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Yafei Zhang

Andrea MM Weare

Heungseok Koh

Li Chen

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Cultural Trends of Audience Online Interaction with Vocal Talent Shows: A Comparative Study between China and the US

Yafei Zhang, Andrea M. Weare, Heungseok Koh and Li Chen

School of Journalism and Mass Communication, the University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA, USA

CONTACT Yafei Zhang yafei-zhang@uiowa.edu

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ABSTRACT

This study examined cultural reflections online of audience comments on social network sites regarding vocal talent shows in China and the United States. The study applied dimensions of cross culture to investigate audience comments on the official social networking sites of The Voice of China and The Voice. Findings reflect Hofstede's dimensions as applied to social media and illustrate how individuals alter their "local" cultural norms in the new media environment. The study specifically enhances the exploration of cultural manifestations in cyberspace, which fewer cross-cultural studies have researched.

KEYWORDS

cross-culture; reality television; social media; audience; china; united states

Amid considerable changes of media, the burgeoning and expansion of social networking sites (SNSs) have become an indispensable and integral part of cultural reflection. Social media not only function as communication platforms, but also reproduce social behaviors, incarnating cultures and social norms. Hence, they afford us the opportunity to examine how cultures may shift in the social networking environment, where the regular structures of a culture may be muted. One such example of cultural manifestations can be seen in SNSs hosting online discussions for the popular vocal talent television shows The Voice of China and The Voice. By

studying audience comments on SNSs cross-culturally, “local” cultural reflections are illuminated as individuals navigate cultural norms in the new media environment.

This study observed audience member feedback in China and the US regarding the two TV programs to explore possible cultural similarities and differences. Previous studies in cultural comparisons between Eastern and Western cultures mostly involve field research with participants in real space (McCort & Malhotra, 1993; Triandis, 2001; Ward, Girardi, & Lewandowska, 2006), rather than in online settings. Conspicuously absent from these studies is an attempt to provide a more quantitative investigation of Hofstede’s cultural dimensions on social media, which is particularly relevant in the online setting. Although there are various definitions of culture, Hofstede defined culture as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another” (1980a, p. 25). The conceptualization of culture in this study – while in line with Hofstede’s definition – is more interested in patterns of thinking and behaviors in the two different countries. Specifically, “culture” is explored in this study as the social behaviors and norms, which may or may not be mirrored online as they are offline.

Due to the scarcity of previous research on manifestations of cultural differences on social media, the purpose of this study was to explore how cultural dimensions are reflected in cyberspace and how individuals may alter their cultural norms in a new communication environment. The construct of cultural dimensions of Hofstede (1991, 2001) has been applied in proliferative research and is also employed here as cultural dimensions are concerned with distinctive cultural values at country-level (Hofstede, 2001). More specifically, this study examined audience members’ interactions with the two shows on their respective public SNSs.

This comparative study not only sheds new light on audience members’ online interactions in different cultural backgrounds, but also benefits a greater understanding of reality television programs, which are fueled by audience online interaction. A deep concern of the reality television market is to attract and retain as many audience members as possible. Therefore, in a broader and practical sense, this study may also contribute to improving the programs’ recognition of their audiences in different cultural contexts to better respond to their needs and expectations.

Conceptualization of culture and cultural differences

Methods of measuring cultural differences have been diverse, and most previous studies engage in assessing thoughts and attitudes via interviews or observations of individuals. Those comparisons overwhelmingly employ ethnography and experiments as methodologies, which are normally conducted in the real space (Adams, 2005; Heine et al., 2001; Rozin, Kabnick, Pete, Fischler, & Shields, 2003). Yet, culture can also be studied via investigating tangible and public cultural products, such as public texts or advertising content (Morling & Lamoreaux, 2008). Cultural differences can reside in thoughts, feelings, as well as practices and behaviors (Markus & Hamedani, 2007). This study contributes to previous culture studies quantifying cultural differences via an investigation of online audience member feedback. Although human beings share some universal characteristics, individuals in different nations are still labeled by unique features or stereotypes (Pittu, 2006). Often, knowing explicit meanings in different contexts is not enough to fully understand what is being referenced until individuals comprehend cultural connotations. Therefore, cultures are typically concentrated on differences between groups of people rather than similarities (Hofstede, 1980). Cultural norms can extensively shape and influence people's understandings and behaviors (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Since cultural norms vary across countries, cross-culture studies mainly aim to know how people from different cultures think and behave. Cross-cultural studies, therefore, are concerned with measuring people's value systems and behaviors in diverse cultures, and there are cultural dimensions to note the differences. Since culture is multidimensional, cultural dimensions that are comparable across nations are vital to scholarly investigation. Clear cultural dimensions are crucial to explaining systematic variation of cultural behaviors (Smith, Dugan, & Trompenaars, 1996).

In recent decades, two major frameworks have dealt with cultural dimensions: Hofstede's framework (1991, 2001) and Schwartz's framework (1994). Schwartz's framework is largely based on human values and is extensively applied in marketing research. Schwartz (1994) identified three cultural dimensions at societal levels, including the relationship between individuals and groups, social responsibility, and the role of individuals in society. By contrast, Hofstede (1991, 2001) provided a more universal framework of cultural dimensions with an emphasis on the relationship between individuals and groups, power, social inequality and implications of gender roles in society. His cross-cultural framework has been highly relevant to a variety of topics including conflict types, humor in advertisements, product development and cultural products

(Alden, Hoyer, & Lee, 1993; Cai & Fink, 2002; Huettinger, 2006; Morling & Lamoreaux, 2008; Nakata & Sivakumar, 1996).

Hofstede (1991, 2001) and Schwartz (1994) suggest some common interests between cultural dimensions in their different frameworks. However, Schwartz (1994)'s framework is highly relevant to social values and uses data from fewer countries than Hofstede's. Since this study aimed to examine cultural differences via online audience member engagement, a broader spectrum of cultural dimensions was needed, as opposed to a focus on social values. Therefore, Hofstede's cross-culture framework suited this study's research questions. Initially based on an empirical study utilizing surveys across 60 countries (Hofstede, 2001), Hofstede developed five dimensions of culture. His large sample contributed to the comprehensiveness, reliability and external validity of Hofstede's theoretical framework. Although country-level scores of Hofstede's framework were originally developed from studying IBM employees who may not represent cultural generalization, there has been a proliferation of social science studies using his framework to investigate cultural differences and, thus, cross-cultural analysis (Morling & Lamoreaux, 2008; Pittu, 2006; Triandis, 2001).

Theoretical framework

This study was concerned with five dimensions of cross-culture developed by Hofstede (2001): individualism–collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, masculinity–femininity and long-term orientation. Each sampled nation was measured and indexes were then generated for the five dimensions respectively (de Mooij, 2010).

Individualism (IDV)–collectivism emphasizes the strength between individuals and society in different cultures. The strength can either be strong or weak. Eastern and Western cultures starkly contrast each other in this dimension. China, Japan and Korea, sharing an Eastern culture, have many common traits with other countries from collectivistic cultures. Group thought and group benefits are prioritized, and individuals are to follow the majority voice and value systems (Heine et al., 2001; Koenig & Dean, 2011; Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). On the other hand, in individualistic cultures, such as in the US, individuals are more concerned with their own feelings rather than conforming to group norms or remaining loyal to groups (Koenig & Dean, 2011).

Uncertainty avoidance (UA) indicates “the extent to which people feel threatened by uncertainty and ambiguity and try to avoid these situations” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 146). This dimension concentrates on individuals' tendencies for keeping silent about what they are unsure

of.

Power distance (PD) refers to the extent to which less powerful people are willing to admit and accept the imbalance of power in organizations or in society as a whole. The differences in the recognition of imbalance lead to different degrees of acceptance of inequality in power distribution (Merkin, 2006). Power distance has been of great use in analyzing interactions and relationships such as comparisons of working relationship interactions between the US and Mexico (Lindsley, 1999).

Table 1. Index of five cultural dimensions in china and the us.

Country	IDV	UAI	PDI	MAS	LTO
China	20	40	0	62	118
US	91	46	40	66	29

Note: IDV refers to individualism; UAI refers to uncertainty avoidance index; PDI refers to power distance index, MAS refers to masculinity and femininity; LTO refers to long-term orientation.

Masculinity (MAS) and femininity denote a society or organization in which “two social gender roles are clearly distinct” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 297). A society can be marked as a masculine one if it is surrounded by values that are inclined to emphasize assertiveness, competitiveness and material achievements. If there is an overlap between social gender roles, femininity can be detected as being “modest, tender and concerned with the quality life” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 297).

Long-term orientation (LTO) and Short-term orientation refer to values with a consideration of future rewards or past traditions. Long-term orientation “stands for the fostering of virtues oriented towards future rewards, in particular perseverance and thrift” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 359). This cluster of values includes face value, reliance on traditions, analytical or synthetic thinking, and attitudes on spending among others. This dimension has been widely used in analyzing consumer choices (Ward et al., 2006).

Hofstede’s empirical study generated a table of indexes concerning the five dimensions across countries (Hofstede, 2001; Huettinger, 2006). The application of the five dimensions to China and the US are detailed in Table 1 (Hofstede, 2001, p. 476).

Reality television talent shows and audience interaction

The past decade of television consumption has been witness to a rise in reality show programming. Reality television can be categorized into various genres: dating, sitcom, law and court

settings, talent shows and hidden camera programming (Murray & Ouellette, 2004). Among these genres, talent shows, in various forms, have gained considerable popularity in entertainment (O'Connor, 2012). Reasons for the universal prevalence of television talent shows lie in audience assumption of ambiguous boundaries between themselves and the show's participants (O'Connor, 2012). Additionally, the formats of talent shows have become globally bought and internationally broadcasted across different countries (O'Connor, 2012). Although formats are universal, content is tailored to meet specific cultural contexts.

Vocal talent shows, for example, have enjoyed a full-spectrum dominance in reality television programming. Apart from the excitement and entertainment brought by these shows, audiences are led to feel they can interact with contestants in tangible ways. Reality television shows in general rely on audience participation, recognizing audiences as indispensable elements for predicting final winners (Edward, 2009). All prestigious talent shows that reach a wide audience allow audience members to send messages to contestants as an interactive means of voting for winners (*The Economist*, 2003). For example, *Super Girl* and *Happy Girl* were popular Chinese vocal talent shows that allowed audiences to vote for their favorite contestants via text message (*The Economist*, 2011). In 2009, *American Idol* received more than 600 million votes by text message, an increase of 25% from four years prior (Edward, 2009). With the overwhelming role of SNSs in digital communication, audiences today have the greatest likelihood of engaging with vocal talent shows and their contestants.

The unique feature of multilateral interactions, with little to no extra expense, facilitates audience engagement with these types of shows. Although there is much research on the general effect of reality television on audiences, as well as studies on the interactions between audiences and reality shows (Andrejevic, 2002; Javors, 2004; Reiss & Wiltz, 2004), very little research addresses the implications of cultural differences on audience members' interactions with these very talent shows on social media. These interactions assisted by SNSs provide new avenues for audience participation in television programming and worthy of scholarly consideration. For the sake of validity in this comparative study, this study selected the vocal talent shows *The Voice of China* from China and *The Voice* from the US in their respective broadcast seasons of the Fall 2012. Both *The Voice of China* and *The Voice* are imported from Holland and thus have very similar formats and processes. Both employ SNSs to enhance interaction among audiences as well as between audiences and the shows.

Online interactions on SNSs

By and large, SNSs have enriched the relevancy of the Internet and become a mainstay of the digital communication era for providing multiple approaches for online active involvement. Boyd and Ellison (2008) propose three rudimentary requirements for a platform to be considered a SNS, one of which is “sharing a connection among users within the system” (p. 211). Facebook, Twitter and MySpace are leaders in the SNS domain and dominate online interaction in most Western countries. For instance, Facebook is not limited to posting statuses, modifying profiles and uploading pictures, but also enables users to share, like, comment on content and chat online (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2007). Facebook’s attributes increase individual desires for virtual conversations with both acquaintances and strangers (Lenhart & Madden, 2005). Undoubtedly, not only individuals but also a variety of organizations have noted the importance of social media. Interaction is beyond the function of adding friends on your friend list or chatting with them. It can also take place on a public page created by an organization for a specific event or a program as seen on Facebook organizational accounts for consumer brands.

In spite of the overwhelming role of Twitter and Facebook around the world, people in China can hardly access either due to the 2009 firewall put in place by the Chinese government. Yet, similar forms of SNSs are prosperous in China such as Sina Weibo, a hybrid of Twitter, Facebook and MySpace. Several Internet companies have developed their own Weibo systems, among which Sina Weibo attracts the most notable attention from the public with almost 200 million users (Chan, 2011). Although Weibo imposes a series of regulations and strict censorship pervasively (Weber & Lu, 2007), it has become an unofficial but main outlet for public opinion. Most information and comments shared on Sina Weibo are occupied by entertainment and business news (Li, 2010). This is in line with US use of Facebook and Twitter where entertainment consumption and interaction dominate (Hargittai, 2007). Therefore, the two SNSs included in this study, Sina Weibo and Facebook, are well suited for comparison.

Online interactions are present in many forms including like, share, live chat and comment on Sina Weibo and Facebook (Lampe et al., 2007). However, it is not difficult to discern that “like” and “share” hardly generate differences with regard to cultural perspectives. Because “live chat” is typically between two people rather than a group, this study probed audience interaction based on comments sections from Sina Weibo and Facebook. Online comments attempt to explain, compliment or criticize opinions. It is obvious that comments could be classified by the criteria of

being positive or negative in general, as comments are rarely neutral and instead rely on the commenter's attitudes and emotions.

Historically, China creates and conforms to Eastern culture while the US implements and advocates Western culture. Regarding the five dimensions of cross culture (Hofstede, 2001), Individualism and Collectivism, as well as Power Distance, are more powerful than other dimensions in explaining individual interactions (Pittu, 2006). However, core values in Eastern and Western cultures are not dichotomous (Pittu, 2006). Falling into a dichotomy pitfall poses a danger in accurately understanding the diversity within cultures. Hence, studying the dominant cultural values of people in different cultures is a more effective method to clarify cultural differences and similarities. Online interactions under a heterogeneous culture system might differently manifest. Therefore, this study posed the following research question and hypotheses:

RQ1. In terms of the object and valence of comments on Sina Weibo and Facebook, how do audiences interact with *The Voice of China* and *The Voice*?

H1. There is a difference of valence of comments on Sina Weibo and Facebook with regard to *The Voice of China* and *The Voice*.

Individualism and collectivism

Cultural psychologists treat individualism–collectivism as a cultural syndrome (Morling & Lamoreaux, 2008). The main distinctiveness between individualism and collectivism lies in the difference between independence and the bonding with others socially (Triandis, 2001). The distinction can go beyond group interdependency to explain individual attitudes and behaviors: “Individualistic cultures are universalistic while collectivistic cultures are particularistic” (de Mooij, 2010, p. 79). The social relations of individualistic cultures are based on people as active and independent, who can influence other people.

By contrast, the social relations of collectivistic cultures are based on people who are associated with the values of interdependency, adjusting to others, and tolerance and sympathy with others. Americans, for example, avidly promote democracy because they believe it is a universal value that should be cherished and shared. Yet, the Chinese are more likely to recognize and respect the diversities and uniqueness of cultures and seldom impose collectivistic values on individualistic cultures (de Mooij, 2010).

Triandis (2001) presents two concepts, “horizontal” and “vertical,” for detailing individualism and collectivism. Both individualistic cultures and collectivistic cultures can be

horizontal or vertical. The typical characteristic of vertical collectivism is that people are supposed to be inferior to groups, authorities and organizations (Triandis, 2001). Values of sympathy and harmony (Imada, 2012) are added to expand the scope of “horizontal collectivism,” which originally emphasized equality (Triandis, 2001).

In horizontal collectivism, the values of sympathy and harmony are more present than in individualist cultures. The importance of being “a winner” is lessened in collectivistic cultures where people “learn sympathy for the underdog, the loser” (de Mooij, 2010, p. 80) and conform to the group benefits of families and organizations. Being situated in the collectivistic culture, Chinese people are more likely to construct one community instead of identifying individual benefits or losses. On the contrary, Americans are socialized not to hide their feelings toward individuals regardless of grudge or praise and are thus more likely to identify an issue at an individual level instead of an entirety (de Mooij, 2010).

In most vocal talent shows, including *The Voice of China* and *The Voice*, the competition at hand is the core scheme to attract an audience. Contestants are eliminated in each round, and only one contestant can be crowned the winner in the finale. According to Hofstede’s Table 1, the US typically shows higher scores as an individualistic culture, while China scores lower in the dimension. In order to investigate the individual versus the whole, this study posed the additional research question and hypothesis:

RQ2. What is the difference between audience comments, in terms of sympathetic comments on the public page of *The Voice of China* on Sina Weibo and on the public page of *The Voice* on Facebook?

H2. The authors expect there are more comments on Sina Weibo that focus on the program itself.

H3. The authors expect there are more comments on Facebook concerning contestants.

Power distance

In Eastern cultures, unequal distribution of power is well accepted by the public. Cultures bearing high scores of power distance tend to expect the public to have a consistent reverence to authorities in its society and organizations (Hofstede, 2001). Hierarchy has been embedded in Eastern cultures, and social status is clearly marked to show respect towards elders and the powerful (de Mooij, 2010, p. 74). Social status is also emphasized and recommended in high power distance cultures (Hofstede, 2001). Hence, during interactions, individuals from high power

distance cultures tend to be more submissive and obedient to elders than insisting opposing opinions. In high power distance cultures, individuals can also be less inclined to reveal negative feelings toward power.

And yet most previous scholarship, as cited earlier, has focused on examining power distance in the real space as opposed to the online space. During face-to-face interactions, Chinese people are more likely than Americans to show reverence and submissiveness toward power. But when the site of analysis transfers from real space to cyberspace, is the analysis of Hofstede's power distance still tenable? In answering this question, this study focused on audience online comments regarding the programs, contestants, judges and others. Since judges represent power and hierarchy, this study explored the representation of power distance of audience interaction of the two different cultures. Table 1 indicates that the US has a low power distance score with China greatly exceeding it. It is difficult to anticipate audience comments toward judges online, therefore, this study posed the third research question:

RQ3. What is the valence of audience comments toward judges on Sina Weibo and Facebook?

Feelings of injustice expressed in comments for this study do not refer to right or wrong doings like in common legal terminology. Rather, this study conceptualized injustice as "unfair treatment" in social interactions (Agnew, 1992). Expressing injustice and remarking on power distance negatively influence each other. In high power distance cultures, people are not socialized to boldly show dissent regarding feelings of injustice. For example, in the high power distance culture of Japan, people seldom bother making complaints of unjust issues (Imada, 2012). One reasonable factor is that high power distance cultures support people to yield to or accept the status quo of injustice. Audiences from high power distance are assumed more likely to keep silent on injustice.

Nevertheless, social equality is a core concept to low power distance cultures, promising equal opportunities to all such as in the US (Hofstede, 2001). Therefore, in low power distance cultures, injustice is not as frequently tolerated. Compared to China, people from low power distance cultures, like the US, are socialized to be more courageous unveiling hierarchy and stereotypes, and actively condemning and demanding the reform of unjust events (Merkin, 2006). The attitude towards injustice that audiences perceive in a vocal talent show, for example, reveals their understandings of power distance. To what extent do audiences dare to voice their

hierarchical concerns? This study proposed a fourth research question and hypothesis:

RQ4. What is the difference between audience comments regarding injustice on Sina Weibo and Facebook?

H4. There are fewer comments about injustice on Sina Weibo than those on Facebook.

Method

This study used content analysis to analyze online audience comments on the public page of *The Voice of China* on Sina Weibo and *The Voice* on Facebook. The units of analysis are comments on Sina Weibo and Facebook. Two factors influence the sampling population. Firstly, in Summer and Fall of 2012, *The Voice of China* season analyzed in its first season, while *The Voice* was in its third season. However, this did not pose a threat for sampling because both seasons were top-rated in their respective countries. The two shows were on slightly different timelines: *The Voice of China* started in July and ended in September 2012, while *The Voice* started in October and ended in December 2012. If we had selected one fixed period for each, such as selecting comments in September for both shows, sampling bias could emerge because September was near the end of *The Voice of China*, but just beginning for *The Voice*. Although it is possible the nature of the content in the comments from the two shows could differ from each other to a large extent, each respective season was analyzed to avoid the bias. Therefore, the sampling population in this study was defined by audience comments on the day after the finale of each show due to intensive discussion of each finale. Specifically, for *The Voice of China*, we selected samples from comments on October 1 and from comments on December 19 for *The Voice*. The time frame of the day after the finale was fair for both shows without any bias. Additionally, since all hypotheses explored audience attitudes, examining audience comments near the end or after the shows was much more reliable and worthwhile.

For collecting data, this study used the following key words derived from the hypotheses to code: "Sympathy" (*Ke Lian* in Chinese) and synonyms of sympathy like "regret" (*yi han*), "pity" (*ke xi*); "Judges" (*cai pan*) or "judges' names"; "negativeness" and synonyms like "badness" (*bu hao*), "kick out" (*zou ren*), "leave" (*li kai*); "Injustice" and its synonyms like "unfairness" (*bu gongpin*) and "insider trading" (*nei mu, hei mu*). Thus, the sampling population of comments on Sina Weibo consisted of 1670 comments. Using the same coding protocol, we sampled 951 comments from 18 posts on Facebook. Although *The Voice* had more posts than *The Voice of China*, each post generated fewer comments than *The Voice of China*.

This study employed three coders who were all doctoral students in journalism and mass communication at a large US Midwestern university. The first coder was responsible for coding comments on both Sina Weibo and Facebook, the second coder coded comments on Sina Weibo, and the third coder coded comments on Facebook. Two coders were fluent in Chinese and English and one coder was fluent in English only. All three coders had solid background knowledge of both cultures and were familiar with the slang and symbolic language used in comments in China and the US. All coders were trained to abide by the codebook. Variable definitions and dimensions in the codebook were explained, and after the pre-test of 10% of the sample, coders' discrepancies were uncovered and then relearned to discuss operational definitions of all contested variables. Finally, modifications were made to clarify operational definitions prior to formal coding.

The authors used Cohen's Kappa coefficient to test the inter-coder reliability: *The Voice of China* was .61 and *The Voice* was .60. According to the interpretation of Kappa value, .60 and .61 represented moderate and substantial agreement (Viera & Garrett, 2005). Although the estimated Kappa value could be due to chance, sample size played an important role in interpreting Kappa value. With the unit of analysis being each individual comment, there were 1670 for *The Voice of China* and 951 for *The Voice*. Since the sample size was moderately large, Kappa values of .61 and .6 respectively were statistically significant according to Viera and Garrett (2005). Additionally, this study employed Chi-Square to test whether the differences between variables were by chance or not.

Operational definitions of variables

Valence of comments

Negative comments referred to comments containing negative words. According to Seuren's analysis of semantics (2001), negative words are not limited to "not" or "no," but also "hardly," "few," "little," "bad," "notorious," "awful," etc. Since this study also coded comments written in Chinese characters, common negative words in Chinese comments were assessed such as "bu hao," "ji hu bu xing," and "mei you," among others. Positive comments referred to comments containing positive words. Positive words are not only limited to commonly used "good" or "right," but also include "marvelous," "excellent," "awesome," and other praising words (Seuren, 2001). Since this study also coded comments written in Chinese characters, common positive words in Chinese comments were assessed such as "hao," "hao kan," "Zheng bang," "liao bu qi," and "tai niu le," among others. The coders coded "Yes," "No," or "Can't tell" for this category.

Sympathetic comments

Eisenberg (1988) states that sympathy is about individual concerns for others' adverse conditions. Sympathy aims to alleviate the negative emotions or adverse effects of another person (Batson, 1991). Audience comments on Sina Weibo and Facebook were considered regarding concerns toward contestants. Hence, sympathetic comments in this study referred to comments showing feelings of care and pity to contestants who lost on stage. Common key words in sympathetic comments were "regret," "pity," "sympathy," "heart broken," etc. Since this study also coded comments written in Chinese characters, common sympathetic words in Chinese comments included "ke xi," "ke lian," "wan xi," and "xin teng," among others. The coders coded "Yes," "No," or "Can't tell" for this category.

Injustice comments

Injustice comments referred to unfairness between expected results and actual results (Agnew, 1992). Injustice tends to focus on objectivity and results, which are not made based on principles and regulations per se (Agnew, 1992). Mazerolle, Piquero, and Capowich (2003) found that student perceptions of being unfairly graded lead to intentions to express anger and rage. Comments about Injustice in this study referred to audience comments about perceived unfairness. The coders coded "Yes," "No," or "Can't tell" for this category.

Objects of comments

Objects of comments were coded for contestants, judges, the program as a whole, or other.

Results

This study corrected the data through a data cleaning process removing comments if they *only* included the following: (1) icons, pictures and punctuations in comments; (2) product advertisements; (3) attitudes towards irrelevant issues. The cleaned data resulted in 2621 comments (1670 comments of *The Voice of China* on Sina Weibo and 951 comments of *The Voice* on Facebook), which were then analyzed.

The results showed that almost half of the comments on Facebook (49.7%) concentrated on contestants, whereas only 16.3% focused on the program. On Sina Weibo, 50.7% of the comments focused on the program itself, whereas 23.6% referred to contestants. Comments on judges of each program accounted for 15.1% on Facebook and 2.8% on Sina Weibo. The result of the Chi-square test as seen in Table 2 showed a significant difference existed regarding

the object of comments between *The Voice* and *The Voice of China* ($\chi^2 = 443.999$, $df = 3$, $p < .001$).

The results of the valence of comments indicated that negative and positive comments reached 48.9 and 12.5% on average, respectively. The detailed results were different for Facebook and Sina Weibo. In the case of Facebook, 54.2% of comments were positive and 20.0% were negative. On Sina Weibo, the positive and negative comments were 12.5 and 65.4% respectively. Employing a cross tabulation analysis, a statistically significant difference existed with each SNS ($\chi^2 = 639.761$, $df = 3$, $p < .001$). For the first hypothesis, the difference in the valence of the comments for Sina Weibo and Facebook regarding *The Voice of China* and *The Voice* was supported, as seen in Table 3.

Table 2. Percentages of comments on programs, judges and contestants.

	Source of comment		
	Facebook	Sina Weibo	Total
Program	16.3%	50.7%	38.2%
Judges	15.1	2.8	7.3
Contestants	49.7	23.6	33.1
Other	18.8	22.9	21.4
Total % (<i>n</i>)	100.0(951)	100.0(1670)	100.0(2621)

Note: $\chi^2 = 443.999$, $df = 3$, $p < .001$.

Table 3. Percentages of valence of comments.

	Source of comment		
	Facebook	Sina Weibo	Total
Negative	20.0%	65.4%	48.9%
Positive	54.2	12.5	27.6
Both	5.7	5.3	5.4
Can't tell	20.2	16.8	18.0
Total % (<i>n</i>)	100.0(951)	100.0(1670)	100.0(2621)

Note: $\chi^2 = 639.761$, $df = 3$, $p < .001$.

For the second research question and related hypotheses, findings revealed that a large number of comments about the programs did not show users' sympathetic feelings. Only a small

number of sympathetic comments were indicated on Facebook (6.1%) and Sina Weibo (2.8%). On average, 4.0% of all comments and the object of these comments referred to losers. Despite a similar proportion in sympathetic comments, these comments were significantly different ($\chi^2 = 17.786$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$) as seen in Table 4.

Table 4. Percentages of sympathetic comments.

	Source of comment		
	Facebook	Sina Weibo	Total
Yes	6.1%	2.8%	4.0%
No	93.9	97.2	69.0
Total % (n)	100.0 (951)	100.0 (1670)	100.0 (2621)

Note: $\chi^2 = 17.786$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$.

All sympathetic comments were subdivided into detailed categories, namely programs, judges, and losers. This study simplified these categories to compare the sympathetic comments for losers with others to analyze the second research question. The study found a statistically significant difference between Facebook and Sina Weibo ($\chi^2 = 17.633$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$) in terms of sympathetic comments toward losers. The result showed more sympathetic comments appeared on Facebook (93.1%) than in Sina Weibo (58.7%) as seen in Table 5.

To examine the third research question, this study analyzed the valence of audience comments toward the judges of each program. Tables 2 and 3 showed that more positive comments than negative comments were observed on the Facebook pages of *The Voice*. In contrast, negative comments overwhelmed other types of comments for *The Voice of China* on Sina Weibo. Negative and positive comments toward judges comprised 27.2% for *The Voice* and 46.1% for *The Voice of China*. Details in the results revealed that the valence of comments toward judges appeared differently. Audience comments regarding judges on Facebook were more positive (56.3%) than negative (17.4%). The valence of comments toward judges on Sina Weibo was more negative (57.4%) than positive (14.9%). Although the number of comments that were clearly neither negative nor positive was 19.4%, a statistically significant difference between Facebook and Sina Weibo existed ($\chi^2 = 37.227$, $df = 3$, $p < .001$) as seen in Table 6.

Table 5. Percentages of sympathetic comments for losers.

Source of comment	
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	Facebook	Sina Weibo	Total
Loser	93.1%	58.7%	77.9%
Others	6.9	41.3	22.1
Total %(n)	100.0 (58)	100.0 (46)	100.0 (104)

Note: $\chi^2 = 17.633$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$.

Table 6. Percentages of valence of comments toward judges.

	Source of comment		
	Facebook	Sina Weibo	Total
Negative	17.4%	57.4%	27.2%
Positive	56.3	14.9	46.1
Both	5.6	12.8	7.3
Can't tell	20.8	14.9	19.4
Total % (n)	100.0 (144)	100.0 (47)	100.0 (191)

Note: $\chi^2 = 37.227$, $df = 3$, $p < .001$.

This study next explored the number of comments about injustice on the two SNSs. For the fourth research question and related hypothesis, results indicated that 18.2% of the comments were related to injustice toward the programs, judges, and contestants. The number of comments about injustice between Facebook and Sina Weibo was significantly different as seen in Table 7 ($\chi^2 = 30.851$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$). Despite the statistically significant difference, however, the fourth hypothesis was not supported because its direction of difference was the opposite of the hypothesis.

Regarding the fourth research question, the number of comments about injustice toward judges was too small,¹ and thus not adequate enough to conduct a cross tabulation analysis between the comment sources and the object of injustice comments. For this reason, this study analyzed the degree of difference of comments about injustice between Facebook and Sina Weibo after combining the two categories of comments about injustice toward judges and other types of comments. The result showed a large number of comments about injustice on Facebook focused on contestants (82.4%), while comments about injustice on Sina Weibo were mostly related to the program itself (75.7%) and the contestants (21.8%) as seen in Table 8. Moreover, a statistically significant difference ($\chi^2 = 142.841$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$) was indicated.

Table 7. Percentages of comments on expressions of injustice.

	Source of comment		
	Facebook	Sina Weibo	Total
Yes	12.5%	21.4%	18.2%
No	87.5	78.6	81.8
Total % (n)	100.0 (951)	100.0 (1670)	100.0 (2621)

Note: $\chi^2 = 30.851$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$.

Table 8. Percentages of comments on injustice toward programs, contestants, and judges.

	Source of comment		
	Facebook	Sina Weibo	Total
Program	16.8%	75.7%	61.0%
Contestants	82.4	21.8	36.9
Judges & other	.8	2.5	2.1
Total % (n)	100.0 (119)	100.0 (358)	100.0 (477)

Note: $\chi^2 = 142.841$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$

Discussion

Program versus contestants

This study's findings revealed that audiences' online interactions with *The Voice of China* and *The Voice* reflect cultural differences between China and the US. Regarding the object of online comments, the majority on Sina Weibo were concerned with *The Voice of China* program itself. In contrast, most Facebook comments concentrated on individual contestants than *The Voice* itself. In online situations, we can see that Chinese audiences give priority to the group and community since they are more inclined to mention the program as a whole than commenting on individuals. When the communication platform is transferred to the online environment, audiences were likely to perceive contestants, judges, stage setting, and directors of *The Voice of China* as part of this program. Therefore, when Chinese audience members commented on any specific component of the program, it was most often related to the components of the community they belong to via praise or blame for *The Voice of China* program as a whole.

Collectivism versus individualism

The valence of comments, to some extent, contradicted Hofstede's theoretical framework.

Accordingly with the concept of collectivism, people in collectivistic cultures are inclined to create a harmonious society, even by sacrificing individual feelings. However, the comments on Sina Weibo revealed that most audience members were antagonistic to building such harmony online, and at times rejected individualism simultaneously.

There are several reasons to support this particular finding. In general, audiences on Sina Weibo consist of Chinese young adults who are cynical and easily irritated with contemporary Chinese society (Lei, 2011). In young adults' opinions, there is a disjuncture between the government's promises and tangible benefits received by the general public. It is not uncommon to see negative online comments targeting government policies and wrongdoings. Many negative comments on Sina Weibo toward *The Voice of China* highlighted "hei mu" (insider trading) and "you guan xi" (insider relationships). Audiences questioned the fairness of the program and implied the existence of an underground exchange of who will be selected as winners in advance. Hence, the young adult grudge against the government sprawled into the entertainment industry as well. Although the young adult audience may have no solid evidence to support their claims of insider trading and relationships, their assumptions of the relationships were loudly voiced online nevertheless.

Another reasonable explanation for this finding lies in the issue of freedom of speech online in China. The Internet seemingly endows people to express dissenting thoughts instead of following the mainstream Chinese voice offline. On social media, audiences can be anonymous, and there is less intimidation as in face-to-face communication in the real space. Chinese online audiences rarely register on SNSs using real names and photographs. Instead, usernames are pseudonyms, and profile photographs can be downloaded from anywhere. The analysis of the valence of comments indicates that traditional Chinese cultural values, such as reverence, are not strictly reflected or obeyed on Chinese social media.

Vocalizing dissent

The study's findings regarding Chinese attitudes toward judges casted doubt on the effectiveness of the hierarchical order of the Chinese Internet. Showing obedience to hierarchical order is unavoidable in daily Chinese life as submissive behavior toward politicians and reverence to parents, teachers and elders is common sense. However, compared to face-to-face situations, hierarchical orders among individuals appeared less visible in the online environment. Although the Chinese are taught to obey hierarchy, they are contradictorily vibrant online in breaking the

hierarchy via SNSs.

There was no significant difference between sympathetic comments on Sina Weibo and Facebook with each reporting low percentages (less than 4%). This finding fails to perfectly validate Hofstede's argument in collectivistic cultures, which "cultivates people to show strong sympathy" (2001, p. 231).

Complicating generalizations

Overall, based on the findings of this study, it is still not enough to generalize cultural similarities and differences between China and the US across all SNSs. However, this pioneering effort in applying Hofstede's model in the online environment shows some critical cultural differences and similarities between audience feedback regarding *The Voice of China* and *The Voice*. Compared with US online individualism, Chinese online audiences displayed a synthesis of collectivism *and* individualism, but still preferred to regard individual components as part of a community. They were also more inclined to position themselves in a group. However, they saw their individual agency in challenging the hierarchal power and the program's structure.

With imported formats of reality TV from Western countries widely circulating to date, some carry-over of Western cultural norms to China was discovered. The presence of SNSs did not make cultural norms disappear, but rather provided more opportunities to display them. Cultural manifestations in audience online comments were found as well, though it would be too simplistic to generalize these either in confirmation with Hofstede's theoretical model or in contradiction to it. Instead, it is more useful to take a holistic perspective of the connections among cultures, the nature of programs, online audience behavior, social background and the adaptation of shows under the advancement of globalization. Thus, this study does not make direct evidentiary statements to show whether the findings support or counter Hofstede's framework in cyberspace. The vocal talent shows position themselves as reality television singing competitions featuring the battle and glory of winners. Although the authors would like to examine audience comments as major cultural products in the research, the nature of the shows as cultural products can hardly be ignored. One argument to be made from the findings is that the show's original platform, which was adopted by China and the US from Holland, highlights competition and winner-takes-all mentalities and, thus, likely holds an individualistic bias. Whether the demographics of this format matter in different SNSs is worthy of future scholarly exploration but was out of the scope of this study's data.

Insights for producers

A final point of discussion from this study's findings lies in the significance of cultural differences of reality television and music programs at large. The observations of online audience member feedback toward reality television provide valuable information for producers of such programs. First, producers may use these analytic insights to better assess how audience members understand programs and what expectations they may yearn for which may enable producers to reposition themselves to better target audiences. Second, reality television and music programs have many assumptions of audience interpretations of their content, but approaching audience members' cultural differences from a decoding perspective could greatly improve production processes (Hall, 2006).

Conclusion

Theoretically, the study extends cross-culture research into cyberspace highlighting cultural products rather than individuals as units of observation. In addition to the current findings, the study reflects how individuals may alter their cultural norms in the new media environment, and future research should conduct interviews or focus groups to explore the cultural psychology of their online experiences. Although some researchers claim individuals are the sole objects which manifest culture objects in the environment where individual mindsets and behaviors reside – such as entertainment media objects – are also meaningful as carriers of cultural meanings and differences (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999).

A limitation of this study lies in the lack of awareness of commenters being studied, which may have influenced what they meant to convey in comments. Future research should conduct similar inquiries within a range of genres such as sitcoms, dance competitions, and dating shows, among others. More comprehensive research is necessary to fully explain why Chinese and American online audiences behave similarly in some situations and differently in others. Although a limited number of comments were analyzed in this study, the efforts were imperatively worthwhile to achieve a better understanding of online audience interactions with vocal talent shows from cross-cultural perspectives.

With the proliferation of social media, the study revealed that some perspectives of cultural divergence remain prevalent, such as the concept of community in collectivist cultures. Yet some aspects of cultural divergence are becoming more distinct, as seen when Chinese audiences dare to negatively comment on judges. Therefore, the blurring boundary between cultures could be well reflected in cyberspace. The broader impact of this study is beneficial to producers of reality TV

programming, who increasingly rely on SNSs to initiate audience interaction. Producers ought to follow how their online audiences resemble and differ from each other cross-culturally to better target and analyze potential audiences.

Note

1. Only one comment of injustice toward judges was posted on Facebook, whereas five comments were posted on Sina Weibo. Four comments about injustice on Sina Weibo were addressed to other matters.

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Notes on contributors

Yafei Zhang is a PhD candidate (ABD) at The University of Iowa and studies television and social media.

Andrea M. Weare is a PhD candidate (ABD) at The University of Iowa and studies digital media production and feminist media studies.

Heungseok Koh is a PhD student at Dongguk University, Seoul, South Korea, and studies new media and political communication.

Li Chen is a PhD candidate (ABD) at The University of Iowa, and studies health communication.

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