A cross-cultural analysis of media agenda set by social media sites: comparing Twitter and Weibo

Abstract

By conducting content analysis on headlines provided by Twitter and Weibo (Microblog) during the same time period, the study attempted to apply agenda setting theory and the model of *five dimensions of cultural difference* first developed by Hofstede to a new dimension: how does media agenda set by social media sites reflect the cultural and societal differences between the United States and China. Major features reviewed from the headlines suggested that the several dimensions of cultural differences revealed by previous scholarly work were reflected in online media agenda. In addition, unique features of the headlines on Weibo suggested that social media attempted to play a vital role in encouraging civic participation among active social media users in China, while the trend was not found in Twitter. Societal and cultural implications were also discussed.
Exploration of the mass media agenda has always been a part of agenda setting studies (Dearing & Rogers, 1996), and media agenda in the online environment is examined either with traditional methods (coding news coverage on one issue across different websites) or by coding categories of news stories in one specific website (e.g. Conway & Patterson, 2008; Jeong et al., 2005; Lanoesga, 2008; Lim, 2006, 2007; Martin, 2009; Meraz, 2009; Roberts et al., 2002; Sweetster et al., 2008). However, few studies have addressed media agenda in social media sites. Functioning differently from news websites in nature, social media sites such as Twitter do not provide their users with news stories; instead, they are more likely to present key words to indicate what is important to users. On the homepage of Twitter, a column titled *Trends* lists the top topics to be discussed on the website. Similarly, on the Chinese Twitter, Weibo (Microblog), there is a column titled *Spotlight*, in which several important topics are listed everyday. The topics presented on the homepages attempts draw users’ attentions to specific themes by indicating the salience of a list of news events.

This study views *Trends* and *Spotlight* as media agenda because the ways in which they are organized indicate that the lists are set by websites. For example, Weibo lists the number of posts relevant to the topic on the side of the link. However, the topic on the top of the list is not always the one that has most posts. Similarly, clicking the link of the top topics in *Trends* does not always get most results. These observations suggest that the selection and the order of these topics are not mere outcomes of a calculation of users’ posts, but they are organized by websites. Therefore, agenda setting and agenda building theory will be appropriate to this study.

The purpose of this study is to examine and to compare the online media agenda set by
Twitter and Weibo. The study does not attempt to predict the online media agenda in general based on the issues perceived to be salient on SNSs, but it will treat what is discovered from Twitter and Weibo as indexes of the cultural and political differences between the United States and China. From the theoretical perspective, comparing media agenda on similar SNSs in two countries with distinct cultural and political systems will provide new understandings of: 1) the effects of agenda building (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996) in social media sites; 2) the application of the model of five dimensions of cultural differences developed by Hofstede (2000) to the analysis of online media agenda in different cultural context.

**Literature Review**

*Agenda building theories and studying media agenda in the cyber space*

Since McCombs and Shaw (1972) proposed agenda setting theory based on their study in Chapel Hill during the 1968 presidential campaign, a grand theoretical framework has been built around agenda setting theory. Agenda setting is a theory about “the transfer of salience from the mass media’s pictures of the world to the pictures in our heads” (McCombs, 2004b, p.69). An agenda is conceptualized as “a set of issues that are communicated in a hierarchy of importance at a point of time” (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, p.2), and media agenda is understood as a collection of issues that are ranked in order by their importance in media (Fremlin, 2008).

Media agendas are built through reflecting “institutional imperatives and an ongoing negotiation between media personnel and their sources of information” (Denham, 2010, p.311). A new question is raised: What are the factors influencing media agenda? In addition to a vague argument in classic agenda setting theory that claims public agenda has an impact
on media agenda (Jeong et al., 2005), agenda building theories are created to explore the factors inside and outside media organizations that affect media content (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). In agenda building studies, media agenda is viewed as a dependent variable reflecting the internal and external factors contributing to the construction of media content (McCombs, 2004b).

Shoemaker and Reese (1996) developed an integrated model describing the agenda building process. They used a series of concentric circles to illustrate the five levels of factors impacting media agenda, and they come in order (start from the inner circle): 1) influences from individual media workers: background and characteristics (e.g., gender, ethnicity, education, etc) of journalists and editors; 2) influence of media routines: media organizations and external factors such as news sources; 3) organizational influence: structures and goals of the media, for example, public and corporate media set different media agenda due to different nature (Fremlin, 2008); 4) influences outside of media organizations: including journalistic-source relationship, relationship with advertiser and audience, government controls, competition in the market place, etc.; 5) influence of ideology: shared values in the society. The model suggests that the shaping of media agenda is impacted by various social forces; in other words, any differences in these five dimensions might result in different types of media agenda.

Due to the significant changes in communication patterns brought by computer-mediated communication (CMC), researchers developed new means to study online media agenda. To study the media agenda on individual websites (such as websites set by political candidates), Luo (2009) compared the different stereotypes presented in websites set by different
politicians or corporations. The comparative approach revealed how the structure and goal of media corporations impacted media agenda. To study the media agenda on news websites in general, Jeong et al. (2005) used search terms as an index of online media agenda. They determined the hierarchical order of salience by counting the frequency of the terms being searched by users. The measurement is similar to the traditional method being used in studying traditional media, and the only difference is the context was shifted into the cyber space.

Cultural difference model in comparative studies

The significance of comparative studies lies in its potential of reflecting deeply-rooted cultural differences. A study examined French, German, Japanese and Dutch Wikipedia websites concluded that cultural differences can be observed in both the physical world and the virtual world (Pfeil et al., 2006). It was also argued that “agenda building is a process ideally suited to comparative analysis. (Because) all communities must decide which issues will be the concern of decision makers” (Cobb et al., 1976, p.126).

Hofstede (2000) developed a five-dimension model that broke the complexity of cultural differences into specific dimensions (Gevorgyan & Manucharova, 2009). The model is widely used in studies that attempt to compare cultural differences in quantitative ways. In Hofstede’s conceptualization (2000), culture is “a collective programming of the mind; it manifests itself not only in values, but in more superficial ways: in symbols, heroes, and rituals” (p.1). Culture differences contribute to the unique representations of media phenomena (e.g.: different media agendas); in turn, examining mass media phenomena will reveal the cultural differences that are deeply rooted in the history. Hofstede concluded five
dimensions that are empirically verifiable to study the differences across societies: 1) power distance; 2) uncertainty avoidance; 3) individualism vs collectivism; 4) masculinity vs. femininity; 5) long-term vs short-term orientation.

Hofstede also developed a set of indexes to measure the five dimensions within in model. Power distance refers to the rate of political centralization, and the higher the Power Distance Index (PDI) is, the less the power in the society is distributed equally. Uncertainty avoidance refers to the extent to which people feel anxious or uneasy in unfamiliar or unpredictable situations, and high Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI) suggests a higher need for strict rules of behavior as well as a belief in an absolute truth to avoid ambiguous situations. Social ties between individuals are loose in countries with high Individualism Index (IDV), and Masculinity Index (MAS) indicates the dominant gender roles in the society. Long-term Orientation Index (LTO) deals with different ways of thinking, and high LTO usually suggests a preference over synthetic thinking over analytic thinking.

The model have been used in a large number of comparative studies (e.g. Cheong et al., 2010; Gevorgyan & Manucharova, 2009; Pfeil et al., 2006; Shuya, 2007; Zhou, 2012). The result of these studies suggest that human behaviors are culturally bound, and cultural factors across countries display different characteristics and patterns in a wide range of realms, including the use of advertising appeals (Cheong et al., 2010), orientations of mass media use (Shuya, 2007), web design preferences and attitudes (Gevorgyan & Manucharova, 2009), self perceptions of social capitals in social media sites (Chu & Choi, 2010), online search behavior (Vuylsteke et al., 2010), online news frames (Zhou, 2012), etc. This study attempts to apply the model to a new dimension, media agenda in SNSs in U.S. and in China, to see
whether the cultural differences in these two countries are reflected in their distinct online media agenda.

Implications of Hofstede’s model and cultural differences in U.S. and China

In a series of studies that compared companies and organizations in different countries, Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) calculated the scores of the indexes (PDI, UAI, IVD, MAS, LTO) for different countries including U.S. and China. In the following paragraphs, I will develop hypotheses and the main research question by looking at the implications of available scores.

**PDI:** The PDI score is 80 for China, 40 for U.S., and 55 for world average (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). The scores show that China is a country with high power distance, while the power distance in U.S. is much lower. Societies with a high score on the power distance index are more tolerant of hierarchies (Gevorgyan & Manucharova, 2009), less likely to have discussions on politics but rely more on authorities (Hofstede, 2000). Therefore, fewer political topics are expected to present on Weibo than on Twitter.


**UAI:** The UAI score is 30 for China, 46 for U.S., and 66 for world average (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). The scores suggest that both China and U.S. are low in uncertainty avoidance worldwide, but U.S. has a comparatively higher UAI than China. For societies with high UAI, there is less control on expressions of emotions and feelings of happiness more likely to widely disperse (Hofstede, 2000). Accordingly, in a society where UAI is lower, Weibo is less likely to present a large number of positive news stories.

H2: More “negative news” appears in Spotlight than in Trends.
**IVD**: The IVD score is 20 for China, 91 for U.S., and 43 for world average (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). The scores suggest that China is a typical country emphasizing collectivism while U.S. values individualism much more. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) also argued that the different attitude toward collectivism and individualism is a key difference between U.S. and China. In countries with low IDV, collective interests are supposed to prevail over individual interest, and people attempt to avoid confrontations (Hofstede, 2000). In addition, lower IDV score implies public consensus is viewed to be more important. Therefore, people are more likely to seek consensus on controversial topics rather than discussing individual stories based on shared themes, which can be reflected in media agenda.

H3a: *Spotlight* includes more headlines that indicate issues concerning the society in general than *Trends*.

H3b: *Spotlight* includes more headlines that indicate issues concerning specific social groups than *Trends*.

H4: Individuals’ names will appear more often in *Trends* than in *Spotlight*.

H5: More episodic headlines appear in *Spotlight* than in *Trends*.

**MAS**: The MAS score is 66 for China, 62 for U.S., and 51 for world average (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). The scores suggest that China and U.S. are similar in their perceptions of gender roles, so no significant difference is expected. LTO is not considered because it does not appear to have a great impact on social media agenda.

These hypotheses will be synthesized to answer the big research question:

RQ: What is the difference (if any) between media agenda set by Twitter and Weibo?

**Methods**


To test the hypotheses and to answer the research question, I conducted content analysis of the headlines provided by *Trends* and *Spotlight*. Content analysis is a systematic, objective and quantitative method to examine the content of recorded information (Wimmer & Dominick, 1994). Content analysis helps researchers study the manifest meaning of media content, which is widely applied in agenda setting and agenda building studies (Dearing & Rogers, 1996) as well as in comparative studies (Pfeil et al, 2006).

According to previous literature, media agenda refers to salience of a particular news issue, including how often and where it appears in the mass media (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). The issue salience is usually measured by a content analysis of the news media coverage to determine the number of news stories about the particular issue. This study does not attempt to measure news coverage of specific social events. Rather, headlines are coded into different categories and media agenda reflected by the salience of each category.

Cross-tabulation (chi-square) and t-test are used to compare the differences between headlines in two social media sites. The unit of analysis is every single headline in *Trends* (e.g. “10Things I Want To Happen”) and in *Spotlight* (e.g. “The Guy Speaking Chinglish Becomes Popular”). The independent variable is the place where the headline appears: *Trends*, *or Spotlight*. The dependent variables are the different categories these headline are supposed to belong to. Headlines were randomly collected from *Trends* and *Spotlight*. I created two new accounts on Twitter and Weibo for data collection purpose. I left all the optional demographic information blank, refused to follow any person, and never posted anything with the accounts. In this way, the websites were not likely to customize specific information for me by predicting my identity or taste. Therefore, I was able to get the real media agenda
set by the websites.

I collected headlines in two constructed weeks (14 days). Between Oct.1,2012 and Nov.22,2012, I checked Twitter and Weibo with my new accounts at 9:00pm every three days. In most cases, 9 or 10 headlines are listed in Trends while 8 or 9 are listed in Spotlight. To ensure I got equal amount of headlines every day, I collected the top 8 headlines from each website every time. 112 headlines were collected from each website. Two duplicated headlines were found when data were ready for coding and they were removed. I had 110 headlines for each website so the final sample size was 220. To test the intercoder reliability, I collected additional 37 headlines (18 from Spotlight and 19 from Trends), which were not included in the primary sample.

The coders are similar in levels of language proficiency: they are native speakers of Chinese and non-native speakers of English, but both of them have been actively doing research with English literature in recent years. In case the coders could not tell what the headline was indicating, they were allowed to search the term on corresponding websites to check its meaning. Because most of the categories in the code book were straightforward, high intercoder reliability was reached (kappa>.85). Each coder was assigned with 110 headlines. Among the 110 headlines they received, half of them were from Trends and the other half were from Spotlight. Coders coded the headlines independently.

Among the studies using content analysis to look at online news (Martin, 2009), researchers have developed various means to categorize the issues in media agenda. For example, the method used by Fremlin’s study (2008) is similar to the current study: the researcher analyzed a collection of headlines and conducted ANOVA to measure media
agenda on two different types of websites. Fremlin developed a twenty-one-item list (or called a “public issues category list”) categorizing issues: Asia, Canada, Education, Entertainment, Environment, General Economic, General International Issues, Government/Politics, Health, Job, Latin America/Africa, Law and Order, Mideast, Miscellaneous (domestic), Miscellaneous (other), Money, Social Relations, Europe, Spending, Technology, and Welfare. The list was also modified and being used by Jim (2010) in his study attempting to examining the salience of different news issues. Similarly, in a study comparing media agenda set by candidates’ website and those covered by newspapers in political campaigns, the researcher (Luo, 2009) divided the news stories based on gender orientation: traditional male issues (such as war, sports) and five female issues (civil rights, education).

I developed the categories with reference to these existing categories, but modification was necessary due to the different social contexts in which the current study and previous studies are situated. Different categories were developed to answer the hypotheses:

H1: More political issues appear in Trends than in Spotlight. The headlines were categorized based on the area of issues they were concerned with. These items are developed with reference to Fremlin’s twenty-one item list (2008): politics, economy, entertainment, education, environment, health, social relations, technology and sports. If a headline appeared to cover more than one area, coders were asked to choose the major area by their knowledge and the very first impression they obtained from the headlines. An “other” category was also provided in case coders had no idea where the headline should be placed. In addition to answering H1, these categories will also be used to answer the RQ: What is the
difference (if any) between media agenda set by Twitter and Weibo? I conducted cross-tabulation to compare the different frequencies of headlines appear in each category between *Trends* and *Spotlight*.

**H2:** More “negative news” appears in *Spotlight* than in *Trends*. The study examined the emotions imbedded in headlines. “Positive news” indicates news stories about celebration, success, etc. “Negative news” is more likely to refer to disasters, scandals, etc. However, there is no rigid standard determining whether a headline implies good news or bad news, and a number of new stories could be neutral. Besides that, how the headline is worded impacts the emotion embedded in the story. Therefore, a 5-point Likert Scale was used to analyze how “positive” and how “negative” the news stories are implied by headlines. Five items are: very negative, negative, neutral, positive, very positive (1 for very negative, 5 for very positive). A negative case refers to a headline indicating a bad issue by coders’ norms and knowledge, and a case can be “very negative” when the headline explicitly expresses strong regret or sympathy. Accordingly, a positive case refers to a headline suggesting a good issue by contemporary standard, and a case can be “very positive” when cheerfulness is indicated by the headline. The headline could be neutral if it did not indicate a specific news event or there was no indication for the nature of the news event. The coders were asked to make the judgment with their impression at the first glance.

**H3a:** *Spotlight* includes more headlines that indicate issues concerning the society in general than *Trends*; **H3b:** *Spotlight* includes more headlines that indicate issues concerning specific social groups than *Trends*. Headlines were categorized by different range of population they were indicating: society in general, social groups, and individuals.
“Individuals” was coded when persons’ names were mentioned, and “social groups” were coded when the headline included terms such as experts, students, children, urban residents, etc. If none of the above were mentioned, “society in general” was coded.

H4: Individuals’ names will appear more often in Trends than in Spotlight. The coders only needed to record whether the headline contains individuals’ names.

H5: More episodic headlines appear in Spotlight than in Trends. The headlines are categorized either as episodic or thematic. The design of this item was learned from the categorization of framings: thematic framing and episodic framing. Coders made the judgment at their first glance whether the headline was episodic or thematic. They coded a headline as episodic only when they could learn a complete story from it. Otherwise, the headline was thematic. Take two headlines from Spotlight an example, “Actor Huang Haibing Divorced” was a typical episodic headline, and “College Students Need More Study Rooms” was a thematic headline.

Results

2.7% of the topics in Trends are concerned with politics, while only 1.8% of those in Spotlight are political issues. At the statistical level, it can be claimed that H1 is supported because the difference was significant (p<.01). However, political headlines rarely appear in both Trends (N=3) and Spotlight (N=2); and among the 220 cases, Trends only had one more political case than Spotlight. The numbers are so close to each other so it is hard to tell whether politics is much more prevalent on Twitter than on Weibo. Therefore, H1 is not supported due to the small number of cases identified from the sample cases.

Table 1 also shows how topics are distributed differently in Spotlight and Trends,
answering the major research question. As is mentioned above, *Trends* has slightly more political topics than *Spotlight*. In addition, several major similarities and differences are reflected by Table 1: 1) entertainment is covered most in both *Spotlight* (40.0%) and *Trends* (38.2%); 2) sports and technology are mentioned significantly more frequently in *Trends* (24.5% for sports and 9.1% for technology) than in *Spotlight* (10.9% for sports and 0% for technology); 3) education and social relations are covered significantly more often in *Spotlight* (5.5% for education and 23.6% for social relations) than in *Trends* (2.7% for education and 10.0% for social relations).

An independent t-test comparing the “emotion” variable suggests that *Spotlight* has a lightly lower mean (M=2.82, SD=0.92) than *Trends* (M=3.00, SD=0.27). The difference is small but statistically significant (t=1.99, p<.05). Therefore, H2 is supported: more “negative news” appears in *Spotlight* than in *Trends*.

52.7% of the headlines in *Trends* are concerned with the society in general, and 10% of the headlines deal with specific social groups. In *Spotlight*, 33.0% of the headlines are concerned with the society as a whole, and 19.9% of the headlines focused on specific social groups (Table 2). The trend is statistically significant (p<.01). Therefore, H3a is not supported. On the contrary, it is observed that more than half of the headlines in *Spotlight* (50.9%) are concerned with individuals, but only 37.3% of the headlines in *Trends* are discussing individuals. H3b is supported: *Spotlight* includes significantly more headlines that indicate issues concerning specific social groups than *Trends*.

27.3% of the headlines in *Trends* and 31.8% of those in *Spotlight* included individual’s names, contrary to what is hypothesized. However, the difference is not statistically
significant (p=.46). Therefore, H4 is not supported.

68.2% of the headlines in Spotlight indicate episodic stories, while only 22.7% of those in Trends are episodic (Table 3). The data suggests a statistically significant (p<.01) difference between two social media sites in terms of episodic and thematic headlines. Therefore, H5 is supported.

**Discussion**

*Impact of cultural differences and the Chinese internet policy*

With a much higher score on power distance, media agenda established by Weibo is expected to cover much less about politics than Twitter (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). However, results show that politics is one of the topics being covered least by both social media sites, and Trends only had one more political case than Spotlight among the 220 cases. The difference between Trends and Spotlight in offering political topics is not as obvious as expected.

The phenomenon has two implications. First, politics is not a popular topic on both websites. Table 1 also shows that on both sites, entertainment is the topic being covered most, making up of more than one-third of all topics. In both countries, rather than acting as a major platform for hard news, Twitter and Weibo play a more important role in providing information for entertainment and keeping social relations. The result corresponds with the statistics about Twitter use: in 2011, entertainment spectacles and sports matches generate the most tweets per second (Highfield et al, 2013). Highfield et al claimed that Twitter has been used most predominantly as a technology of fandom, where connection of fans and expression of shared interest are the most prevalent themes. The phenomenon explains why
entertainment and sports are the topics being covered most by Twitter: these topics are what its users are interested in most. Similarly, entertainment is covered most by Weibo, but sports is not a popular topic partially because the sports industry in China is not commercialized enough to obtain a large audience.

Second, Chinese social media is encouraging users to discuss politics, but the topic and content is highly constrained. Influences outside of media organizations, including governmental control, contributes to the formation of media agenda (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). On the one hand, politics is no longer a taboo topic in social media in China, and social media agenda is encouraging users to participate in some types of political discussion. On the other hand, however, promoting political discussion does not always imply democratic political participation. The only two political headlines found in Spotlight are: “First Plenum of the 18th Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee”, and “Lei Zhengfu (Chongqing) was discharged”. The First Plenum was viewed to be one of the most important political issues of the year when Xi Jinping was prepared to take office. Lei Zhengfu used to be a senior-level government official in Chongqing, and he was discharged and later arrested due to corruption. Although the latter was a corruption case, it was framed in a positive way because figuring out corruption cases is the success of Central Commission for Discipline Inspection.

The Chinese internet policy explains why only very few but positively-framed political cases are listed in Spotlight: internet use is encouraged for economic purpose, but the government attempted to keep internet content “focused within allowable political boundaries” (Harwit & Clark, 2001, p.394). “Allowable political boundaries” is vaguely
defined, providing the government and social media service providers plenty of space to
control and regulate online speech. The strategy is also called a “two-hand strategy”
regulating internet speech, through which political discussion was allowed but controlled
(Yang, 2011). Therefore, it is not surprising that Weibo used these topics to construct and
reinforce the positive images of the central Chinese government. According to Hofstede
(2000), in a country with high score on power distance index, people are more likely to
tolerate hierarchies and rely more on authorities, and the trend is being emphasized when
political agenda on Weibo places more emphasis on issues shaped in a top-down manner.

Table 1 and H2 reflect major differences between online media agenda on Twitter and
Weibo: by story topics implied by the headline, Spotlight covers more social relation stories
than Trends; by the emotions embedded in the stories, Spotlight covers more “negative news”
such as accidents and disasters than Trends. UAI explains that counties with lower
uncertainty avoidance are less likely to express happiness (Hofstede, 2000), and as a result,
Weibo in China is likely to echo the trend. For example, Spotlight was interested in issues
such as the death of the father a pop star, a famous writer was beaten in the public, suicide of
a female student, accident in a studio, explosion in a hot pot restaurant, etc. Very few positive
headlines are found in the entertainment category either: such as congratulation on a wedding
of a star couple. Although not statistically significant, a trend is observed that negative stories
on Spotlight appear even more often when the major subject of the story is an ordinary citizen.
UAI can be one explanation, but it is not sufficient enough to interpret the phenomenon
within a big societal background. More discussion will be made when the results from H3b
and H5 are incorporated.
Run in a country where collectivism is highly emphasized (Hofstede, 2005), Spotlight is expected to include more headlines concerned with the society in general and specific groups. Results suggest that headlines indicating stories that focus on the society in general is not as prevalent in Spotlight then in Trends; however, Spotlight includes much more headlines emphasizing specific social groups. Accordingly, H4 is not supported because Spotlight includes more individuals’ names than expected and there is no big difference between Spotlight and Trends in this regard.

It is rash to conclude that collectivism is no longer emphasized in social media in China. Language is one of reasons explaining why individuals’ names appear more often in Spotlight than expected. Chinese characters are able provide more information than same amount of letters in English; and as a result, having names included in headlines written in Chinese will not make the headline too long to be placed in a column. On the contrary, an English headline will be made too long to be put in a small column if a full name is included. In Trends, when full names are presented, there is usually no additional information telling more details about the person, or vice versa. In other words, Trends is able emphasize only one part of the story, the person or the event, either is more important. It is very different from Spotlight where short sentences such as “somebody does something” appear frequently. Therefore, in this case, language feature rather than the collectivism/individualism plays a more important role in determining the characteristics of headlines. However, having more names shown in media agenda might have the potential to promote individualism in China and the long-term impact could be revealed in future research, but this is not the major point to be discussed in this paper.
Having a large number of headlines addressing specific social groups suggests that collectivism is still emphasized by online media in contemporary China. Focusing on different social groups rather than the society in general is the result of social migration and social stratification. On the one hand, large-scale societal transformation in China in the past few decades promoted social mobility, and “vast population movements mixed people from many background and concentrated them into new areas” (McQuail, 1978, p. 183). On the other hand, social stratification creates new hierarchical structures among different social groups, and the common identity during the Maoist era no longer exists (Zhou, 2004). Emphasizing social groups reflects a rising recognition of unique group identities. In Spotlight, a large number of headlines are addressing specific social groups: teachers, experts, girls, online retailers, daughters, architects, Chinese journalists, bachelors, female college students, women in their late 20s, homeless kids, etc. Trends also has headlines addressing social groups, but the groups defined in a much vaguer manner: parents, lady, etc. Besides that, headlines on Trends emphasize more on stories about individuals. Typical headlines of this kind on Trends are: 100 things about me, what I love the most, mention true friend, etc.

Regardless of the change in social background, the idea of collectivism is still prevalent because people have always been encouraged to think by groups, and the only change is, smaller social groups defined by demographics and social economic status have taken the place of the broad, traditional “social group” at the national level. Collective interest and group identities are emphasized by the headlines; and some of the headlines are seeking consensus on some controversial issues. For example, a headline saying “what makes great teachers” is more interested in looking for a common standard for great teachers than
exploring the unique identities of individual teachers. Collectivism is emphasized when individual stories are judged by the collective group interest.

According to H5, *Spotlight* has more episodically-framed headlines than *Trends*. A large portion of the headlines in *Spotlight* describes a complete story, but headlines on *Trends* are more likely to be broad and are concerned with more abstract themes, such as relationship, haute party, marathon, etc. Including these terms in *Trends* is partially triggered by recent social events, but *Trends* is not likely to describe the story in the headline. On the contrary, *Spotlight* prefers citing the recent news story to encourage discussion. Typical examples are: questioning Voice of China, first snow in Beijing, 27-year-old women quits job and travel around the country, etc.

*Social media as a platform for civic engagement in China*

In addition to the cultural factors, acting as an intermediary for expression of public opinions be one reason explains why a large portion of headlines in *Spotlight* are concerned with social relations, negative news, and specific news events. Previous research suggests that social media in China is often used as a platform for civic participation. Civic engagement involves all types of attempts to influence public policies and political life, and in China, new media is expected to be a major channel for civic engagement because the official petition and public hearing system are not able to address all the needs from the public (Shao et al, 2012). While traditional mainstream media are highly restricted for alternative or democratic participation, media users are looking for other venues for talking about issues of public concern (Pan et al, 2010).

By investigating the recent phenomenon of cyber vigilantism (human flesh search) in
China, Cheong and Gong (2010) revealed that Chinese social media users have a strong desire to engage in civic engagement. According to their study, because expression of alternative political opinions in the public sphere is highly restricted, Chinese social media users become highly interested in hunting for personal information to identify corrupt officials in order to pressure the authorities toward accountability. Cheong and Gong suggested that high-context collectivism increased the relational connectivity and personal allegiance to group interests, which encourages social media users to discuss, criticize, and debate on social and political issues. Lei’s study (2011) had similar findings: new media users in China are younger and have higher education background than traditional media users, and they are more opinionated and had more potential in collective action.

A shared media agenda acts as online intermediaries and enables users to perform collective social critique (Cheong & Guo, 2010). However, Weibo is facing a dilemma. On the one hand, as a state-certified social media site, Weibo is not supposed to provide a large number of controversial political topics. On the other hand, users have always been eager to engage in civic participation. Like most media outlets and programs in China, Weibo needs to balance the market needs and governmental regulations in order to survive in the highly competitive market and avoid political risks at the same time (Chen, 2013). As a result, Weibo provides its users with a media agenda that is not politically sensitive, but it is more concerned with users’ everyday life. Offering a large number of topics that are concerned with social relations has two benefits: first, they are able to survive the censorship; second, users always have a lot to discuss on these issues.

Social topics provided by Spotlight are either controversial, or having strong intentions to
call for attention to public issues, especially charity. Typical examples of controversial topics include: housing makes rural residents get divorced, Huanghe Tower is suspected to be fake, top great cities, gas price drops, why do online retailers die, crossing the street with “Chinese style”, always happy to work for the government?, why more and more guys fail to find girlfriends, etc. These topics covered a wide range of areas and most of them are triggered by recently happened events. Other topics have stronger intention: stop child abuse, biggest change around me, how to care homeless kids, winter clothing for mountain-area kids, etc. Although not many political topics are available, from the users’ perspective, participating in public debate over social issues or engage in charity activates can be viewed as a way of civic participation, which is encouraged by social media. In 2011, a famous journalist, Deng Fei, proposed a charity fund raising program for rural kids, and the initiative received 2015 responses in one day after it was posted (Wan & Ma, 2012). Although no follow-up research has examined the exact number of people who actually donated money to the program, the example shows how online charity programs are welcomed by Chinese social media users and how influential social media topics can be in a large population.

Limitation and future research

The result of H1 is the biggest limitation of this study. Not enough cases were obtained to test whether the hypothesis was supported. The hypothesis is supported but the difference is not large enough to support a more persuasive argument. One explanation of is that in both websites, political topics are covered much rarer than expected. This study did not successfully reveal the difference between Twitter and Weibo in terms of presenting political topics in media agenda, but it reaffirmed the idea that the shaping of media agenda is deeply
rooted in societal and political background. Future research could collect a larger sample to see if adequate cases could be found, or researchers could collect and look deeper into the political headlines only to analyze their political implication and potential.

The current study examined the content of media agenda provided by Twitter and Weibo, but it does not address users’ responses. Future research could explore how users use and react to these topics. Besides that, discourse analysis could be applied to examine how the headlines are constructed. In addition, in recent years, there has been a growing trend that social media sites offer content and recommendations based on users’ personal information and online behavior. Therefore, media agenda identified by using two “neutral” accounts may not be sufficient enough to explain the information received by ordinary user. To study the impact of online media agenda on users, future research need to address the issue of customized information rather than rely solely on what is revealed in the current content analysis.

**Conclusion**

As is predicted by the hypotheses, cultural differences contribute to the formation of unique media phenomena (Hofstede, 2000). In addition, the political and media system in China contributed to the unique characters of media agenda on Weibo.

Chinese citizens used to be disconnected with community or public affairs due to lack of information, lack of channels, and lack of motivations. Social media solved these problems so that civic participation is enabled and encouraged in the contemporary era (Shao et al, 2012). Findings of this study echo these arguments. At the technical level, Weibo provides a decentralized media channel (Lei, 2011) for civic participation. Social media agenda revealed
in this study illustrates how the rest two problems are addressed.

*Spotlight* provides profound and approachable information for civic participation. First, unlike thematic headlines that are broad and vague, a large portion of episodic headlines act as abstracts of latest news events. In this way users are informed of latest social events and the thus discussion topics are ready-made for them. Second, topics that are concerned with social relations are not obtrusive to users, so users are able to express their opinions with their knowledge and personal experience. Finally, because civic participation involves criticism, and scandals, accidents, disasters, etc., more negative news stories are provided to obtain broader public attention.

Users have stronger motivations to engage in civic participation because social media enhanced the idea of collectivism (Shao, 2012). Therefore, social groups and are frequently mentioned in the headlines in *Spotlight*, and group identities are emphasized as well. Besides that, a number of headlines are designed to call for public attention on specific issues, which encourages collaborative efforts.

In brief, the unique features of media agenda found in *Spotlight* reflect the fact that Weibo is acting as a platform for civic participation. These characteristics are not found in Twitter because Twitter does not play such significant role in civic participation in U.S. than in China.
Table 1

Headline topics by SNSs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SNS</th>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Law and politics</th>
<th>Economy</th>
<th>Entertainment</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Environment</th>
<th>Health</th>
<th>Social relations</th>
<th>Technology</th>
<th>Sports</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trends</td>
<td></td>
<td>3 (2.7%)</td>
<td>3(2.7%)</td>
<td>42(38.2%)</td>
<td>3(2.7%)</td>
<td>2(1.8%)</td>
<td>3(2.7%)</td>
<td>11(10.0%)</td>
<td>10(9.1%)</td>
<td>27(24.5%)</td>
<td>6(5.5%)</td>
<td>110(100.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spotlight</td>
<td></td>
<td>2(1.8%)</td>
<td>4(3.6%)</td>
<td>44(40.0%)</td>
<td>6(5.5%)</td>
<td>3(2.7%)</td>
<td>5(4.5%)</td>
<td>26(23.6%)</td>
<td>0(0.0%)</td>
<td>12(10.9%)</td>
<td>8(7.3%)</td>
<td>110(100.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>5(2.3%)</td>
<td>7(3.2%)</td>
<td>86(39.1%)</td>
<td>9(4.1%)</td>
<td>5(2.3%)</td>
<td>8(3.6%)</td>
<td>37(16.8%)</td>
<td>10(4.5%)</td>
<td>39(17.3%)</td>
<td>14(6.4%)</td>
<td>220(100.0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $\chi^2 (9, N = 220) = 24.23, p < .01, \ V = .33.$
Table 2
Headline population by SNSs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SNS</th>
<th>Society in general</th>
<th>Specific groups</th>
<th>Individuals</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trends</td>
<td>58 (52.7%)</td>
<td>11 (10.0%)</td>
<td>41 (37.3%)</td>
<td>110 (100.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spotlight</td>
<td>33 (30.0%)</td>
<td>21 (19.1%)</td>
<td>56 (50.9%)</td>
<td>110 (100.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>91 (41.4%)</td>
<td>32 (14.5%)</td>
<td>97 (44.1%)</td>
<td>220 (100.0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. χ² (2, N = 220) = 12.31, p < .01, V = .24.*

Table 3
Headline thematic/episodic by SNSs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SNS</th>
<th>Thematic</th>
<th>Episodic</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trends</td>
<td>85 (77.3%)</td>
<td>25 (22.7%)</td>
<td>110 (100.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spotlight</td>
<td>35 (31.8%)</td>
<td>75 (68.2%)</td>
<td>110 (100.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>120 (54.5%)</td>
<td>100 (45.5%)</td>
<td>220 (100.0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. χ² (1, N = 220) = 45.83, p < .01, V = .46.*
Reference


Lei, Y. (2011). The political consequences of the rise of the internet: political beliefs and


