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Dangerous women of Hong Kong? Media construction of stigma in female sex workers

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Abstract

This study used a cultural model analysis to examine the Hong Kong print media's social construction of stigma in respect to female sex workers. An analysis was conducted on captions and main headlines of two newspaper (Chinese and English) media in Hong Kong between the years 2003-2006. A total of 591 articles on sex workers were recruited in the analysis with 422 located from the Ming Pao and 169 articles from the SCMP. In Hong Kong, as in elsewhere, sex workers were commonly labeled as the sources of sexually transmitted diseases and as women who endangered the public safety through socially unacceptable occupations. They were also portrayed as "ugly", "weak" and "powerless" in the articles identified. We conclude the Hong Kong print media plays a significant role in contributing to the stigmatization of sex workers, heightening health risk and vulnerability. Such social construction of public stigma then in turn, can be argued to contribute to a lessened propensity for female sex workers both seek and engage with formal health services.

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INTRODUCTION

For many years, commercial sex in Hong Kong has become an integral component of the city's socio-cultural and economic structure. In the past decade, the number of mainland sex workers has been increasing with 70% of all women currently incarcerated in Hong Kong being suspected to be from mainland China.¹ The number of mainland Chinese sex workers jailed and charged with breach of their conditions of stay in addition to the crime of soliciting for an immoral purpose in Hong Kong rose from 3,646 in 2000 to 11,794 in 2005.¹ The influx of mainland sex workers to Hong Kong can be explained by the emergent of close connections between Hong Kong and mainland China, and the significant income gaps created as the consequence of rapid economic growth of China.

Sex work is commonly portrayed as a public nuisance associated with concerns that these women violate

social norms of what "good Chinese women" should do. Furthermore, women working in the sex industry in Hong Kong often find themselves in an ambiguous legal position. In Hong Kong, the sale of sex is not an offence; however many of the related activities such as solicitation and the maintenance of vice establishment are offences. This marginal criminalization commonly forces women engaged in the sex industry to seek invisibility and protection from criminal organizations. The complex linkage of sex work and illegal activities associates these women with "impropriety", "misconduct" and "misbehavior" which further informs their marginalized context in terms of health seeking and health protection in contemporary society.

For many years, sex workers are viewed as transmitters of HIV and they were assumed to act as a "bridge" over which HIV/AIDS can spread to the general public.² Despite the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) confirmed that the incidence of HIV infection among

sex workers was about the same as that among women in the general population in early 1990s,³ this unfound association continues to stereotype these women and lends contention to the social categorization and stigmatization of sex workers.

Contemporary media is argued to create a space for understanding socially segregated groups.⁴ Media narratives represent the primary sites where most of the public acquire knowledge about sex workers, i.e. the primary channels of cultural expression, as source of images of social reality as well as materials for forming and maintaining prescribed social identity.⁵ The survival of a particular discourse on a marginalized group depends on its ability to maintain its popularity, as such that it is often guided by the interests and demands of the audience.⁶ Media are considered to commonly employ resonant framing, a narrative technique which uses contextually available cultural tools such as relevant metaphors, recognizable stereotypes and familiar story templates that make the news immediately accessible and satisfying to audiences.

This portrayal of sex workers as criminals and as vectors of diseases is a popular narrative in the social construction of stigma. At the same time, sex workers have very limited opportunities to challenge dominant media narratives. In this study, we aimed to examine the ways in which two mainstream Hong Kong newspapers portrayed female sex workers, and the contribution of the popular media to the public construction and stigmatization of sex work. Differences in construction of health and social stigma of sex workers between English and Chinese newspaper were also evaluated.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

To frame the analysis, the paradigm of 'cultural models' was employed.⁷ A cultural model explains a social group process of forming preconceptions, ideas and associated behaviors in light of prevailing social structure and public messages. The model used in the current study refers to how cultural messages of sex work are portrayed by the popular media to inform how sex work and Chinese women's moral conduct is recognized, stigmatized, valued or devalued and understood by the public or by the associated health professionals. These cultural models can then further be informed by the dominant ideas of the society as well as the prevailing social rhetoric of engendered and generational acceptability. In our analysis the model served to guide what was considered by the mainstream cultural group as well as what was considered as the "right and proper" behavior of women in a given society.

Documentary analyses of two Hong Kong newspapers with the highest credibility, the South China Morning Post (SCMP), (English-language newspaper) and the Ming Pao, (Chinese-language) were conducted in 2007. News articles concerning sex workers from the two local newspapers published between 1st November 2003 and 30th October 2006 were surveyed inclusively. **That particular period of history was chosen as it encapsulated a period of rapid social change in the role of women as well as the passing of a number of immigration and work policies in Hong Kong further integrating Hong Kong from the rest of mainland china.** All news articles including features and commentaries were retrieved that portrayed of the sex worker. The search mechanism included utilizing Factiva, an online database offering access to global newspaper, and proceeding to search for one of the following English or related Chinese (Cantonese) language search terms: which included sex work, sex worker(s), prostitution, prostitute(s), vice activity(ies), brothel(s), nightclub(s), commercial sex and paid sex.

The retrieved archive was reviewed by two independent researchers, both proficient in English and Chinese. Major themes of the articles were identified and systematically categorized using constant comparative method until no further themes could be generated.⁸ Whenever there was a disagreement in categorization, the opinion of a third bilingual independent researcher was sought.

Three categories of themes for the captions and predominate headings were derived and established: these being as follows "Social and legal perspectives", "Health" and "Social support". To enhance the detail in categorization, subheadings were devised under each category of theme by the constant comparative method aforementioned. "Social and legal perspectives" was subdivided into subheadings of "Human rights", "Social perceptions" and "Government social policy"; "Health" was subcategorized into "HIV/AIDS", "Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)", "Gynecological diseases" and "Other health related issues"; lastly, "Social support" was categorized into support from "Family", "Lovers", "Peers" and "Non-governmental organizations (NGOs)".

Semantic Differential scale

To establish the subject intensity of emotion response towards the articles, a seven-point Semantic Differential (SD) scale was employed.⁹ This scale has been used to measure people's reactions and intensity of feelings towards articles in terms of ratings on bipolar scales defined with contrasting **adjectives at each end with the following dimensions of meaning: evaluation, potency and activity.**¹⁰ Points '1' to '7' were assigned to each scale with point '4' being

'neutral', while the two ends represented the two contrasting adjectives. SD scales chosen for assessment were positivism (negative - positive), aesthetic (ugly - beautiful), potency (powerless - powerful), strength (weak - strong), action (passive - active), and successfulness (unsuccessful - successful). The ratings were given by the two researchers independently according to their perceptions of how sex workers were being portrayed in each article reviewed. The mean and standard deviations of each rating were calculated and quantitative differences between the two newsprint media were then derived.

RESULTS

A total of 591 articles on sex workers were recruited in the analysis with 422 located from the Ming Pao and 169 articles from the SCMP. Among the surveyed articles, 67 fell into the categories of "Health", "Social and legal perspectives" and "Social support", of which 41 came from the Ming Pao and 25 from the SCMP. Articles belonging to these three categories were assessed and analyzed in the present study as they contributed significantly to the construction of physical, mental and social well-being of sex workers.

Table 1 indicates the average SD ratings of the news articles from both the Ming Pao and the SCMP. The ratings between the two newspapers were comparable in most of the parameters except "successfulness". The parameter of successfulness in the SCMP had a neutral rating in comparison to the ranking of "unsuccessful" in the Ming Pao, though the difference was statistically insignificant [p-value = 0.67%; 95% Confidence interval = -1.44 - 2.24]. In general, both papers were found to portray

a negative impression of sex workers through engaging specific emotional words and/or themes.

Sex workers were often linked with negative attributes of society such as engaging in triad activities and sources of STDs.^{11,12} At the same FSW were portrayed as "ugly" in some articles. The SCMP reported a woman blaming the sex workers living in her building as a threat to her marriage and making her life hell.¹³ In addition, a number of articles reported mistreatment and abuse of sex workers by police officers during arrests, in which the images as "weak" and "powerless" were frequently presented. Among the articles surveyed, only a few reported sex workers advocating for their rights, while the rest depicted female sex workers as being "passive" and victimized in society.^{14,15}

Health

Among the news articles under this category, themes regarding STDs and HIV/AIDS appeared most frequently (25.4%) with only two articles reporting other gynecological diseases. None of the articles reported on the general health of the sex workers.

Sex workers were depicted as sources of STDs and HIV/AIDS as well as threats to public health. Commercial sex was attributed to the rising trend of elderly men contracting HIV by drawing upon speculative opinion from a senior medical officer without references to scientific evidence.¹¹ Both newspapers portrayed female sex workers as irresponsible with their health and as a threat to the general public. Two articles described how certain sex workers continued to provide sexual services despite knowing their positive STDs or HIV status and taking over-the-counter medication instead of seeking proper medical advice.^{16,17}

Table 1. Semantic Differential (SD) ratings of articles from the South China Morning

	SCMP		Ming Pao	
	Mean	St dev	Mean	St dev
Negative-positive	3.5	0.8	3.3	0.9
Powerless-powerful	3.8	1.2	3.8	1.1
Weak-strong	3.4	1.2	3.5	1.2
Ugly-beautiful	3.3	0.6	3.2	0.8
Passive-active	3.1	1.7	3.5	1.5
Unsuccessful-successful	4.0	5.6	3.6	1.4

Post (SCMP) and Ming Pao

Note: all scales run from negative end of scale represented in smaller numbers to positive end of scale represented in larger number.

Sex workers were further portrayed to be at a high risk of contracting STDs and HIV/AIDS, and as women who ignored their health and were desperately in need of public health education. Female sex workers, as depicted in the papers, were found to consume over-the-counter medications rather than seeking proper medical advice when suspected to be suffering from STDs.¹⁷ Volunteers from NGOs were reported to have selectively approached sex workers to distribute condoms, convey the messages of safe sex and offer health check-ups.^{18,19} Further articles reported nurses from government clinics providing outreach health service to sex workers and referrals to formal health services for those who were diagnosed or at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS.^{20,21}

One article reported an extraordinary high incidence of abnormal PAP smears among sex workers. Furthermore, an article in the Chinese press stated that, "9.8% of sex workers had an abnormal cervical smear, which was significantly higher than that of the general public (1-2%)".²² Similar to the reports on STDs and HIV/AIDS, a number of articles portrayed female sex workers as not taking care of their health. The example provided was that only 43% of local and 20% of non-local sex workers reported to have ever had a Pap smear. It is of note that other contextual factors such as costs of sexual services, knowledge of disease and prevention strategies were not discussed in any of the articles.

Social and legal perspectives

Half of the articles under the theme "Social and legal perspectives" were concerned with government policies on prostitution, particularly laws relating to the regulation of sex work in Hong Kong. Though sex work is not illegal in Hong Kong, there are a number of ordinances which limit the livelihood of sex workers, and "these laws had forced sex workers to survive in a legal grey area, leaving them open to be abused by police and clients."¹⁴ It was further reported that police officers had often threatened sex workers with these laws in order to gain extra benefits or even free sexual services.²³ To protect the sex workers, some NGOs had been advocating for decriminalization of prostitution and a legalized red-light district.²⁴

In contrast, very few articles depicted the reactions of general public towards sex workers. "The neighbors looked at me [sex worker] with disgust and sometimes called me a whore to my face," and "...when I told him [police officer] about my job, the courtesy immediately ended and he began using foul language" were quoted in an article.¹⁸ Another article reported the public's view of sex workers' in their neighborhoods and reported that sex workers were believed to endanger the safety of the residents by soliciting and interacting with

dangerous triad members.¹³ These examples most clearly depicted the attitudes of the general public towards sex workers and revealed the media role in constructing the stigmatization of sex work.

Negative perceptions of sex workers were also noted in the medical professionals. News reports of the maltreatment or discrimination of sex workers during medical consultations were not infrequent. Female sex workers were reported to be denied proper treatment by the healthcare providers or even harassed during medical consultation. An article reported that a doctor had been unnecessarily forceful during medical examination and said, "That's what it feels like when you have sex with a man".²⁵ Furthermore, a counselor from an NGO had commented that, "...incidents of sex workers being discriminated against when seeking help were not uncommon because of the stigma associated with their work."²⁵ The maltreatment from medical staff could well contribute to sex workers consumption of over-the-counter medications and avoidance of formal medical care aforementioned.

A quarter of the news articles (22.7%) in this category reported on the human rights of sex workers. Many articles outlined the maltreatment of sex workers and the associated violation of their human rights. For example, both the Chinese and English language media papers reported an incident in which predominantly Mainland sex workers were kept on public display in a detention cage outdoors after a large-scale arrest.^{12,15} However, none of these newspapers reported any in-depth human, health or legal rights issues from the perspective of these sex workers.

Social Support

"Social support" for sex workers was the least frequently reported theme (8.96%) in our survey. Within this category, reports of support from NGOs dominated; while support from family, lovers and peers seldom featured.

The lack of formal support structures was revealed in one of the articles, which stated that "[sex workers] are very isolated. They have no friends and a lot [of sex workers] are trapped by undercover police, who ask their price and then arrest them for soliciting customers", directly quoting a social worker for Zi Teng, a Hong Kong based NGO concerning local sex workers.¹⁴

Newspapers clearly portrayed NGOs as a major source of support for sex workers in Hong Kong. Many of the sex workers were reported as being harassed by the police during covert operations. In a story about the suicide of a sex worker, police officers were reported as seeking free sexual services before arresting the women: "In Li's six suicide letters, she said a police

officer had offered her sex for \$3,000 and then revealed his identity as a policeman only after she had performed oral sex for him". This incident has resulted in Hong Kong's NGOs conducting a demonstration to fight for justice and rights for the women.¹⁴

DISCUSSION

The Greek word *stigma* means "mark" or "prick". In ancient Athens, slaves or criminals were tattooed with a pointed stick to visibly identify them as blemished or morally polluted persons. In 1963, Erving Goffman defined *stigma* as an attribute that is deeply discrediting which reduces an individual from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one.²⁶ The definition was further expanded by Link and Phelan as the co-occurrence of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss and discrimination in a power situation that allows them.²⁷ Human differences are first labeled, and the dominant cultural beliefs then link the labeled persons to negative stereotypes. **For these newspaper articles surveyed Hong Kong female sex workers responded to the associated stigma as if indicative of personal moral defects, by engaging in health or legal deviance such as criminality and addictions.**²⁸

Social psychologists often found stigma as the possession of an attribute that conveys a devalued social identity within a particular context.²⁹ In our analysis, stigma was applied by the newsprint media to a group of already marginalized women through a range of print media and associated public rhetoric informed by the media. In Hong Kong and indeed, increasingly in China, a number of factors have given rise to the construction of stigmatization of sex workers including a dominant public Confucian rhetoric of what proper women should do and what she must not do. These female sex workers as portrayed in the Hong Kong print media surveyed, were stigmatized by association with illegality, marginalization, danger and health risk all of which served to foster more instantaneous and judgmental decisions about social exclusions.

Our analysis points to the extent to which the Chinese newspapers of the period surveyed shaped attitudes by drawing out deep-seated historically-rooted cultural beliefs about "good and proper" female behavior. The use of terms such as "bad" and "ugly" suggest a deviation for the social normality and potential danger to others in keeping with Goffman's theory of stigmatization.

While there were some attempts by the media to appeal to a standard of justice and human rights, most notable themes was the nature of "otherness" and illegality in the articles reviewed. This was to suggest the powerful role played by the Hong Kong media in reinforcing

cultural fears about threat and public health risks. The adherence to the notions of government regulation and public health threats rather than human rights advocacy or social support services served to reinforce the dominant public messages of segregation of marginalized populations from the general public.²⁷ We further contend that Hong Kong print media's construction of health and social stigma towards female sex workers in the period of our review portrayed a sense of public cohesion in opposition to "otherness" during rapid social change. This process constituted one of the means of cultural identity signified by a "good" Chinese society as one where Chinese women behave properly as mothers and as wives.

Despite considerable British colonial and international cultural influence in Hong Kong, the fear of the dangers posed by sex workers is perpetuated not only in the media but also by government regulations. The contention being that the stigmatization of sex work allows public protection and provides vehicle for expression and cultural identification in a time of social vulnerability. Given that the majority of sex workers enter Hong Kong illegally from China, with low educational and income levels, these women could be seen as a threat to the moral and economic development of Hong Kong. Thus both at conscious and subconscious levels, sex workers as a marginalized group are continually rejected, devalued and disempowered. We would therefore argue at the health and social welfare policy level that the media depiction of crime and safeguard public health associated with sex work further justifies the stigmatization.

Research has well demonstrated that sex workers are not the major contributors in transmission of HIV and mainly visit doctors for consultations regarding colds and flu, as well as other common acute medical problems.^{30,31} The associated stigma, barriers to service attendance and the resultant maltreatment by health professionals could prevent this group of women from receiving prompt medical treatment and proper preventive care such as cervical cancer screening. This, in turn, signifies female sex workers as more vulnerable to gynecological diseases, in particular human papilloma virus infection, leading to high chances of getting cervical cancer.³²

We, further contend that female sex workers are marginalized by the way of both media representation and corresponding public rhetoric in both English and Chinese newsprint media. It then follows that the self-esteem of these women might well be undermined, leading them to assume a subordinate role ascribed, so constituting an insidious form of discrimination.³³ In Hong Kong, at present, the carrying of multiple condoms is used as evidence of prostitution in the law

courts of Hong Kong. Many sex workers dare not carry or use condoms, being afraid that police will sue them as the evidence of illegal activity such as soliciting, creating in turn a paradoxical situation of being unable to protect themselves and their clients. It has been further contended that sex workers are isolated from the sources of social support available to other members of society and this may well make them more prone to suffer from psychological illness due to social isolation.³⁴

The duty of the public media

On a positive note, the mass media surveyed appeared to bring visibility to sex workers' lives and the problems they encountered. This provides a humanist dimension and alleviates unnecessary fear or misunderstanding from the public, thus in turn possibly reduces discrimination. The mass media have tended to sensationalize or even eroticize stories to gain resonance with the audience and boost market popularity. Our study has found that a number of articles appeared to emotively portray sex workers as threats to public health in order to cultivate anxiety and potentially promote marketing. This is demonstrated both in our current study as well as the others which link the sex workers with crime and vectors of diseases, consequently escalating social stigma.^{35,36} We further contend that the media has the moral duty to exhibit a greater degree of social responsibility and portray real lives of groups, in particular marginalized groups to be as close as factually possible, and so engage in a form of public accountability. Through less biased and sensationalized reports of their stories, the general public could then make informed opinions based on the human rights of sex workers.

In terms of our cultural model analysis, the casting of sex workers as "bad" women and therefore a social and health threat to the Hong Kong public is linked to a complex process of social circumstances (generation and social class) leading to personalized acceptance. This in turn leads to a rejection or modification of the model. In the process of the media transmission of stigma to the public the media messages needed to concur with current public and social circumstances (employment, economy, fear of disease) if stigma is to be reinforced.

Limitations

Our study only surveyed articles from two newspapers and we acknowledge that the newsprint media are not the only contributors to the construction of social stigma regarding sex work in Hong Kong. Magazines, television programs and the Internet were omitted from our study and these also constitute proficient sources of public media information. In addition, the selected newspapers are only two of the many available to the

public. Of note is that the SCMP is an English medium newspaper circulating in a predominantly Chinese population, and tends to have middle class bias and often Western readership.

Selected themes including "Health", "Social and legal perspectives" and "Social support" were analyzed in our study, while articles on "Sex work as business", "Crimes" and "Route to sex industry" which might have an indirect impact on stigmatization and health might have been omitted. Articles featuring sources of crime might further stigmatize sex workers, having negative impacts on sex workers' psychosocial health.

CONCLUSION

Hong Kong media surveyed in this study appeared to contribute to the social construction of stigma and resultant barriers to accessing health services for sex workers. Given the influential power of the print media, and that it constitutes a primary channel for the general public to gain insight into sex workers' lives, we recommend that public health efforts should engage the media collaboratively to portray the voices of these women. This would enable the development of newsworthy accounts of sex workers' lives and the challenges they face, and so make visible health and social concerns of this vulnerable population.

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