

SOCIAL PERCEPTION OF FOREIGN DOMESTIC HELPERS IN SOUTH KOREA

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ABSTRACT

Investigating South Korea's social perception of foreign domestic helpers using the BIGKinds analysis offers insights for policymakers to balance economic benefits with ethical treatment and protection. Thus, Korean media coverage were analyzed from 1991 to 2023 using the big data platform compiling 104 mediaoutlets. Yearly trends and related keywords, identifying positive and negative themes were focused on, to understand the evolving discourse surrounding foreign domestic helpers(FDHs) in South Korea. 1,998 articles discussed FDHs, showing minimal activity in the 1990s, a slight increase in the 2000s, and significant growth in the 2010s and early 2020s. Positive keywords included "Hong Kong," "Singapore," and "low birth rate," indicating potential economic benefits. Negative keywords like "illegal employment" and "immigration authorities" highlighted concerns about regulation and legality. The analysis revealed a dynamic interplay of economic, demographic, and social factors influencing media discourse. Recent peaks in coverage reflect policy movements and socio-political events, underscoring the need for robust support systems and legal protections. In conclusion, understanding public perception is crucial for balancing economic needs with ethical responsibilities, promoting a sustainable and just approach to employing FDHs in South Korea.

KEYWORDS:

BIG Kinds, foreign domestic helper, media analysis, social perception

1. INTRODUCTION

With the increasing women's social participation, the importation of migrant care workers is becoming a global phenomenon in developed countries and cities (León, 2010; Gavanas, 2013; Palenga-Möllnbeck, 2013; Cohen-Mansfield et al., 2013). The system of employing foreign domestic helpers (FDHs) is already in use in places like Hong Kong and Singapore (Constable, 2020). In late July 2024, Korea welcomed 100 domestic helpers from the Philippines for a pilot program to test the import of foreign care workers. After training, they are expected to start working in Seoul by the end of August. The Filipino care workers entered Korea with non-professional employment visas (E-9) and are participating in the six-month pilot program. Applicants for foreign care worker positions in Korea should be at least 24 years old, pass language and health evaluations, and complete background checks (Jun, 2024). Hong Kong and Singapore have imported FDHs primarily to address the shortage of local labor willing to perform household chores and caregiving duties (Yeoh et al., 2023). The high demand for domestic workers in Hong Kong and Singapore is driven by their fast-paced lifestyles, increasing female workforce participation, and aging populations requiring additional care (Teo, 2010; Cortes & Pan, 2013).

FDHs provide affordable and reliable support, enabling local women to maintain their careers while managing household responsibilities. Additionally, the presence of FDHs can alleviate the

pressures of eldercare and childcare, which are critical in these densely populated and economically vibrant regions (Huang et al., 2012). However, the operation of foreign domestic helper systems in Hong Kong and Singapore presents several significant issues. Social support deficiency is prevalent as many FDHs migrate alone, lacking strong support networks of family members, which leads to social isolation and emotional challenges. Health problems are common among FDHs from the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand due to the demanding nature of their work and insufficient access to healthcare (Constable, 2015). Additionally, instances of abuse and violence against FDHs highlight their vulnerability and exploitation in the workplace. In Singapore, FDHs are often viewed with suspicion and anxiety, particularly regarding their perceived sexuality and potential disruption to household dynamics. Furthermore, government policies struggle to balance human rights with public interest, resulting in inadequate protection of FDHs' rights and welfare. These challenges underscore the need for more robust support systems, better healthcare access, stronger legal protections, and improved social integration efforts to ensure the well-being of FDHs in both societies (Ullah, 2015). Based on the examples of Hong Kong and Singapore, the introduction of FDHs in South Korea presents numerous possibilities aimed at addressing pressing socio-economic challenges faced by the country. The initiative highlights Korea's efforts to balance the growing demand for domestic services amid a declining local labor supply. As Korea navigates demographic challenges, incorporating FDHs could provide a sustainable solution, promoting both economic stability and social support for working families. Meanwhile, analyzing big data from news articles is useful for understanding public opinion in a society, which can reflect important issues, includes diverse opinions, indicates public interest and mood, and identifies trends over time, providing a comprehensive, data-driven approach to accurately gauge societal attitudes and concerns (Jung & Shin, 2020). BIGKinds is a big data analysis system developed by the Korea Press Foundation that allows media reports to be classified and analyzed based on keywords (Lee et al., 2023). Through BIGKinds analysis, numerous studies have actively examined various social issues within Korean society. For example, Kim (2019) explored health inequality discourse in Korean newspapers from 2000 to 2018 using topic modeling.

Analyzing 1,038 articles, five key topics were identified: public health policies, social inequalities in health, inequality as a social problem, healthcare policies, and regional health gaps. The frequency of these topics increased over time, influenced by events such as elections. The study highlights the importance of media discourse in addressing health inequality and suggests monitoring media perspectives to inform strategic actions. Jung and Shin (2020) analyzed Korean media reports on COVID-19 using big data to understand public and governmental responses. Initially, keywords related to accurate information sources and fake news were prominent. During the active response phase, the number of articles and relevant keywords surged, reflecting intense public interest in government measures. They emphasized the critical role of media in shaping public perception and the need for accurate reporting during health crises. Lee and Kwon (2022) examined how Korean mass media portrayed maker education. Analyzing 1,303 articles from 54 media companies, they identified increased interest in maker education, particularly following government policy announcements in 2017 and 2018. Key themes include future education, school curriculum, youth maker education, and policy directions. They recommended expanding maker education policies to diverse audiences and integrating technology and design education to support maker education's growth.

However, there are few previous studies that have analyzed Korean news articles about FDHs using the BIGKinds program. This study aimed to investigate the social perception of FDHs in Korea by utilizing BIGKinds analysis. Understanding these perceptions is crucial for policymakers to balance the economic benefits of employing FDHs with the ethical imperative of ensuring their fair treatment and protection. This analysis will ultimately aid in formulating strategies that address both the practical needs of Korean households and the moral

responsibilities towards foreign workers, promoting a sustainable and just approach to the employment of FDHs in Korea.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA

This study explored the social perception of foreign domestic workers as depicted in Korean media using the BIGKinds program that is an advanced news reporting and analysis tool developed from the Korea Integrated News Database System (KINDS). The BIGKinds system is a news analysis service that leverages big data techniques with a comprehensive database of news gathered from various media outlets, including general daily newspapers, economic newspapers, regional daily newspapers, and broadcasting stations (Kang, et al., 2023). This service evolved from the Korea Integrated News Database System, which began in the early nineties, providing a searchable database of news articles from major daily newspapers and broadcasts. In the mid-2010s, BIGKinds was launched, incorporating advanced big data analysis capabilities into the extensive news database accumulated over the years, enabling more sophisticated and in-depth analysis beyond simple article searches (Hwang et al., 2021).

The BIGKinds service is a comprehensive news analysis platform that integrates data from 104 South Korean media outlets, including text, photos, and PDFs. The service is structured into three main systems: the News Collection System, the News Analysis System, and the News Storage System. The News Collection System automatically gathers and categorizes news articles from an integrated database, ensuring efficient organization by news category and standardizing the extraction of keywords within the news. This process helps in creating a robust and easily navigable database of news content (Seo et al., 2024). The News Analysis System offers advanced analytical capabilities, including morphological analysis, named entity analysis, and network analysis. It also provides tools for language resource management, allowing for in-depth examination of news articles and the relationships between key entities and concepts. The News Storage System is responsible for storing the extracted named entities, metadata, and indexing the results of the analysis in a news big data database. This ensures that the data is well-organized and accessible for future reference and further analysis (Shin & Boonjubun, 2021). The BIGKinds service is utilized by a diverse range of users, including government bodies, media organizations, academics, and startups. It supports various applications, from policy analysis and academic research to media monitoring and public opinion tracking. The provision of the BIGKinds service represents a significant advancement in the field of news data analysis, enabling users to perform detailed and accurate analyses of media content (Seo et al., 2024).

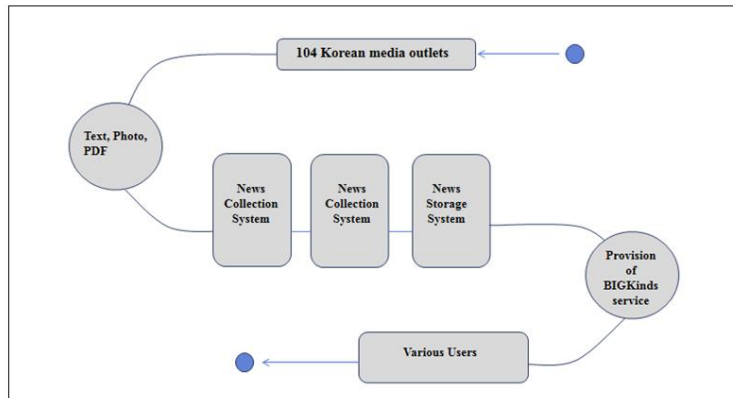


Figure 1. Schematic diagram of data collection and analysis in the BIGKinds system

This study utilized the BIGKinds service to examine media coverage of the term "foreign domestic helper" in South Korean news from 1991 to 2023. The BIGKinds platform offers access to over 10 million news articles from 104 media outlets, including national newspapers, economic newspapers, local newspapers, broadcast stations, and specialty magazines. For this study, the data collection process began with defining the search keyword "foreign domestic helper," ensuring that the query encompasses variations and related terms to capture a comprehensive set of relevant articles. Using the BIGKinds service, the search spanned across articles published between 1991 and 2023. This extensive period allowed for an in-depth longitudinal analysis. The service's robust search capabilities enable filtering by date, media type, and specific outlets, ensuring that the dataset is both relevant and comprehensive. Articles are then categorized into various themes such as political, economic, social, cultural, regional, and IT science to facilitate a multifaceted analysis. The collected articles are further processed to extract metadata, such as publication date, media outlet, and thematic categorization, providing a structured dataset for subsequent analysis. This systematic data collection process ensures that the dataset is representative of the media discourse on FDHs in South Korea over the specified period.

Table 1. Conditions for search terms in the BIGKinds system

Keywords	Data collection	Media data
Foreign domestic helper	Jan 1,1991-Dec31, 2023	Articles from 104 media outlets in South Korea, including broadcasters like KBS and newspapers like Donga Ilbo

The data analysis focused on two primary aspects: yearly trend analysis and the analysis of related keywords. Yearly trend analysis involves tracking the frequency and context of the keyword "foreign domestic helper" across different years. This analysis highlights the temporal dynamics of media attention, identifying peaks and troughs in coverage and correlating these with socio-political events or policy changes in South Korea. By visualizing the data through time series graphs, this study can discern patterns and shifts in media focus, providing a historical perspective on the issue. The analysis of related keywords delves into the co-occurrence of keywords within the collected articles. By examining which terms frequently appear alongside "foreign domestic helper," this study can uncover underlying themes and narratives. This analysis is facilitated by the topic rank algorithm, which calculates the frequency and importance of co-occurring terms, thereby highlighting significant associations. These associations are then visualized to illustrate the complex interplay of factors and themes surrounding the discourse on FDHs. Together, these analytical methods provide a comprehensive understanding of how FDHs have been portrayed and discussed in South Korean media over the past three decades. The

combination of yearly trend analysis and the analysis of related keywords offers a robust framework for exploring the evolution of media narratives and their socio-cultural implications.

3. RESULTS

This article derives two main results by analysis: (1) trend analysis and (2) related word analysis. Trend analysis provides changes in public attitudes regarding foreign domestic helpers in South Korea for three decades from 1990s through 2020s. Related words analysis provides positive and negative discourse around foreign domestic helpers in South Korea.

3.1. Trend Analysis

From 1991 to 2023, a total of 1,998 articles were identified discussing foreign domestic helpers in South Korean media. This data provides a broad overview of the media coverage on this topic over a significant period, allowing for an analysis of changes in frequency and context over time. Over the three decades analyzed, there has been a noticeable shift in the discourse surrounding foreign domestic helpers. Figure 2 provides bar chart illustrates the changes in the frequency of references to foreign domestic helpers from 1990 to 2023. Analyzing the chart in 10-year intervals reveals distinct trends and characteristics for each period. Here's a detailed description of the trends observed in each decade.

During the 1990s, the chart shows almost negligible activity. The bars representing this decade are extremely short, indicating that the topic of foreign domestic helpers was not prominently discussed or considered a significant issue in Korean society at that time. This minimal activity could be attributed to several factors, including a lack of demand, economic conditions, and cultural factors. The domestic labor market may not have seen a substantial need for foreign domestic helpers. Economic conditions in South Korea during this period might not have driven households to seek external help for domestic chores and childcare. Additionally, there could have been cultural resistance or a lack of awareness about employing foreign domestic workers. workers (Kwon, 1997).

The early 2000s begin to show a slight increase in the frequency of references to foreign domestic helpers. While the bars remain relatively low, there is a noticeable upward trend compared to the previous decade. This period marks the beginning of increased discourse around foreign domestic helpers, likely influenced by economic growth, globalization, and changing demographics. Improved economic conditions may have led more households to consider hiring domestic help. Increased globalization and exposure to practices in other countries might have started influencing public opinion and policies. Initial signs of demographic changes, such as lower birth rates and an aging population, might have started prompting discussions on alternative childcare and eldercare solutions (Kim, 2013).

The decade from 2010 to 2019 shows a substantial increase in activity, with significant growth in the frequency of references to foreign domestic helpers, particularly towards the latter part of the decade. This period is characterized by demographic pressures, policy discussions, economic considerations, and human rights concerns. Sharply declining birth rates and an aging population in Korea created an urgent need for domestic and caregiving assistance. Increased policy discussions and debates about adopting systems similar to those in Hong Kong and Singapore, where foreign domestic helpers are widely employed, became more common. Discussions on the economic benefits and challenges of employing foreign domestic helpers became more prominent, including arguments about alleviating household burdens and the potential for exploitation. Greater awareness and debates regarding the human rights and labor conditions of foreign

domestic helpers, with advocacy for protective measures and fair treatment, also emerged (Heo, 2023).

The period from 2020 to 2023 exhibits dramatic spikes and fluctuations in the frequency of references to foreign domestic helpers, with the highest peaks observed in 2020 and 2022. This recent period highlights significant policy movements or the introduction of pilot programs for employing foreign domestic helpers, leading to intense public and media attention. The COVID-19 pandemic might have influenced the discourse, with increased need for domestic help due to lockdowns and changing work environments. Heated debates over the ethical, economic, and social implications of employing foreign domestic helpers, reflecting both support and opposition from various societal segments, intensified. Possible regulatory developments or changes in immigration and labor laws affecting the employment of foreign domestic helpers further fueled public discourse. Thus, from minimal activity in the 1990s to significant growth and intense debates in recent years, the changing trends reflect the dynamic interplay of economic, demographic, and social factors influencing public perception and policy discussions regarding FDHs. The sharp increases in recent years underscore the urgency and complexity of addressing this issue within the context of Korea's broader socio-economic landscape (Ernst, 2018).

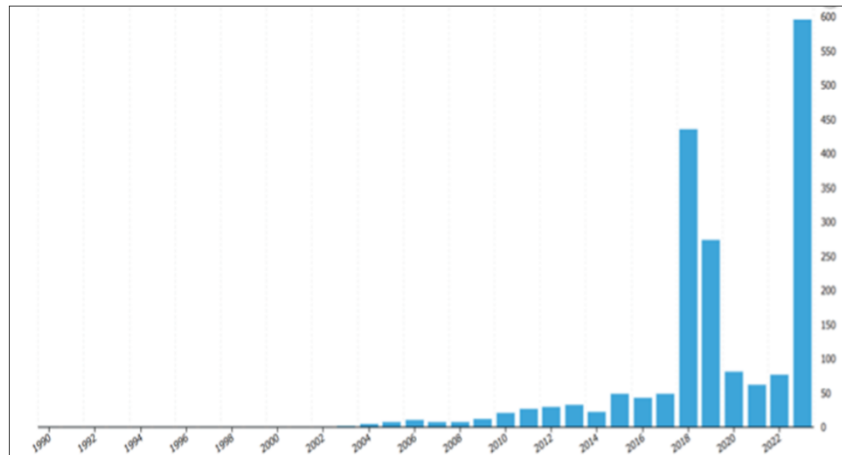


Figure 2. Trends in search term frequency from 1991 to 2023

3.2. Related Words

The data highlights several keywords that suggest a positive discourse around foreign domestic helpers in South Korea. The high frequency and weight of "Hong Kong" (Rank 6, Weight 8.8, Frequency 143) and "Singapore" (Rank 9, Weight 7.28, Frequency 120) indicate that these countries are often cited as successful models for employing foreign domestic workers. These references suggest that adopting similar practices could alleviate domestic labor shortages and support dual-income families in South Korea. The keyword "Low Birth Rate" (Rank 10, Weight 5.76, Frequency 60) also points to a positive angle, as foreign domestic helpers can provide much-needed childcare support, potentially encouraging higher birth rates by reducing the burden on working parents. Additionally, the "Ministry of Employment and Labor" (Rank 3, Weight 12.24, Frequency 35) involvement implies governmental support and regulation, which can ensure fair treatment and integration of foreign workers into the labor market, contributing positively to the discourse.

Conversely, the keywords "Illegal Employment" (Rank 1, Weight 27.92, Frequency 73) and "Immigration Authorities" (Rank 2, Weight 21.88, Frequency 53) reflect concerns regarding the

legality and regulation of foreign domestic helpers in South Korea. The high weight and frequency of these terms suggest that issues of illegal hiring practices and stringent immigration controls are significant negative aspects of the discourse. "Native Citizen" (Rank 4, Weight 9.52, Frequency 83) may indicate concerns about the impact of foreign workers on local employment opportunities and social integration challenges. The "Application of Minimum Wage" (Rank 5, Weight 9.24, Frequency 28) highlights worries about wage standards and potential exploitation, as there may be discrepancies in wage application between foreign and local workers. Overall, these keywords suggest that while there is a positive view of the potential benefits, there are substantial concerns about regulation, legality, and the socio-economic impact of employing foreign domestic helpers.

Table 2. Results for related words of foreign domestic helpers

Rank	Keywords	Weight	Frequency
1	Illegal Employment	27.92	73
2	Immigration Authorities	21.88	53
3	Ministry of Employment and Labor	12.24	35
4	Native Citizen	9.52	83
5	Application of Minimum Wage	9.24	28
6	Hong Kong	8.8	143
7	Marriage Immigrant	8.73	28
8	Overseas Korean	8.21	29
9	Singapore	7.28	120
10	Low Birth Rate	5.76	60

4. DISCUSSION

The importation of FDHs has been a subject of extensive discourse in various countries, particularly in regions with high demand for domestic labor due to increasing social participation of women, aging populations, and economic growth. This discussion will compare the perceptions and implications of employing FDHs in South Korea with similar practices in Hong Kong and Singapore, utilizing data from BIGKinds, a comprehensive news analysis tool, to understand the evolving media narrative and public sentiment. Hong Kong and Singapore have long histories of employing FDHs, primarily from the Philippines, Indonesia, and other Southeast Asian countries. The main drivers for employing FDHs in these regions include the need to address labor shortages for household chores and caregiving duties, supporting the fast-paced lifestyles of their populations, and increasing female workforce participation. In Hong Kong and Singapore, FDHs provide affordable and reliable domestic support, enabling local women to maintain their careers while managing household responsibilities. The presence of FDHs helps alleviate the pressures of eldercare and childcare, which are critical in these densely populated and economically vibrant regions. Studies by Teo (2010) and Huang, Yeoh, and Toyota (2012) highlighted how FDHs contribute to the economic stability of households by allowing more women to participate in the labor market. Despite the benefits, the foreign domestic helper system in these regions faces several significant issues. Social support deficiency is prevalent as many FDHs migrate alone, lacking strong support networks, leading to social isolation and emotional challenges. Health problems are common among FDHs due to the demanding nature of their work and insufficient access to healthcare (Huang et al., 2012). Additionally, instances of abuse and violence against FDHs highlight their vulnerability and exploitation in the workplace (Constable, 2015; Ullah, 2015). Government policies in both Hong Kong and Singapore have struggled to balance human rights with public interest, often resulting in inadequate protection of FDHs' rights and welfare (Cohen-Mansfield et al., 2013).

The introduction of FDHs in South Korea is relatively recent, with a pilot program initiated in late July 2024, welcoming 100 domestic helpers from the Philippines (Jun, 2024). This move tried to address pressing socio-economic challenges such as the declining local labor supply, low birth rates, and the need for domestic and caregiving assistance. South Korea, by learning from the experiences of Hong Kong and Singapore, sees the potential economic benefits of employing FDHs. The presence of FDHs could help alleviate the domestic labor shortage and support dual-income families, thereby promoting both economic stability and social support for working families (Cortes and Pan, 2013). This initiative is part of Korea's efforts to balance the growing demand for domestic services amid demographic challenges. However, similar to Hong Kong and Singapore, there are concerns about the implementation and regulation of the foreign domestic helper system in Korea. Keywords such as "Illegal Employment" and "Immigration Authorities" reflect worries regarding the legality and regulation of FDHs. Issues such as illegal hiring practices and stringent immigration controls are significant negative aspects of the discourse. Additionally, concerns about the impact of foreign workers on local employment opportunities and social integration challenges are indicated by keywords like "Native Citizen". Analyzing media coverage using the BIGKinds platform reveals how public sentiment towards FDHs in Korea has evolved. The frequency analysis shows periods of high and low media attention, correlating with socio-political events or policy changes. The trend analysis indicates a noticeable shift in the discourse surrounding FDHs over the past three decades, reflecting the dynamic interplay of economic, demographic, and social factors. While Hong Kong and Singapore have established systems for employing FDHs (Constable, 2020), South Korea is still in the early stages of implementation. The involvement of governmental bodies like the Ministry of Employment and Labor in Korea suggests a proactive approach to regulation, which could ensure fair treatment and integration of FDHs into the labor market. However, the challenges faced by FDHs in Hong Kong and Singapore highlight the need for robust support systems, better healthcare access, stronger legal protections, and improved social integration efforts (Constable, 2015; Ullah, 2015). Social integration of FDHs remains a critical issue in all three regions. In Hong Kong and Singapore, FDHs often face social isolation and emotional challenges due to the lack of strong support networks (Ernst, 2018). South Korea needs to address these issues by promoting community support and ensuring that FDHs have access to social and emotional resources. Public opinion plays a crucial role in shaping policies and regulations regarding FDHs. The analysis of related keywords and media coverage in South Korea provides insights into the concerns and perceptions of the public. While there is a positive view of the potential benefits of employing FDHs, substantial concerns about regulation, legality, and the socio-economic impact need to be addressed. The experiences of Hong Kong and Singapore provide valuable lessons for South Korea as it navigates the complexities of employing FDHs. While the potential benefits in terms of economic stability and support for working families are significant, the challenges of social integration, legal protection, and public perception must be carefully managed. By leveraging big data analysis tools like BIGKinds, policymakers can gain a comprehensive understanding of societal attitudes and concerns, allowing for the development of balanced and informed strategies that promote both the practical needs of Korean households and the ethical imperative of ensuring the fair treatment and protection of FDHs. As South Korea continues to integrate FDHs into its socio-economic framework, ongoing monitoring and adaptation of policies will be essential to create a sustainable and just system that benefits all stakeholders involved. Japan's use of FDHs, starting in 2015, supports women's social participation through the "National Strategic Special Zones" system. Workers must be at least 18, proficient in Japanese, and have one year of experience. They receive over 200 hours of training and are employed by dispatch companies, ensuring regulatory compliance and worker welfare. Live-in arrangements are prohibited to protect worker well-being. South Korea can learn from Japan's model by establishing robust regulations, comprehensive training, proper employment structures, and social support systems to effectively integrate FDHs, addressing demographic challenges while ensuring fair treatment and protection.

Thus, this study examined the case of Japan, which has a similar social environment to Korea. Japan's introduction of FDHs offers key insights for South Korea. Japan's robust regulatory framework and comprehensive training programs highlight the importance of language proficiency and professional skills, ensuring high service quality and better cultural integration. Employing FDHs through dispatch companies ensures compliance with labor laws and worker welfare, while prohibiting live-in arrangements helps maintain a healthy work-life balance for the helpers (Lan, 2018). South Korea can adopt these practices to effectively integrate FDHs, addressing demographic challenges and supporting dual-income families, while ensuring fair treatment and protection for the workers, promoting both social stability and economic growth.

5. CONCLUSION

This study evaluated the social perception of FDHs in South Korea through an analysis of media coverage from 1991 to 2023 using the BIGKinds big data platform. By examining 1,998 articles, this study traced the evolution of discourse surrounding FDHs in Korean media. ~~In the 1990s, references to FDHs were minimal, reflecting low public and policy interest. However, from the 2000s onwards, mentions increased, driven by economic growth, globalization, and demographic shifts. Significant peaks in coverage occurred in the 2010s and early 2020s, correlating with policy discussions and socio-political events.~~ The analysis identifies both positive and negative themes in the media narrative, including the potential economic benefits of employing FDHs and concerns about illegal employment, social integration, and labor rights.

This study underscores the importance of understanding public perception in formulating policies for employing FDHs. Positive media discourse suggests economic benefits, such as alleviating labor shortages and supporting dual-income families. However, negative themes, including illegal employment and social integration challenges, highlight the necessity for stringent regulatory frameworks and protective measures. Learning from Hong Kong and Singapore, South Korea can implement comprehensive training programs, ensure fair wages, and provide adequate healthcare access to FDHs. Policymakers should leverage these insights to balance economic needs with ethical responsibilities, fostering a sustainable and just environment for FDHs.

This study is limited by its reliance on media coverage, which may not fully capture public opinion or the lived experiences of FDHs. Media biases and varying levels of attention to the issue over time could influence the findings. The analysis is also constrained to articles available in the BIGKinds database, potentially overlooking relevant discourse from other sources. Additionally, the study focuses on the term "foreign domestic helper," which may not encompass all related discussions.

Future research could benefit from incorporating qualitative methods, such as interviews with FDHs and employers, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the issue. Future studies should explore the lived experiences of FDHs through qualitative methods, such as interviews and surveys, to complement media analysis. Additionally, examining public opinion through social media platforms and conducting comparative studies with other countries employing FDHs can offer deeper insights into the issue.

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