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Study on the transmission of female gender empathy in the Russo-Ukrainian War (Postprint)

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Abstract

Based on the theory of empathic communication and questionnaire survey, this paper analyzes the influence of Chinese media reports on Ukrainian women during the Russo-Ukrainian war on three indicators: audience sympathy, anti-war sentiment, and Ukrainian sense of national identity. As the war between Russia and Ukraine continues, coverage of the displacement, abuse, and cannon fodder of Ukrainian women is characterized by sympathy for the underdog. Therefore, this paper puts forward six questions from two aspects: “The impact of having seen or not seen the above types of reports on the audience’s sympathy, anti-war sentiment, and the sense of national identity of Ukraine” and “the impact of the amount of watching such reports on the audience’s sympathy, anti-war sentiment, and sense of identity.”

Full Text

Preamble

A Study on Empathetic Communication Regarding Ukrainian Women in the Russo-Ukrainian War

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Abstract: Based on the theory of empathetic communication and questionnaire surveys, this paper analyzes how Chinese media reports on Ukrainian women during the Russo-Ukrainian war influence three key indicators: audience sympathy, anti-war sentiment, and sense of Ukrainian national identity. As the war continues, coverage of Ukrainian women’s displacement, abuse, and victimization has been characterized by sympathy for the underdog. This paper therefore proposes six hypotheses addressing two aspects: first, whether exposure to such

reports affects audience sympathy, anti-war sentiment, and national identity; and second, how the frequency of exposure influences these three outcomes.

Keywords: empathetic communication, war reporting, sympathy and anti-war sentiment, national identity

1 Introduction

In February 2022, the Russo-Ukrainian War officially began when Russian President Vladimir Putin declared war on Ukraine. As of February 21 of this year, the past year has witnessed over 21,000 civilian casualties according to the latest United Nations statistics, with global economic losses exceeding one trillion yuan. During the war, despite Russia being China's strategic partner, Ukraine has garnered considerable sympathy within China. Beyond direct war coverage, the Chinese internet has circulated numerous reports about Ukrainian women—stories of forced separation from Chinese partners, displacement and homelessness, and victimization on the battlefield. These reports have generated compassion among Chinese audiences and subsequently aroused strong anti-war sentiment. Evidently, coverage of Ukrainian women is characterized by clear sympathy for the vulnerable, which undoubtedly influences audiences. This raises important questions: Does reporting on Ukrainian women have a distinctive impact on Chinese audiences? Does it influence their anti-war sentiment and sense of identity with Ukraine?

2.1 Review of Studies on Ukrainian Women Reporting During the Russo-Ukrainian War

The Russo-Ukrainian War has lasted over a year, generating extensive scholarly analysis of related reporting. A search on China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) for literature on the “Russia-Ukraine conflict” and “Russia-Ukraine War” as of April 4, 2023, yielded 1,039 relevant journal articles. However, none of these focused specifically on Ukrainian women. A search for “Women of War” produced 450 results, with only ten relevant documents, none of which addressed the Russo-Ukrainian war or Ukrainian statehood. Based on these search results, the topic of Ukrainian women in war reporting remains an underexplored field, offering a novel perspective within the broader study of Russo-Ukrainian war coverage.

2.2.1 Review of Research on the Concept of Empathetic Communication

Empathy is an inherent psychological mechanism in human beings. In recent years, the psychological concept of “empathy” has gradually been introduced into communication studies. Drawing on theoretical foundations from *The Exploration of the Theoretical Foundation and Practical Path of Empathetic Communication*, Wu Fei (2019) proposed three practical pathways for empathetic

communication: empathy based on “love,” communication that promotes empathy, and the tendency for high-recognition groups to more readily produce empathy. Liu Licheng (2020) defined empathetic transmission as a process where communicators and recipients exchange information with empathy, producing transmission effects of “emotional contagion,” “opinion selection,” and “empathetic concern.” Zhao Jianguo (2021) distinguished between empathy and empathetic communication in *On The Communication of Empathy*, arguing that empathetic communication generates empathy through the transmission, diffusion, and sharing of information. Additionally, Ren Danyu (2021) proposed that the key to defining empathetic communication lies in generating empathy through information dissemination.

2.2.2 Review of Studies on the Application of Empathetic Communication Theory

Currently, the theory of “empathetic communication” is primarily applied in four areas: theoretical development, the medical field, educational psychology, and integration with international or cross-cultural communication. Over the past three years, common perspectives have focused on theoretical analysis during outbreaks and public opinion events. For instance, Su Jinyuan’s study on empathetic communication in *Southern Character Weekly’s* WeChat public account during COVID-19 analyzed the effects and mechanisms of empathetic communication using early pandemic-era posts. Some scholars have applied this theory to analyze communication strategies of mainstream media, such as Zhou Xin’s study on empathetic communication strategies in CCTV News Douyin short videos, which examined empathetic factors and communication effects. Additionally, from the perspective of empathetic communication, foreign scholars explored the mechanisms of empathy effects in specific programs, as seen in research on the food documentary *Once Upon a Bite*, which constructed empathetic communication strategies through themes of homesickness and empathy.

In summary, academic research on how war reporting influences audiences remains extremely limited. A combined search of CNKI and VIP databases for “empathetic communication” and “war reporting” yielded only one relevant journal article. Therefore, existing research has not examined how Ukrainian women reporting influences Chinese audiences through the lens of empathetic communication, nor has it addressed whether such reporting affects Chinese women’s sympathy, among other questions.

2.3 Questions Are Raised

Building on the theory of empathetic communication, this paper seeks to answer three core questions: Did reports on Ukrainian women in the Russo-Ukrainian war arouse sympathy among Chinese people? Did they generate anti-war sentiment? And did they influence Chinese audiences’ sense of identity with the Ukrainian state?

3 Research Methods

This study employs questionnaire surveys to address these research questions.

3.1.1 Assumption Establishment

Based on the research questions, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1: There is a significant difference in sympathy toward Ukrainian women between audiences who have and have not seen relevant reports, with those exposed to reports showing greater sympathy.

H2: There is a significant difference in anti-war sentiment between audiences who have and have not seen reports on Ukrainian women, with exposed audiences demonstrating stronger anti-war consciousness.

H3: There is a significant difference in Ukrainian national identity between audiences who have and have not seen reports on Ukrainian women, with exposed audiences showing a stronger sense of national identity.

H4: Greater exposure to reports on Ukrainian women correlates with increased sympathy toward them.

H5: Greater exposure to reports on Ukrainian women correlates with stronger anti-war sentiment.

H6: Greater exposure to reports on Ukrainian women correlates with a stronger sense of Ukrainian national identity.

To test these hypotheses, this study conducted a questionnaire survey using population sampling.

3.1.2 Sampling Method

The target population for this research is the broad Chinese public. We first conducted representative sampling, selecting citizens from multiple provinces and undergraduates from Shandong University of Finance and Economics as the overall research group. Specifically, we sampled citizens from Jinan (Shandong Province), undergraduates from Shandong University, and some citizens from other provinces and cities. We then performed stratified multilevel sampling with a 95% confidence interval and 3% sampling error, yielding a sample of 296 students and residents. If access was denied, we substituted the next available student or resident from the subsequent class or family.

Data collection, collation, and analysis were completed on May 5, 2023. The survey included both open and closed questions covering: (1) basic demographic information (gender and age); (2) exposure to reports on Ukrainian women (including 0, 1, or 3+ reports from sources such as *Global Times* and *People's Daily*); and (3) three five-level Likert scales measuring compassion, anti-war sentiment, and national identity (ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree). The questionnaire contained seven questions total: two single questions

for basic information, one question on report exposure and frequency, and three five-level Likert scales (with 5, 3, and 4 corresponding questions respectively). We distributed the questionnaire through both online (WeChat Moments, QQ Space, survey platform databases) and offline channels.

We designed three experimental groups, asking respondents to rate their sympathy, anti-war sentiment, and national identity toward Ukrainian women under three conditions: without viewing any material, after viewing one material, and after viewing three materials. The survey collected 296 valid questionnaires: 102 samples without materials, 89 samples with one material, and 105 samples with two materials. Since compassion, anti-war sentiment, and national identity were measured using five-level Likert scales, we summed the corresponding measurement items to create composite variables for subsequent analysis.

4 Research Findings and Discussion

4.1 Scenario Absence: Media Reports Show No Direct Relationship with Audience Sympathy Levels

Surprisingly, the level of sympathy for Ukrainian women appears unrelated to media exposure. Descriptive analysis reveals that respondents who had not viewed any materials showed slightly higher mean sympathy scores than those who had viewed materials. This indicates that even without reading reports, audiences develop strong sympathy for Ukrainian women, suggesting no significant relationship between report exposure and audience sympathy.

Specifically, the mean compassion score among respondents who viewed Ukrainian women-related materials was 4.4, while those who did not view materials scored 4.8. This demonstrates that respondents felt a high degree of compassion for Ukrainian women regardless of exposure, leading us to reject hypothesis H1.

The theory of empathetic communication emphasizes that “situation” is a crucial environmental condition for generating empathy. When asking respondents about their sympathy for Ukrainian women, we could not simply pose an abstract “sympathy” question, as this would cause confusion. The questionnaire necessarily elaborated on specific situations, such as “Do you feel sorrow for Ukrainian women who have been violated, exploited, and trafficked?” and “Do you pity Ukrainian women who have lost families or become homeless due to war?” Individual empathy requires such broad environmental conditions (i.e., situation), and understanding the situation enables individuals to estimate others’ emotional states in specific contexts, directly affecting their own empathetic responses. Thus, even without viewing tragic materials about Ukrainian women, audiences can construct a situation from minimal information, perceive the despair and helplessness of Ukrainian women, and consequently experience strong compassion (as evidenced by the remarkably high average compassion score of 4.8 among those who did not view reports).

4.2 Report Content Promotes Empathy: Audience Anti-War Sentiment Correlates with Media Exposure

In contrast, audience anti-war sentiment does correlate with exposure to reports on Ukrainian women's tragic experiences. Audiences who viewed such reports demonstrated higher and stronger opposition to the ongoing war.

The mean anti-war sentiment scores were 3.7 for those who did not view materials and 4.7 for those who did, indicating stronger anti-war feelings among exposed audiences. We conducted a Shapiro-Wilk test to assess normality of the "anti-war sentiment" variable, finding a significance value $P < 0.05$, which led us to reject the null hypothesis and conclude the data were not normally distributed. We therefore performed an independent samples Mann-Whitney U test. The median anti-war sentiment scores were 4.667 for those who viewed reports versus 3.667 for those who did not; the P-value was less than 0.05, confirming statistically significant differences. The effect size Cohen's d was 0.334, indicating a small effect. Consequently, hypothesis H2 is supported.

From the perspective of empathetic communication content, when news reports depict real events or describe Ukrainian women's circumstances with emotional language, they evoke audience emotions. The characters' joys and sorrows and the narrative arc of events resonate with people. Those who have viewed reports understand that Ukrainian women's helplessness is caused by the conflict and that as long as the war continues, they cannot save their lives or see hope for returning to normal life. This spawns anti-war sentiment. When audiences see homeless Ukrainian women under the shadow of war, they feel the despair of lives grasped by smoke and fire. News reports on actual conditions awaken audience resonance. Conversely, those without report exposure cannot clearly answer questions like "Should the Russia-Ukraine conflict continue?" or "Can Ukraine's contradictions be resolved peacefully?" Their anti-war sentiment is not spontaneously generated but remains ambiguous, carrying a connotation of "no need for others' advice."

4.3 Further Emotional Fermentation: Media Reports Significantly Enhance National Identity

Respondents who viewed reports on Ukrainian women's status showed a stronger sense of Ukrainian national identity than those who did not, with a substantial difference between the two groups.

The mean national identity scores were 2.5 for those who did not view reports and 3.8 for those who did, indicating stronger identity among exposed audiences. As with anti-war sentiment, the Shapiro-Wilk test for the "Ukrainian national identity" variable yielded $P < 0.05$, indicating non-normal distribution and necessitating an independent samples Mann-Whitney U test. The median national identity scores were 3.75 for those who viewed reports versus 2.5 for those who did not; the test result's P-value was less than 0.05, confirming statistically significant differences. The effect size Cohen's d was 0.799, indicating

a large effect. Based on this analysis, hypothesis H3 is supported.

Ukrainian national identity is a more complex concept that differs substantially from simple emotions like “sympathy for Ukrainian women’s miserable lives” or “desire for peace.” National identity comprises composite factors including recognition of Ukraine’s state system, politics, economy, culture, and ethnicity. Compared to compassion and anti-war sentiment, identity represents a form of emotional sublimation.

Those who have viewed reports possess more information about the Russia-Ukraine conflict, particularly regarding Ukraine’s war situation: why the war began, what action plans were implemented, and how the government resettled local populations. Media coverage of Ukrainian women, while clearly characterized by sympathy for the vulnerable, reveals their sense of helplessness. Emotion and communication are fundamental to empathy. If war, violence, and death are reported through pale narratives alone, they merely spread negative information. From the perspective of empathetic communication, negative content is more likely to cause adverse emotions, thereby weakening empathy. However, as noted earlier, most current reports on Ukrainian women emphasize emotional elements, valuing content that reflects understanding, respect, and communication. This helps audiences develop greater empathy. By reporting on Ukrainian women’s plight, media foster compassion and concern for their situation, even desperation to help within their capacity, thereby creating closer ties with the Ukrainian people at war. This encourages audiences to understand Ukraine’s current political and economic situation, search for Ukrainian history and culture, and comprehend the Russia-Ukraine conflict’s context, ultimately elevating their identification with the Ukrainian state. This analysis also explains why report exposure influences identity more strongly than compassion or anti-war sentiment (the difference between exposed and unexposed audiences is larger for identity), because national identity requires deeper empathy, which in turn needs an emotional foundation. While compassion and anti-war sentiment can be triggered through narrative alone, genuine national identity of Ukraine only emerges after exposure to reports that provide both information and emotional resonance. Without empathetic communication, how could audiences understand Ukrainian culture, believe in Ukraine’s economic recovery, or feel closer ties with the Ukrainian people?

4.4 Excessive Media Reporting and Limited Audience Acceptance: Report Frequency Shows No Impact

The quantity of reports does not significantly affect audience sympathy, anti-war sentiment, or sense of Ukrainian national identity. Remarkably, respondents who read only one report showed greater compassion than those who read three or more reports.

Descriptive analysis revealed that the mean compassion score for respondents who read one report was 4.1, while for those who read three materials it was

4.0, leading us to reject hypothesis H4. Differential testing for anti-war sentiment and national identity found that the median anti-war sentiment scores for respondents viewing different quantities of materials were both 4.667; the test result's P-value was 0.618, indicating no statistical significance, thus hypothesis H5 is not supported. The median national identity scores were 3.5 and 3.75 respectively; the P-value was 0.800, also indicating no statistical significance, leading us to reject hypothesis H6. Therefore, reading more reports on Ukraine does not significantly impact audience sympathy, anti-war sentiment, or sense of national identity.

In the process of mutual influence between media and audience, if media cannot control empathetic communication within moderate bounds, audience acceptance capacity becomes limited. In the modern media era, numerous and repetitive news reports affect public reading experience and media value. Respondents who read one Ukrainian women report became aware of their dire circumstances and understood the chaos of war in Ukraine; additional reports provided no new information, merely offering different women's stories of the same situation with similar content. Frequent reporting on the same topic, while intending to evoke empathy, actually causes audience emotional fatigue. After reading one report, respondents' sympathy, anti-war sentiment, and sense of identity had already reached high levels. This demonstrates that more is not necessarily better. While media should report promptly, they must consider audience acceptance capacity and must never exploit disasters or others' suffering for profit.

5 Research Summary and Reflection

Through questionnaire surveys and the theoretical lens of empathetic communication, this study examined how sympathetic media reports on Ukrainian women's tragic experiences in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict influence Chinese audiences' compassion, anti-war sentiment, and national identity. The research attempted to answer whether exposure to Ukrainian women reporting and the frequency of such exposure affect these three variables. Findings indicate that significant differences exist between audiences who have and have not viewed Ukrainian women coverage regarding compassion, anti-war sentiment, and national identity, with exposed audiences showing higher levels of all three. However, the hypotheses that greater exposure leads to higher sympathy, stronger anti-war emotions, and greater national identity were not supported. This is primarily because multiple reports on Ukrainian women's tragedies contain largely similar content, failing to provide audiences with new information or reveal more severe difficulties. Excessive sensational reporting does not intensify empathy but instead causes emotional fatigue due to limited acceptance capacity, thereby weakening empathetic ability.

From the perspective of empathetic communication theory, this study explores how war reporting influences audiences and how Ukrainian women reporting specifically affects compassion, anti-war sentiment, and identity. It highlights

how to capture the empathetic perspective in war reporting.

Simultaneously, this study reveals a noteworthy finding: when media mass-produce reports on Ukrainian women's tragedies to attract traffic and gain profit, such coverage does not significantly enhance audience sympathy, anti-war sentiment, or identity, and may even cause emotional fatigue that weakens strong compassion. This reflects the current state of Ukrainian women reporting and warrants vigilance and reflection, particularly in disaster reporting. Media should avoid excessive sensationalism and must not exploit disasters or others' pain to win audience sympathy for profit. Quality outweighs quantity, and better content should be the media's goal rather than blindly relying on repetitive and exhausted topics to perfunctorily serve audiences while attempting to harvest traffic.

During questionnaire distribution and collection, manpower limitations resulted in college students comprising a large proportion of respondents, preventing us from capturing attitudes of middle-aged and elderly groups after reading relevant reports. Future research in war reporting should pay greater attention to whether exposure to refugees' lives in war affects compassion, anti-war sentiment, and national identity toward the refugee's country, thereby expanding research and practical applications of empathetic communication theory.

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