The Construction of China's National Image from the Perspective of Framing Theory

-- Take Independent Online's Report on the Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract. The construction of a national image in the global media landscape plays a critical role in shaping international relations and perceptions, particularly in an era where geopolitical strategies like China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are increasingly under the spotlight. Academically, there is a growing interest in understanding how countries' images are constructed and communicated through media narratives, especially in relation to significant international collaborations. In this context, utilizing a systematic content analysis, this study analyzes the representation of China's Belt and Road Initiative in South Africa through the lens of Independent Online (IOL) reporting. The choice of IOL is predicated on its stature as South Africa's extensive media brand, noted for its authority, wide reach, multimedia dissemination capabilities, and dedication to maintaining independent and objective reporting. A total of 34 relevant articles published between January 1, 2023, and August 1, 2023, were collected and analyzed using the Divominer text mining platform, showcasing the methodological approach employed to uncover the narrative structures shaping the national image of China within mainstream South African media. The research reveals two main narrative strategies in the construction of a positive national image: deconstruction and construction, and event and reaction. The findings highlight Chinese local media's significant presence in Independent Online, thus positively influencing China's overseas image construction. However, it also identifies limitations in communication forms, namely the monolithic, official tone and didactic nature of the content, which may impede audience understanding and acceptance.

Keywords: framing theory; The Belt and Road; National image; South Africa; IOL.

1   Introduction

1.1   Background

Since its introduction in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative has become a global de-velopment strategy launched by Chinese President Xi Jinping. Symbolizing the ancient Silk Road, the Initiative integrates the concepts of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, and is guided by the principle of "building and sharing". Upholding the Silk Road spirit of peace and cooperation, openness and in-clusiveness, mutual learning and mutual appreciation, and mutual benefit and win-win situation, the Initiative aims to promote synergistic cooperation among participating countries in the five key areas of policy communication, facility connectivity, trade facilitation, financial integration, and people-to-people contact, to realize common development and prosperity, forge a new type of international relations, and facilitating reforms and improvements of the global governance system.

Over the last ten years, the Belt and Road Initiative has garnered global attention and is now widely accepted as a public good. The Initiative's progress and related projects have also become a significant topic in international media. As a broad strategy span-ning multiple continents and countries, a positive national image is crucial for business success. The portrayal of a positive national image in relation to the Belt and Road Initiative is an important issue for China, particularly in the media spotlight.

South Africa, as an economic giant on the African continent, plays a significant role in Africa. Independent Online, one of the major news media in South Africa, not only influences the South African public's view of China but also shapes Africa's perception of China's Belt and Road Initiative. The Belt and Road Initiative's coverage has in-fluenced not only the South African public's perception of China but also, to some extent, the perception of China's role and image in the initiative throughout Africa.

1.2   Significance

Under the framework of the 'Belt and Road', individuals from various backgrounds in African countries along the 'Belt and Road' express differing views and feedback on the implementation of the initiative in Africa. Overall, the majority of voices support cooperation and accelerated development, while some express concerns, questions, and objections. With the deepening of political and economic exchanges between China and Africa, Western countries have become increasingly critical of China's efforts to strengthen its influence in Africa. They frequently accused China of 'neo-colonialism', 'resource plundering', 'environmental destruction', and 'disregard for human rights' in an attempt to incite the international community to suppress China by stigmatizing it. This has made it increasingly difficult for China to improve its image in Africa and gain recognition for the Belt and Road Initiative. China's national image in Africa and the recognition of the 'Belt and Road' initiative have been greatly threatened. Therefore, it is crucial for South African mainstream media to cover China's image in relation to the initiative objectively and comprehensively. This not only concerns the future devel-

opment of China and Africa but is also an important step in exploring how to improve China's image in Africa.

Taking the South African media Independent Online as an example, we analyse the coverage of "Belt and Road" by major Chinese and British media in Africa, and explore the news frames of different media outlets and their constructed images of "Belt and Road", which is conducive to grasping the perception of "Belt and Road" and their attitudes towards the image of the Chinese state in African societies. This is conducive to grasping the African society's perception of the Belt and Road Initiative and its attitude towards China's national image. It is also conducive to objectively and truthfully understanding how Africans perceive China's role, function and position in Africa, guiding the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative in Africa, and enhancing the shaping of China's national image and international reputation. The study is of great practical significance for the objective and realistic understanding of how Africans perceive China's role, functions and status in Africa, guiding the implementation of the "Belt and Road" initiative in Africa, strengthening China's national image and enhancing its international reputation.

2   Literature Review

Framing theory originates from the fields of psychology and sociology, and it was not until the 1980s that it was introduced into the field of journalism and communication by Western scholars of mass communication, and then through the continuous exploration of domestic scholars, the cognition of framing theory in the field of journalism and communication has produced a variety of dimensions. Since most of the interpretations of framing theory come from the West, there are more studies on framing theory in foreign literature. Framing theory originated from Bateson[1], then Goffman published Self-Presentation in Everyday Life and Framing Analysis, which formally introduced the concept into sociology[2], while Entman took a significant step forward by taking it as a major concept in news text research, which he believed that the meaning of framing is to selectively highlight and weaken the content of things through the elaboration of media practitioners[3]. He proposed the theory of "frame fusion", stating that news reports tend to frame events by highlighting certain facts, explaining causes, making moral judgements and recommending coping strategies.[3] The frames and analyses developed from these two theories are mainly embodied in the three dimensions of news production, content research and effect research in the field of news communication. Zang Guo-ren, a Taiwanese scholar, combed through the previous studies and systematically divided the internal structure of framing into three levels: high-level structure, middle-level structure and low-level structure[4]. The above theory lays the foundation for this paper to analyse the two dimensions of news production and content research.

In addition, foreign literature on China's relationship with other regions and China's image in other regions is also relatively large. Taking China and Africa as an example, which is the focus of this paper, there are quite a number of related works on this subject, such as The Dragon's Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa by Deborah A.

Brautigam[5], a professor at the American University, which has been described as "the first time that authoritative scholars of China-Africa relations from the West have come up with conclusions that are favourable to China". Anthony Halff, former executive director of the International Energy Agency (IEA), wrote an article entitled "Is China a Neo-Colonialist in Africa", which analysed the reasons for the West's dissatisfaction with China's economic presence in Africa, and pointed out the difficulties that China will face in increasing its influence in Africa under the trend of U.S.-driven economic globalisation, as well as the inadequacies of China's policies in this regard. However, it can be seen that there is an obvious lack of foreign articles and writings that study the country's image through analyses of the Belt and Road Initiative, so the literature review in this paper will focus on domestic literature.

Due to China's long-term comprehensive attention to the BRI and its in-depth implementation, there has been a wide range of studies in the Chinese academic community on the analysis of public opinion in the countries along the BRI as well as in non-BRI countries. Many studies have focused on promoting the Initiative and its concepts, constructing a national image, and building soft power. However, research on the relationship between the framing stance of media reports in different countries and China's overseas image is still in its early stages, and there are differences in research ideas and methodologies.

Sun Peizhao and Chen Xuefei analyse China's image and initiatives in Africa through media evaluation. Huang Hui examines the coverage of the Belt and Road initiative by Arab media using the coverage intensity index and the positive coverage index. Yu Hong and Yu Xia used content analysis based on framing theory to examine news sources, coverage volume, coverage topics, and the relationship of news coverage with China's image abroad. Zhu Guisheng and Huang Jianbin conducted a critical discourse analysis of the Washington Post at three levels: text, discourse practice, and social practice.

After reviewing the literature, it is evident that journalism and communication scholars have primarily conducted empirical research on media report framing using the framing theory. However, there is a lack of systematic research on the framing of BRI reports by media from different countries in the academic world. Furthermore, the few related documents lack scholarship and completeness.

However, there have been few systematic studies on how the media covers a specific African country in both Chinese and foreign academic circles. Most studies focus on China's image in Africa or Africa's attitude towards the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in general. This lack of professionalism and relevance needs to be addressed in future research, which is precisely what our study aims to do.

3   Research Method

3.1   Media Selection

This study analysed Independent Online (IOL) as a media outlet for several reasons. Firstly, Independent Media is the largest newspaper and online publishing company in South Africa, giving it significant authority. Secondly, IOL has a wide audience, with

newspaper subscribers in over 26 cities across South Africa, reaching millions of readers. Therefore, it is an important source and distribution platform for all types of news. In addition, IOL has diversified distribution channels with a clear online layout designed for a diverse audience that is mobile-friendly, making it easy for users to read on a variety of mobile devices. IOL also utilises the influence of social media through its accounts on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and other platforms, providing readers with the latest news updates and opportunities for interaction. IOL is committed to maintaining its journalistic independence, objectivity, and authenticity. It respects the diversity of its readership and endeavors to reflect the diverse voices of South African society. These characteristics make IOL an ideal candidate for this study.

3.2   Data Collection

Data was collected from the official website of Independent Online (IOL) (https://www.iol.co.za/) using web crawler software. The keywords used were 'One Belt, One Road', 'Belt and Road Initiative', 'BRI', 'The Silk Road Economic Belt', 'The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road', 'China', and 'Chinese'. The data crawling timeframe was set from 1 January 2023 to 31 July 2023. After collecting the data, irrelevant and repetitive articles were eliminated, leaving 34 valid samples which were saved in CSV format. The data was then cleaned using the ANACONDA NAVIGATOR (Jupyter Notebook) tool in Python. The clean data was uploaded to the 'DivoMiner' text mining and analysis platform for visualisation, quantitative and qualitative analysis.

3.3   Data Analysis

This study utilises the 'DivoMiner' data processing platform to visualise temporal trends in news coverage through line graphs, which are segmented into 'days' and 'months'. Additionally, word clouds are used to visually emphasise frequently occurring keywords in the sample of reports.

In terms of data quantification, this study mainly analyses the thematic framework and sentiment framework of the reported samples through the Semantic Network Analysis Model and the Text Sentiment Analysis Model, respectively. The TF-IDF algorithm is used in the Semantic Network Analysis Model to extract a specified number of important keywords, and then the Jaccard coefficient (the ratio of intersection to concatenation) is used to measure the strength of association between words. This coefficient is the ratio of the frequency of co-occurrence between words to the sum of their independent occurrences, with larger coefficient values indicating a strong relationship and vice versa for a distant relationship. In order to facilitate the observation and interpretation of these coefficients, a numerical normalisation technique was used, with a normalised data interval of (0.1,1). In exploring the role of South African IOL media in shaping China's image abroad, a textual sentiment analysis model was selected as the main tool in this study. The model incorporates Natural Language Processing (NLP) and Text Mining techniques to accurately extract and analysing sentiment tendencies from China-related reports. This approach enables this study to gain insights into the emotional attitudes expressed by authors in a given text and the

underlying intentions conveyed to readers through that text. Through this analysis, subjective emotional information in the content of media reports is revealed to assess its impact on the communication of China's national image abroad.

4   News Production Perspective

4.1   News Coverage Density, Quantity Change

The year 2023 is the 10th year of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and in Fig. 1, the number of reports on the BRI in the South African media "Independent Online" this year showed a trend from 1 January to 1 August, ranging from flat to rising, then falling and finally rising. In terms of the number of stories in each month(Fig. 1), January and February were flat, and the number of reports continued to rise from February to April, reaching a peak in April, then continued to fall and reach a small trough in June, before rising again and peaking again in July. As can be seen, April and July are high-density publicity periods.

Fig. 1. Articles per month on the BRI in the Independent Online(January 2023 to July 2023)(This figure uses the DiVoMiner® platform for data processing)

In Fig. 2, there was usually one report on the BRI on a given day of the month, with two reports in April and May, which shows that the coverage was generally spread out, with occasional clustering.

Fig. 2. Articles per day on the BRI in the Independent Online (January 2023 to July 2023) (This figure uses the DiVoMiner® platform for data processing)

4.2   Sources

"Sources are a very important indicator in the framing construct. Comprehensive sources will ensure that the news is as comprehensive and unbiased as possible." In Table 1, the sources of the report are more extensive, mainly adopting Chinese media propaganda, accounting for more than half of the total(18 articles). "The Belt and Road, as a national initiative of China, attaches importance to official and professional interpretations to ensure the authority as well as accuracy of the reports. Therefore, the main source for foreign media to obtain relevant information and advice is Chinese media. In addition, scholars are also an important source for the reason that the academic authority of the interpretation of the initiative can still be guaranteed(7 articles). In addition, reports from other media give Independent Online important references(4 articles). Media outlets have strong channels for sharing resources and are a better choice than getting information from other areas. In addition, the voices of local individuals, such as embassy staff, journalists and entrepreneurs, can also make the report more realistic and vivid, and make the Belt and Road story circulate more. On the whole, the sources of information are relatively rich, listening to the voices of various countries and sectors, and consciously maintaining objectivity and impartiality, but as the main reference is Chinese media reports, it is difficult to avoid the propaganda being purposive, subjective and one-sided.

Table 1. Sources of news texts (From own elaboration)

Correspondent of this newspaper	Chinese media	Scholars	Embassy personnel	Entrepreneurs	Other media	Totals
1	18	7	3	1	4	34

4.3   Keyword Analysis of the Title

According to the keyword analysis of the title in Table 2, it can be seen that the content is relatively rich, in which the highest frequency and the greatest impact are "China" and "Africa", which appear 24 times and 11 times respectively, and the TF-IDF value is 3.47 and 2.54 respectively. It can be seen that "One Belt, One Road" is very important for the construction of the relationship between China and Africa, which is to a large extent a concept related to countries.

In addition, "Xi" appears 6 times and "Xiplomacy" 4 times(Table 2), reflecting the irreplaceable role that the presentation of leaders' images at high-level events plays in building the country's image abroad, especially for China, which is often active on the international stage in the context of the country's rise.

Finally, the words "Summit", "Global", "Cooperation", "Development" and "South" also occupy a certain proportion and status, all appearing between 4-6 times(Table 2) ,which reflects the trend of today's world for peaceful development and win-win cooperation.

Table 2. Word frequency of the title (Choose words with a frequency greater than 3) (This table uses the DiVoMiner® platform for data processing and content analysis.)

Word	Ocurrences	TF-IDF
China	24	3.47
Africa	11	2.54
Summit	5	1.77
Xi	6	1.58
Global	6	1.43
Cooperation	4	1.28
Development	5	1.24
Xiplomacy	4	1.19
South	4	1.13

4.4   Genres of News Coverage

In Table 3, the number of commentaries was 14, which accounted for nearly half of all news stories, reflecting the depth of the media audience's interest in what the Belt and Road Initiative means in Africa. This is followed by newsletters(10 articles) and special reports(9 articles), demonstrating the importance of storytelling and uniqueness in media outreach. There was also a speech(1 articles), which enriched the genre and effectively enhanced the sense of immersion.

Table 3. News genres in statistical samples (From own elaboration)

	News Letters	Special Reports	Commentaries	Speech	Totals
Number	10	9	14	1	34

5   Content Research Perspective

5.1   Topic Framework

5.1.1 Hot Word Frequency

Through the DiVoMiner text analysis tool, select the body part of the csv file to get the following word cloud map.
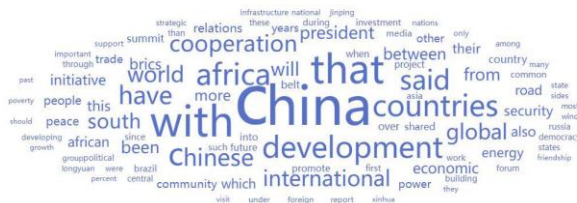
Fig. 3. Text word cloud diagram (This study uses the DiVoMiner® platform for data processing and content analysis)

From the literal word cloud map in Fig. 3, we can see that "cooperation", "development", "global" and "international" have great visual impact. Therefore, we can infer that cooperation and development from international and global perspectives have become the themes of news reports.

Table 4. Word frequency of the text (Select words with TF-IDF values greater than 1.3) (This table uses the DiVoMiner® platform for data processing and content analysis)

Word	Ocurrences	TF-IDF
Africa	284	4.18
Cooperation	164	2.27
South	157	2.2
Chinese	177	2.07
Xi	147	2.01
Global	153	1.98
Brics	101	1.93
International	152	1.83
Brazil	65	1.67
Security	87	1.55
Russia	65	1.48
President	117	1.47
People	118	1.43
African	85	1.33
Energy	94	1.32

By analyzing the word frequency in Table 4, we can find the following characteristics:

"Africa" has the highest frequency, reaching 284 times.

"Cooperation", "Xi", "Brics" and "Presisent" appear extremely frequently in relation to high-level events, with TF-IDF values ranging from 1.47 to 2.27, reflecting the fact that the South African media is more interested in reporting on diplomatic events.

Non-african words such as "Global", "International", "Russia" and "Brazil" also appear more frequently, which reflects the international vision of South African media as a leader in Africa and its attitude towards the Belt and Road Initiative as the master of Africa.
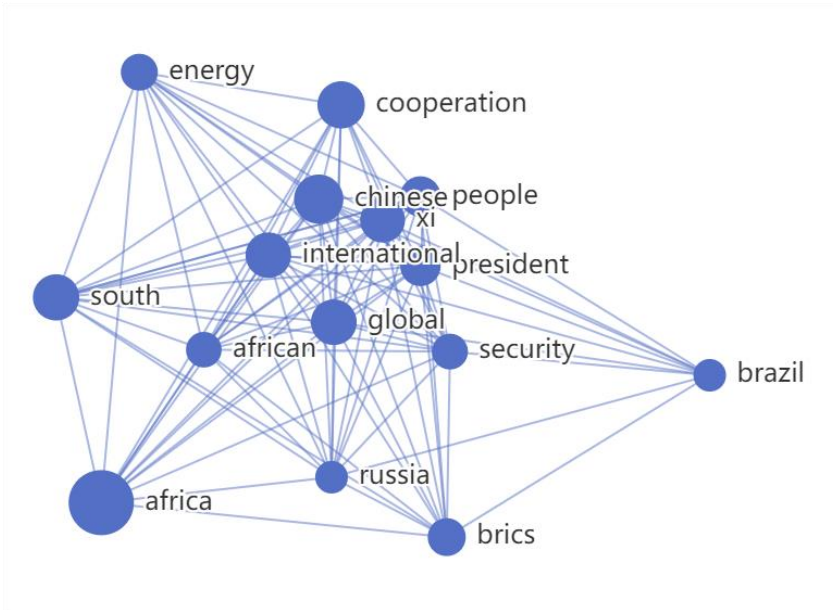
Fig. 4. Semantic network association diagram (This table uses the DiVoMiner® platform for data processing and content analysis)

From this semantic link chart in Fig. 4, we can see that there are more connections between "energy" and "cooperation" and "Chinese", which also reflects that the cooperation under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative is centered on energy.

5.1.2 Topic Analysis

When counting the occurrence times of different topics under the theme framework, we take the strategy of counting the occurrence times of related topics as long as they appear. Although there is crossover between different topics, the presentation of research results will not be affected in the end. The statistics in Table 5 include China-Africa summits, forums and leaders' meetings, as well as China's and Africa's respective foreign-related initiatives. In order to better reflect China's overseas image in Africa, news reports that are not related to the two sides will not be included in the quantitative analysis.

From the subject statistics in Table 5, we can see that there are extremely many topics about economic construction and diplomatic activities, 59 and 77 times respectively. Diplomatic activities are mainly reflected in leaders' diplomacy, and the cover picture of the news is often the scene of leaders' meeting. On the other hand, the media pay little attention to cultural exchange, education and medical treatment. "Medical and health care" appeared 17 times and "culture and education" only 16 times(Table 5).

Table 5. Topic frequency statistics table (From own elaboration)

	Defini-tion	Economy and Trade	Culture and Education	Medical and Healthcare	Diplomacy	Reaction and Evaluation	Peace and Security	Total
Frequency	2	59	16	17	77	98	27	296

In terms of Economic construction, the Bejaia Highway in Algeria, the third China-Africa Economic and Trade Expo, photovoltaic power generation and wind power generation have become the focus of attention. Since economic exchange is an activity that can be seen and felt, it plays a crucial role in shaping China's overseas national image. Through research, we find that such economic cooperation benefiting people is often beneficial to building a positive image.

The wind farm built by longyuan, a Chinese energy company, in Cape Town has not only provided clean energy to the local community, but also created 190,000 jobs, provided scholarships for youth, and provided medical services for the community. So it's no surprise that the Chinese project has been well received locally. According to the report, OBOR has generated nearly $1 trillion in investment, created about 420,000 jobs worldwide, and lifted nearly 40 million people out of poverty in a decade.

In terms of diplomatic activities, it mainly involves the China-Algeria summit, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit, the BRICS Summit, the Global Human Rights Council Forum and the summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation.

The image of leaders in diplomatic activities plays an irreplaceable role in the construction of a country's overseas image, especially in the context of the rise of China, which is often active on the international stage. Through the media, Chinese leaders can directly convey representative remarks to the people of South Africa and other countries, which is a very powerful tool of soft power. Their statements can convey the intent of China's policies, including its stance on South-South cooperation, global affairs, and global issues such as climate change. This can not only increase the transparency of China's policies, reduce misunderstandings and uncertainties, but more importantly, create a friendly image in front of the public.

5.2   Narrative Framework

5.2.1 Deconstruction and Construction Framework

Deconstruction refers to refuting the actions that smear China's national image, criticizing the remarks that run counter to China's strategy, and re-constructing the national image on this basis. Only when the "bad guy" appears, the "hero" will come. For example, in one report: This selective summit convened by the United States provokes confrontation between countries, undermines the authority of the United Nations and genuine multilateralism, and disrupts normal friendly exchanges among countries in the political, economic and cultural fields, which will not help solve regional hotspot issues, but only hinder international cooperation in addressing global risks and challenges. The United States has been forcing African countries to choose

sides. However, China's democracy is people's democracy in the whole process, and its essence is that the people are masters of the country. Different from the Western concept of "one person, one vote", China's democracy has a mature institutional procedure and a set of practices, which have opened up broad prospects for China's modernization. In this process of deconstruction and construction, China's positive national image has been set up.

5.2.2 Event and Reaction Framework

From the statistics, we can see that Xinhua News Agency is the largest source of IOL information. Although we cannot say whether it will subjectively embellish some facts or report unilaterally and selectively, Xinhua News Agency objectively plays an extremely important role in shaping China's image overseas. For local Chinese media like Xinhua News Agency, the framework of event and positive reaction is often adopted in their reports on the Belt and Road Initiative. Such a positive reaction usually comes from authoritative figures, such as government officials, entrepreneurs, scholars and so on.

Xinhua has an article on IOL, World Insight: How China is working to improve global human rights governance and build a Better world. It then conducted extensive interviews with officials and scholars, all of whom spoke positively of the Chinese government's efforts. Former Prime Minister of Guyana Moses Nagamootoo said China's concept of people-centered human rights could be illuminating to other countries. Leonardo Santos Simao, former foreign minister of Mozambique, said China has ensured its people's political, economic, social and cultural rights during its development." The international community needs the contribution of China in global human rights governance," said Micol Savia, permanent representative of the International Association of Democratic Lawyers to the United Nations in Geneva.

5.2.3 Emotional Framework

Table 6. Statistical table of news emotional tendency (From own elaboration)

	Posotive	Passive	Neutral	Total
Number	29	1	4	34

This study makes a quantitative analysis of the emotional tendency of news to measure the role of South African IOL media in shaping China's national image. From the data in Table 6, we can see that most of them are positive emotional tendencies(29 articles), which may have a lot to do with the source of news, because more than half of the news comes from local Chinese media such as Xinhua News Agency, China Daily and CGTN.

Some news articles written by South African academics express concern about China's strategy in Africa(4 articles), arguing that South Africa and the continent's development goals are at unprecedented risk. It is up to South Africans to avoid becoming pawns in a wider geopolitical game and to protect their sovereignty and independence.

6   Conclusion

From the perspective of framing theory, this paper makes an in-depth analysis of Independent Online (IOL) media reports on China's Belt and Road Initiative. The research finds that most of the IOL series reports on China have a positive tendency, which helps to build a positive international image of China to a certain extent.

In terms of the selection of topics, IOL pays more attention to the diplomatic activities of Chinese leaders, the reaction evaluation of international events and the local economic construction in cooperation with China. These reports not only present the events themselves, but also pay special attention to the reactions and evaluations of the events, providing readers with a more comprehensive perspective.

In the narrative deconstruction of positive national image, IOL reports mainly have two remarkable characteristics: deconstruction and construction, and event and reaction. Deconstruction is an in-depth analysis of events or situations, revealing the complexity and diversity behind them for readers; While construction is to build a more positive and positive national image on this basis. The narrative mode of event and reaction enables readers to not only understand the event itself, but also perceive the attitudes and reactions of different groups, countries or media towards the event, making the report more three-dimensional and rich.

However, as Chinese media such as Xinhua News Agency, China Daily and CGTN account for a large proportion of reports, this study also reveals several significant problems concerning the overseas dissemination of Xinhua News Agency:

1. The cultural diversity of South Africa is not taken into account: South Africa is a country with great cultural, religious and racial diversity. Current reports do not adequately take into account South Africa's indigenous cultural practices and values in terms of content and form. Future reports should pay more attention to local conditions and target, and carry out targeted dissemination in combination with local religious beliefs, cultural habits and values in South Africa.

2. Official and didactic language of Xinhua News Agency: The research finds that the news reports of Xinhua News Agency are often too official and didactic, focusing on official communication, with too many slogans, didactic and conventional words, and lack of folk and more down-to-earth communication channels. This kind of communication may weaken the affinity and credibility of news reports.

3. Low level of localization: The study also reveals that Xinhua News Agency's communication in South Africa is faced with the problems of lack of language talents, single transmission channels and narrow group coverage. The current communication strategy mainly targets the African elite, but does not fully take into account a wide range of audiences outside the African elite.

In general, although IOL media's coverage of China has a positive bias, it lacks sufficient localization and diversification as it mainly relies on official information from Xinhua News Agency. In the future, in order to disseminate and interpret the Belt and Road Initiative more effectively and in depth, in South Africa and other countries with similar cultural backgrounds, Xinhua and other Chinese media should aim to improve their reporting methods and content selection, focusing on close integration with local cultural and social realities, and in-depth understanding of the needs, values

and concerns of the target audience, As well as adopting communication strategies that are appropriate to the local culture and context. Reduce official and didactic statements in favor of more down-to-earth, vivid and engaging language and narratives. This can help stories better resonate with local audiences and increase their impact. Increase independent and in-depth analysis that focuses on and reports on the attitudes and reactions of different groups, countries or media to the event. Expand communication channels and audience groups, thereby increasing its communication effectiveness and international influence.

7   Limitations

In this study, despite our in-depth analysis of Independent Online (IOL) media reports on China's Belt and Road Initiative, there are the following glaring research deficiencies:

1. Sample size and time span: The sample size of this study is relatively small and the time span is short, which may not fully reflect the trend and change of IOL coverage in a longer period of time.

2. Limitations of a single media source: Although IOL is an important South African media, relying only on reports from a single media may lead to insufficient convincing of the study. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of South African reporting attitudes towards China, media with different political orientations, such as left, right, center-left and center-right, should be considered.

3. Limitations of research level and sample selection: Although this study mainly focused on IOL coverage of China under the framework of "One Belt, One Road" and BRICS, we did not analyze the role of China and Africa in national image building, continental-wide and extraterritorial, nor did we compare the differences among the three.

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