

Celebrity Suicides in China: How Social Media Shapes News Framing

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Abstract

The proliferation of social media platforms has profoundly reshaped news reporting, particularly concerning sensitive events like suicide. This study investigates how Chinese news media framed the suicides of two high-profile female celebrities, Sulli and Coco Lee, on the influential social media platform Weibo. It examines the dominant reporting frames and explores how Weibo’s unique interactive environment influenced the framing process. Computational thematic analysis was employed to investigate dominant themes from Weibo posts published by verified news media accounts, and three primary frames were identified: mental health, gossip, and nationalism. While the mental health frame marked a shift from traditional Chinese reporting, it often remained superficial and was intertwined with sensational elements. The gossip frame, which centres on personal scandals and conflicts, aligns with the problematic sensationalism often observed in suicide reporting. The nationalism frame positioned the suicides within contexts of cultural comparison and national pride. Findings indicate that social media affordance significantly shaped these frames, resulting in more sensational and dynamically evolving narratives. This has shifted traditional gatekeeping and agenda-setting power, and potentially diminishes the quality and responsibility of reporting. This research highlights the complex interplay between journalistic norms, platform dynamics, and audience interaction in the digital news era, underscoring the need for updated approaches to responsible reporting on social media.

Keywords

audiences; gatekeeping; interactive framing; journalism; mental health; platform dynamics; social media; suicide reporting

1. Introduction

The digital transformation of the media landscape, driven by the ubiquity of social media, has altered how news is produced and diffused. In China, platforms like Weibo, a highly regulated microblogging site, have become increasingly important for public discourses. While broadly comparable to platforms like X (previously Twitter) with features like comments, reposts, and hashtags, Weibo possesses distinct characteristics such as an algorithmically curated “Hot Search” leaderboard. This feature acts as a powerful national agenda-setter and the intense competition for visibility on this list creates immense pressure on news media to produce viral content. This compels news organisations to leverage immediacy and foster audience engagement within an algorithmically curated environment (Baftiu & Dodds, 2023). This shift carries profound implications for the reporting of sensitive events, including suicide, where media portrayals can significantly influence public understanding and behaviour (McTernan et al., 2018; Phillips, 1974).

Media reporting of suicide across various contexts has often deviated from established guidelines on responsible reporting (McTernan et al., 2018; Raj et al., 2020) such as those suggested by the WHO (2023), like employing sensational language, focusing excessively on methods, or framing deaths in terms of individual failings rather than complex underlying issues such as mental illness (Banerjee, 2021; Duncan & Luce, 2022). In a Chinese context, suicide reporting has been limited and tightly controlled, often framed through lenses of interpersonal conflicts or broader societal issues rather than mental health, partly due to concerns regarding negativity and social stability (Kou et al., 2017; Lai et al., 2021).

The integration of social media introduces further complexities. News media need to understand and conform to the underlying mechanisms of social media platform functionality (Van Dijck et al., 2019) typified by connectivity, instantaneity, and popularity (Han, 2018). While these characteristics can complement the traditional news values like immediacy, the algorithmic emphasis on “popularity” often competes directly with the professional duty to cover important but less viral issues. They also need to compete in a timeline alongside influencers and ordinary users, tailoring their framing to what is likely to be algorithmically rewarded (Tsurriel et al., 2021). Within China’s unique digital ecosystem where platforms operate under state regulation while simultaneously leveraging advanced algorithms to foster user engagement (Ren, 2024), the dynamics of news framing become particularly complex. News organisations must balance journalistic norms, state directives, platform logic, and audience narratives (Guo et al., 2024; Jiang & Fu, 2018).

While existing research has examined traditional suicide reporting and the general impact of social media on journalism (e.g., Banerjee, 2020; Raj et al., 2020), a gap remains in understanding how the interactive and algorithmically driven environment of a major platform such as Weibo shapes the framing of high-profile suicide cases by news media within China’s specific socio-political context. To address this gap, this study analysed online news posts related to the suicides of female celebrities Sulli, a South Korean singer and actress who died in 2019, and Coco Lee, a Chinese-American singer who died in 2023, to determine if common patterns or themes emerged. Widespread discussions of suicide are limited on Chinese social media (Kou et al., 2017) due to the negativity. These two cases were selected as they represent the most prominent and widely discussed celebrity suicides on Chinese social media in recent years, making them useful for analysing media framing dynamics (S. Zhang, Zhou, et al., 2024).

This study employs framing theory (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974) to investigate how Chinese news media outlets utilised Weibo to report on these tragic events. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the dominant reporting frames used by Chinese news media on Weibo in their coverage of the suicides of Sulli and Coco Lee?

RQ2: How does the interactive social media environment of Weibo shape the framing of female celebrity suicides by Chinese news media outlets?

By analysing the content and patterns of news reporting on Weibo surrounding these two cases, this study aims to illuminate the evolving nature of news framing in the digital age, identify the specific influence of social media practices, and discuss the implications for responsible journalism and media ethics in reporting sensitive issues such as suicide within complex digital environments.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Media Reports of Suicide

Media reports play an important role in shaping public understanding of suicide, but they often show persistent problematic patterns. The WHO has established clear international guidelines for the responsible reporting of suicide (WHO, 2023). However, empirical studies of journalistic practices consistently find that news reports fail to adhere to these standards (McTernan et al., 2018; Raj et al., 2020). This deviation often manifests as dramatic or sensational language, a focus on personal scandals, or excessive details about suicide methods, leading to an increase in subsequent suicide (Finkelstein, 2007; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2020), often referred to as the Werther effect (Phillips, 1974). A previous study by Kim et al. (2023) found a subsequent increase in suicides in Korea in the months following Sulli's death. Conversely, reporting on suicide that emphasises help-seeking and coping can have a protective influence (described as the Papageno effect; Domaradzki, 2021), but this approach is often neglected in favour of perceived newsworthiness and audience engagement (Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2020; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

News stories tend to emphasise the most tragic or shocking aspects of a suicide case while neglecting its complexities (Duncan & Luce, 2022). This characterisation of features is a form of attribute agenda-setting, a process where media coverage influences how the public thinks about an issue by making certain attributes more salient than others (McCombs et al., 2018). For example, editorial choices frequently frame celebrity suicides around personal misfortunes or gossip (Banerjee, 2020), thereby setting an agenda focused on individual failings or sensational elements rather than underlying issues like depression or systemic pressures. This occurs even though journalists are often aware of responsible reporting guidelines and wish to follow them (Cheng et al., 2014), suggesting a powerful conflict between professional ethics and institutional pressure. This conflict often results in the neglect of preventive and supportive information (Sinyor et al., 2018). While the established newsroom practices in traditional media remain influential, social media platforms introduce new dynamics. The algorithmic curation and user-driven selection (Napoli, 2019) can create space for counter-narratives (Stockmann & Luo, 2017), but also intensify the pressures for sensationalism and risk the rapid spread of harmful details (Groshek & Groshek, 2013), which can negatively influence vulnerable individuals (Luxton et al., 2012).

In the Chinese context, media reporting of suicide exhibits some distinctive characteristics shaped by strong institutional gatekeeping (Pan et al., 2022). Open discussion of suicide in mass media has been limited and online discourse on the topic is tightly controlled due to concerns about its negativity and the potential to lead to social instability (Kou et al., 2017). Research indicates that Chinese news media often frame suicides as a result of interpersonal or social conflicts rather than mental health issues (Lai et al., 2021), such as family disputes, romantic frustrations, or workplace pressures. Moreover, the reports tend to adopt a “grand narrative” or macro-level focus, tying personal suicide cases to broader societal issues or moral themes while neglecting the specificities of personal struggles (Lai et al., 2021). For instance, a student’s suicide may be attributed to academic pressure within the education system, and a worker’s death might be framed as the social costs of industrialisation (Cheng et al., 2011; Ye et al., 2024).

2.2. Social Media and News Reporting

Social media platforms have fundamentally transformed news reporting practices, becoming indispensable tools for news organisations aiming to expand their audience reach and foster greater audience engagement (Baftiu & Dodds, 2023). Platforms like X and Weibo offer immediacy, interactive engagement, and real-time analytics, helping journalists adapt their content rapidly according to audience preferences and trends (Canter, 2013). Many news organisations have established specialised roles, such as social media editors, focusing on tasks like curating content specifically for digital audiences, managing online interactions, and incorporating user-generated content into their reporting process (Tsurriel et al., 2021).

The platform logic of social media has a profound influence on news production and dissemination (Tsurriel et al., 2021). The platforms prioritise information that increases public attention, and thus news media often tailor their content to this end (Civila & Lugo-Ocando, 2024). Moreover, the pace and real-time demands of platforms compress news cycles, pushing journalists to prioritise immediacy and virality over depth and fact-checking (Hermida, 2012). Meanwhile, audiences on social media platforms are no longer passive readers or viewers. Instead, they collectively act as a “participatory news network,” sharing information and sentiments that journalists often cannot ignore (Bergström & Belfrage, 2018). Therefore, traditional gatekeeping is increasingly reshaped by social media, often forcing journalists to rely on user-generated content (Humayun & Ferrucci, 2022). Such integration blurs the lines between content producers and consumers (Ren, 2024; Valenzuela et al., 2021), accelerates news delivery, and diversifies eyewitness accounts (Bruns & Burgess, 2012; Hermida, 2012), but also heightens the risks of misinformation and compromises verification standards of journalistic professionalism (Newman et al., 2024).

The design and algorithms of platforms also act as powerful news gatekeepers (Van Dijck et al., 2019). Unlike traditional editorial judgement based on professional news values, algorithms prioritise content predicted to maximise user engagement (Napoli, 2019). This algorithmic logic amplifies sensational, emotionally resonant, or polarising content, potentially overshadowing less immediately engaging but civically important news (Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018; Tsurriel et al., 2021). This pressures newsrooms to adapt their reporting strategies to these algorithmic norms, sometimes sacrificing depth and accuracy for immediacy and virality (Newman et al., 2024). This changing dynamic degrades news quality and diversity and increases risks of echo chambers and the spread of misinformation (Napoli, 2019).

In the Chinese context, the role of social media in news reporting presents a unique dynamic characterised by the interplay of state regulation, algorithmic curation, and user engagement (Tang & Sampson, 2012; Yin & Xie, 2024). Platforms like Weibo have created spaces for public discourse (Stockmann & Luo, 2017) and democratised news production and dissemination (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). However, the platforms also facilitate state-imposed regulation through a combination of human moderation and algorithmic manipulation (Ren, 2024). This context has given rise to a hybrid reporting style that blends innovative digital engagement strategies with cautious content framing. Sensational and emotional frames frequently dominate the reporting of celebrity incidents or socially charged topics to maximise audience interaction, yet these frames remain bounded by the imperative to maintain ideological conformity and social stability narratives promoted by state authorities (Guo et al., 2024).

2.3. *Framing Theory*

Framing theory, originating from sociological and communication studies, explores how issues are selectively presented and emphasised by media to shape audience perceptions and interpretations (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974). According to Entman (1993), framing involves highlighting particular aspects of perceived reality to promote specific interpretations, moral evaluations, or recommended solutions. Frames operate as interpretative schemas, aiding audiences in understanding complex issues by simplifying and structuring information into recognisable patterns (Reese, 2010; Scheufele & Iyengar, 2014). Scholars have categorised frames broadly into generic frames, which are widely applicable across contexts, and issue-specific frames, tailored explicitly to particular events or topics (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000).

In traditional news reporting, framing theory is closely linked to journalistic practices like gatekeeping and agenda-setting (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009), demonstrating media power in shaping public discourse (Entman, 1993). Specifically, while first-level agenda setting determines what issues the public thinks about, framing is functionally similar to second-level agenda-setting which influences how the public thinks about those issues. For this reason, many scholars consider framing and second-level agenda-setting to be essentially the same concept (Weaver, 2007). In suicide reporting, traditional media tend to employ sensational frames, emphasising suicide-relevant details to attract public attention and engagement (McInerney et al., 2024). These frames often deviate from responsible reporting guidelines, prioritising perceived newsworthiness over ethical considerations (Niederkrötenhaller et al., 2020; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009), potentially leading to an increase in imitative suicidal behaviour following sensationalised reporting (Phillips, 1974). Furthermore, the failure to include preventive information or support resources in these frames represents another significant deviation from reporting guidelines (McTernan et al., 2018).

The emergence of social media has significantly transformed the framing landscape by decentralising framing processes. Non-traditional actors, like ordinary social media users, actively engage in framing, generating content independent from or even contrasting with traditional media gatekeepers (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013). This has introduced a dynamic and interactive environment characterised by rapid, user-driven frame emergence and propagation and shaped by platform logic favouring sensational or emotional frames (Dubois & Blank, 2018; Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018). These characters further complicate news framing, at times challenging or reinforcing traditional media frames (Humayun & Ferrucci, 2022).

In the Chinese context, framing theory can be used to explore the interplay between authoritative state narratives, journalistic professionalism, and grassroots voices (Xia et al., 2022; Zhao & Wang, 2023). As the mouthpiece of the government, it is the duty of traditional media in China to understand public narratives, disseminate official narratives, and shape public opinion (Stockmann & Luo, 2017). Frames used by the media typically focus on social harmony, stability, and collective interests, frequently steering public conversations towards politically acceptable interpretations and away from contentious topics (Kou et al., 2017). The Chinese digital media context, on the one hand, facilitates a form of intermedia agenda-setting where alternative or subtle counter-frames occasionally gain traction, compelling state media to acknowledge and incorporate public sentiment into official narratives (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Du, 2013). This illustrates interactive and negotiated framing processes unique to China's socio-political context (Jiang & Fu, 2018). On the other hand, platforms and algorithms are also utilised by the state and news institutions to enhance their frames, thus reinforcing official narratives and ideological conformity (Ren, 2024).

3. Methodology

3.1. Data Collection

This study aims to understand how news media on Weibo framed the highly publicised suicides of two female celebrities, Sulli and Coco Lee, through a thematic analysis of widely publicised online discussions of their deaths. In China, online discussions of suicide are subject to dual censorship by the state and the platforms due to their perceived negativity and misalignment with mainstream values (Kou et al., 2017). The cases of Sulli and Coco Lee are two of the most widely discussed suicide cases in China in recent years. Therefore, we conducted a study centred on Weibo conversations that emerged following the suicide of Sulli and Coco.

Data for this study were collected from Weibo, one of China's most popular microblogging platforms. A custom web crawler was developed using Python requests library as the official Weibo API has highly restrictive daily access limits, making it unsuitable for large-scale data collection. Utilising Weibo's archive of trending topics on 14th October 2019 and 5th July 2023 (the respective dates of Sulli's and Coco's deaths), topics related to Sulli's and Coco's suicide were selected based on the eight most-used hashtags (each exceeding 10,000 discussions): #Sulli confirmed dead# (#雪莉确认死亡#), #Sulli confirmed passed away# (#雪莉确认去世#), #No more peach on Earth# (#再无人间水蜜桃#), #Sulli depression disorder# (#雪莉 抑郁症#), #Coco passed away# (#李玟去世#), #Coco depression disorder# (#李玟抑郁症#), #Hong Kong media reports details of Coco's suicide# (#港媒曝李玟轻生细节#), and #Coco's husband# (#李玟老公#). The hashtags were fed into the crawler to collect posts from all user types, associated comments and reposts, publication timestamp, and the account's verification status within one month following the suicide cases. A verified type is an official designation from Weibo's system and it was programmatically extracted from Weibo's backend system during data collection rather than being coded by the authors. This initial collection yielded 31,422 posts for Sulli's death and 55,584 for Coco. The analysis focuses on three types of verified accounts: state-owned media organisations (e.g., Xinhua News and China Central Television), government agencies (e.g., National Health Commission and the Ministry of Public Security), and commercial media (e.g., Sina Entertainment and Phoenix Entertainment). Filtering for these sources resulted in a final dataset of 7,287 posts for Sulli's case (with 107,155 associated comments and 73,643 reposts) and 7,536 posts for Coco's case (with 84,344 associated comments and 44,934 reposts) for further analysis.

3.2. Data Analysis

The current study employed computational thematic analysis to investigate the framing of celebrity suicides by Chinese news media and the public discourse on Weibo. This method combines the strengths of thematic analysis with the capabilities of computational modelling to achieve robust and interpretable results (S. Zhang, Tsatsou, et al., 2024). The thematic analysis provides a systematic framework for identifying, organising, and interpreting patterns of meaning across a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006), making it particularly well-suited for exploring complex qualitative data within the field of media and communication studies (e.g., Buehler et al., 2019; Castro, 2023). This allows for a deep understanding of the themes and narratives surrounding the news reporting of the suicide of Sulli and Coco. Transformer-based natural language processing has made it much easier for researchers to recognise patterns from data, making them mainly focus on reviewing and interpreting the topics generated from natural language processing (Wang & Luo, 2023). Contextualized topic model (CTM), a sentence transformer model that uses pre-trained representation language, has been able to generate coherent topics (Bianchi et al., 2020). In this study, frames were identified in a multi-stage process: First, CTM was used to generate topics (computational word clusters); second, these topics were manually interpreted into descriptive themes; finally, related themes were grouped into frames—the higher-level analytical constructs that organise the data into a coherent perspective.

The thematic analysis involves six steps: familiarising with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Traditionally, all the steps are conducted manually. With the help of CTM, the two steps (generating initial codes and searching for themes) can be conducted by natural language processing to identify patterns and clusters of words that frequently appear together in documents (Bianchi et al., 2020). Based on the guidelines from Braun and Clarke (2006), we first familiarised ourselves with the data by reviewing all the posts in the two datasets to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content and making initial observational notes. Then, CTM was employed to generate N topics in the two datasets, and the coherence measure (a metric that scores the semantic similarity of words within a topic) was used to identify the optimal number of topics (N) and the topic model with the highest coherence score (Röder et al., 2015). The topic model with the optimal N was used to generate keywords for each topic and all the posts were assigned to a topic based on the results. In the third step, the keywords of each topic and the posts assigned to each topic were reviewed to identify the emerging patterns, and the themes were generated in this process. Subsequently, the themes were reviewed to investigate whether the posts within each theme have a coherent pattern, whether the themes are distinct from each other, and whether the themes can reflect the overall datasets. Finally, the themes were defined and named. The keywords of each topic generated by CTM and the defined themes can be found in the Supplementary File. Then, the reporting frames were identified from the themes. Throughout data analysis, we employed four procedures to ensure the validity of our findings: investigator triangulation, audit trail, referential adequacy, and exemplar identification (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Detailed descriptions of the implementation of these four procedures can be found in the Supplementary File.

The thematic analysis of media posts was supplemented by a qualitative monitoring of user engagement. This involved reviewing the collected posts from ordinary users and the comments and reposts of the verified media posts to contextualise the media's framing choices. Moreover, temporal comparison was conducted to

chronologically examine posts to observe any evolution in framing strategies between the initial reporting and later coverage.

4. Findings

Computational thematic analysis identified eight themes from the Sulli dataset and four themes from the Coco dataset (Table 1). Based on the themes, three reporting frames were identified: mental health, gossip, and nationalism.

Table 1. Themes of Sulli's and Coco's cases.

No.	Sulli	No.	Coco
1	Smiling depression	1	Coco confirmed dead
2	Mysterious/pseudoscientific forces and depression	2	Coco's battles with depression
3	Ask users to assess whether they have depression	3	Coco's marital issues
4	Stress leads to depression	4	Netizen's outrage about Coco's husband
5	Cyberbullying and depression		
6	Personal family background and depression		
7	Systemic risk in the entertainment industry and celebrities' depression		
8	Celebrities in South Korea are more vulnerable to mental illness		

4.1. Mental Health Frame

A mental health frame, commonly employed by state-owned media and government agencies, explains the tragedies through a psychological lens. The initial reports focused on issues like depression and emotional struggles as key factors leading to the celebrities' suicides. For example, multiple news accounts reported that Sulli had experienced "severe depression prior to her death" (*Beijing News*, 2019; *Global Times*, 2019), citing statements from her agents and previous interviews. Such descriptions presented Sulli's suicide not as a sudden and inexplicable act, but as the culmination of an ongoing mental health battle that had largely been hidden from public view. In Coco's case, a similar focus emerged: News reports (e.g., *China News*, 2023; *The Cover*, 2023) noted that Coco had long struggled with depression in the years leading up to her death, even as she maintained a glamorous public image. Media accounts (e.g., *Caijing*, 2023; *Sina News*, 2023) referenced how Coco had sought treatment for her depression and recounted her past statements about enduring pain and sadness privately, underscoring mental illness as a root cause of the tragedy. The news media's rapid collection and dissemination of these details exemplify the platform's penchant for aggregating extensive user-generated and historical content, facilitating the construction of detailed yet superficial mental health narratives.

The emergence of a dedicated mental health frame in Chinese coverage marks a subtle shift, given the broader media context. Prior studies have observed that Chinese news reports on suicide often adopt a conflict orientation by focusing on interpersonal disputes or social tensions rather than highlighting mental illness as a cause (Lai et al., 2021). In this study, the reports did pay considerable attention to mental health issues in both cases. However, the mental health frame did not stand alone but was often intertwined with

more sensational elements. For instance, when discussing Sulli's reported mental illness, some accounts framed the entertainment industry of South Korea as a "meat grinder" with a "patriarchal ghost." Moreover, the reports lack follow-up information on mental health resources or prevention, a practice that directly contradicts a key WHO guideline which urges media professionals to provide accurate information on where to seek help (WHO, 2023). This reflects a persistent gap identified in the literature: Even when media acknowledge mental illness, they may still neglect preventive or supportive information (Banerjee, 2020; McTernan et al., 2018). A review of the data shows that no report provided information on counselling services or crisis hotlines in both cases.

As the online discourse evolved in the days following the deaths, the focus of news coverage shifted from event reporting to attributing the celebrities' mental illness to single causes, like cyberbullying and societal pressure, without recognising the multifaceted factors underpinning suicidal behaviour, which research has established as being complex and multifactorial (Nugent et al., 2019). For example, several posts on Sulli's suicide emphasised that relentless online abuse was solely responsible for her death, like "cyber violence is the biggest executioner" (Sina News, 2019). Some reports on Coco's case pointed exclusively to career pressures or family disputes as key factors, like "Coco was diagnosed with depression since her relationship with her husband began to deteriorate" (Sina Entertainment, 2023). The subsequent media focus on cyberbullying, career pressures, and family disputes was largely responsive to prevailing user discussions, which were the dominant debates among ordinary users following their death. These also suggest a potentially data-driven editorial adaptation and shift in agenda-setting power where content was shaped to align with what was capturing public interest. By reducing the causes of mental illness to isolated phenomena, these reports presented a superficial narrative that may ultimately not only oversimplify the complexity of mental health and suicide but also risk misguiding the public by obscuring the multifaceted interplay of individual vulnerabilities, social stressors, and structural factors (Sewall & Parry, 2024). The findings show that the reports, despite shifting their focus on mental health issues, are mainly superficially descriptive with limited emphasis on solutions.

4.2. Gossip Frame

A gossip frame, often found in commercial media, sensationalises events by focusing on personal and often lurid aspects of celebrities' lives such as interpersonal drama and scandals that could have led to their demise. This is consistent with previous studies that showed how media tends to frame suicide through a lens of intrigue and sensationalism (Banerjee, 2020; Duncan & Luce, 2022).

For Sulli, the gossip frame manifested in reports that fixated on her past controversies and relationships. For instance, news accounts, particularly the commercial media (e.g., Sina Entertainment, Phoenix Entertainment, and Toutiao News), revisited Sulli's much-publicised romantic relationship with a rapper, focusing on the details of their relationship such as producing photographs and songs with sexual innuendos. For example:

Following the rumoured romance with the older rapper, Sulli's recent collaboration—featuring provocative photographs and songs laden with sexual innuendos—has reignited public fascination with the scandal. (Sina Korean Entertainment, 2019)

Other reports under this frame emphasised Sulli's rebellious behaviours and the controversies that had surrounded her such as defying K-pop norms and facing conservative backlash for her feminist stances and lifestyle choices like not wearing a bra publicly (e.g., Pear Video, 2019; Sina News, 2019). Rather than treating these as context for understanding mental illness, some coverage presented them as sensational details, focusing on Sulli's celebrity persona and scandals. This aligns with the tendency in celebrity suicide reporting to prioritise distal factors while neglecting crucial mental health perspectives (Banerjee, 2020). This focus on sensational details was amplified by Weibo's interactive features. The use of comments and reposts attached user-generated speculation and judgment to media reports, creating feedback loops where the most sensational angles gained visibility and were reinforced by subsequent media coverage. It also suggests that a data-driven approach was employed by news media in report framing.

In the coverage of Coco's death, the gossip frame was equally evident, though it took on different contours. Chinese media reports swiftly turned the spotlight onto Coco's personal relationships and career dramas in the wake of her suicide. A dominant theme was Coco's marital issues. Coco had been married to a Canadian businessman, and rumours of an unhappy marriage had been circulating (e.g., Sina Entertainment, 2023). After her death, many posts, particularly those on entertainment and gossip-focused accounts, amplified these rumours. They reported that Coco's marriage had been strained in recent years, mentioning alleged marital issues and insinuating that a breakdown in her relationship or lack of support from her spouse might have contributed to her depression. Some reports even hinted at infidelity, echoing unverified claims from Hong Kong media that her husband had not been emotionally present. In addition, coverage of Coco often listed her professional struggles, such as her experience of being mistreated on a TV singing competition, *The Voice of China*. The sensationalised narration exemplifies the gossip frame's focus on dramatic, conflict-driven content. It resonates with the known pattern of Chinese online suicide reporting that favours sensationalism and clickbait headlines (Lai et al., 2021). This angle echoed the widespread user-generated discourse about the speculation of her marriage and anger towards those they perceived as having hurt her. This reactive reporting also suggests a rebalancing of traditional gatekeeping power, with the audience's agenda influencing media coverage.

The comparison between these two cases reveals that the gossip frame frequently centres on intimate personal drama, such as relationship conflicts, rebellious behaviours, marital strains, and career setbacks, aligning with the long-standing problematic practices in suicide reporting (Banerjee, 2020; Duncan & Luce, 2022). These narrative elements suggest that the reporting tends to isolate personal shortcomings or moral failings as principal explanations for the suicides, rather than engaging with the broader, multifactorial nature of mental health issues. For example:

Sulli's relentless defiance and inability to maintain stable relationships have long been cited as warning signs; it seems her self-destructive path was inevitable given her constant clash with societal expectations. (*Hunan Daily*, 2019)

Coco's ongoing marital conflicts and career pressures not only isolated her from meaningful support but also painted her as someone whose personal battles left her with no way out—her downfall appears to be a result of her own inability to cope. (Phoenix Entertainment, 2023)

The approach of these news posts echoes what Duncan and Luce (2022) describe as the “othering” of suicide victims. Specifically, by focusing on aspects of personal life and reducing complex psychosocial phenomena to individual attributes, the reporting implicitly reinforces a narrative where suicide is seen as an outcome of individual failure. This approach not only stigmatises the victims, distancing them from the collective experience of mental illness, but also undermines more nuanced understandings of suicide as the product of complex interactions among psychological, social, and environmental factors. Despite the sensationalised reporting having captured the audience’s attention, it came at the cost of the mental health frame frequently being overshadowed by the more tabloid-oriented gossip frame. This observation is consistent with the finding from Banerjee (2020) that media discourse around a celebrity suicide tends to be dominated by all that “followed a death,” like the scandals and sensational reactions, rather than the professional discussion of mental illness.

4.3. Nationalism Frame

A nationalism frame, also often observed in state-owned media and government accounts, includes the elements of national identity, cultural comparisons, and political subtext. While not as immediately obvious as the mental health or gossip frames, the nationalism frame emerged through subtle but significant cues in how the news was contextualised on Weibo.

In Sulli’s case, a South Korean celebrity whose death attracted significant attention in China, the nationalism frame emerged as Chinese news media positioned the tragedy within a foreign cultural context by comparing differences between South Korea and China. Many posts referred to the incident as part of a troubling pattern in South Korea’s entertainment industry, calling it a “South Korean entertainment industry suicide curse” (Sina News, 2019). The reports raised questions like “What’s wrong with K-entertainment?” (CCTV News, 2019) and tried to disclose the “darkness” in South Korea. On the contrary, the reports claimed that Chinese celebrities, by virtue of their cultural and institutional advantages, rarely experience similar mental health challenges. This form of nationalistic frame othered the event to some extent (Idevall Hagren, 2022). Such framing resonates with findings from studies of Chinese media that, in the context of a broader nationalist discourse, there is a tendency to assert Chinese superiority by denigrating foreign systems (Xinhui, 2023). In this context, the mental illness narrative in South Korea becomes a tool not only for explaining Sulli’s tragedy but also for advancing a critique of a foreign cultural model.

In Coco’s case, the nationalism frame took a different form, rooted in patriotism and national pride. Coco was an ethnically Chinese superstar who had achieved international fame, and Weibo news reports memorialised Coco by highlighting her identity as a Chinese singer who made her mark on the world stage, using phrases like “a light for Chinese people” (Jiemian, 2023). This celebratory recollection of Coco’s career, while part of honouring her legacy, also functioned as a nationalistic framing, suggesting that her death is a loss to China. Moreover, the discussion around improving conditions for artists and addressing depression was, at times, linked to calls for societal and governmental support, suggesting that caring for figures like Coco is part of a national responsibility. For this point, the nationalism frame was less about othering and more about nationalising the mourning.

5. Discussion: Weibo's Interactive Environment and Framing

Findings suggest that specific properties of Weibo significantly influenced which frames dominated and how stories were told, leading to notable deviations from traditional media framing practices. While issues like sensationalism and a superficial mental health focus exist in pre-social media reporting in China (Cheng et al., 2011; Lai et al., 2021), Weibo's algorithmic and interactive nature transforms the mechanisms behind them. Compared with global platforms like X, Weibo also represents distinct characteristics such as an algorithmically curated "Hot Search" leaderboard and operation within a system of state regulation (Ren, 2024). Therefore, the interrelated aspects that this study identified including platform logic, user-generated content, and data-driven strategies, are amplified and conditioned by these unique environmental factors, leading to the distinct framing outcomes observed.

5.1. User-Generated Content and Interactive Framing

Unlike traditional media where framing is a one-way editorial decision in most cases, social media platforms foster a reciprocal environment (Han, 2018), promoting a two-way process in which audiences actively contribute to both the construction and dissemination of frames (Civita & Lugo-Ocando, 2024; Ren, 2024). The findings underscore that framing on Weibo, particularly concerning sensitive events like celebrity suicides, is not a unilateral process designed by news media but rather a dynamic, interactive negotiation influenced by user participation and platform dynamics. Our temporal analysis revealed that Chinese news media were responsive to prevailing user-generated discussions. By tracking timestamps, we observed that some user-generated content emerged and gained traction before being incorporated into a news report. Media outlets would then echo these sentiments, frequently quoting viral posts or comments as information sources to enrich their stories. This real-time interaction meant that certain frames gained visibility because they resonated with user discourse (Bergström & Belfrage, 2018). In this way, the user-generated content provided raw material for the media's framing (Ren, 2024; Valenzuela et al., 2021). This could result in a more dynamic, crowd-influenced framing process than traditional top-down journalism (Moscato, 2016).

Moreover, this interactive environment allows news media to strategically leverage user-generated content to advance specific narratives (Hermida, 2012). China's news media have been actively engaged in fostering and amplifying nationalist content on social media (X. Zhang et al., 2024). In this study, many posts by ordinary users adopted nationalist discourse, blaming Sulli's suicide on the flaws in South Korean society and attributing Coco's suffering as a consequence of her marriage to a foreign husband. These user-generated framings were subsequently reinforced by news media through direct citation or by adding interpretative angles, such as a deep dive into the system of the South Korean entertainment industry and what happened to South Korean society (e.g., CCTV News, 2019; Sohu Entertainment, 2019). This interactive environment reveals a uniquely ideological dimension to platform logic in the Chinese context. News media frequently employ user-generated nationalist discourse to reinforce state-favoured narratives, creating a convergence between grassroots nationalism and top-down ideological positions. Additionally, news media posts frequently employed emotional and sensational expressions capable of mobilising fear, anger, and grievance by invoking nationalistic themes (C. Zhang et al., 2023).

While the interactive framing may democratise the narrative to some extent, it also carries significant risks. The pressure to engage rapidly with trending, often emotionally charged user narratives can lead to the

amplification of unverified rumours and speculation, blurring the lines between reporting and participating in gossip (Moscato, 2016). In this study, the news media's reports of certain speculative content, like the unconfirmed claims about Coco's husband, demonstrate shifts of power dynamics in news production on social media, with ordinary users gaining more power and traditional news media being weakened. However, it also demonstrates the tension between the platform's demand for immediacy and engagement versus traditional journalistic norms. In traditional media, editors might carefully investigate the claims before publishing them. While on social media, the pressure to join the trending discussion forced the media to reply to public discourses, even if those claims were still unconfirmed.

5.2. Data-Driven Strategies and Editorial Adaptation

The digital architecture of social media platforms provides news media with an array of metrics, such as the number of likes, shares, and comments, that serve as indicators of audience engagement (S. Zhang, Zhou, et al., 2024). These data points underpin a data-driven approach to framing where editorial decisions are increasingly informed by real-time analytics (Moscato, 2016). Although our study cannot directly measure editorial decision-making, the observed shift in reporting, from initial factual accounts to later coverage focusing on trending and sensational information, strongly suggests a data-driven approach to framing. This indicates that editors were using real-time analytics to adjust the framing with the most trending topics on Weibo, aligning with the concept of "social media monitoring" by news outlets proposed by Moscato (2016).

The findings can also be supported by the dominance of the gossip frame observed in the two cases. News media heavily emphasised Sulli's controversial history or Coco's marital issues in the posts aligning with the topics that were already trending or provocative on social media, thereby likely boosting the posts' visibility. Moreover, traditional media even participated in the emotive tone of the trend, like using sorrowful emojis, empathic punctuation, multiple exclamation marks, or ellipses, to convey a shared sense of grief and shock. In contrast, content that might be essential for responsible reporting but less viral, such as discussions of mental illness treatment, was downplayed since it is less clickable. In traditional media, an editor might have balanced these elements differently under professional norms but the platform logic on Weibo compels news producers to adapt their framing to ensure connectivity and exposure (Tsurriel et al., 2021). This interactive, metric-guided environment led to a fluid framing process where frames were not predetermined solely by the newsroom, but evolved as the story developed online. The evolution of frames over time can be found in the Supplementary File. This, on the one hand, could enrich the angles of news reporting, while on the other hand, it could result in a sensational and crowd-pleasing frame.

5.3. Shifts in Gatekeeping and Agenda-Setting Power

The dynamics of user interaction, platform logic, and data-driven adaptation observed on social media platforms can shift traditional notions of news media gatekeeping and agenda-setting power (Napoli, 2019). While traditional media may retain significant influence in the broader media landscape (Stockmann & Luo, 2017), in this study, we observed a significant rebalancing of power where platform features and public participation diluted the absolute gatekeeping control of news media. Due to the platform features and intense public participation, by the time news media publish their reports, dominant frames and narratives may already be circulating widely among users. This forces a change in the media's gatekeeping role from

one of pure content creation to one of curation and response, where they select and amplify frames already resonating online.

Moreover, the immediacy inherent in social media erodes the temporal advantage media once had in setting the narratives (Ren, 2024). Information, whether correct or not, spreads rapidly through online user networks, shaping initial public perceptions before formal news reports emerge (Vosoughi et al., 2018). This pressures news media to move beyond simple fact reporting (which users may already know) towards more interpretive, analytical, or emotionally resonant framing to add value and capture attention (Tsuriel et al., 2021). Our findings show that the news posts did not simply report the fact of suicide which has already been widely known via social media. They added angles like “why did it happen,” “what are people saying about it,” or trying to dig to find the backstories of the South Korean entertainment industry or Coco’s husband. This dynamic illustrates a fundamental shift from traditional, top-down gatekeeping to a more negotiated and networked process. News media are no longer the sole creators of narratives. Instead, they act as curators and amplifiers, where their selection of attributes for public attention, a core second-level agenda-setting function, is heavily influenced by pre-existing participatory framing processes.

However, this shift towards a negotiated, platform-influenced model of gatekeeping and agenda-setting has tangible consequences for the nature and quality of the resulting news frames. The prevalence of sensational frames observed in this study, particularly the gossip frame focusing on human interest and conflict, and the nationalism frame leveraging ideological sentiment suggests that this model can diminish adherence to responsible reporting standards. While frames rooted in sensationalism and nationalism are not new, our findings indicate that the mechanisms of these frames are transformed by the negotiated, platform-influenced model of gatekeeping. For example, the nationalism frame changes from a top-down broadcast into a participatory event, co-constructed and reinforced by users in real-time. These frames, likely products of the negotiation between editorial intentions and the imperative for audience engagement within an algorithmic environment, prioritise angles known to generate clicks and shares. Even when addressing mental health, the framing often remained superficial or sensationalised, focusing on dramatic portrayals of symptoms or speculated causes rather than providing systematic analysis or crucial information about treatment and support, which are key recommendations for responsible suicide reporting (WHO, 2023). The resulting news discourse, therefore, reflects a complex interplay where the journalistic agency is constrained and reshaped by the demands of visibility and interaction inherent in Weibo’s hybrid environment. This system, where the universal platform logic of engagement is bounded by state regulation and amplified by its distinct features like “Hot Search” list, helps explain why responsible reporting, already a challenge in the pre-social media era, is further complicated by these platform-specific pressures.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how Chinese news media on Weibo framed the suicides of two female celebrities, Sulli and Coco Lee, and how the social media context influenced these frames. We identified three key frames in the news media coverage: mental health, gossip, and nationalism. The findings indicate that the social media environment on Weibo engenders a complex and interactive framing process, shaped by traditional journalistic norms, user-driven dynamics, and underlying state power. Notably, the affordances of Weibo, such as immediacy, algorithmic curation, and real-time audience engagement, shape or influence the process of frame construction, news gatekeeping, and agenda-setting.

A key theoretical contribution lies in highlighting how Chinese platform logic extends traditional models of framing theory. First, the inherent affordances of Weibo compel news media to operate within the platform logic, which shapes editorial decisions through a data-driven approach. Moreover, the interactive environment of Weibo leads to a two-way framing process. Consequently, the news media's role evolved from solely setting narratives to also acting as curators and amplifiers of frames already circulating among users. This rebalancing of gatekeeping and agenda-setting power challenges traditional top-down models and extends frame theory by incorporating the influence of networked publics and big data analytics. Furthermore, the study illustrates a uniquely ideological dimension to platform logic in China where news media leverage user discourse to reinforce state-approved narratives. This convergence of grassroots nationalism and top-down ideological messaging underscores how Chinese media not only reconfigure frame construction but also operate within a political context that prioritises certain narratives.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the analysis is based on data from two high-profile cases which may not fully represent the broader spectrum of suicide reporting on Chinese social media. Second, the reliance on computational thematic analysis, although robust, may overlook subtleties in cultural context and intertextual nuance. Finally, the study demonstrates that shifts in traditional gatekeeping and agenda-setting power directly impact the production and character of news frames. However, it remains challenging to quantify the long-term influence of these platform-shaped frames on public perception compared to the effects of frames disseminated through legacy media.

Future studies should explore a broader array of cases and consider mixed-method approaches to capture both quantitative metrics and the qualitative intricacies of frame construction. In particular, investigations into how big data analytics continue to evolve and shape editorial practices on platforms such as Weibo will be crucial.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Data is available from the author on request.

LLMs Disclosure

Gemini was used for language editing purposes.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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