structured in a condensed manner, soft news usually starts with an anecdote to grab the audience's attention, and it takes longer to get to the story's focus. Past studies have documented a shift to a softer news, feature-oriented approach in Chinese state media due to digital transformation. This transformation in China's media landscape has facilitated a new journalistic paradigm in which Chinese news outlets are

moving away from traditional, dogmatic propaganda and embracing infotainment, with a focus on soft news (Zhu & Fu, 2024). Similarly, Zhang et al. (2023) identified three key aspects of this transformation: soft news dominance, positive energy promotion, and sentiment incorporation to engage audiences while maintaining an authoritative image.

Another element of frames explored in this study was the news frame. It represented the presence of an idea organizer that structured the issue in a specific way, suggesting what the problem was (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987). Building on this, Clogston (1990) and Haller (1995) categorized disability reporting frames into traditional and progressive types. The traditional frame refers to the burdens placed on society by people with disabilities for their reasons, including the 'social pathology,' 'medical,' 'supercrip,' and 'business' dimensions (Clogston, 1990; Haller, 1995). In contrast, the progressive frame categorizes disability as a social responsibility, including the 'minority or civil rights,' 'cultural pluralism,' and 'legal' dimensions (Clogston, 1990; Haller, 1995). While findings suggest an evolution in disability coverage away from outdated medicalized and heroic stereotypes, media reliance on official sources, event-driven reporting, and commercial or cultural biases can still limit diverse, in-depth, and sustained portrayals of disability issues. A framing analysis of disability reporting offers valuable insight into how the news media constructs images of intellectual disability in China. To date, few studies have explicitly focused on this area. Chen et al.'s (2012) study of Taiwanese newspapers identified negative images such as 'dispirited images' and 'needy images' (traditional frames), as well as positive 'affirmative images' (progressive frames) in their portrayal of people with intellectual disabilities. Similarly, Lin et al.'s (2024) content analysis of *People's Daily* (1946–2021) found representations of people with disabilities in China often fall into frames like 'heroes,' 'role models,' 'builders,' 'beneficiaries,' and 'free riders,' indicating a shift toward more progressive language but the persistence of stereotypes. Given China's evolving news media landscape and the limited research specifically on intellectual disability representation in this context, this study aims to address this knowledge gap by analyzing how intellectual disability is portrayed across various Chinese news outlets, leading to the following questions:

RQ1: What was the extent of coverage of people with intellectual disabilities by *the People's Daily* and *the Southern Metropolitan Daily*?

RQ2: How were people with intellectual disabilities portrayed in *People's Daily* and *Southern Metropolitan Daily*?

3. Method

3.1. Content analysis

To examine the portrayal of people with intellectual disabilities in Chinese media, a content analysis of news articles published by *People's Daily* and *Southern Metropolitan Daily* was conducted. Weaver (2007) contends that framing can be studied using systematic content analysis or more interpretive textual analysis alone. Content analysis is a research method that provides an objective, systematic, and quantitative description of communication content with clear characteristics (Berelson, 1952). Krippendorff (1989) proposed that content analysis is a method of data investigation that analyses the content to explain social facts and to understand the connections made by the content, the intentions of the communicator, and the impact on the audience and the social environment. One of the benefits of content analysis is that it can reveal trends, patterns, and changes that occur over significant periods (Krippendorff, 2004).

3.2. Data sampling

The data were collected over three years from January 2021 to December 2023. This period was chosen to capture significant events and developments related to intellectual disability. On July 23, 2021, the State Council issued a notice on the ‘14th Five-Year Plan’ for the protection and development of people with disabilities, indicating a heightened focus on disability issues at the national level. Additionally, in September 2023, the release of a comedy film centered on intellectual disability sparked widespread discussions in the media. These events underscored the relevance and timeliness of examining news coverage of intellectual disability during this period.

News articles were retrieved using a keyword search of the homepages of individual news websites. The keywords “retarded 智障” OR “intellectual disability 智力障碍” appearing in the headlines and lead paragraphs were used to find articles about intellectual disability. The final sample consists of 220 articles for analysis after excluding repeated articles and news items that only mentioned intellectual disability in passing.

3.3. Coding categorizations

The full text of each article was examined to determine its portrayal of intellectual disability. All stories collected were coded in the following categories: news outlet, date, headline, type of news, and news frame. The coding instrument was developed by thoroughly reviewing news stories and previous studies. The extent of coverage was studied from two angles: 1) the number of articles and 2) the type of articles. Two categories of articles were identified in this study: 1) hard news (it represents a summary of the main facts as it happened, without the journalist’s explicit opinion, analysis nor interpretation) and 2) feature articles (it goes beyond straight news reporting to provide a more in-depth, interpretive, or human-interest perspective on a topic). Six frames were employed based on the previous work by Clogston (1990) and Haller (1995). Each article was categorized as one of the following: 1) social pathology; 2) medical; 3) supercrip; 4) business; 5) cultural pluralism, or 6) legal frame. The operational definitions of news frames are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptions of frames

Frame	Description
Social pathology	The story focuses on people with disabilities who are viewed as vulnerable and must seek financial support from the state or society, but this is seen as a given rather than a right.
Medical	The story focuses on people with disabilities portrayed as suffering from illnesses and must rely on professional treatment.
Supercrip	The story focuses on people with disabilities portrayed as ‘superhuman’ and removed from their original condition.
Business	The story focuses on people with disabilities, who are very expensive for society and business, and that accessibility for people with disabilities is unprofitable.
Cultural pluralism	The story focuses on people with disabilities who are viewed as multifaceted people whose disabilities do not receive much attention and who are considered to be in the same category as the able-bodied.
Legal	The story communicates that it is against the law to treat people with disabilities in a certain way, and the law is used as a powerful tool to stop discrimination against people with disabilities.

Source: Own elaboration.

3.4. Intercooder reliability

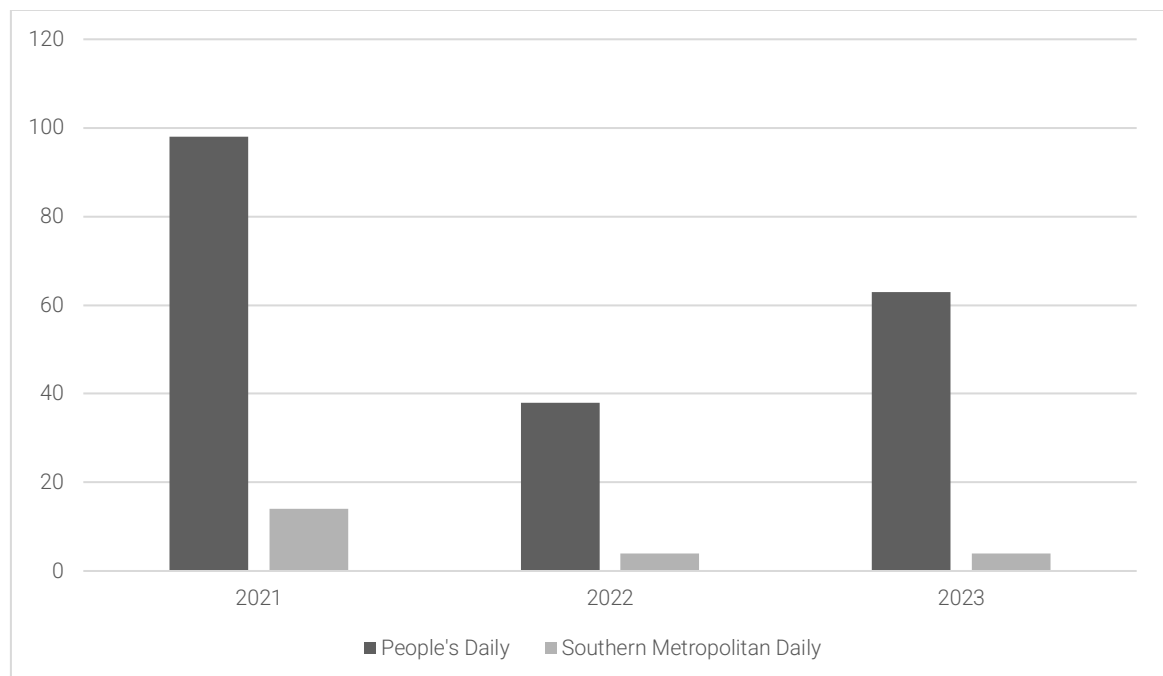
Intercooder reliability was calculated using Holsti's formula, $R = 2M/N_1 + N_2$, where M is the total number of decisions both coders agreed upon and N₁ and N₂ are the numbers of coding decisions made by both coders, respectively. This was calculated for 10% (N = 22) of the sub-sample (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). The intercooder agreement for the type of news and the news frame was 1.00 and 0.82, respectively.

4. Findings

4.1. Extent of coverage

People's Daily, an official news outlet, consistently provides more extensive coverage on intellectual disability (199 items, 90.5%) than *Southern Metropolitan Daily* (21 items, 9.5%). As shown in Figure 1, the *People's Daily* experienced a surge in coverage in 2021, primarily attributed to the issuance of the 14th Five-Year Plan by the State Council on July 23, 2021, which emphasized the protection and development of people with disabilities, thus attracting media attention. *Southern Metropolitan Daily*, as a commercial news outlet, shows lower coverage in comparison, with fewer than 20 articles in 2021 and a further decline in subsequent years. The year 2022 saw a decline in coverage from both outlets, with *People's Daily* publishing approximately 40 articles and *Southern Metropolitan Daily* producing minimal coverage. In 2023, there is an observable increase in *People's Daily* coverage, with over 60 articles published. This resurgence can be linked to heightened media discussions sparked by releasing a comedy film centered on intellectual disability in September 2023. The film likely reignited public and media interest in the topic.

Figure 1. Frequency of coverage



Source: Own elaboration.

Table 2 shows the variations in the types of news used by official and commercial news outlets. The *People's Daily* predominantly employs hard news formats, while the *Southern Metropolitan Daily* leans towards feature articles. Hard news, characterized by its focus

on current events, often straightforwardly presents factual information as Reinemann et al. (2012) defined, and is prevalent in intellectual disability reporting. Slightly over six in ten news items published in *People's Daily* were in hard news format, which suggests that coverage of individuals with intellectual disabilities in official news outlets is predominantly focused on straightforward, factual reporting of events and developments. Feature articles, which provide more in-depth coverage and often include personal stories, analysis, and context, make up 38.7% of the coverage in the *People's Daily*. Conversely, *Southern Metropolitan Daily* published more feature articles (85.7%) than hard news (14.3%), indicating considerable attention to providing detailed and narrative-driven content on individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Table 2. Types of news

	People's Daily		Southern Metropolitan Daily		Total
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	
Hard news	122	61.3	3	14.3	125
Feature articles	77	38.7	18	85.7	95
Total	199	100.0	21	100.0	220

Source: Own elaboration.

4.2. News frames

As Table 4 shows, the three most frequently used frames are social pathology (126 articles), medical (40 articles), and cultural pluralism (25 articles).

Table 4. Frequency of frames

Frames	People's Daily		Southern Metropolitan Daily		Total
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	
Traditional frame					
Social pathology	108	54.3	18	85.7	126
Medical	39	19.6	1	4.8	40
Supercrip	16	8.1	0	0	16
Progressive frame					
Business	0	0	1	4.8	1
Cultural pluralism	24	12.0	1	4.8	25
Legal	12	6.0	0	0	12
Total	199	100.0	21	100.0	220

Source: Own elaboration.

The social pathology is the most dominant frame in the portrayal of individuals with intellectual disabilities, appearing the most frequently in *People's Daily* (54.3%) and in *Southern Metropolitan Daily* (85.7%). Examples of the frames are presented below:

Ten people with intellectual disability are cared for daily in shifts by their parents, special schoolteachers, caring community members, and other volunteers (*People's Daily*, 3 November 2023).

Inclusive education (for ‘visible disabilities’ such as blindness, deafness, intellectual disability, autism, speech disorders) has been gradually launched through the promotion of the Education Sector and the Disability Federation system (*Southern Metropolitan Daily*, 10 March 2021).

The medical is the second most common frame, with a notable disparity between *People's Daily* (19.6%) and *Southern Metropolitan Daily* (4.8%). The following excerpts exemplify the frame:

An individual with intellectual disability who has a significant impairment in physical locomotion combined with cognitive and communication disorders undergoes rehabilitation training in specialized institutions (*People's Daily*, 8 December 2023).

Provide more scientific treatment for children with cerebral palsy, intellectual disability, learning disabilities, and other neurological disorders (*Southern Metropolitan Daily*, 4 July 2023).

The cultural pluralism, the third most common frame, is more frequent in *the People's Daily* (12.0%) than in *the Southern Metropolitan Daily* (4.8%). Illustrative examples are provided below:

Employees with intellectual disability worked hard, and the cars were washed very well (*People's Daily*, 12 September 2021).

People with intellectual disability performed a piano four-handed ensemble in collaboration with the integration partner (*Southern Metropolitan Daily*, 29 August 2022).

In addition, the supercrip and legal frames were found in the *People's Daily*, accounting for 8.1% and 6.0%, respectively. Illustrative excerpts are provided below:

Supercrip: The painter with intellectual disability has painted over 3,500 paintings inspired by Western music and has appeared on television (*People's Daily*, 5 June 2023).

Legal: The Provincial Public Security Bureau launched a special operation to combat crimes such as sexual assault of children with intellectual disability by violence, coercion, etc. (*People's Daily*, 7 March 2022).

In the *Southern Metropolitan Daily*, the only article fitting the business frame is found, in which individuals with intellectual disabilities were portrayed as follows:

Business: Mentally and intellectually disabled persons are denied coverage by all insurance policies (*Southern Metropolitan Daily*, 1 April 2021).

Analysis of *People's Daily* indicates a tendency to frame individuals with intellectual disabilities as a vulnerable group in need of government or organizational support and professional medical intervention. Notably, this outlet also portrays them as multifaceted individuals actively participating in various cultural activities. In contrast, the commercial news outlet in this study depicts individuals with intellectual disabilities in a more one-dimensional way, frequently emphasizing their vulnerability and need for support from the government or organizations. When the framing across these two specific news outlets is combined, the results indicate a higher prevalence of traditional frames than progressive frames.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Through content analysis, this study examined the framing of people with intellectual disabilities in two Chinese news outlets, i.e., *People's Daily* and *Southern Metropolitan Daily*, focusing on the extent of coverage and the framing strategies employed in their reporting. *People's Daily* devoted significant attention to reporting on intellectual disability, a likely consequence of the State Council's '14th Five-Year Plan' for the protection and development of people with disabilities. Conversely, *Southern Metropolitan Daily* demonstrated considerably less interest in this topic. Given the media's crucial role in setting the agenda for public discourse, the frequency with which intellectual disability was reported in news outlets offers insight into its salience in the media agenda and

potentially in public attention and thought, aligning with the notion that the media “may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what [and how] to think about” (Cohen, 1963, p. 13). The policy emphasis appears to have driven *People’s Daily’s* prioritization of intellectual disability coverage, thereby shaping public discourse. Meanwhile, *Southern Metropolitan Daily’s* consistently little coverage over the three years likely reflects a commercial orientation towards topics with greater immediate audience engagement or commercial value.

The types of articles published by these news outlets also reflect distinct reporting strategies. *People’s Daily* predominantly utilized hard news, which suggests that the official media’s approach to covering intellectual disability is largely event-driven and focused on delivering factual updates, aligning with Reinemann et al.’s (2012) definition of hard news. The reliance of official news outlets on hard news can be seen as a strategy to present intellectual disability within the policy, social developments, and governmental actions, reinforcing the state’s agenda and narrative. This particular style and form of presentation can be linked to journalists’ role conceptions of their news-gathering practices. Chinese journalists primarily view themselves as performing the journalistic role of disseminators of information (Zhang, 2009; Shao & Nik Hasan, 2014). Conversely, *Southern Metropolitan Daily* published more feature articles, and this narrative-driven approach indicates a commercial media strategy that seeks to engage readers through detailed, human-interest stories. Feature articles can enhance public empathy and understanding by presenting the lived experiences of individuals with intellectual disabilities, thus potentially influencing public attitudes more effectively than hard news. This disparity in coverage and article types aligns with findings from previous research on media representation of disabilities. For instance, Barnes and Mercer (2001) noted that media portrayal of disability issues often varies significantly between various media outlets, with commercial media more likely to adopt a human-interest angle.

In terms of framing strategies employed in disability reporting, this study found that people with intellectual disabilities are frequently presented within traditional frames in both official (*People’s Daily*) and commercial (*Southern Metropolitan Daily*) news outlets, potentially leading to misrepresentations of people with intellectual disabilities. This aligns with previous research, which shows that traditional, negative portrayals outnumber progressive frames (Chen et al., 2012; Wertheimer, 1988; Wilkinson & McGill, 2009). Studies in the UK and China have consistently found that traditional frames dominate media portrayals of intellectual disability, reinforcing negative images (Chen et al., 2012; Renwick, 2016; Worrell, 2018). Traditional frames, including medical and social pathology dimensions, emphasize dependency and vulnerability, often to highlight government support. Lin et al. (2024) note that when the social pathology frame is used in China, it creates an image of people with intellectual disabilities as vulnerable and being helped, thus creating a good image of the government caring for the intellectual disability population. In fact, in the Chinese context, the medical frame also contributes to the same outcomes as the social pathology by promoting political performance through descriptions of individuals with intellectual disabilities as needing specialized medical care. However, scholars have not previously highlighted this aspect. In addition, this study also found that the demands of people with intellectual disabilities for employment, education, and healthcare access inadvertently reinforce stigmatizing images of dependency.

While broader media representations of disability show some positive changes (Devotta et al., 2013; McGillivray et al., 2021), this study found that the supercrip frame, which portrays people with disabilities as heroic, appears in a small portion of articles, particularly in the *People's Daily*. This frame tends to portray people with disabilities as heroes who have overcome their disabilities. For example, "Individual with intellectual disability continues to persevere without discouragement even though they have difficulty controlling their limbs" (People's Daily, 2023). However, this portrayal does not depart from the stereotype that people with disabilities are defined primarily by their disabilities (Worrell, 2018). Meanwhile, the cultural pluralism frame, which presents diverse identities, offers a more positive portrayal but remains less common than traditional frames. The legal frame is also underrepresented, indicating limited attention to legal issues related to intellectual disability in China.

With the power of media to shape public understanding through the way intellectual disability is selected and portrayed, it can be argued that the audience may have a distorted view of reality fed to them by the Chinese news outlets. By exposing the audience to narrow portrayals of traditional frames, these news outlets have created an information environment where stereotypical worldviews about intellectual disability are continually reinforced rather than challenged. Recognizing the media's impact, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities identifies it as a critical educational tool, urging the promotion of an accurate image and enhancing the voice of people with disabilities in the media (UN, n.d.). Echoing this, Lin et al. (2024) and Chen et al. (2012) support more humanistic, equal, and pluralistic approaches to reporting that recognize the intrinsic value of people with disabilities beyond their impairments. While the media can be a powerful force for good, it can also spread false information and biases. Therefore, audiences must be aware of its limitations and critically evaluate the information they encounter.

To conclude, negative portrayals of individuals with intellectual disabilities remain prevalent in Chinese media, with variations between different news outlets. *People's Daily*, a state-affiliated media, frames disability coverage to align with government policies and initiatives, legitimizing state interventions aimed at supporting individuals with disabilities. In contrast, *Southern Metropolitan Daily*, as a commercial news outlet, tends to represent individuals with intellectual disabilities more narrowly, often focusing on their vulnerabilities. However, the lack of diversity in frames indicates a more traditional and possibly stigmatizing portrayal of individuals with intellectual disabilities.

While Internet technology has expanded opportunities for disability awareness by disseminating information more widely and rapidly, bringing the needs and challenges of those with intellectual disabilities to public attention, substantial issues persist. The rise of organizations promoting disability rights is also a significant positive trend (Li & Ren, 2024). However, the analysis of reporting patterns across these two influential Chinese news outlets reveals that social negligence and stigmatization of people with intellectual disabilities remain perennial societal problems, despite technological advances and increased advocacy efforts.

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was limited to two news outlets, *People's Daily* and *Southern Metropolitan Daily*, which may not fully represent the entire spectrum of media coverage in China. Future research should consider a broader range of media sources, including regional newspapers, television broadcasts, and other online platforms, to provide a more comprehensive picture. Secondly, the study focused on a

specific timeframe from 2021 to 2023. Expanding the temporal scope to include extended periods could capture long-term trends and changes in media representation. Finally, this study has focused on two dimensions of framing. It would be interesting however, to explore more dimensions of frames by investigating slant of news and sources of news.

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