Setting the Pandemic Stage: Online News Media Framing and Affective Tones in the Philippine COVID-19 Crisis Coverage of *Manila Bulletin* and *Philippine Daily Inquirer*

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ABSTRACT

During the unprecedented COVID-19 global health crisis, online news media emerged as crucial drivers of information dissemination and public discourse in the Philippines. This study investigates how two major online news media platforms, the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (PDI) and *Manila Bulletin* (MB), framed and conveyed affective tones in their coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic. Guided by Framing Theory, the study examined 114 articles from PDI and MB across three critical phases: pre-lockdown, lockdown, and post-lockdown. The findings revealed both similarities and differences in framing. Throughout all phases, the Government Response frame appeared the most dominant, demonstrating its crucial role in shaping public discourse by emphasizing governmental actions and policies. The findings also underscore the significance of Government Response as a foundational frame in the study of crises, such as the pandemic. Results also showed differences in focus using other frames, such as the Economic Consequences and Human Interest frames. Additionally, the analysis of affective tones indicated a predominant use of neutral tones across articles, with variations in emotional framing between the two newspapers. These results highlight the influential role of news media in disseminating information and in shaping public discourse in the country during a time of crisis. Moreover, the study contributes insights into the significance of media framing studies in examining and understanding news media's editorial approaches in reporting crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic

Keywords: *framing, media frames, affective tones, COVID-19, pandemic*

Introduction

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus outbreak, more commonly known as COVID-19, a global pandemic. COVID-19 was first reported in Wuhan City, China, where dealers and vendors from the Huanan seafood market were reported to have a pneumonia-like illness that quickly spread not only throughout China but also to the rest of the world (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020; Buheji et al., 2020; Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020). Due to its novelty and speed of transmission, governments had to impose quick preventive measures, such as lockdowns, to stop the spread of the virus.

In the Philippines, the first case was reported on January 22, 2020. The government immediately enforced preventive measures to limit transmission. In March 2020, during the height of the COVID-19 outbreak, several precautions were strictly implemented, including tight home quarantines, lockdowns in areas where there were confirmed cases, suspension of public transit, and limitations on air and sea travel (Lau et al., 2020). The country's COVID-19 lockdown has been characterized as one of the most stringent and prolonged in the world. Penalties were enforced for violations, with the government relying significantly on the police and the military to uphold order and ensure compliance with health protocols. As a result, some analysts and experts have labeled the government's approach as "draconian," "militarized," or "police-centric" (Maru, 2020). However, these actions set off an economic crisis that greatly impacted various sectors of society, including businesses, livelihood, education, transportation, and healthcare (Pedrosa et al., 2020; Saladino et al., 2020). The lockdown had a profound negative impact on the lives of both adults and children (Edrada et al., 2020).

Every crisis, such as the pandemic, has a significant impact on people's lives. A crisis is defined as a "serious threat to the basic structures or the fundamental values and norms of a system, which under time pressure and highly uncertain circumstances necessitates making vital decisions" within a group, organization, or community (Rosenthal et al., 1989, p. 10). This definition of crisis includes various forms of adversity, such as financial meltdowns, terrorist attacks, natural disasters, environmental hazards, and disease outbreaks. These events have one thing in common: they result in challenging situations where leaders and first responders must make urgent decisions, often under pressure to act quickly while crucial information regarding the event's causes and effects is either missing, inaccurate, or incomplete (Boin et al., 2017).

In times of crisis, the media's responsibility is primarily to cover matters of public interest that substantially influence public perception of those issues

(McCombs & Shaw, 1972). When people are faced with uncertainties and their information-seeking is high, they turn to and rely on media for insights into social realities (McCombs & Weaver, 1973; McCombs et al., 2014; Weaver, 1980). Moreover, the media can "reach people at the grassroots" (Medina et al., 2021, p. 1), giving them the power to disseminate crucial information on various topics, especially those about which the audience lacks sufficient knowledge, such as COVID-19.

News media reporting, one of the functions of media, is recognized as crucial during national security and health crises (Laing, 2011; Klemm et al., 2016; Pieri, 2019). News conveys critical information, such as risks, and influences public perception through the quantity, content, and tone of news coverage (Laing, 2011; Pieri, 2019). News reporting is more akin to storytelling about the world than merely presenting information, even though stories contain factual elements (Gamson, 1989). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the framing of news has been essential in shaping public discourse about the outbreak and communicating disease management interventions. Furthermore, social, economic, and political factors within countries provide context for how international media frame their stories, influencing which aspects to highlight and which to omit (Mutua & Ongonga, 2020). Thus, the virus is seen as more than just an infectious agent; it is a complex issue influenced by factors such as politics and economics.

Against this backdrop, this study aims to investigate the frames and tones of online news coverage of COVID-19 in the Philippines by the two biggest and most prominent newspapers in the country, *Manila Bulletin* and *Philippine Daily Inquirer*. The *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, an English-language newspaper founded in 1985, is known for its bold reporting and comprehensive coverage of national events. Its strong emphasis on democracy and human rights—stemming from its origins during the People Power Revolution—reflects the country's ongoing pursuit of social justice (M2 Communications, 2023). Conversely, the *Manila Bulletin*, originally established as the Daily Bulletin in 1900, is the second-oldest newspaper in the Philippines and the oldest continuously published English-language newspaper in the country. With over a century of publication, *Manila Bulletin*, is known for its uplifting articles. Readers seeking a positive perspective on national issues appreciate this publication for its unique focus on portraying the Philippines in a favorable light (M2 Communications, 2023).

Given the novelty of the COVID-19 pandemic and the media's power to shape discourses on crucial topics, such as crises, this study seeks to answer the research question: How is the COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines framed in selected online news media, namely Inquirer.Net and *Manila Bulletin*? Specifically, the study aims to 1) identify the frames and the affective tones of the COVID-19

pandemic in the Philippines as portrayed in select online news media during pre-lockdown, lockdown, and post-lockdown periods, and 2) describe the predominance of these frames and affective tones at each stage of the pandemic. More specifically, this study aims to uncover how these two online media in the Philippines have covered the COVID-19 pandemic in their news stories in terms of framing and affective tones —whether positive, negative, or neutral.

Additionally, this study aims to contribute to the study on framing in the Philippine context, given that most research on framing has been conducted in Western contexts. Generally, this research aims to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on the capabilities and influence of media in shaping public discourse, especially during a time of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. It also aims to contribute to the conceptualization of framing as a theory and research methodology, both in global and local contexts.

Literature Review

Framing Theory and News Reporting

The most salient effect of mass media emanates from its ability to set agendas, shape individual thinking, and affect cognitive change by telling audience not *what* to think but *what to think about* (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Mass media influence the audience's perceptions, values, focus, and priorities, playing a significant role in shaping public opinion and agenda. Such influence of mass media on the public agenda or opinion can happen intentionally or unintentionally (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Due to this influence, audiences tend to form their own opinion or focus on issues considered worthy of inclusion in their mental agendas (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008).

Consequently, mass media can focus on a particular framing of an issue. A frame is defined as "a central organizing idea or storyline that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them and suggesting the controversy and essence of the issue" (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987). According to Entman, framing involves "selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in communicating text in such a way as to promote a particular problem, definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (1993, p. 53).

Mass media agencies employ news framing to highlight aspects of a news story. News frames can either be generic or issue-specific. Generic frames are common frames used broadly across media and are generally more applicable than issue-specific frames (Neuman et al., 1992). Semetko and Valkenburg (1999) identified five generic news frames —conflict, human interest, attribution

of responsibility, morality, and economic consequences—commonly used in various studies.

The use of framing theory is no longer limited to studying media framing of traditional media. With media convergence, information from traditional sources, such as newspapers, is now readily available on the Internet. Numerous studies have utilized frame theory and frame analysis in the context of new media (Mach et al., 2021; Mutua & Ong'ong'a, 2020; Poirier et al., 2020; Ho et al., 2020). The emergence of social media has also paved the way for studies of framing on social media platforms, such as Twitter (Park & Chong, 2020; Wicke & Bolognesi, 2020; Tahamtan et al., 2020).

Moreover, frame analysis has been utilized in various studies, either through inductive or deductive approaches. Several quantitative content analyses used predetermined frames utilized by previous studies (Msughter & Phillips, 2020; Mutua & Ong'ong'a, 2020; Ogbodo et al., 2020; Umukoro & Ogwezi, 2022), while other studies use qualitative methods, such as qualitative content analysis. Recent studies have utilized advanced methodologies, such as Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), an unsupervised machine learning method where the researcher gives no input as to how the data should be classified inductively and the software sorts the documents according to topics (Poirier, 2020).

Additionally, framing theory and frame analysis have been widely used in studying news frames of crises, such as health-related crises like pandemics (Tian & Stewart, 2006; Beaudoin, 2007). Studies show that even the biggest news media outfits globally adopt frames in their reportage of various issues, including health-related ones. For instance, Tian and Stewart (2006) found BBC and CNN adopted frames in their reportage of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) crisis in 2003. Xinhua News Agency, the official state news agency of the People's Republic of China, and the Associated Press (AP), one of the largest sources of independent newsgathering for global consumers, also adopted framing in their news reporting of SARS (Beaudoin, 2007).

Moreover, different media platforms frame stories differently, making certain frames more salient or dominant over others. For example, in their coverage on SARS, CNN highlighted the economic impact, while BBC emphasized issues of "control" and the role of Taiwan in the crisis (Tian & Stewart, 2006). In a comparative study, Beaudoin (2007), found significant differences between Xinhua News Agency of China and the Associated Press (AP) in their use of frames such as Attribution of Responsibility, Human Interest, Economic Consequences, and Severity in their reporting of SARS.

The use of particular news frames during a public health emergency significantly affects societal understanding and reactions to the outbreak

(Gislason, 2013). Risk professionals and scholars have long recognized the media as a key player in the social construction of risk and in representing diverse hazards (Kitzinger, 1999; Singer & Endreny, 1994). Media coverage does not report on general dangers and associated risks, but on specific instances of a hazard (e.g., a flood or a plane crash) that result in specific harms, such as death, injuries, and property loss (Singer & Endreny, 1994).

Framing of COVID-19 in international news

When the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global health emergency, and later a pandemic, the world was thrust into chaos. The novelty of the virus and the lack of a cure led many countries to declare national emergencies and implement strict measures to contain its spread. As with any crisis, the pandemic created unprecedented challenges. COVID-19, just like any crisis, demanded rapid and critical decision-making from leaders and first responders, often under pressure and with limited or incomplete information about the causes and consequences (Boin et al., 2017).

With information-seeking at an all-time high, people constantly turned to media for information. Information dissemination regarding the pandemic was faster because of the internet. The convergence of traditional and new media made the transmission of pandemic-related information faster and easier. The Internet became the most common source of COVID-19-related information, followed by traditional media (Ho, Chen, & Yen, 2020). People turned to the media for reliable information, and this information-seeking was highly associated with heightened public worry (Ho, Chen, & Yen, 2020).

Numerous studies on media coverage of COVID-19 provided significant insights into the role of media in information dissemination during national and worldwide emergencies. Many of these studies focused on framing in traditional media, such as newspapers (Msughter & Phillips, 2020; Mach et al., 2021; Umukoro & Ogwezi, 2022). For instance, Msughter and Phillips (2020), through content analysis, investigated how Nigeria's two largest newspapers, *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard*, framed the pandemic. Their research found that economic and political frames dominated the coverage, while health, safety, and quality-of-life frames were downplayed, reflecting a media focus aligned with government interests during the pandemic. Moreover, Nigerian media employed framing not just in news stories but in their editorials. Umukoro and Ogwezi (2022) investigated the types of frames in the editorials from selected newspapers and revealed 13 frames despite very few editorial publications.

Moreover, Mach et al. (2021) analyzed print and online newspaper coverage of COVID-19 in Canada, the UK, and the US from March to August 2020. The study assessed the scientific quality and sensationalism of 1,331 randomly

sampled articles from 12 newspapers across the political spectrum. It was found that COVID-19 reporting had moderate scientific quality and low sensationalism. Moreover, articles on healthcare topics had the highest scientific quality, while political topics had the highest sensationalism.

Studies on how international media framed COVID-19 reveal both similarities and differences. With the internet as the primary information source during the pandemic (Ho, Chen, & Yen, 2020), research showed that early news coverage focused on the pandemic's spread, later shifting to economic consequences (Colarossi, 2020). Ogbodo et al. (2020) found that media in the Americas primarily framed the pandemic through human interest and fear/scaremongering, with a growing focus on economic impacts. In contrast, Canadian media emphasized the health crisis (Poirier et al., 2020). Mutua and Ong'ong'a (2020) analyzed BBC, CNN, Al-Jazeera, and People's Daily, identifying four key frames—economic consequence, human interest, attribution of responsibility, and health severity—highlighting diverse approaches in early pandemic coverage.

Furthermore, as countries took strict measures, such as lockdowns, the internet emerged as the main source of information (Ho et al., 2020). Various studies examining global media's online COVID-19 coverage showed both similarities and differences in their framing approaches (Mach et al., 2021; Mutua & Ong'ong'a, 2020; Poirier et al., 2020; Ho et al., 2020; Ogbodo et al., 2020). In the USA, early online news focused on the virus' spread, with later coverage shifting to economic consequences (Colarossi, 2020). Ogbodo et al. (2020) found that global media in the Americas primarily framed the pandemic through human interest and fear/scaremongering, with a growing focus on economic impacts. In contrast, Canadian media emphasized the health crisis (Poirier et al., 2020).

The framing of COVID-19 on Twitter highlighted a range of perspectives, reflecting both positivity and the complexities of public discourse. Park and Chong (2020) identified positive frames that emphasized individual and group contributions during the pandemic, while entertainment frames focused on celebrity donations. Wicke and Bolognesi (2020) observed that Twitter discourse frequently used literal family-related frames (e.g., home, kinship) and figurative war metaphors, though they called for more diverse frames to capture the scope of pandemic discussions. Similarly, Tahamtan et al. (2021) analyzed trending hashtags and identified nine key frames, with "call for action" generating the most public engagement, followed by "conflict" and "evidence and facts." This research highlighted Twitter's role as a dynamic platform for framing public discourse on COVID-19, contributing valuable insights into framing theory.

Framing of COVID-19 in Philippine media

Several studies have examined how COVID-19 was framed by media in the Philippines. Villanueva (2020) compared the COVID-19 framing of selected newspapers in the Philippines and Malaysia during the initial phase of the pandemic (from 0–11 weeks). The study analyzed news headlines using "Keyness Analysis" (Scott, 1997, cited in Villanueva, 2020), a corpus-based approach for identifying salient themes, topics, and framings surrounding the disease. The results show differences in outbreak reporting between the two countries. In the Philippines, news reports depicted the disease through an 'enigmatic lens,' which explains the alarmist angle of news reports and the government response focused on movement restrictions and the need to repatriate Filipino seafarers and Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW). On the other hand, Malaysian newspaper focused on the war frame that depicted the disease as an enemy to be fought and defeated, with emphasis on personal hygiene, safety protocols, and economic concerns.

Moreover, Metila et al. (2023) analyzed three major Philippine broadsheets—The *Manila Bulletin*, The *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, and *Philippine Star*—during the early phase of the pandemic, from January 30 to March 25, 2020. They identified key frames such as Action/Prevention, New Evidence, Reassurance, Conflict, Economic Consequences, and Social Consequences, alongside minor frames like Uncertainty, Solidarity, Responsibility, Human Interest, and Hope. The study found that coverage generally focused on government response and new information over fear-mongering, emphasizing positive frames to reassure the public. The authors suggest integrating media framing discussions into media literacy education to foster critical thinking and better consumption of information.

In examining the Philippine government's response to the pandemic, Panao and Rye (2023) investigated how the government framed its COVID-19 response by analyzing press releases issued by the Philippine News Agency between February 2020 and April 2021. The study found that the government initially focused on social amelioration and economic support in its policy narratives. However, as citizens' economic anxiety intensified, the government's framing shifted towards promoting mass vaccination. The authors conclude that the Philippine government's response involved policy experimentation and incremental adaptation. While facing international criticism, the findings suggest the government attempted to be responsive, even by pandering to public sentiment.

These studies reveal that COVID-19 is not just a health emergency but one with broad political, social, and economic dimensions. They also highlight the

significant role of media, in all forms, in disseminating information, shaping public perceptions, and enabling social actions. Moreover, the literature on COVID-19 media framing highlights different approaches to studying framing. Building on previous research, this study adopts frames such as Economic Consequences, Human Interest, Conflict, Morality/Religion, and Attribution of Responsibility (Semetko & Valkenburg, 1999), as well as Health Severity (Mutua & Ong'ong'a, 2020). The researcher added an additional frame —Government Response — since both international and local literature on media framing of COVID-19 revealed how the government actions and responses were a key focus in news coverage. The addition of Government Response aims to contribute to the conceptualization of framing theory in news media reporting of crises.

Tone and Affective News

Studies on news framing emphasize not only the salience of events but also the tone of coverage, which can be positive, neutral, or negative (Brunken, 2006). Research shows that initial coverage tends to be emotionally charged but becomes more intellectual over time (Gortner & Pennebaker, 2003). Certain frames suggest a "good" versus "bad" dichotomy, embedding positive or negative elements (de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2003). Shaefer (2007) highlights the tone's role in the agenda-setting and priming processes, noting that the evaluative tone of media influences public perception and political judgment. The affective content of news is connected to symbolic language, suggesting that tone is crucial for understanding media effects on democracy (Young & Soroka, 2012). Moreover, emotion is becoming increasingly significant in news production and consumption (Beckett & Deuze, 2016) and how the blending of facts, opinion, and emotion shapes public anticipation before events gain mainstream recognition (Papacharissi, 2012). Together, these studies reveal that while tone and emotional content are essential across different studies, their effects vary based on framing contexts and the timing of coverage.

In relation to COVID-19, Msughter and Philips (2020) defined tones, which served as a valuable reference for this paper. A positive tone presents a favorable and generally sympathetic view of COVID-19, while a negative tone presents an unfavorable and non-sympathetic perspective. Neutral tone presents neither of the two types described above, with news articles discussing the issue either positively or negatively. Ogdobo et al. (2020) included the fear frame and hope frame in the content analysis of COVID-19. The fear frame involves stories that are exaggerated to cause fear or panic among the public, while the hope frame emphasizes people's hope amidst the crisis. It denotes that hope and fear were the two main sentiments in the pandemic.

Moreover, Mutua & Ong'ong'a (2020) studied the tone of news from four news media outlets—BBC, Al-Jazeera, CNN, and People's Daily — during the pandemic's early stages. They found that out of the four news organizations, BBC mostly published pessimistic stories, while People's Daily coverage was more neutral and optimistic. CNN had the least number of pessimistic stories among the four media outlets. This reflects that media organizations employ a particular tone in their news reporting, though the choice of tone varies across media outlets.

Drawing from the literature review, this paper utilizes the concept of *Affective Tone*, which refers to the sentiment or emotion conveyed in the expression of information. Ogdobo et al. (2020) included both the fear frame and hope frame in the content analysis of COVID-19; the former involves stories that are exaggerated to cause fear or panic among the public, while the latter emphasizes people's hope amidst the crisis. It denotes and verifies that hope and fear are two main dominant sentiments observed after initial browsing of the sample selected news. However, this paper did not adopt hope and fear as separate frames because they may overlap with the Human Interest frame. Instead, they are conceptualized as a representation of sentiments or emotions in COVID-19-related news, with hope associated with a positive tone and fear with a negative tone.

Lastly, this paper holds significance in investigating how two of the biggest media organizations in the Philippines employed framing and affective tone in their online COVID-19 coverage, considering the internet's role as a primary information source during the pandemic. Additionally, the study seeks to establish 'Government Response' as a vital frame in the analysis of crisis issues such as pandemics by providing insights and evidence from online media in the Philippine context.

Method

The study utilized a deductive content analysis approach, concentrating on predefined frames and affective tones in news articles regarding the COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines. Seven frames were analyzed, including Economic Consequences, Human Interest, Conflict, Morality/Religion, and Attribution of Responsibility (Semetko & Valkenburg, 1999), as well as Health Severity (Mutua & Ong'ong'a, 2020), and an additional frame introduced by the researcher, Government Response (Table 1).

The tones were categorized as positive (can be focused on hope), negative (can be focused on fear), and neutral (Ogdobo et al., 2020). The Positive tone presents the story favorably and with sympathy towards COVID-19-related concerns. The Negative tone presents the story unfavorably, generally without

sympathy towards COVID-19-related concerns. The Neutral tone presents a factual perspective with neither favorable nor unfavorable stance. Hope involves stories that highlight people's will and determination to survive the pandemic and present the COVID-19 pandemic as a challenge that people will eventually overcome. Fear involves exaggeration to cause fear or panic among the public and presents the COVID-19 pandemic as a highly alarming situation.

Moreover, the study analyzed news headline stories from Inquirer.net, the online news platform of the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (PDI), and the *Manila Bulletin*. These two media outfits were chosen due to their long-standing history, broad circulation, and reputation. The *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (PDI), established in 1985, is recognized for its critical coverage of issues like the drug war (Ragragio, 2022), while the *Manila Bulletin*, founded in 1900, is noted for its pro-government narratives (Media Bias Fact Check, 2020).

The researcher used the keywords 'coronavirus,' 'COVID-19,' and 'pandemic' to gather news headlines. A total of 114 articles were collected for analysis, with 57 from Inquirer.net and 57 from the *Manila Bulletin*, covering three weeks of the lockdown period. The analysis covered the week before lockdown (March 9-15), one week during lockdown (March 16-22), and the first week after lockdown (May 16-21). These timeframes were selected to examine potential changes in news coverage frames during the initial lockdown stages, a period marked by heightened anxiety and uncertainty, when the media's role in information dissemination and shaping public discourse about the pandemic was crucial.

 Additionally, a codebook was developed to systematically analyze articles. The study adopted and revised the "Content Analysis Measures for Frames" (Semetko & Valkenburg, 1999), with each frame containing five questions (see Table 1). Affective tones were categorized as either positive (focused on hope and optimism) or negative (focused on fear and pessimism). The codes were pre-tested with an external coder to establish intercoder reliability before the remaining samples were interdependently coded by the two coders.

Lastly, the study utilized descriptive statistics in analyzing the frames and affective tones. However, differences and shifts in the framing and affective tones were not quantitatively analyzed, which is a limitation of this study that the researcher intends to address in future research undertakings.

Table 1. Content Analysis Measures for Frames

Content Analysis Measures for Frames		
Frames	**Frame Definition**	**Questions**
1. Attribution of Responsibility	appoints responsibility for the COVID-19 situation in the country to the government, public officials, and private individuals/s locally and nationally	1. Does the story suggest that the national government and/or the local government can alleviate the problems brought about by COVID-19? 2. Does the story suggest that the national government and/or the local government are responsible for the present condition of COVID-19 and COVID-19-related problems in the country? 3. Does the story mention that some nongovernment individuals or groups of people in society are responsible for the problem? 4. Does the story suggest possible solutions to end COVID-19 and COVID-19-related concerns? 5. Does the story suggest that COVID-19 and COVID-19-related concerns require urgent action?
2. Human Interest	gives a "human face" and focuses on the personal stories of individuals as human participants, especially involving emotional angles in the presentation of COVID-19	1. Does the story provide a specific human example, human situation, or "human face" of COVID-19? 2. Does the story employ adjectives or personal vignettes that generate feelings of outrage, empathy, sympathy, or compassion to spark the readers' emotions? 3. Does the story emphasize how individuals or groups are affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and other related events and consequences? 4. Does the story go into the personal or private lives of the actors? 5. Does the story use metaphors or language that might generate feelings of outrage, empathy, sympathy, or compassion to create emotion?

3. Conflict	involves disagreement between individuals, groups, or institutions in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic and presents the different sides of various COVOID-19 related concerns	1. Does the story reflect a disagreement between two or more parties/individuals/groups/ countries regarding COVID-19? 2. Does one party/individual/group/ country reproach/criticize/rebuke another on COVID-19? 3. Does the story refer to two or more sides of the issue of COVID-19? 4. Does the story refer to the winner or loser in the fight against COVID-19? 5. Does the story mention any military action or use of the police in addressing COVID-19-related concerns?
4. Morality	places COVID-19 in the context of religious tenets or moral prescriptions	1. Does the story contain/present any moral message or ethical issues? 2. Does the story refer to Catholic, Christianity, or other religious beliefs? 3. Does the story offer specific moral prescriptions about how to behave? 4. Does the story appraise/reward any good/moral behavior? 5. Does the story criticize or punish any bad/immoral behavior?
5. Economic Consequences	focuses on the economic consequences of the pandemic on individuals, groups, organizations, or country	1. Does the story mention financial losses or gains now or in the future because of COVID-19? 2. Does the story mention the costs/ degree of expense involved in addressing COVID-19?\ 3. Is there a reference to the economic consequences of pursuing or not pursuing a course of action in addressing COVID-19, either local or national? 4. Does the story mention any economic-related decisions enacted by the local/national government? 5. Does the story mention financial insufficiency or basic goods insufficiency that resulted in any economic-related phenomenon?

6. Health Severity	emphasizes present health conditions due to and health risks of COVID-19 locally and nationally	1. Does the story mention the present health condition/risks of COVID-19 on human life as a whole? 2. Does the story have risk comparisons of COVID-19 with other viral diseases on human life as a whole? 3. Does the story provide incidence/morbidity/mortality statistics on COVID-19, either at the local or national level? 4. Does the story present the impact of COVID-19 health risks on the healthcare system, either at the local or national level? 5. Does the story involve scientific predictions/calculations on the severity of COVID-19 health-related issues?
7. Government Response	involves measures or actions undertaken or being planned to be undertaken by the government to address the COVID-19 pandemic and other related concerns locally and nationally	1. Does the story feature a policy, measure, or action undertaken or being planned to be undertaken by the government, local government, or any government sector to keep the public safe from COVID-19? 2. Does the story feature financial aid/ assistance in kind given to the people by the government to help them survive the pandemic? 3. Does the story feature a policy, or an action undertaken by the government to balance the economy and public safety? 4. Does the story focus on government-initiated infrastructure projects/technology to address COVID-19-related concerns? 5. Does it involve government officials, locally and nationally, personally taking actions to oversee/implement policies/actions of the government?

Results and Discussion

A. Distribution and Predominance of Frames Across Periods

Table 2. Distribution of Frames During the Pre-lockdown Period

Online Media	Frames %							N
	Economic Consequences	Morality	Conflict	Attribution of Responsibility	Human Interest	Health Severity	Government Response	
PDI	11.4	6.8	9.1	25.0	6.8	11.4	29.5	44
MB	14.3	6.1	0.0	12.2	24.5	8.2	34.7	49

In the pre-lockdown period, both the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (PDI) and *Manila Bulletin* (MB) prioritized coverage of Government Response (29.5% and 34.7% respectively), indicating that media attention was heavily centered on how the authorities were preparing to manage the looming pandemic. *Manila Bulletin* placed even greater emphasis on this frame compared to PDI, suggesting that MB was particularly focused on tracking the government's immediate actions and responses to the crisis. This emphasis on Government Response is shown in an MB article by Geducos and De Vera (2020): "*Health Secretary Francisco Duque III was also authorized to call upon the Philippine National Police (PNP) and other law enforcement agencies to provide assistance in addressing the disease*," as well as in this PDI article: *The Quezon City government declared on Friday a state of calamity, a status that would allow local officials to "utilize a portion of its quick-response funds" to address the spread of the new coronavirus (COVID-19) after six cases were confirmed in the city* (Ramos, 2020).

Both newspapers' strong emphasis on the government's response highlights the significance of media in holding public authorities responsible and evaluating the implementation of health emergency responses. However, PDI's notable attention to Attribution of Responsibility (25%) further highlights the public discourse surrounding accountability. By emphasizing responsibility, PDI provided a platform for discussion on who should be held accountable for any delays or missteps in the government's response, as exemplified in this statement from Aurelio (2020): "*She (Vice President Leni Robredo) expressed disappointment over the delayed action of the Duterte administration, noting that Duque recommended the declaration of a state of public health emergency in a letter to Malacañang dated Feb. 21.*"

The *Manila Bulletin*, on the other hand, adopted a more human-centered approach by emphasizing Human Interest stories (24.5%), which highlighted personal narratives and the pandemic's effects on people. This coverage

demonstrates the newspaper's concern for the experiences of everyday people facing the crisis, giving greater weight to their challenges, resilience, and emotional reactions to the pandemic, as exemplified in this statement from Rosario, Fernandez, and AFP (2020): *"We just got off our plane and we're going to go straight back—we can't believe it," said 29-year-old Tiara Streng, queueing with three friends at London's Heathrow Airport for a return flight to Colorado."*

Moreover, both newspapers addressed Economic Consequences (PDI:11.4%, MB: 14.3%) and Health Severity (PDI:11.4%, MB: 8.2%) similarly. However, Conflict (PDI: 9.1%, MB: 0%) was notably absent in MB, unlike PDI, which had a moderate focus on disputes. This contrast in focus between the two newspapers highlights the varied ways in which media outlets framed the situation, balancing between government scrutiny and the human aspect of the pandemic.

Table 3. Distribution of Frames during the Lockdown Period

Online Media	Frames %							N
	Economic Conseuences	Morality	Conflict	Attribution of Responsibility	Human Interest	Health Severity	Government Response	
PDI	6.1	14.3	6.1	20.4	16.3	2.0	38.6	49
MB	18.5	16.3	3.3	10.9	18.5	9.8	22.8	92

During the lockdown period, both the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (PDI) and the *Manila Bulletin* (MB) continued to focus heavily on the Government Response frame (PDI: 38.6%, MB: 22.8%), reflecting the media's persistent scrutiny of how the authorities were handling the unfolding crisis. While this frame remained the most dominant in both publications, there was a noticeable shift in emphasis, particularly in the *Manila Bulletin*, whose coverage of Government Response slightly decreased to 22.8%, compared to its pre-lockdown level of 43.7%. This decrease suggests that while the government's measures remained important, attention began to shift toward other aspects of the pandemic's effects. This change indicates that MB started to view the pandemic more broadly, considering the overall social, economic, and personal impacts of the crisis rather than merely examining government actions.

Interestingly, MB varied its coverage during this period by devoting equal attention to topics with Economic Consequences and Human Interest stories, both accounting for 18.5% of its content. Through the Economic Consequences

frame, MB addressed the financial impact of the pandemic on enterprises, industries, and livelihoods, focusing on topics such as unemployment, business closures, and economic instability, as shown in this statement:

> In the same briefing, Dominguez admitted the coronavirus outbreak has hit the country 'very hard.' 'We have already received 44,000 respondents and we will analyze to see the damage on tourism and manufacturing, which companies were hit hard, either small and medium enterprises or the big corporations' (Kabiling, 2020).

Moreover, MB's emphasis on Human Interest stories demonstrates an effort to make the pandemic's effects more relatable. This approach includes sharing the experiences of common people and their hardships during the lockdown to humanize the situation by highlighting instances of illness, bereavement, resilience, and group efforts. Through Human Interest stories, MB was able to emotionally connect with readers by showcasing these personal accounts and providing a more sympathetic viewpoint on the pandemic, as shown in this statement:

> Veteran actress-scriptwriter Bibeth Orteza paid tribute to her brother, Dr. Ephraim Neal Orteza, who died of COVID-19 on Wednesday. He was the medical director and pediatrician of Ospital ng Parañaque. "Bimboy was my best friend and best enemy when we were growing up," she wrote. She said her brother would often earn praises from their mother for being studious, not to mention that Ephraim had always dreamed of becoming a doctor." (Aquino et al., 2020).

On the other hand, Government Response continued to be a prominent frame for the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* during the lockdown. This suggests that PDI was consistent in stressing the government's role in managing the crisis, maintaining a steady stance in its reporting. The fact that PDI did not diversify its focus to the same level as MB may reflect a deeper commitment to holding the government accountable for its actions during this crisis.

In summary, during the lockdown period, while both newspapers continued to prominently feature Government Response, the *Manila Bulletin*'s coverage evolved to reflect a broader range of concerns. By placing equal emphasis on Economic Consequences and Human Interest stories, MB acknowledged both the financial and personal challenges posed by the lockdown. This diversification contrasts with PDI's steadier focus on governmental actions, highlighting the

different editorial strategies each newspaper employed in responding to the complexities of the pandemic. Moreover, *Manila Bulletin* broadened its coverage throughout the lockdown period to cover a wider range of issues. By giving equal weight to Human Interest and Economic Consequences frames, MB recognized the financial and psychological difficulties that the lockdown presented and their impact on the lives of ordinary people, in contrast to PDI's more consistent focus on governmental activities.

Table 4. *Distribution of Frames during the Post-lockdown Period*

Online Media	Frames %							N
	Economic Consequences	Morality	Conflict	Attribution of Responsibility	Human Interest	Health Severity	Government Response	
PDI	13.2	20.8	18.9	18.9	0.0	5.7	22.6	53
MB	2.7	25.3	12.0	22.7	0.0	6.7	30.7	75

In the post-lockdown period, both the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (PDI) and *Manila Bulletin* (MB) continued to prioritize the Government Response frame, reflecting a sustained focus on how authorities were managing the ongoing pandemic. For PDI, Government Response remained the most covered frame at 22.6%, showing that even after the initial crisis had passed, the public and media continued to scrutinize government actions. In the *Manila Bulletin*, this emphasis was even stronger, with 30.7% of its coverage focusing on government efforts, indicating a clear interest in the official response to the evolving situation.

One notable trend in the post-lockdown period is the increased emphasis on Morality in both newspapers. PDI allocated 20.8% of its coverage to moral considerations, while the *Manila Bulletin* devoted an even higher proportion (25.3%) to this frame. This suggests that as the immediate threat of the pandemic subsided, discussions surrounding ethical implications, societal values, and moral judgments gained more prominence. The public and media were likely reflecting on the broader implications of the crisis, such as fairness, justice, and moral accountability, especially regarding decisions made by those in power. This emphasis on morality is shown in the following statements from the two newspapers:

> Photos and videos of mall-goers violating the physical distancing order inside the malls went viral in the social media

on Saturday. Other netizens also narrated their experience about how the physical distancing was brazenly violated in malls. "'Let us work together to make sure that all the measures aimed at protecting each and every one of us are strictly observed," said Eleazar.' (Recuenco, 2020) [MB].

Presidential spokesperson Harry Roque said the government eased the quarantine rules in Metro Manila on the assumption that the public would follow health measures to prevent a resurgence of the new coronavirus. "We expect everybody's full cooperation. If there's no full cooperation, we will go back to [enhanced community quarantine] because the state cannot be remiss in its obligation to protect the health of its citizens," Roque said. (Aurelio, 2020) [PDI].

Moreover, Conflict and Attribution of Responsibility were equally significant in PDI (18.9%). This focus indicates that the media continued to highlight disagreements and assign blame, reflecting ongoing tensions between various actors, such as government officials, health authorities, and political figures. In contrast, the *Manila Bulletin* also covered Attribution of Responsibility (22.7%) but devoted less space to Conflict (12%). This may imply that while the Bulletin continued to explore issues of accountability, it placed less emphasis on highlighting conflicts or tensions between parties.

Interestingly, Economic Consequences and Health Severity were given less attention during the post-lockdown period. In PDI, Economic Consequences accounted for 13.2% of coverage, and Health Severity was the least mentioned frame at 5.7%. Similarly, the *Manila Bulletin* gave minimal focus on Economic Consequences (2.7%) and Health Severity (6.7%). This shift could indicate that the urgency surrounding health and economic impacts had somewhat diminished after the lockdown, as the media turned its attention to political, moral, and societal debates rather than the immediate fallout from the pandemic.

The table highlights the shifts in media framing across the three periods—pre-lockdown, lockdown, and post-lockdown—to show how the narrative focus shifted in response to the evolving pandemic. Before the lockdown, the media focused primarily on frames like Human Interest (17.4%) and Attribution of Responsibility (17.4%). This suggests that early discussions centered on personal narratives and accountability as the public and media tried to figure out who was responsible in managing the impending crisis and how it would affect the citizens. Notably, Conflict and Health Severity were completely absent at this stage, likely because the pandemic had not yet reached a point where these issues

Table 5. Predominant Frames Across Periods

PERIODS	FRAMES						
	Economic Consequences	Morality	Conflict	Attribution of Responsibility	Human Interest	Health Severity	Government Response
Pre-lockdown	13.0	4.3	0.0	17.4	17.4	0.0	13.0
Lockdown	13.9	16.7	2.8	11.1	16.7	2.8	36.1
Post-lockdown	11.4	22.9	14.3	20.0	0.0	5.7	25.7

demanded attention. While Government Response and Economic Consequences were less prominent, they still surfaced, indicating the early phases of public awareness of the issue.

The media drastically changed its focus during the lockdown period. The Government Response frame increased to 36.1%, becoming the central theme in coverage as the actions of the authorities came under intense scrutiny. The increase in coverage of Morality (16.7%) and Human Interest (16.7%) indicates growing concerns about ethical issues and the human impact of the pandemic, in addition to government actions. Economic Consequences (13.9%) remained fairly consistent with the pre-lockdown period, while Conflict and Health Severity started to rise (2.8% each), suggesting that disagreements and health-related issues started gaining more media attention as the pandemic worsened.

After the lockdown, the focus of media framing shifted once more. While Government Response remained significant (25.7%), it was no longer the main focus. Instead, Morality (22.9%) and Conflict (14.3%) became more prominent. This implies that once the immediate crisis subsided, media attention turned to ethical discussions, effects on society, and conflicts that emerged both during and after the pandemic. Attribution of Responsibility (20%) also became more prominent, indicating the renewed public interest in accountability as people started to evaluate the overall management of the pandemic. Economic Consequences (11.4%) and Health Severity (5.7%), on the other hand, received less attention, suggesting that the emphasis had shifted from the immediate effects of the pandemic to more comprehensive analyses of its aftermath.

Moreover, these findings show how media framing changed as the pandemic progressed. As the crisis worsened, government actions were the primary focus, reflecting the media's role in holding authorities accountable amid an unprecedented public health emergency. Furthermore, the Government Response frame's prevalence throughout the pandemic emphasizes its importance in media coverage of COVID-19. This framing emphasizes the political aspects of the health crisis, and became the most popular in the Philippines. Its inclusion expands on established issue-specific frames identified by Semetko and Valkenburg (1999) and Mutua and Ong'ong'a (2020), demonstrating the pandemic's uniqueness as a global event that intertwined with health, politics, and governance. This change in framing not only illustrates how complicated the pandemic is, but also highlights media's role in shaping public discourse and influencing public perceptions of COVID-19 as both a political and health emergency.

Overall, the post-lockdown coverage in both newspapers reflects a transition from crisis reporting—focused on health and economic effects—to a more reflective discourse on government actions, ethical considerations, and accountability. The continuing dominance of Government Response suggests sustained public interest in how authorities handled the pandemic, while the increased focus on Morality highlights the broader societal reflections prompted by the crisis.

The consistent prominence of Government Response frame across periods in both online media significantly emphasizes the media's criticism of government actions and demand for accountability. These results are consistent with the research conducted by Panao and Rye (2023), which examined how the government framed the COVID-19 response in the Philippines. This demonstrates the complex dynamics of the pandemic, which is both a health and political crisis.

 Overall, these findings not solely reveal differences in the prominence of frames in both newspapers but also reflect their respective editorial approaches to framing issues in the country. The results show that PDI adopts a more forceful and distinct stance in holding the government accountable, as seen by the prevalence of Government Response and Attribution of Responsibility frames over time. This is in line with PDI's reputation for fearless reporting with emphasis on democracy, human rights, and the nation's quest for social justice, as attributed to its founding during the People Power Revolution (M2 Communication, 2023).

On the other hand, the shift in frame dominance from Government Response to Economic Consequences and Human Interest stories in the *Manila Bulletin* reflects its reputation for focusing on inspirational articles, taking a positive viewpoint on national issues, and projecting the Philippines' positive image (M2

Communication, 2023). The *Manila Bulletin* generally publishes factual news. However, a strong pro-government bias leaves out criticism.

These results align with earlier studies. They corroborate the findings of Msughter and Phillips (2020), who discovered that the two largest newspapers in Nigeria covered COVID-19 primarily from a political and economic perspective, downplaying themes related to health, safety, and quality-of-life, representing a focus on government interests. Additionally, this study supports the research of Mutua and Ong'ong'a (2020), who identified four key frames, namely, health severity, attribution of responsibility, economic consequence, and human interest. Of these, the first three frames are the most prevalent in the current study, highlighting various strategies for early pandemic coverage. This study also aligns with Villanueva's (2020) findings, which highlighted the government's reassuring narratives while emphasizing movement restrictions and guidelines. MB's emphasis on economic consequences is comparable to Colarossi's (2020) findings, while human interest stories align with those of Ogbodo et al. (2020).

Moreover, the *Manila Bulletin*'s reputation for inspirational articles, taking a positive stance on national issues, and projecting a positive image of the Philippines (M2 Communication, 2023) is reflected in the shift from Government Response to Economic Consequences and Human Interest frames. Although the *Manila Bulletin* generally publishes accurate news, it often omits criticism and unfavorable news due to a significant pro-government slant (Media Bias Fact Check, 2020).

B. Distribution and Predominance of Affective Tones Across Periods

Table 6. Distribution of Affective Tones Across Periods

Periods	Affective Tones					N
	Positive	Positive & Hopeful	Negative	Negative & Fearful	Neutral	
Pre-lockdown	33.3	16.7	11.1	50.0	55.6	18
Lockdown	17.4	50.0	17.4	50.0	65.2	23
Post-lockdown	26.1	33.3	17.4	50.0	56.5	23

The two online media mostly adopted a neutral tone (55.6%) prior to the lockdown, concentrating on providing clear and factual information when

the pandemic emerged. This is balanced by positive tones (33.3%), many of them expressing hope and reflecting early optimism about efforts to limit the infection and community resilience, and negative tones (16.7%) with half of them expressing fear. This indicates that people were beginning to recognize the crisis's potential severity even before its full impact was known.

Both newspapers exercise a neutral tone by reporting straight facts. This is shown in an MB article by Torregoza et al. (2020): "*Several members of the Cabinet, some senators, mayors, and other local officials are undergoing self-quarantine after their exposure to persons who later tested positive for coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19),*" and in the following article in PDI:

> The Philippines' sixth case is the 59-year-old wife of the fifth case, a 62-year-old diabetic from Cainta, Rizal province, who has not traveled to any of the more than 90 countries where the new coronavirus has spread since it emerged at a wildlife market in Wuhan in late December (Aurelio, 2020).

During the lockdown period, the neutral tone became even more dominant (65.2%), highlighting the need for objective reporting as the pandemic worsened. However, the continued presence of negative tones (17.4%), with half conveying fear, reflected the media's emphasis on caution and risk as infection rates surged and uncertainty grew. The percentage of positive tones decreased to 17.4%, which is indicative of the tremendous difficulties encountered during this time, including rising cases, overburdened healthcare systems, and extreme financial difficulties, which left less room for positive stories, as shown in a PDI article:

> Some families have complained against the slow distribution of the emergency cash assistance, while Metro Manila mayors lamented that the amounts given to them for this was [sic] based on a 2015 census and was [sic] not enough for the poor families on their list (Salaverria, 2020).

The media's coverage after the lockdown grew more balanced. Most articles (56.5%) had neutral tones, although 26.1% had positive tones, 33.3% of these convey hope. This change implies that the media began to emphasize vaccination campaigns, rehabilitation initiatives, and the gradual return to normalcy. The negative tone has 17.4%, with 50% evoking fear, indicating continuing worries about the pandemic's long-term impacts, such as health hazards and economic hardships. The positive tone during the post-lockdown is illustrated in this MB article:

> As the threats of COVID-19 continue to reduce physical mobility and highlight the importance of preparing for the

"new normal", Senator Christopher Lawrence "Bong" Go has recommended that the education sector to innovate on ways on how to conduct teaching and learning while adhering to the physical distancing protocols and other measures set by the government to curb the spread of COVID-19 (Austria, 2020).

Overall, the findings show how the media's tone evolved across the three phases, responding to the pandemic's changing dynamics. While excitement and optimism before the lockdown were muted by fear and caution during the lockdown, post-lockdown coverage reflected a more hopeful attitude, albeit some unresolved problems. This development emphasizes how the media shapes public opinion by balancing factual reporting with optimism and caution.

Table 7. Distribution of Affective Tones in the Two Online Media

Online Media	Affective Tones %					N
	Positive	Positive & Hopeful	Negative	Negative & Fearful	Neutral	
PDI	22.2	16.7	29.6	37.5	50.8	27
MB	27.0	40	10.8	25	62.2	38

An affective tone analysis of COVID-19 stories from the *Manila Bulletin* (MB) and the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (PDI) reveals distinct editorial approaches in how each newspaper chose to frame the pandemic. A significant portion of the articles in the PDI (50.8%) maintained a neutral tone, suggesting that factual reporting was prioritized. However, nearly a third of its coverage (29.6%) had a negative tone, and a significant portion of these pieces (37.5%) evoking fear. This shows PDI's focus on the more alarming and concerning aspects of the crisis. The use of fear reflects a deliberate editorial choice to underscore the severity of the pandemic's impact.

A cheerful and hopeful tone was adopted by 22.2% of PDI's publications, with 16.7% particularly conveying optimism, in contrast to the predominantly negative tones seen in the organization's coverage. This illustrates PDI's conscious attempt to balance its reporting by emphasizing positive developments and resiliency in the face of the pandemic's obstacles. By highlighting adaptation attempts, such as financial programs linked to mass testing, PDI portrayed progress and recovery were still possible despite the adversities. This strategy demonstrates the editorial goal of empowering readers' agency and confidence amid uncertainty

by providing not just warnings but also ways of moving forward. This strategy is exemplified in this statement by Andrade (2020): *"Economic activity should start and must be accompanied by aggressive mass testing, using both antibody rapid and RT-PCR tests "to avoid another lockdown," he (Presidential Adviser for Entrepreneurship Joey Concepcion) said."*

The PDI's use of negative tone and fear-inciting stories is consistent with the findings of Ogbodo et al. (2020), who discovered that worldwide media in the Americas used human interest stories and fear or scaremongering tactics to frame the pandemic. This strategy might be part of a larger media trend of using emotionally charged stories to capture attention and highlight the gravity of the situation. In the case of PDI, the combination of fear-driven reporting and an emphasis on government accountability heightens the sense of urgency, drawing attention to the government's response as well as significant economic and societal impacts of the pandemic.

Conversely, the *Manila Bulletin* (MB) adopts a predominantly neutral tone in 62.2% of its articles, reflecting a stronger commitment to impartial reporting compared to PDI. This emphasis on objectivity implies that MB prioritized presenting clear facts without strongly favoring one emotional framing over another. Nonetheless, 27% of MB's articles have a positive tone, and 40% of these articles convey hope. This suggests a significant focus on positive stories, as seen in this statement by San Juan and Aro (2020): *"Makakaasa po kayo na ginagawa ng MRT-3 ang lahat upang mapanatili ang kaligtasan ninyo, ang aming mga pasahero,"* [Be rest assured that MRT-3 is doing everything to keep the safety of our passengers."]

MB's use of an optimistic tone and stories that inspire hope validates Metila et al.'s (2023) findings that hope was a crucial frame during the early phases of the pandemic. While Metila et al. focused on hope as a frame, the current study examined it as a tone. Nevertheless, these results support the positive portrayal of COVID-19 in the media.

MB's consistent inclusion of hopeful messages suggests an editorial seeking to balance neutral reporting with stories that encouraged optimism and trust in public services and institutions. This approach highlights the newspaper's tendency to present not only factual updates but also narratives that emphasize resilience and collective efforts to overcome the challenges posed by the pandemic.

Negative-toned articles are the least common in MB, making up only 10.8% of its coverage, with 25% of these articles evoking fear. This suggests that MB's negative reporting is not only less frequent but also less fear-driven compared to PDI. Moreover, this underscores that MB aimed to report on concerning developments in a way that maintained public awareness without amplifying anxiety, as shown in this statement:

To my dear fellow Filipinos, my kababayans (countrymen). It is with sadness that I announce that I am positive for COVID-19. I had a test taken last Friday while on self-quarantine and this afternoon I received a call from Sec. Duque on my condition," Zubiri told reporters in a text message (Terrazola, 2020).

This comparatively low percentage of fear-inducing articles reflects MB's editorial choice to place greater emphasis on impartiality and reassurance than to focus on the more upsetting aspects of the pandemic. Perhaps the goal of this subdued tone was to provide readers a sense of security amid uncertainty.

Overall, both newspapers maintain a predominantly neutral tone in their coverage, but they differ in the use of positive and negative tones. PDI shows a stronger focus on fear in its negative reporting, with a pronounced emphasis on alarming aspects of the pandemic and less focus on hope in its positive articles. This approach suggests a more critical and potentially unsettling portrayal of the crisis. Conversely, MB places a greater emphasis on hope in its positive news and publishes fewer, less fear-driven negative stories. This contrast suggests that while PDI emphasizes the dangers and difficulties posed by the pandemic, MB tends to offer a reassuring and comforting narrative, potentially attempting to give readers hope and comfort during the crisis.

Moreover, the finding highlights how the media's use of tones in presenting news stories can shape public discourse that, consequently, may intentionally or unintentionally influence public perception (Iyengar & Kinder: 1987), especially given the prominence of online media during the pandemic (Ho et al., 2020). Presentation of critical information, such as risk-related content, influences public perception through the quantity, content, and tone of news (Laing, 2011; Pieri, 2019).

Overall, the results on tones generally align with the framing techniques observed in the two newspapers. The *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (PDI) uses tones consistent with its focus on the Government Response and Attribution of Responsibility frames. These frames are combined with stories that incite fear and have negative tones. On the other hand, MB's emphasis on Human Interest and Economic Consequences frames, together with its generally positive tone, highlight its tendency toward more encouraging and hopeful reporting. This contrast between PDI's critical tone and MB's optimistic perspective reflects how editorial biases shape the media's role in shaping public discourse and influencing public perception, particularly during a national health crisis. As Iyengar and Kinder (1987) asserted, this can intentionally or unintentionally influence the public agenda or opinion.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the analysis of the news coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (PDI) and the *Manila Bulletin* (MB) reveals notable differences in their editorial approaches and framing techniques. With the consistent predominance of Government Response and Attribution of Responsibility frames, PDI takes a more critical position, highlighting government accountability and responsibility. This is consistent with PDI's reputation for courageous reporting and critical examination of government activities, establishing the organization as a watchdog for public welfare during crises.

Conversely, the *Manila Bulletin* shifts its focus to topics through Human Interest and Economic Consequences frames, taking on a more positive tone and advancing inspirational stories. This editorial strategy indicates a pro-government attitude that aims to present a positive image of the Philippines while highlighting positive developments. In contrast to PDI's more critical reporting approach, MB emphasizes positive stories over critical analysis, demonstrating how editorial approaches can shape public discourse.

Overall, these findings underscore the critical role of media, particularly in online news media, in information dissemination and shaping public discourse that can influence public perception, especially during national health emergencies. The way COVID-19 was framed as both a political and a health catastrophe strengthens the relevance of existing framing theories and highlights the significant impact media can have on people's reactions. Understanding these editorial variances helps audiences better understand how media narratives shape public discourse and potentially affect public opinion and behavior, especially during times of national crisis.

Lastly, the introduction of Government Response as a predetermined frame in this study, and its consistency as the most dominant frame underscore its critical significance in understanding media narratives during national crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. By consistently emerging as a dominant frame in news coverage, Government Response reveals the intricate relationship between public health and political dynamics, emphasizing that the pandemic is not merely a health crisis but also a political one—deeply intertwined with governance, policy decisions, and the social contract between the government and its citizens. This connection positions the media as a key player in holding authorities accountable, shaping public discourse, and, possibly, influencing societal responses. Moreover, this study positions the Government Response frame as an additional to framing theory and as a valid framework for analyzing related topics, particularly the accountability and transparency of government actions during crises.

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