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The Role of Euphemistic Tea Hostesses in COVID-19 Reporting

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Abstract

This study employed a qualitative document analysis of lexical choices used in English news articles, those which were written during the 2021 COVID-19 outbreak in Taiwan. More specifically, the use of euphemisms by local media outlets and overseas sources was compared, with the aim of documenting the occurrence of direct and indirect language. The publication dates of these sources were May 17th, 20th and 21st. During this week, Wanhua District was mentioned as an outbreak area, which houses a red-light district. While reporting on the infections in this district, it was found that most local news articles replaced negative words, such as sex workers/prostitutes and brothel, with the euphemistic terms, 'tea hostesses' and 'tea parlor'. Since local English news articles are mainly read by foreigners living in Taiwan, using indirect language would mitigate the fact that COVID-19 was spreading in the red-light district. Alternatively, some international news agencies replaced these euphemistic terms with more direct language. Here, the articles pinpointed that the virus was spreading in adult entertainment venues among sex workers. Since local reports avoided using direct language, it could be assumed that euphemisms were adopted in an attempt to ease pandemic fears, save the face of those infected in the Wanhua District and help preserve Taiwan's reputation.

Key Terms: Euphemism, Euphemistic Terms/Language, Lexical Form, Tea Hostess, Tea Parlor

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

On April 23, 2021, Taiwan confirmed its first locally-transmitted COVID-19 case since February 9th of the same year. After much success in containing the virus, this was devastating news. Unfortunately, the cluster of infections grew to over 30 cases (Li and Cheng, 2021), and thereafter, Taiwan reached its peak on May 17th at 633 cases (Blanchard, 2021). Through genetic analysis, the government confirmed that one outbreak stemmed from several positive cases among China Airlines pilots (Reuters, 2021.) It was also reported that the pilots had been staying at a Taoyuan International Airport hotel, which violated pandemic regulations. In this respect, the hotel had housed quarantined and non-quarantine guests (Reuters, 2021). The cluster eventually included at least a dozen pilots, several of their family members and one flight attendant. However, the infection extended to 'hostess bars' and 'tea parlors' in Wanhua District. The term 'hostess' was used in local news reports, and its referential meaning was only clear to Taiwanese who were familiar with the area.

In English, a hostess is generally a woman who works at the front of a restaurant. She would greet guests, check reservations and accompany customers to their tables. A hostess might also organize a party or large-scale gathering. However, in the movie, 'From here to Eternity', the prostitute played by Donna Reed was referred to as a hostess. The meaning of hostess thus tends to have a variety of definitions. Nevertheless, when a tea hostess was mentioned in COVID-19 reporting in Taiwan, the details of this profession remained nebulous. It was however overseas news articles that first made the Taiwanese meaning of hostess clear. Here, the *BBC* and *Time* reported that some tea hostesses are sex workers, while some tea parlors are brothels or adult entertainment venues. Thus, the lexical terms used in these reports differed according to the location where they were written, and the use of direct and indirect language.

1.2 Origins of the Terms Tea Hostess and Tea House in China and Japan

Tea Hostess

With the aim of understanding the connection of tea hostess and tea house to prostitution, it is necessary to outline the hierarchical system that was established in China. In "Beautiful Merchandise:

Prostitution in China, 1860–1936”, Sue Groneweld outlines the history of sex work in Shanghai, China over four centuries. From her research, she states that pre-1949, the system was arranged in a hierarchy, and the nine categories were as follows: storytellers, sing-song girls, tea house prostitutes, tryst houses with concubines, salt pork shop prostitutes, wild chicks or pheasants in brothels, opium brothels or flower room prostitutes, nailshed prostitutes and lastly, actors and singers who performed in new-style teahouses (Groneweld, 1982). At the time of publication in 1982, there were seven quasi-official categories being used by the police and the public. These included: a new-style concubine/second wife, contracted wives, escort girls/ktv hostesses/bar girls, ding-dong girls, massage parlor/hair salon girls, street walkers and shed women (Groneweld, 1982, p. 578). Given that the terms tea house prostitutes and hostesses are included within these rankings, it is clear to see the evolution of these words as a reference to brothels and prostitutes. To add to this, from about 1930 onwards, the Han-Chinese courtesan house culture gradually took root in cities, such as Taipei, by establishing salon-style coffee houses and dance halls. Thus, these adult venues initially gave rise to an alternate meaning of ‘hostess’ in Taiwan.

Meanwhile, in Japan, the government’s licensing policy allowed courtesan/geisha houses and brothels to operate in the authorized red-light districts. Furthermore, prostitution in Taiwan during the Japanese colonial period, according to the historian Lin Hongxun (1997), was constituted with the cultural traditions of the Han-Chinese and Japanese. In both traditions, women prostitutes were distinguished according to their skills, or lack thereof. In this respect, educated prostitutes were the courtesan in the Han-Chinese system and the geisha in the Japanese system. These individuals entertained the gentry with their artistic skills. On the lower end, illiterate women only provided a service that included sexual intercourse.

This practice was also facilitated by colonists. In Taiwan during the Japanese rule (1895–1945), geisha houses and brothels were authorized to operate in certain districts. Thereafter, geishas evolved into ‘hostesses’ (Jin, 2014). By the end of the Japanese colonial period, the hostess culture could be found in all the leisure businesses, ranging from traditional wine houses and tea rooms, to modern coffee houses and dance halls (Lin 1997: 108-110). From this overview, we are able to see the spread of the term ‘hostess’ from China and Japan, along with its evolution in Taiwan.

Tea Houses

Under Chiang Kai-shek’s government, 1950 to 1975, all existing local leisure businesses, such as wine houses and tea rooms, were renamed ‘public canteens’ or ‘public tearooms’. At that time, hostesses were termed waitresses, and they were forbidden to drink, sing or have intercourse with customers. However, they were required to have regular venereal diseases check-ups to obtain work permits from the police (Lin, 1997). Given that the regulation specifically mentions sexually transmitted diseases, it may be assumed that regardless of the legality, hostesses/waitresses in tea houses were engaged in prostitution.

In 1962, the KMT government enlisted nine categories of businesses to be governed by police. They are as follows: 1) cinemas/theatres; 2) hotels; 3) wine houses, bars, tea rooms, coffee houses; 4) amusement parks; 5) firework factories; 6) old furniture depositories; 7) employment agencies; 8) bicycle maintenance shops and bicycle parking businesses; 9) stamp making businesses (Wang 1969: 119). The unifying element of wine houses, bars, tea rooms and coffee houses during this time was the hostess culture. Thus, these businesses were allowed to hire waitresses/hostesses and employers were required to register them with the local police authority. During the Vietnam War, the American government established the ‘Rest and Relaxation Center’ in Taipei. Hence, roughly 200,000 American soldiers took leave in Taiwan between 1965–1970, while yet another 200,000 visited the Center between 1970 and 1971 (Zhong 1988: 73). With this influx of money being spent by American soldiers, Taiwan’s hostess culture and tea room establishments resided as prosperous ventures.

In 1994, Chen Shui-bian was elected mayor in Taipei, and he shut down the last legal brothels in the city. Therefore, the trade went underground (Red Brick Daily, 2017). In 2011, an amendment was suggested to the Social Order Maintenance Act that would allow local governments to set up special zones to legally manage the sex trade. However, this has yet to be established. Thereafter, the current Mayor Kou stated that “if he had the support of city residents, he would consider a “Red Zone” — perhaps in Wanhua District (Red Brick Daily, 2017). Currently, a red-light district does exist in Wanhua, one where hostess bars usually have private rooms with karaoke televisions and sofas. Meanwhile, customers can pay for the company of a hostess, and these women sing, drink or dine with them. However, it is illegal for hostesses to have intercourse or engage in other sexual activities with the customers.

Nevertheless, it often occurs (Chang, 2017). In addition, some teahouses reportedly operate as fronts for brothels and employ migrant women who are in Taiwan illegally (Zennie and Tsai, 2021).

From the sex worker timeline in China, Japan and Taiwan, it is evident that ‘tea hostesses’ and ‘tea houses’ have been referred to as prostitutes and brothels for many years. Although these lexical choices seem euphemistic to those outside of the culture, the underlying meaning is commonly known in Taiwan.

1.3 Euphemisms in COVID-19 Reporting

In regards to euphemisms, a wide range of previous researchers claim that indirect language may assist with mitigating the potential danger of certain words to offend others. Crespo contends that a euphemism is “a more general phenomenon that participants in communicative exchanges employ with the purpose of softening the effects of what they really wish to communicate, avoiding, as much as possible, offence and conflict” (Crespo, 2005 p. 79). Prior to COVID-19, the use of stylistics in reports on pandemics and similar emergency situations has been examined. In 2015, Basnyat and Lee discussed the use of war metaphors during the H1N1 pandemic. Here, a need to fight and win against a disease was emphasized. To add to this, Scott (2014) contends that responses to diseases are usually politicized, fueling political consequences. Alternatively, the media also tends to convey vague perspectives. While analyzing the Ebola outbreak, Kott and Limaye (2016) found that radio show hosts incorporated unclear words and phrases, leaving people confused. Thus, the English language can be contrived in various ways to either alleviate the severity of a situation or instigate an event that might otherwise prove meaningless.

Given the serious nature of COVID-19, adopting linguistic mechanisms to avoid disruptions within community settings is comprehensible. This is particularly important when considering that the media currently plays a key role in enforcing cultural conventions and attitudes, specifically during health emergencies (Kott and Limaye, 2016). For the past year and a half, COVID-19 has been the main topic of news reports around the world. Hence, some people consider media outlets as their main source of information (Menzie & Menzie, 2020). These sources can be accessed on social media platforms and websites, while also being watched on television and heard on the radio. With such a wide-ranging audience, writers are able to downplay or fuel fears and anxieties by the language they use. For example, vague language has been applied to several marketing schemes, where a total avoidance of mentioning the disease can be documented. In May 2020, Kirshner noted the following advertisements:

J.P. Morgan: *“In these uncertain times, look after yourself, your family, your friends. But know when it comes to your finances, we are here for you.”*

AT&T: *“These days, it’s anything but business as usual. That’s why working together is more important than ever. AT&T is committed to keeping you connected.”*

Sprint: *“At Sprint, our priority is keeping our customers, employees, and communities safe. During these uncertain times, get the great service you expect without leaving the safety of your home.”*

Quilted Northern: *“We’ve been making toilet paper since 1901. And we won’t stop now. We’re working harder, faster, together to get the shelves stocked. And provide comfort when you need it most.”*

Phrases, such as uncertain times, anything but business as usual and when you need it most briefly acknowledge a certain situation, yet offer a sense of security to the general public. In social settings, words and phrases have been added to the English language, with some intending to shed a positive light on the environment. For instance, ‘zoom bombing’ has become a popular practice, and some enjoy a ‘quarantini’ during online meetings with friends. Meanwhile, the term ‘fakeaway’ dinner refers to a meal cooked at home, one that resembles a take away meal. Finally, the derogatory phrase, ‘boomer remover’ has surfaced, and this refers to the effects of COVID-19 killing the elderly generation.

It is interesting to note that at the time of writing this paper, there has been a reoccurring trend of writing Covid-19 instead of COVID-19. The aim is to demonstrate a slowing down of the disease through lower-case letters, instead emphasizing the seriousness through all capital letters. Depending on the source, the pandemic may be portrayed as a humorous event or a tragic situation. In either case, the intricacies of the English language allow writers to mold their message and achieve a desired effect.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Euphemisms and Face

Since some words have negative connotations, euphemisms tend to alleviate an unpleasant reality. In this respect, derogatory words may show a critical attitude towards a situation or recipients; thus, euphemisms refer to something embarrassing or unpleasant in a way that makes it seem more acceptable and neutral [Hornby 2004: 339–428]. To add to this, Crespo (2005) contends that any linguistic unit or verbal strategy which tries to avoid conflict in interpersonal communication can be euphemistic. Furthermore, he claims that the use of euphemisms indicates a politeness marker, that which exists within the research of Lakoff (1973), Leech (2007) and Brown and Levinson (1978). They claim that politeness favors indirectness when mitigating conflictive situations and insuring the mutual protection of face. In support of these views, Ma (2011) states that a euphemism can be defined as ‘speaking good words in a pleasant manner’. In most cases, speakers tend to use indirect language to veil sensitive topics, thus ensuring that the listener is not offended.

In regards to face, this term has been consistently associated with the politeness theory. According to Brown and Levinson (1978), the politeness theory incorporates the notion that people in interactive situations have a social image that they consciously or unconsciously project, as well as protect. Politeness, furthered by Brown and Levinson (1978), “can be seen as the means employed by a language user to be mindful of another person’s face, while face is the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself” (p. 66). These researchers also divide face into negative and positive aspects. Negative face reflects an individual’s desire to avoid an imposition, while positive face indicates a person’s desire to preserve their image.

The specifics of face have been clarified in several studies. Cutrone (2011) contends that activating a negative or positive face depends largely on the social positions of the people involved in the conversational exchange. Therefore, those who are cognizant of politeness principles when conversing may behave as if their face wants to be acknowledged and respected. According to Brown and Levinson (1978), when being polite, if a speaker’s words are interpreted as a threat to a listener’s face, the speaker can say something to avoid a potential offense. This action has been termed as a face-saving act. In contrast, a face-threatening act would include a lexical choice that may threaten a listener’s image. Hence, when an individual puts forth the effort to maintain or degrade someone’s self-image, it could be said that they are assisting with the preservation or destruction of their desired identity. McGlone and Batchelor (2003) claim that euphemisms protect the positive self. In relation to this study, the media’s choice to replace brothel and sex worker/prostitute with ‘tea parlor’ and ‘tea hostess’ may constitute as face saving acts.

Euphemisms tend to reinforce social relations, those which reside within a set of shared values, cultural understandings and ideologies. Timothy claims that all cultures have created euphemisms “to describe genitals, sexual acts, sexual body parts and body products” (Timothy, 1999, p. 144). In China and Taiwan, the terms ‘tea parlor’ and ‘tea hostess’ have been adopted to mitigate the negative image of an age-old practice. In the Taiwanese media, this linguistic technique aimed to disguise the source of a COVID-19 outbreak. In other words, saving the face of those infected after visiting the Wanhua District required the use of indirect language.

2.2 Collective and Individualistic Cultures

Within each culture, there exists communication styles which dictate relationships and human interactions. The two most widely compared cultures are collectivist and individualistic. According to Ting-Toomey (2005), individualistic cultures apply direct techniques to save face, while collective cultures utilize indirect methods. The difference therefore resides in the lexical choices within verbal and written communication. Face-saving can be considered as a strategy for retaining social standing in a potentially damaging situation. This idea is particularly relevant to this study, as a prominent individual was infected with the virus after visiting the Wanhua District. On May 12, 2021, Taiwan News reported that the former Lion’s Club president was shocked to learn of his infection and was unable to determine how he contracted the disease. His source of infection remained a mystery; however, on May 26, 2021, the Japan Times wrote, “the contact tracing of a past president had found that he had spent time in a hostess tea shop in Wanhua District. Since these are generally venues where older men are intimately served by women of similar age, it’s a sexy tea” (Culpan, 2021). When using the same search methods for this study, this connection is never mentioned in any of the local news sources, prior to May 26, 2021.

Triandis (1995) argues that individualists are most concerned with saving their own face (self-face concern), whereas collectivists are concerned with saving the face of its in-group members (other-face concern). According to Redding and Ng (1982), the differences are related to the individualism-collectivism dimension of culture and other cultural attributes, such as the function of shame. Shame is a group concern and most Chinese belong to a closely integrated group upon which their honor or shame is reflected (Wilson, 1981). This aspect was clearly evident when Taiwan News reported, “a source familiar with the matter told the news agency that the former president was indeed diagnosed with the virus and enjoys participating in social functions, with a wide range of friends. However, the man does not remember having any contact with any of the Novotel or China Airlines cases” (Everington, 2021). Although two different clusters were addressed, the outbreak in the Wanhua District was not mentioned. Admitting to being in the Wanhua District would produce a sense of shame and as a result, this reluctance to disclose recent visits to the area proved to be a hindrance in contact tracing (Zennie and Tsai, 2021). Hence, we are able to view how the media contributed to saving the face of a well-known businessman, as the details offered sway distract readers from connecting the former president to the Wanhua District.

Given that Taiwan is considered to be a collectivist culture, losing face would affect the individual and those around them. As Lustig and Koester (2006) suggest, in collectivist cultures, one purpose of interaction is to promote and sustain harmony among the interactants. Therefore, direct communication could threaten the face or social esteem of others. Indirect communication is therefore typically used to avoid the possibility of hurting someone. In this study, indirect communication would be choosing the word ‘tea hostess’ and ‘tea parlor’, while examples of direct language include articles that stated sex worker/prostitute and brothel. In Taiwan, most would defer from being open and straightforward, specifically during times of uncertainty, such as a COVID-19 outbreak. Thus, local news writers may have been assisting the Taiwanese community from an embarrassing situation, while some international journalists preferred to report on the same situation more directly.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative document analysis of online English articles in Taiwan. Thus, local and overseas publications on the COVID-19 outbreak in Taiwan were reviewed. The main aim was to determine the differences in reporting on one of the areas where hundreds of people contracted the virus. More specifically, given that one of the sources of infection occurred in the red-light district in Wanhua, Taipei, this study examined the use of the terms ‘tea hostess’ and ‘tea parlor’ in reporting, as compared to sex worker/prostitute and brothel.

Throughout the course of data collection, Van Dijk’s approach to analyzing discourse within news reports was consulted. His studies offer a framework, which includes macrostructures, superstructures and microstructures. A macrostructure is the main subject or topic of the story being published, while the superstructure refers to the structure or organization of the article. The third category is the microstructure, which focuses on selected lexical items (words) and sentences used in a news article. According to Van Dijk (1991), “a news story is not free from the following different aspects of meaning: *presuppositions, implications, inferences, concealments, euphemisms, disclaiming denials, blaming the victim, negativization, and in general the combined strategy of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation. Many of these semantic features involve various forms of implicitness or indirectness*” (p. 177).

Since this paper focused on the use of euphemisms in local and overseas news reports, applying the microstructure approach was deemed to be best suited to accomplish the study’s goals. In this regard, the use of direct and indirect language was tracked across six media outlets on three different dates. During this time, there is an assumption that certain terms are embedded within the background knowledge of the local Taiwanese readers. However, this same knowledge would be unknown to those in other countries, along with foreigners living in Taiwan. Thus, although the referential meaning of the terms ‘tea hostess’ and ‘tea parlor’ are known by most Taiwanese people, they would not be understood by those who are unaware with the history and practice. Therefore, investigating the use of euphemisms in local and overseas articles on the COVID-19 outbreak demonstrates how indirect language can mitigate an embarrassing situation.

3.1 Data Collection

Online English newspapers in Taiwan were chosen for this study, as they are the main sources of local news for foreigners. These publications included: *Taiwan News* (TN), *Focus Taiwan*, (FT) and the *Taipei Times*, (TT).

Taiwan News, formerly *China News*, currently employs native English-speaking journalists to report local news, and has a significant presence on Facebook, Google Plus, Twitter and LinkedIn. *Focus Taiwan*, also known as the *Central News Agency*, is the longest running news outlet. The publication maintains a website and collaborates with international agencies, but has a smaller presence on social media platforms. The *Taipei Times* currently resides as the only printed English-language newspaper in Taiwan, but can also be accessed online. Overseas articles were additionally reviewed, namely *CNN*, *BBC* and *Time*. The reason for including these publications was mainly for comparison, as some of these outlets reported the news directly, instead of using euphemistic terms.

In regards to the time period, articles were retrieved on the following dates, May 17, 2021, May 20, 2021 and May 21, 2021. This was the initial onset of the COVID-19 outbreak in Taiwan, and each date corresponds with an overseas report. Given that the source of the initial infections had been determined during this time, most news articles included information on the outbreak area. During this time, some journalists replaced direct language with more indirect or euphemistic language. The main examples include: visiting the red-light district as ‘having activities in the Wanhua area’; sex workers/prostitutes were termed as ‘tea hostesses’ and the word brothel was replaced by ‘tea parlor’.

Google searches were conducted according to the key words, COVID outbreak in Taiwan, along with the date of publication. When searching on Google, if the headline referred to the outbreak on the specific date, the article was retrieved. The search yielded daily results in the locally published news sources, but only occasional reports from overseas media outlets. Nevertheless, both sources were investigated, as the differences in lexical choices demonstrated the use of direct and indirect language. In this respect, news reports in Taiwan incorporated euphemisms, while overseas publications included terms that described the outbreak more succinctly.

3.2 Findings

Table 1: Comparison of TN, FTN, TT and CNN on May 17, 2021.

| Publication | Euphemistic Terms Used | Direct Language Used |
|---------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------|
| <i>Taiwan News</i> | Teahouse Cluster | None |
| <i>Focus Taiwan</i> | Hostess Teahouses | None |
| <i>Taipei Times</i> | Cluster at Wanhua’s Teahouses | None |
| <i>CNN</i> | Hostess Teahouse | None |

From the data above, we can see that the local news outlets and CNN all used euphemistic terms to describe the source of the COVID-19 outbreak in Wanhua District. CNN was the only overseas network chosen on this date, as the BBC and Time did not publish a Taiwan outbreak report on the same day.

Table 2: Comparison of TN, FTN, TT and the BBC on May 20, 2021.

| Publication | Euphemistic Terms Used | Direct Language Used |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------|---|
| <i>Taiwan News</i> | Activities in Wanhua, Tea Parlors | None |
| <i>Focus Taiwan</i> | Hostess Teahouses | None |
| <i>Taipei Times</i> | Cluster linked to Wanhua’s Teahouses | None |
| <i>BBC</i> | Tea Houses with an explanation | Taiwan’s Teahouses – Adult Entertainment Venues |

The data above indicates that local news outlets continued to use euphemistic terms, while the *BBC* added more direct language. Here, the article mentioned teahouses, but also included a description of a teahouse as an adult entertainment venue. In the article, Yvette Tan wrote, “The virus then spread through the community, eventually making its way to Taiwan’s “tea houses” - adult entertainment venues (May 20, 2021). The language in this article refers to the euphemistic term, while also offering a definition of it. Thus, the reader has a clear picture of teahouse operations, and is able to comprehend the referential meaning in Taiwan.

Table 3: Comparison of TN, FTN, TT and Time on May 21, 2021.

| Publication | Euphemistic Terms Used | Direct Language Used |
|---------------------|--|-----------------------|
| <i>Taiwan News</i> | Hostess Bars | None |
| <i>Focus Taiwan</i> | Hostess Teahouse in Wanhua | None |
| <i>Taipei Times</i> | Visited Wanhua District | None |
| <i>Time</i> | Differentiates between actual tea house and tea house as a brothel | Brothels, Sex Workers |

The data in the chart indicates that local news outlets continued to rely upon euphemistic terms, while *Time* offered a detailed description of a ‘Taiwanese teahouse’. In this article, Zennie and Tsai concisely wrote, “Many of the Wanhua tea shops are relatively innocent..... However, some reportedly operate as fronts for brothels and employ migrant women who are in Taiwan illegally” (2021 May 21). The article furthers the information by stating, “There is no way that you can wear masks in the tea houses, no matter if it is with sex workers or just a normal tea house” (2021 May 21). The clarification within this article differentiates a teahouse from a brothel, while also informing the reader that sex workers are employed at some of these establishments.

4. Discussion

This study reviewed local and overseas news articles on the most recent COVID-19 outbreak in Taiwan. The aim was to examine the use of euphemistic terms on three specific dates regarding the outbreak in Wanhua District. This area has a red-light district, one where prostitutes/sex workers are employed at brothels/adult entertainment venues. However, it was found that indirect language replaced these terms in all local reports and one overseas report (CNN). As Hornby claimed, “euphemisms refer to something embarrassing or unpleasant in a way that makes it seem more acceptable and neutral” [Hornby 2004: 339–428]. From the dates examined, it was shown that local Taiwan news agencies consistently reported on infections in tea parlors, instead of stating brothels. Therefore, some readers may have assumed that a tea parlor is an establishment that serves tea. This lexical choice would project a sense of innocence, instead of a negative judgment.

The aspect of shame is another main concern in a collectivist culture. Chinese belong to a closely integrated group upon which their honor or shame is reflected (Wilson, 1981). Hence, explicit descriptions could threaten the social standing of others, while any association with the Wanhua area could bring disgrace upon an extended family, company or entire country. Although local news outlets adhered to the mitigation of negative terms, overseas reports detailed the ongoing situation. As Zennie and Tsai pointed out, “Combined with customers who aren’t eager to tell contact tracers—or their own families—that they visited such an infamous area, along with marginalized workers who may be hesitant to come forward, the red-light district in Wanhua has become the catalyst for more than 1,000 of the infections reported across Taiwan” (21 May 2021). Unfortunately, confessing to being in this area would be shameful; therefore, many people remained silent. As a result, there were difficulties in contact tracing, which culminated in a sharp rise of COVID-19 cases. However, local journalists never mentioned this connection in any of their reports.

Overall, the media has the ability to influence a vast audience, leaving journalists in a powerful role. This idea has been emphasized by several researchers, yet Zhang et al (2014) offer an insightful perspective on Van Dijk’s contentions of this idea:

Van Dijk’s study of news discourse has his peculiar feature. He believes that discourse is a kind of social control power, which represents the willpower of authority, and reflects special power structure. The people who control and spread discourse are news journalists, writers, artists and scholars. These people are called “symbolic elites”. The powerful people are entitled to control all kinds of discourse, while common people are only able to control daily conversation (p. 200–201).

As Lustig and Koester (2006) suggest, in collectivist cultures, one purpose of interaction is to promote and sustain harmony among the interactants. In view of this, the linguistic techniques applied by journalists in Taiwan may have aimed to avoid negative press coverage and preserve Taiwan’s image. This is important when considering that Taiwan had previously been a world leader in stopping the virus from spreading around the island. With its reputation in jeopardy, concealing an embarrassing infection source would help downplay additional negative press, along with unrest in community settings.

5. Conclusion

While keeping the public informed on the latest COVID-19 outbreak, it is clearly apparent that local media outlets concurrently aimed to preserve Taiwan's reputation, along that of the individuals who had visited the red-light district. The use of euphemistic language therefore attempted to save the face of nation. Alternatively, overseas journalists reported more directly on the meaning of tea hostess and tea parlor, which provided a clearer picture of the actual situation. As this was an exploratory study, more research needs to be conducted to determine the effectiveness of the euphemisms in this COVID-19 coverage. Given that most Taiwanese residents are cognizant of the connection between tea hostess and sex worker/prostitute, along with tea parlor and brothel, a future study should be conducted outside of Taiwan.

McGlone and Batchelor (2003) claim that euphemisms protect the positive self. Hence, it is worth investigating the power of words use by these journalists. More specifically, was the euphemistic language used in local Taiwan news reports successful in portraying an innocent tea hostess culture to a larger audience, one outside of Taiwan? Was Taiwan's reputation preserved by the use of tea hostess and tea parlor? These mitigation techniques will be investigated to determine the level of success in masking referential meanings.

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