Rochester Institute of Technology

School of Communication

College of Liberal Arts

Online News Coverage About Fraud and Self-Defensive Behavior in China

by

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A *Thesis* presented

in partial fulfillment of the Master of Science degree

in Communication & Media Technologies

Degree Awarded:

May 11, 2018

ProQuest Number: 10816683

ProQuest 10816683

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Acknowledgements

Foremost, I would like to thank my thesis advisor Dr. Ammina Kothari of School of Communication at Rochester Institute of Technology. The door to Dr. Kothari's office was always open whenever I have questions about my research and writing. She provides unfailing help on every aspect of my research and this thesis would not be accomplished without her.

I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Raj S Murthy of the Saunders College of Business at Rochester Institute of Technology as the second reader of this thesis, and I am gratefully indebted to his very valuable comments on this thesis.

Nevertheless, I am also grateful to the faculties and staff who were involved in supporting my research: senior staff assistant of School of Communication---Helen Adamson, who helped me in preparing my thesis defense and thesis submission; Dr. Grant Cos who guided me through my graduate study at Rochester Institute of Technology.

I am also grateful to all my survey participants. My survey would not be successfully conducted without their contribution.

Thanks for all your encouragement!

Congxi Wang

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Master of Science in Communication & Media Technologies

Term Degree Awarded: Spring Semester 2018 (2175)

Abstract

This study explores the role of online news media in directing people's behavior in China. Previous literature shows that Chinese tend to be suspicious or hostile towards strangers and those outside their network. This study assumes that this self-defensive behavior was caused by negative portrayal of strangers in Chinese online news media. A survey and a qualitative content analysis were conducted to understand how the exposure to crime news affects people's perception of strangers and public safety in China, then causes self-defensive behavior in China. The finding shows consistency between survey responses and media coverages about strangers, which establishes the relationship between crime news coverage and self-defensive behavior.

Keywords: cultivation theory, theory of reasoned action, online crime news, protective behavior, China, Chinese news.

Online News Coverage About Fraud and Self-Defensive Behavior in China

In recent years, a series of high-profile incidents have demonstrated the decrease in helping behavior tendencies in China (Wang, 2013). For example, in 2011, a two-year-old girl was hit by two motor vehicles and eighteen pedestrians passed by her without offering any assistance. This tragedy highlights Chinese notorious state of mind of indifference. The reluctance in helping strangers is rising along with the falling in trust in China, which could be related to the fear of crime (Young, 2013). There is an increase in crime involving scammers who pretend to fall down and accuse the helpful bystanders of hurt and then demand money, which results in widespread hesitancy to render aid to others in need (Young, 2013).

A study conducted by Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (2013) showed that Chinese tend to be indifferent—suspicious, or sometimes hostile even—towards strangers and those outside their network. They surveyed over 1,900 people in seven different cities, only between 20% and 30% of the respondents felt trust for people they didn't know (Annual Report on Social Mentality of China, 2012-2013). This figure represents a 30% decline in the number of people who were willing to trust strangers in surveys from previous years. The lack of social trust in China primarily showed as the lack of "bridging" trust (Fukuyama 1995; Redding 1993, p. 67), which refers to trust beyond one's immediate social circles to more distant others with whom one has no direct ties or few personal connections (Putnam, 2000). Chinese citizens tend to distrust out-of-network people and trust only in-network people (Fukuyama, 1995).

The fear of interacting with strangers and the highly self-defensive behavior is a recent phenomenon. The economic reform in 1987 was recognized as a changing point for Chinese perception of safety. Before the reformation, China enjoyed very low crime rates (Li, 2015) and people's fear of crime was not a prominent social issue (Zhang, Messner, Liu & Zhou, 2009).

The economic reform in China has resulted in rising crime rates and growing public concern about public safety and security (Liu 2005; 2006). China's official statistics show that there was a substantial increase in serious and violent offenses from 1978 to 2006 (China Law Yearbooks 1989–2006). The increasing fear of crime changed the local relationships and social cohesion in China (Zhang et al., 2009). However, China still has relatively low crime rate compared to the rest of the world (NUMBEO.com). This gap in the perception of safety and the real crime rate raises a question about the role of the media in shaping publics' opinion in crime. Media attention to the crime and injustice of these incidents might be the one to blame, because it can reinforce reluctance to interact with strangers (Young, 2013).

A quick search on Baidu.com (Chinese largest search engine) brings up an average of 110 news stories about fraud and scam in one day, including credit card scam, tele fraud, and so forth. It shows that a large amount of crime news exists online, and they prefer to use violent words and headlines to attract readers (Li & Polumbaum, 2006). Aggressive language employed in the news media has the potential to create public fear (Gerbner & Gross, 1986). In order to test the media news effect in China, this paper will investigate the relationship between online news about fraud and the self-defensive behavior in China by using cultivation theory and theory of reasoned action as the theoretical framework.

This research focuses on internet as the media channel to study negative news reports because of the special media environment in China. Unlike western countries' news organizations, which have an independent legal status, the traditional media in China, such as newspapers, magazine, and broadcasting, must meet the criteria of "correct political orientation" to survive. Otherwise, the publications will be closed down or absorbed into party newspapers (He, 2008). Additionally, strict regulation and political requirements for media registration lead

to the reality that most newspapers, radio, and TV stations are sponsored by the party or local government (He, 2008). Consequently, there is obvious coverage bias in the Chinese traditional press, characterized as "covering more positive than negative stories" (Xiao, 2012, p. 28). However, the rise of internet has reduced people's reliance on conventional media for information and therefore has diminished the traditional media and the government's abilities to set the agenda for the public (Luo, 2014).

Thus, in this paper, I chose to focus on online media instead of traditional media because traditional media tend to follow the party line and focus on the positive news (Xiao, 2012). Also, the web portals and social media are becoming the main channels for news in China (Lagerkvist, 2006). Compared to traditional media, "the internet promotes a relatively free spread of information and contributes to the progress of democracy and freedom of the press in China" (He, 2008. p. xvi). Therefore, because the online media are becoming the mainstream outlets and less biased, it is suitable for my research on the self-defensive behavior and the framing of fraud news.

The nature of media technology prevailing in a society strongly influence how the members of that society think and behave (Innis, 1950). Likewise, online news as a prevailing media in China have the potential to affect people's perception about safety and strangers and therefore result in self-defensive behavior like distrust and indifference to others. Previous studies have shown the media effect on the perception of safety and the creation of fear (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). But social media and online news as two innovative sources for information in China have not been studied extensively. In consideration of the media environment in China, I assume the online media effect in shaping opinion will be very different from traditional media. Also, I will build the connections between cultivation effects and behavioral intention to explain

the behavior changing. Thus, in this paper, I employ a mixed method approach to understand the content in Chinese crime news and how people perceive it.

<div align="center">**Literature Review**</div>

Media Effect and Cultivation Theory

Cultivation theory was originally developed by George Gerbner and Larry Gross to examine the effect of television. In their original research (1976), they claimed that their primary focus falls on the effects of viewing on the attitudes of the viewer as opposed to created behavior. And heavy viewers are exposed to more violence and therefore are affected by the mean world syndrome: the belief that the world is a far worse and dangerous place than it actually is. Heavy viewers of TV are thought to be "cultivating" attitudes that seem to believe that the world created by television is an accurate depiction of the real world. Gerbner posited that "television as a mass medium produce repetitive pattern of messages and formed into a common symbolic environment" that (1986, p. 3) socializing people into standardized roles and behaviors (Griffin, 2012). At the same time, the light viewers, who live in the same culture environment, will still be affected by the heavy viewers and have similar persuasion as the heavy viewers.

In further studies (Gerbner & Gross, 1986), researchers claimed that different from unidirectional media effect, cultivation is more like a "gravitational process" (p. 15), rather than simple creation nor reflection of images and it could absorb the divergent currents into a stable and common mainstream, which can evolve the effect to cultivation (George, 1998).

The repetitive pattern of television's mass-produced messages and images form the mainstream of the common symbolic environment. The mainstream defines its dominant current (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986). Social media may serve the same function as

mainstream media in mass-producing messages. Therefore, the perception of strangers is defined by how the strangers are portrayed by the media. So when the media give negative information on strangers over the positive information, the symbolic of the word "stranger" changes to negative. In this way, when people in China think about strangers, they associate with the information like "dangerous" or "crime" instead of the perception of welcome or helpful.

Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA)

Theory of reasoned action suggests that a person's behavior is determined by the intention to perform the behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), and this intention comes as a result of a belief that performing the behavior will lead to a specific outcome (Ajzen, 1985). Ajzen and Fishbein (1975) point out two factors, attitudes and subjective norms, are determinates of behavioral intention. An attitude is a person's judgement on whether an action is positive or negative; subjective norm is a perceived social pressure arising from one's perception (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). In other words, we behave by the perception of others' judgement. There are two components in subjective norms: normative beliefs (what I think others would want or expect me to do) and motivation to comply (how important it is to me to do what I think others expect) (Sheppard, Hartwick, & Warshaw, 1988). A subjective norm describes the social pressure an individual feel to perform or not perform the behavior at hand (Ajzen & Madden, 1986).

Theory of reasoned action extended to theory of planned behavior in 1985, which adds a major component: perceived behavioral control. This additional predictor can be applied when people have the intention to conduct the behavior, but the actual behavior is thwarted because of subjective and objective reasons (Ajzen, 1985). In this case, even though individuals hold positive attitudes towards strangers, they still choose to behave defensively due to the behavioral control mechanism.

Linking Cultivation and the TRA

Cultivation theory and the theory of reasoned action are the two media effects theories that can explain the flow from negative information to the self-defensive behavior. According to TRA, an individual's intention to perform a behavior is determined by attitudes and subjective norms (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Accordingly, those two factors could be influenced by the media based on the cultivation theory which claims that perceptions of the world are heavily influenced by the images and ideological messages transmitted through popular television media (Cohen & Weimann, 2000). Under these two theories, the distrustful and protective behavior occurring in China can be explained as the change in attitude and subjective norms which influenced by the symbolic environment created by negative online coverage of crime.

After establishing the relation between human behavior and media message, now we can see the public attitude from a perspective of how media functioned in our society. And it is reasonable to assume that social issues can be raised by the media information. So this study raises the question on how online news about fraud and scam can lead to self-defensive behavior? This study will focus not only on the media effect but also on the process from media information to human behavior change.

Related Studies

There are existing studies in the West that provide rich insights into the negative news coverage and its effects. Based on cultivation theory, there were a large amount of previous studies focused on negative news effect in creating fear about the reality. Romer, Jamieson, and Aday (2003) used survey as a first source to exam the relation between exposure to various news sources and the assessments of crime risks and other risks covered by media and found that the

viewing of local television news is the main channel for the concern about crime. Furthermore, previous research found that news media is the most effective media genre in cultivating fear compared to other genres like movies or TV shows (Grabe & Drew, 2007).

Moreover, the media effect shows not only in shaping opinion but also in directing behavior. Kleinnijenhuis, Van hoof, and Oegema (2006) studied negative news effect in voting. Their finding proved that the negative news discouraged trust in party leader, then caused behavioral change in voting. Based on TRA, the implement of a behavior is decided by the behavioral intention, and this intention could be explained by the perceived consequence. Shim and You applied this concept on food consumption and consumer behavior. The negative news coverages about food were strongly associated with the perceived susceptibility and severity, which can direct customers' consumption on food. Additionally, the perceived potential risk can also lead to protective behavior. Nabi and Sullivan (2001) explained how heavy television viewing determined the engagement in protective behavior through elaborating cultivation theory by using a theory of reasoned action perspective. The authors successfully built the relations among five measurements (news viewing, belief, attitude, behavioral intention, and behavior) to explain the cognitive process in engaging protective behavior, which was also employed in my research.

However, very limited research has been published that addresses the media effects on Chinese protective behavior. What is available in the existing literature is scattered among studies about Chinese news framing and social alienation in China. The agenda-setting effects in Chinese media have been discovered in existing studies (Cheng & Chan, 2015; Luo, 2014; Shen & Guo, 2013). Even though the online media have more freedom in news reporting, government could still set the online public agenda on some occasions (Luo, 2014). Additionally, the online

news twisted the meaning of the words and used aggression language to attract readers (Zhang, 2015). The cultivation effect could also be shown from how audience portray the meaning of words based on its use in the online media. As to the crime coverage in Chinese media, Li and Polumbaum (2006) analyzed the news coverage of crimes in two of China's most popular commercial portals, Sina.com and Sohu.com, trying to see how online media portray crime news. At the same time, they analyzed the readers' comments under the news, to see the interpretations from the audiences (Li & Polumbaum, 2006). The result shows that the readers' responses to crime news could affect ideological rendering. Most importantly, the analysis on crime shows that the online news tends to use violent words and headlines, which indicate there are negative and aggressive information contained in Chinese online news.

Cultivation researchers often investigate how the media influence the audience attitudinally and cognitively. Only a few studies have looked into how mass media effects can be translated into planned behaviors or actions (Vu & Lee, 2013). In this study I tried to cover the topic on both negative news coverage and self-defensive behavior to explain the indifference happening in China. This study will build the connection between the perception given by the media and the behavioral intention to engage in behavior.

Hypotheses

In order to establish the link between the negative news consumption and indifference to strangers, I have made the following assumptions based on the literature review.

First, I assume that the negative online news on Chinese media can influence people's belief in public safety. According to cultivation theory and mean world syndrome, the more negative news a person watches, the more he or she is likely to believe that the world is a scary place. Specifically, people who are always exposed to online news about scam and fraud are

more likely to believe that the world is dangerous and full of crime. Also, cultivation theory suggest that cultivation is a continuous process and is often influenced by the viewer's life experience as well (Shrum & Bischak, 2001). Thus, I assume that a person's experience of crime like scam will act as a moderating variable. The personal experience of crime in this paper is defined as individuals themselves or their families and close friends who have been scammed and experienced a financial loss.

Based on the theoretical framework, I propose:

H 1: Amount of negative news viewing will be positively related to beliefs about the prevalence of swindle in society.

Secondly, knowing that the negative media coverage can shape viewer's beliefs on issues and create the symbolic environment of danger, the second hypothesis will be made on the assumption that beliefs and symbolic environment has an effect too. According to the TRA, salient beliefs are expected to be the best predictors of attitude. According to cultivation theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976), the news shape people's perception about the social environment, which are the meanings attached on the norms. For example, a stranger could be seen as helpful in a welcoming environment, but could also be seen as dangerous in an environment that lack of trust. So, the norms of strangers change under different environment and people behave the way based on the norms brought by the symbolic environment. Thus, we would anticipate that beliefs about the prevalence of scam and fraud can lead to our attitude towards our perception about safety and friendly in the society.

H 2: Beliefs about the prevalence of swindle in our society will predict the perception that the world we live is unsafe and unfriendly.

Third, based on TRA (Ajzen & Madden, 1986), attitude and subjective norms are expected to predict related behavioral intentions. Thus, I assume that the perception about our world orient the intention to perform protective measures, then leading to actual protective behaviors. Specifically, the intention of responding to a stranger might be inquiry or suspicion instead of curiosity or care under a circumstance that our world is unsafe and unfriendly. Subsequently, our expression or acts will show the reluctance to interact with the stranger or refusing to talk.

H3: The perception that the world is unsafe and unfriendly will predict intentions to take protective measures like distrust.

H4: Intention to take protective measures will predict engagement in protective behaviors.

Methodology

Survey Sample and Instrument

The above hypotheses will be examined using simple random sampling approach to survey Chinese internet news audience. Given the purpose of this study, this approach is appropriate because self-defensive behavior cannot be easily observed on a large number basis, so survey is an "alternative way to collect the reports on acts and behavior" (Spickard, 2016, p.72). Survey is also an efficient approach to gather shallow held opinions and attitudes from a large amount of random sample (Spickard, 2016). In order to measure the cognitive process of engagement of behavior, previous studies (Kim et al., 2015; Nabi & Sullivan, 2001) also employed survey to address their research question.

The questionnaire was randomly distributed via social media (WeChat and Weibo), as well as physical copies. Participants invited to participate in the survey from my social media homepage and via reposts of the questionnaire. Only people who used online news channel,

including business portals, social media, and news App as their main source of news consumption were qualified to participant in this survey. In total, 167 responses were collected. After screening the data, 11 respondents had to be eliminated as they had answered that they do not use internet as their main channel to get news from, resulting in a total of 154 valid responses.

The questionnaire included 33 questions in total and was translated into Chinese and presented in both languages to avoid the misinterpretation of the translated questions. Before commencement of the study, all survey instruments were approved by the Institutional Review Board at the Rochester Institute of Technology.

Measures

The questionnaire included three sections, in the following order: demographic information; news consumption preferences, social perceptions and experiences. Six demographic variables were controlled in this study, including the current geographic location, the permanent geographic location in China, age, gender, education, and occupation. The two variables which concerned of participants' geographic location, were demonstrated by two open ended questions.

The questionnaire was designed to test five sets of critical measures: news viewing, trust in news; attitude about strangers, safety and willingness to interact with strangers; intentions to take protective measure; and the implementation of protective behavior. This measurement was modified based on a previous study (Nabi & Sullivan, 2001) in order to test the relationship between media consumption and protective action.

Gerbner et al. (1994) point out that the cultivation effect can manifest in two forms ---the mainstream and resonance effects. According Shrum and Bischak (idem, 2001), the media

audience with more "direct experience related to risks and dangers, such as crime and violence, will be more affected by television viewing than those with less direct experience" (p.192). There were existing studies applied mainstream and resonance effects on the use of online media (Cheng & Chan, 2015) and the results showed that the mainstream and resonance effects in the use of online media functioned as the same as television. In this case, I proposed that personal experience of swindle is a factor moderated the resonance effects. Accordingly, I designed a survey question related to participants' personal experience about swindle. The personal experience including direct experience which referred to scam happened to the participants themselves or their family, and the indirect experience which referred to the participants hear about swindle happened to their acquaintances.

News consumption. Cultivation theory posits that the more time an individual spends with the media, the more likely the individual believes the social reality portrayed in the media (Gerbner & Gross, 1979). For the purpose of this study, the crime news consumption was one of the variable used to evaluate the cultivation effect. Participants were asked three questions related to their exposure to news about scam and fraud. First, the frequency of browsing online news was rated on a 6-point scale: 1 (more than 5 times a day) to 6 (rarely). The second question was designed to assess the exposure to news related to fraud, asking participants to rate how they browse news online: 1 (all news about fraud) to 5 (no news about fraud). Given the social media environment in China, it is important to ask this question because the audience will only consume the news based on their subscription or from the accounts they followed on social media. Thus, the exposure to news about scam will vary based on the individuals' subscription and the following of other accounts. Third measurement focused on how participants consumed

online news, which was assessed by the frequency of reading the news about swindle from 1 (always) to 4 (never).

Belief. In order to find out how much the participants believe in the news stories, they were asked to choose from following options: 1.all the stories are true, 2. True with exaggeration, 3. Mostly true but has false information, 4. Half true and false, 5. full of exaggeration, 6. All fake stories. Further question asked if the participants felt scared when they were in a situation similar to what they read in the crime news. The choices were given by 1 (yes), 2 (no), 3 (can't tell). The previous studies showed that the violent content in the media can cultivate fear of the viewers (Gerbner, 2006). In other words, the fear of crime can reflect how much the audience believed in the news media.

Attitude. To assess general attitude about the social environment and strangers, I used three Likert-scale type questions to examine people's perception about the degree of safety and friendly of the city they lived in the longest in China. The scale ranged from 1 is very dangerous or very unfriendly to 5 very safe or very friendly. Also, their attitude towards strangers was measured from 1 (very friendly) to 5 (very unfriendly).

Behavioral intention. To assess intentions to take protective actions, participants were asked about how they would respond in three scenarios that present situations of stranger interaction. The scenarios were: when a stranger comes up and says hi; when a stranger offers free things; when you see a phone number you don't know. My assumption is that those who portray the situation negatively (e.g., feel threatened or scared) are more likely to engage in actual protective measures than those who think the situation is neutral (e.g., feel curious).

Behavior. In order to assess participants' protective behavior towards strangers, the questions were designed to find out about their interactions with others on a daily basis,

including how often they talk to strangers and the possibilities in helping a stranger. My assumption is that people who barely talk to strangers tend to be exposed to more online news about swindle.

Content Analysis

To effectively study the effects of crime news, it is important to analyze news content consumed by target demographic. Previous research suggested that only a consistent tone in the news, either positive or negative, is likely to have an effect (Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006; Zaller, 1996). In order to assess the consistent tone used in media messages, a qualitative content analysis of online news should be carried out to better explain the survey results, because qualitative content analysis can interpret meaning from the content of text data (Creswell, 2014). Thus, a qualitative content analysis was conducted to collect data on crime news coverage.

To account for the online news that was consumed in China, I analyzed the news from Chinese largest search engine ---Baidu.com. Baidu News Source has been considered a premium label for online media, and major online news portal (Kun, 2017). It includes news sources from traditional press, provincial and municipal government portals. Using baidu.com as a search platform allowed access to the largest credible online news stories based on the search keywords. In this study, the search keyword "scam" was used to search for scam related news stories in the Baidu News channel. The search date was set up from March 1st to the May 31st, which is the time period during which the survey-based research was conducted. By searching the keyword "scam" (including titles and body text), a total 704 news stories were identified from March to May 2017. The search engine automatically folded same news story from different sources to ensure all 704 news stories were different. The search result was displayed in chronological order, from the latest to the oldest. Based on the order of the news stories shown on the search

result page, 50 news stories were randomly selected for further analysis using a digital randomizer.

The analysis was divided into six coding categories: news source, type of scam, the description of scammer, use of violent language, warning about dangerous strangers, image use, and images of scam victims. Those categories were based on the basis of survey questions in order to identify the themes in the news.

An open coding scheme was used to identify the similarities or differences between various categories. I began the analysis by reading each news article to decide the existence of each theme. Each theme was measured by the use of certain words and the implication of these sentences. The description of scammer included in the content such as the scammer's identity or their scam tactics. The inclusion of violent language in the stories was defined as exaggeration, or of danger posed by the said crime or criminal, and the exaggeration of the prevalence of crime. The non-existing themes were coded as "0". Otherwise, the description that matched to each of the themes/ categories were coded specifically. Detailed notes were taken during each reading, once the phrase in the news article was identified as being related to a theme was noted in the code book. An Excel file was used for coding, in which the column was set as the title of the news stories, while the rows were used to list of each of the themes. All the related phrases were transferred into the Excel based on the themes.

Results

Survey Findings

Survey data. Table 1 (see Appendix) presents the distribution of demographic of all valid respondents. 53.9% reported their current geographic location was in Beijing (the capital city of China). The mean age was 3.36 ($SD = 1.413$) and 33.1% were between 18-24 years old. 60.4%

of the participants were female, 36.4% were male, and 3.2% prefer not to answer ($SD = 0.558$).

Most (63.6%) were employed for wages and the majority (51.9%) had bachelor's degree.

To provide descriptive information regarding the news consumption associated with defensive behavior, frequencies and chi-square were used. There were 12 significant relations were found.

1. The relation between **gender and the fear of crime** was significant, X^2 (2, $N = 154$) = 23.822, $p < 0.01$. Women more tend to be scared of crime when they are in a situation that is similar to what reported in online news.

2. The relation between **gender and the crime news exposure** was significant, X^2 (2, $N = 154$) = 37.164, $p < 0.01$. Men saw more stories about crime and fraud every time they browsed news than women did.

3. The relation between **education and scammer description** was significant, X^2 (2, $N = 154$) = 72.182, $p < 0.01$. Participants who have higher education (Bachelor's, Master's and Doctorate degree) more tend to recognize a scammer from their way of talking.

4. The relation between **crime news exposure and likelihood in helping strangers** was significant, X^2 (2, $N = 154$) = 34.551, $p < 0.05$. The more individuals read the crime news, the more they were willing to help strangers.

5. The relation between **crime news exposure and believe in news** was significant, X^2 (2, $N = 154$) =70.333, $p < 0.01$. The participants who read more crime news, tend to believe the stories are true.

6. The relation between the **fear of crime and the likelihood in helping strangers** was significant, X^2 (2, $N = 154$) = 70.333, $p < 0.01$. Participants who have no fear in the crime news are more likely to help strangers.

7. The relation between **fear of crime and scammer description** was significant, X^2 (2, N = 154) = 70.333, $p < 0.01$. Individuals who fear of crime tend to judge the scammer from their way of talking

8. The relation between **personal experiences and perception of strangers** was significant, X^2 (2, N = 154) = 68.164, $p < 0.01$. Although people have experienced scam, they still hold positive perception about strangers.

9. The relation between **the perception of safety and the perception of friendly** was significant, X^2 (2, N = 154) = 70.333, $p < 0.01$. The perception of a city's safety is positively related to the perception of a city's friendliness.

10. The relation between **perception of strangers and the news effect on perception of strangers** was significant, X^2 (2, N = 154) = 67.146, $p < 0.01$. The participants who think media brought them negative perception to strangers, tend to think that strangers never offer free things.

11. The relation between **perception of strangers offering free things and the trust in strangers** was significant, X^2 (2, N = 154) = 77.215, $p < 0.01$. People who think that strangers cannot be trusted are more tend to believe that strangers never offer free things.

12. The relation between **likelihood in helping strangers and the trust in strangers** was significant, X^2 (2, N = 154) = 47.363, $p < 0.01$. People who find it hard to trust the strangers are more unlikely to help strangers

Hypotheses testing. H1 predicts that the more negative news a person viewed, the more likely they are to believe the prevalence of swindle in society. It was partially supported since the there is a significance showed that the participants who read more crime news, tend to believe the stories are true. However, no significance has been found between news consumption and the

perception of safety. So the negative news viewing affected their belief in news but did not create the fear towards crime.

H2 predicts that beliefs about the prevalence of swindle in our society will predict the attitude that strangers are distrustful. The fear towards crime is the main evaluation to assess the prevalence of swindle, showed a significant relation with the attitude towards strangers. Thus, H2 was supported. People who always fear of crime are not willing to offer help to strangers. Although most of the participants responded that they feel natural about the claim that crime news brought them negative perception towards strangers, the significance relation demonstrated their distrustfulness to strangers when they predicted the swindle is prevalent.

H3 predicts the perception that the world is unsafe and unfriendly will predict intentions to take protective measures like distrust. This hypothesis was not supported since there is no significance showing that the perception of safety and friendliness have relation with likelihood in trusting strangers.

H4 predicts that intention to take protective measures will predict engagement in protective behaviors. The intention like distrust is related to their interaction with strangers like helping behavior. Thus, H4 is supported.

Other Survey Findings

Gender plays an important role in news consumption and the fear of crime. Nearly 41% of female participants responded that they have felt scared when they were in situation similar to a news story that they read or watched online, while only 12% of male respondents felt scared. Furthermore, men were exposed to more crime news than women; 60% of the male participants responded that they browsed online news more than three times a day, and saw more news about swindle every time they browsed online news. In contrast, the frequency of browsing news on a

daily basis for females was less than males and they were exposed to less crime news content every time they browsed news. Even though women were exposed to less scam news than men, women still have a higher fear of crime.

Theoretically, the resonance effect (Shrum & Bishak, 2001) states the personal experience of crime will increase the cultivation effect of media viewing. However, this study showed that although people have experienced scam, they still hold positive perceptions about strangers. Therefore, personal experience of crime is not a factor that can affect behavior. The significance between crime news exposure and likelihood in helping strangers also shows an unexpected relation: the more individuals read the crime news, the more they were willing to help strangers. This significance indicates that the negative news consumption does not directly lead to protective behavior. Nevertheless, 74.7% of the respondents agree or strongly agree that news about fraud and scam raised their vigilance. In conclusion, the negative news changed people's attitude toward strangers but cannot lead to the protective behavior.

Content Analysis

Types of scam. The 50 randomly selected news stories covered mainly three types of scam: telecommunication scam, face to face and a summary of scam cases. Twenty-seven of the news stories covered telecommunication scam which included phone scam, job and employment scam, online shopping scam, banking scam, financial and investment scam, social media scam, lottery scam, and romance scam. Eleven news stories were summary of the scams, combining information from multiple scam cases. Those cases had several focuses: 1) scam victims' age group. Two news stories stated young generation is the major victims of scam, while another new story stated the elders are the targeted group for scammers; 2) high crime rate area. Those news stories picked up the regions that had high scam rate and summary the scam type happened

in that region; 12 news stories fall under the face to face scam category. It includes cases of selling fake products, imposter scam, and credit card scam.

  Description of scammer. The selected stories have mainly three focuses in the description of scammer: scam tactics, identity (including gender, region, age), scammers are professional and proficient. One story can have more than one focus. The scam tactics were mentioned the most of the stories analyzed. Thirty-seven news stories had a detailed description of the means and process of scamming. Eighteen news stories described the scammer as professional and proficient. This trait was mentioned more often in telecommunication scam and summary of scam cases. The face to face scam news tended to include the scammers identity because it was more noticeable in face to face scam.

  In describing the scammers, the news stories tend to portray the scammers as crafty, vile, immoral, jobless, and from rural area. The following is an example of how the news portray the scammers. In a news story posted by *Shandong News* that summarized the monthly telecommunication scam in Shandong province, the writer stated:

> The recent scam cases are all organized gang crime. The criminals well-designed a
> "script," planed thoroughly and put many people in the "play". The gang members
> pretend to be procurator, judge, police, employees from bank, insurance and social
> security and set up serial fraud, using drug dealing, money wash, children abduction as
> causes, induce the victims to wire the money to a "safe account," then to implement the
> scam. Victims are easy to be deceived by the well-designed "plot"... Their scam
> techniques are covert and changeable…Once victims fell into the trap, they will be fully
> drained by the criminals. (sd.dzwww.com, May 31st, 2017)

In the above quote, the scammers were described as scary, crafty, and greedy. The news story pointed out that they threaten the victims and they won't stop until they get all of the victims' money. Furthermore, the news emphasized scammers' crafty and treacherous traits by saying that the scammers' evolving and covert scamming tactics made the scam hard to identify and a victim can easily fall into the trap.

Use of violent language. The use of violent language can be categorized into the following descriptions: the prevalence of scam, large amount of money and many people involved, scam caused serious social issue. Telecommunication scam news tends to be more specific about the amount of money and number of people involved in the case. The stories always phrase the prevalence of scam by saying that more than hundred of scammers are located all over the nation and the victims are from multiple regions. The summary type of news stories always began with how often the scam happened in a certain region or time period, and then warned the readers to be alert to the situation in those cases. Six news stories think scam can result social issues. Three news stories stated that scam threatens social security and could disturb social order. The other stories claim scam is a drawback of technology.

Warning of strangers are dangerous. In telecommunication scams, 13 stories included warning about strangers, while 14 stories don't. Most of the other two types of scam news story warned the reader not to trust a stranger easily. The following is an example of how those warnings are presented in the news stories. In a story titled with "the elders ae the main target for scammers," the writer states at the end:

> To protect your property, we suggest: first, the elders need to protect their personal
>
> information and don't reveal it to strangers. Second, don't trust unknown phone call or

text messages. Third, Don't reply to the phone call or text messages from an unknown

number….. (jsnews.com.cn, April 20th, 2017)

In the above quote, the story clearly pointed out that strangers are unreliable and

distrustful. Additionally, the phone call or text messages from strangers are also questionable.

The news stories proposed that staying aware about the contact from strangers is a way to protect

yourself. The similar statements are also found in the other news stories which warned the

readers to be vigilant towards strangers.

Image use. Seventeen new stories included visual images, which ranged from photos to

illustrations. Most photos showed the scammers who got arrested and the police who captured

them. The photos tended to portray the braveness of the police and how justice was served. The

illustrators were used in the news stories mainly for two purposes. First, to visualized scam

process or numbers. For example, in a news story about APP scam, the graphic used arrows to

demonstrate the "business" chain created by the scammers and the links that gathered money.

Second, the illustrators were used to show the images of scammer and/or victims. For example,

in a news story that summarized 60 types of telecommunication scam, an illustration was used to

describe job scam. It showed a young man sitting in front of a computer sweating, and behind his

computer was a monster holding a sign saying "boss," reaching his hand out of the computer

screen to the young men. The scammer is shown as a monster in the illustration and the victim

was shown as someone who is desperate to find a job.

Image of scam victim. Thirty-one stories describe the scam victim in the news story,

while 27 stories reported on the age, gender and occupation, and origin of the victims. Young

adults and the elders were the most mentioned victim groups. The victims were also described as

weak, petty, poor, lacking social experiences, and desperate after being scammed. The following

is an example of how the victims were presented. In a news story about job scam, the writer states:

> The majority of victims don't want to go to the police and report after they got scammed because the small loss and high time cost. And this is the reason they the scamming group grow so fast…. Some victims think file a report cost too much time and effort and decide not to report which caused trouble for the investigation. (Legaldaily.com)

In the above quote, the victims were blamed for the growth of the scam group. They were also described as people who are unsupportive during the police investigation on the case.

Discussion

This study employed a mixed method approach to understand how people in China perceive public safety and how they behave accordingly. First, a survey was conducted to identify public opinion about scamming in China and people's interaction with strangers in daily life. Next, a content analysis was conducted to verify if public opinion reflected media coverage of scams in China. Survey findings show that the cultivation effects of crime news on people's belief in the prevalence of crime. While the qualitative findings show that negative portrayal of strangers lead to social distrust in China. The findings provided further supports for the use of cultivation theory and theory of reasoned action in China. This study contributes to both mass communication theory and the practical knowledge of Chinese indifference behavior --- an emerging social phenomenon.

There were two surprising findings in the quantitative study: people who have experienced scam still hold positive perception about strangers, and the more individuals read the crime news the more they were willing to help strangers. These two findings are contradictory to the previous studies and theoretical framework. What is also surprising is that hypothesis 3 is not

supported. There is no relation between the perception about safety and the willingness to help others in this study but has been supported in previous studies. The unexpected findings and unsupported hypothesis could be explained by the type of my participants. First, around 20.13% of the participants are not currently living in China. Their perception towards safety and their interaction with strangers might be affected by their experiences in the country they were currently living in. Even though I clarified in the survey that all the questions refer to their experiences in China, the scenario may be hard to recall if the participants live in other countries for most of their times. For example, some of the participants are Chinese students studying in the United State. They spend most their time outside China and living in the college which is a closed and safe community. So it might be hard for students to connect what they saw in the news to their real life in the US and they might be less affected by the crime news. Second, the age range from 18 to 32 accounted for 62% of the overall participants. Most of the responses were young adults who are more familiar with internet information than older generation and have more life experiences than children and teenagers. So they might be more immune to the media message than other age ranges.

The findings in the qualitative research shows a consistency with the survey response. The survey uses open ended questions to collect responses on: 1) the type of scam they see the most on the internet, 2) description scammer, and 3) writers' comments on the scam cases. Most of the respondents said they see telecommunication scam the most on the internet. The same result was found in content analysis. The survey answers to this question also contains medical scam, job scam, online shopping scam, financial service scam, lottery, and banking scam. All those types of scam news were discovered in content analysis. Most of the respondents have very negative description of scammers in use of the words --- vile, immoral, nonhuman, endanger the

public safety. Those moralistic condemnations of the criminals are similar to the findings in the content analysis. In answering what the writer comments on the scam case, the survey responses concentrate on: 1) be aware of scamming and raise vigilance to strangers, 2) the scammer is evil and should be punished, and 3) victims are ignorant, careless, and lack of social experiences. The survey respondents also noted that the elders are easy to be scammed, while the selected news stories also mentioned that old people is a targeted group for scammers.

The qualitative content analysis confirmed the existence of negative portrayal of strangers and public safety in online crime news stories. Besides, the consistency between the qualitative and quantitative research results indicate that the public's strong aversion and moral condemnation to scammers may result from online news coverage. Additionally, online news stories tend to individualize the cause of crime. This finding has been established by previous study (Xiao & Polumbaum, 2006) who noted that crime was framed as an individual matter. The cases concerned in this study blame the high scamming rate on scammer's voracity and victims' ignorance. This kind of argument suggested that crime only happen to people who are negligent of self-protection and it is simply the individual's duty to prevent scam from happening. The impact of this argument is shown in the survey where the respondents think the victims are careless and lack of social experiences. The constant reminding of being cautious around stranger in the news stories lead the readers to associate scam with strangers. This association between scam and stranger plus the violent content and graphic depiction of scammers lead to a public distrust towards strangers.

Overall, the findings partially support the theory of cultivation and TRA. Heavy viewing of online news about swindle leads to the perception of the prevalence of swindle. In support of TRA, the data showed that exposure to the negative media messages can result in protective

behavior. Overall, findings of the present study confirmed the effects of crime news in shaping public perception and its power in directing protective behavior. Most of existing research on media and behavior studies in China are not interdisciplinary. Agenda setting was a commonly used theory in explaining how Chinese media serve for political purpose (Cheng & Chan, 2015; Luo, 2014; Zhang, Shao & Bowman, 2012). While research in social behavior and social connections were primarily studied from historical and cultural perspectives. Limited studies consider media as a factor can influence social connections in China. My study explained the changing of social connection, like the increasing in distrust and indifference, caused by online media, which provide a new perspective for the study of Chinese society. Another theory that can explain the rise of collective behavior in China is contagion theory. It states that "the crowd can cause a hypnotic impact on individuals" (Smelser, 1965) which demonstrates that individual can act unreasonable or inconsistent within a group and become normal when they are alone (Park & Burgess, 1921). This theory shows a possibility that the widespread indifference behavior in China is because people were encouraged to be indifferent and distrust after seeing others act in a similar way to strangers.

This study also has practical contributions. First, it explores Chinese news consumption habits. I found out that the majority of the participants choose online news media as their main source of information. This result indicated that the traditional media is no longer the mainstream in China, and people prefer to read news that are less biased and oriented. Additionally, more and more incidences about indifference behavior happened in China. The decrease in helping behavior is becoming a social issue that aroused national attention and needs to be addressed. This study provides an alternative to restore the helping behavior which is the elimination of the negative portrayal of strangers in news coverage about swindle.

Limitations and Future Studies

First, the survey is not evenly distributed demographically. Most (53.9%) of the participants are from Beijing, the capital city in China. The experiences and habits of people in big cities cannot be generalized to people from small towns or villages. Gender is also the limitation that must be considered. There are more women who took the survey than men. However, the gender ratio in China is 113.5 men to every 100 women. There should be more men answering the survey than women to meet the population ratio. Second, because the survey was translated from English to Chinese, there might be some inaccuracy in the interpretation. Third, the simple size is too small compared to the enormous population of China. Thus, the result may only speak for the concentrated demographic. Future studies should analyze the content of crime online news to determine how the crime news were covered. More specific questions should be asked according to the news content in testing the cultivation effect. The survey should include a more diversified demographic.

The limitation in the content analysis is the use of the search engine to identify crime news. Because Baidu.com is in favor of authorized news portals, private online publisher is hard to be indexed by Baidu robots. Thus, Baidu.com is unable to cover all the online news from different sources. Besides, with the growing popularity of mobile oriented news portals, more and more audience prefer to read content from private publishers instead of traditional media. So Baidu.com may not be a well represent of all the online news coverage. Future studies may look into more online media sources to determine the online news coverages.

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Appendix

Table 1

Age

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	18–24	51	33.1	33.1	33.1
	25–32	50	32.5	32.5	65.6
	33–40	24	15.6	15.6	81.2
	41–48	9	5.8	5.8	87.0
	49–55	15	9.7	9.7	96.8
	56–65	5	3.2	3.2	100.0
	Total	154	100.0	100.0	

Gender

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Female	93	60.4	60.4	60.4
	Male	56	36.4	36.4	96.8
	Prefer not to answer	5	3.2	3.2	100.0
	Total	154	100.0	100.0	

Occupation

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Employed for wages	98	63.6	63.6	63.6
	Self–employed	4	2.6	2.6	66.2
	Out of job/ between jobs	3	1.9	1.9	68.2
	Student	36	23.4	23.4	91.6
	Retired	5	3.2	3.2	94.8
	Freelancer	8	5.2	5.2	100.0
	Total	154	100.0	100.0	

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Age	154	5	2	7	3.36	1.413	1.998
Gender	154	2	1	3	1.43	.558	.312
Occupation	154	6	1	7	2.47	2.093	4.382
Education	154	6	1	7	5.07	.930	.864
Valid N (listwise)	154						

Education

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No formal education training	1	.6	.6	.6
	Elementary School	1	.6	.6	1.3
	Secondary school	9	5.8	5.8	7.1
	Junior College	15	9.7	9.7	16.9
	Bachelor's degree	80	51.9	51.9	68.8
	Master's degree	45	29.2	29.2	98.1
	Doctorate degree	3	1.9	1.9	100.0
	Total	154	100.0	100.0	

Survey Instrument

You have been chosen to participate in this survey because you indicated that you get news from online sources. The goal of this study is to collect information about people's perception of fraud news as well as their attitudes towards safety and trust in China. By continuing with the survey, you give your consent to be part of this study.

A. Background/Demographics

1. What is your current geographical location?

City_____ Country_____

2. Where did you grow up?

City _____ Country_____

3. What is your age range? A. Under 18

B. 18-24

C. 25-32

D. 33-40

E. 41-48

F. 49-55

G. 56-64

H. Over 65

4. What is your gender?

A. Female B. Male C. Other

5. What is your current occupation?

A. Employed for wages

B. Self-employed

C. Out of job / between jobs

D. Homemaker

E. Student

F. Retired

G. Unable to work

H. Other: Specify: _____

6. What is the highest level of education you've attained (or currently enrolled)?

A. No formal education training

B. Elementary school

C. Secondary school (High School or Technical School)

D. Junior college

E. Bachelor's degree F. Master's degree G. Doctorate degree

B. News Consumption

1. How often do you browse news?

A. More than 5 times a day

B. 3-4 times a day

C. Once or twice a day

D. 4-6 times per week

E. 1-3 times per week

F. Rarely

G. Others: _____

2. Which channel do you usually get news from.

A. Business Portals (e.g. Sina.com, Sohu.com) B. Social Media (e.g. Weibo or WeChat)

C. TV

D. Newspapers

E. News APP: _____ E. Others: _____

3. Please use the following scale to select an average portion of news coverage that is about fraud

or scam when you browse news.

|------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|

100%   75%   50%   25%   0%
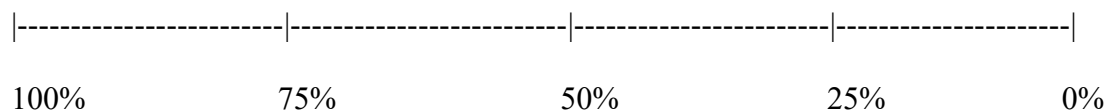
4. How often do you click in to read the story every time you see a news title that is about fraud

or scam?

A. Always

B. Sometimes

C. Barely

D. Never

E. Other: Specify: _____

5. How credible do you find news stories about fraud?

A. I think all stories about fraud cases are true, reliable and accurate.

B. I think they are all true but include some exaggeration.

C. I think most of the stories are true, but might include some false information.

D. Stories have an equal balance of true and false information.

E. They are full of exaggeration

F. They are all fake news

6. What kind of fraud news do you see the most on the internet.

7. What do the comments/discussion related fraud news stories usually focus on?

8. How do you feel after you watch/read news about fraud?

9. What are the most frequently used words in describing the scammers in the online news you

watched

10. Did you ever feel scared when you are in some situation similar to a news story you read or

watched online?

A. Yes

B. No

C. Can't Tell

D. Other: _____

C. Personal Character and Experiences

1. Has anyone in your family or close friends experienced any scam/fraud?

A. Yes. It happened to me or my family before

B. It happened to my friend or someone I know

C. It never happened to me or the people I know

D. Other: _____

2. Do you think reading/ watching news about fraud make you more vigilant about crime?

A. Yes.

B. No

C. Hard to Tell

D. Other: Specify: _____

3. Please use the following scale to select degree of safety that could best describe the city you are living in right now. (If you are currently not living in China, please describe the city you lived in the longest while in China)

|--|---|

Extremely Dangerous   Neutral   Very Safe

4. Please use the following scale to select degree of friendliness that could best describe the people from the city you are living in right now. (If you are currently not living in China, please describe the city you lived in the longest while in China)

|--|---|

Very friendly   Neutral   Very Unfriendly

5.Please use the following scale to describe how likely you are to trust a stranger?

|---------------------------------------|--|

Very easily   Neither trust nor distrust   Very difficulty

6.What trait of a stranger would make you feel he/she is a scammer?

A. Appearance

B. Dressing

C. The tone of talking

D. The way of talking

E. Age

F. Gender

G. Others: _____

7.How often do you interact with people you don't know outside the necessary conversation?

(necessary conversation: e.g. ordering or consultant)

A. All the Time

B. Sometimes

C. Rarely

D. Never

E. Can't Tell

F. Other: _____

8.Why do you choose to (sometimes) talk or (sometimes) not talk to people you don't know?

9.If a stranger came up to you and say hello, what would be your first reaction to this situation?

A. This person might need some help

B. This person wants something from me

C. This person is being nice

D. Whatever this person says is definitely a lie.

E. This never happened to me before.

F. It depends on _____

G. Other: _____

10. Please use the following scale to describe your opinion about following statement: If a stranger offered me free things, she/he must want to trick me.

|--|---|

Strongly Agree   Neither Agree nor Disagree   Strongly Disagree

11. If a stranger asks you to do him/her a favor, how likely are you to help him/her?

|--|--|

Very Likely   Half likely half unlikely   Very Unlikely

12. What is your first thought when you see a phone number you don't know?

13. Did you feel bad after you choose distrust and ignore a stranger?

A. Never

B. Barely

C. Sometimes D. Always

E. Hard to tell

14. Have you ever made friends with a complete stranger in the past one year? If yes, how many?

15. Is there anything you are afraid of when interact with a stranger? If yes, what is your fear?

16. Please use the following scale to describe how much do you think the news about scam and

fraud bring you negative attitude towards strangers.

|---|---|

Very much   Neither Much nor Little   Very Limited

17. Use some words to describe how you feel about scammers?