

**A Comparative Analysis of WeChat and Facebook and Data Privacy Sentiment in China
and the United States**

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received
unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines
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Fable of Tomorrow

“Can anyone hear me?
Is anyone there?”
He called out to no one,
Completely aware.

He had lost his way,
And it all turned to black,
There was no direction,
There was no turning back.

So he wandered and called out,
Listening for a sign,
A daily ritual,
Till the end of time.

“Can anyone hear me?
Does anyone care?”
She cried out to no one,
It didn't feel fair.

She gave them everything,
She shielded their name,
She fielded their questions,
She felt their pain.

Where did it go wrong?
How could she go back?
Through deafening silence,
She trudged through the black.

“Hello?” she called out,
“Hello!” he yelled back,
They both felt a warmth,
They followed its path.

The light now returning,
The silence long killed,
They held on to that warmth,
The void now filled.

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Introduction

The World Wide Web has been expanding and evolving ever since it was invented in 1990. Today, there are over 1.5 billion websites, with more than 200 million of them active. Despite the vast number and variety of web pages available, the purposes for which these websites are accessed can be generally categorized: to socialize, to learn, to participate in forums, or to consume media, to start. However, a big-picture view of Internet usage reveals similarities and differences in usage patterns and the implementation of services in different regions of the world. This can be attributed to cultural differences and government policies, further described below.

In western society, the most heavily trafficked Internet domains include Wikipedia, Amazon, Google, YouTube, and Facebook. These all center on information retrieval, consumerism, and socialization. The most visited domains in China include Google, Baidu, QQ, WeChat, and Sina, centered on the same ideas as the West. At the surface it would seem that there is significant overlap consumption patterns of most Internet patrons. This is largely true because the Internet has consolidated and homogenized the types of services offered. The way these services are implemented, however, highlights different cultural aspects that exist between the East and the West. The most apparent of these is the fundamental difference between the so-called “me culture” of the West and the “we culture” that exists throughout the East. The technological manifestation of these cultural differences are most notable in the design of social media, as they offer profoundly different experiences to their respective users.

In recent years, the issue of online data privacy has gained significant global attention. In 2018, the European Union passed the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in order to standardize and regulate the policies in place across member countries. As a result, businesses and organizations were given a set template to follow when developing their services to abide by these security principles (Meyer, 2018). Prior to this regulation, it was difficult for businesses to conform to different legislative pieces on data privacy in place across borders, making it very costly to provide services to different countries. This weight fell disproportionately on smaller businesses that did not have the capital available to follow the varying laws (Gregersen, 2019). This is a problem currently faced by companies in the United States, which does not have any set federal legislation on data privacy and instead defers to the discretion of individual states. As such, the problems previously faced by European countries in the EU is currently dealt with by American companies as they work to fall in compliance with many different states' legislation. Similarly to the EU, China has begun to implement different data protection regulations in order to protect its citizens from corporations and hackers alike through their Cybersecurity Law (CSL). Their implementation differs, however, since the Chinese government itself maintains access to and control over all collected data. Users thus must take precautions in their communications since any anonymity regularly provided by the Internet can be uncovered by their government and users may face repercussions if their actions are found in breach of the law.

At a glance, it would seem that the ways in which the Internet is used and how it affects the lives of people from these different cultures are very similar. However, the sentiment towards data privacy and government oversight varies significantly between China and the West. These differences are rooted in aforementioned cultural differences, the effects of which can be seen

clearly in the ways people in China communicate over the internet as compared to people in the West.

Literature Review

Cultural Phenomena

Culture is an important factor in deciphering the attitudes and motivations held by members of any society. It dictates the needs of any given person and delineates the ways they attempt to satisfy said needs (Huang et al., 2018). Throughout the West, society has adopted a more individualistic culture, whereby an individual focuses on themselves and the way they are impacted by events and situations. “The individual” is thus the main unit in this society. Chinese culture is far more collectivism-oriented, in which individuals, instead, focus on how their actions will impact society at large. The main unit of society under this culture is “the family (Jian, 2009).” Such differences can be directly observed in the structure of major social media services in China vs in the West. Facebook is the most widely used social media platform throughout the United States and Europe. It allows users to create and embellish their profiles with many pictures, interests, and hobbies. The platform is designed to encourage individuals to share as much information about their lives as possible. The system used by WeChat differs in that users may only insert basic information about them as part of their profile. The application focuses on the communication aspect above all else, having fewer other non-communication-related features than Facebook. The result is an experience where interactions with friends are more intimate and unadulterated by the clutter of semi-relevant information compared to those same interactions via Facebook (Iachini, 2017).

The Rise of the Internet

The number of Internet users worldwide has increased dramatically over the past decade, with China alone adding 530 million users from 2008 to 2018 (Wenyan, 2019). The increase in Internet usage has provided companies new avenues for increasing revenue, such as the collection and distribution of private user data. Most Internet users are initially naïve and fail to realize their private information is being harvested. Consequently, they do not take necessary precautions and inadvertently compromise their own privacy. In a survey done by the China Consumer Association, 85% of respondents indicated that their data had been stolen and leaked, which oftentimes included sensitive data (Sacks and Laskai, 2019). In order to address such issues, the governing bodies of many nations enacted laws to prevent companies from engaging in such practices, as well as to set standards regarding the protection of sensitive data hosted by said companies. Here lies the dilemma: Governments such as those in China and the United States reserve the right to access personal data if it is in the interest of national security. This is most often implemented by creating back-doors into products and services that can be used by law enforcement agencies. In China, there is no way for companies to avoid abiding by these laws, forcing them to cooperate in allowing government agencies unauthorized access to their network. In the United States, however, many companies refuse to cooperate with law enforcement and do not comply. This can be interpreted as an act of defiance in order to win over potential users and assure them that their data is, indeed, protected (Cobb, 2016). What results is a fracture in the efforts to protect users and citizens as the two entities responsible for it are at ends.

STS Framework

The overall system surrounding the Internet is highly complex, involving many different institutions, governments, and individuals. Each of these is connected to one another both directly and indirectly; any action taken by one group perpetuates through the network to the rest and affects each of them uniquely. In order to organize this information in such a way that the connections could be studied, Actor-Network Theory (ANT) was used. ANT was selected as the framework for this problem because it focuses on the analysis and understanding of different combinations and interactions between actors, as well as how they all come together as a whole (Cressman, 2009).

The following are actors in the model produced: the European Parliament, Internet users within Europe, European companies, the federal government in the United States, state governments within the United States, Internet users within the United States, American companies, the Chinese government, Internet users within China, Chinese companies, and the legislative processes within Europe, the United States, and China.

Using the ANT model with the aforementioned actors, one can analyze the relations between them and how different actors influence one another. Within China, for example, the Chinese government has the strongest influence over both Chinese companies and Internet users within China. Internet users in China embody a collectivist culture, which influences the design and services provided by Chinese social media companies. These companies connect the Internet users within China in turn and provide them with the services they offer, and are also responsible for the safeguarding of users' private information. Should a company violate these responsibilities, the Chinese government will step in and hold them responsible. Internet users within China are also influenced by Internet users in America since direct communication and

the transfer of media occur every day between both parties. Any effect had on Chinese internet users by American internet users are felt by Chinese companies and the Chinese government, likely warranting a response in the other direction.

Methods

In order to analyze different aspects of the developed ANT model, three methods were used: document analysis, a case study comparing and contrasting WeChat with Facebook, and an interview with a Chinese student. These methods were chosen to provide insight into multiple facets of the systems in question, explore a variety of perspectives, and mitigate personal biases or preconceived notions.

Document Analysis

The first subject of document analysis concentrated on the experiences had by Internet users in the West and those had by Internet users in China. The data collected was mostly qualitative, with the exception of some relevant statistics. The goal in this analysis was to determine how the experiences of western Internet users and Chinese Internet users differed, what websites, services, and social media platforms were most prominent amongst both sets of users, and how cultural differences play a role in these experiences.

The second aspect of the document analysis was centered on Internet data and privacy protections in the United States, Europe, and China. As an extension of this topic, additional data was collected on the influence of government, private companies, and individual users in order to observe how they differed between the three regions.

Sources for both parts of document analysis comprised of academic and research papers from a diverse set of researchers and scholars, relevant articles on the Internet by news sources, explanatory videos, and blog posts. These sources were chosen to incorporate a host of different perspectives and provide a balanced set of opinions to draw from.

Case Study

A comparative case study was conducted in order to explore the similarities and differences between WeChat and Facebook. Social media is extremely prominent throughout both the West and China and makes up a significant portion of Internet activity for both sets of Internet users. WeChat and Facebook are the most popular social media platforms in China and the West, respectively, and were thus chosen for comparison. Additionally, both platforms focus on person-to-person interactions and allow for groups to be created so that multiple people may communicate simultaneously. The main sources of data for this case study were academic papers and research papers that explore different aspects of both platforms and provide insights into relevant cultural traits reflected by them.

Interview with a Chinese Student

Students represent a significant portion of Internet users and are intimately acquainted with the Internet and social media. As such, interviewing a student from Zhejiang University in Hangzhou, China, provided an unadulterated view into the experiences, perspectives, and opinions of an Internet user in China. Over the course of several weeks, different sets of questions were presented to the subject and his responses, as well as the resulting discussions, were documented, analyzed, and researched.

Data Analysis

Each of the data collection methods yielded significant results with parallel trends and little overall bias. Analysis has been divided into several categories in order to investigate different overarching themes.

Cultural Differences

The cultures that exist in the West and in China are notably distinct. The culture perpetuated by the West is considered individualistic; the individual is the smallest unit of survival. Culture in China is instead based on collectivist ideals, where the opinions and will of an individual and the group to which they pertain almost completely overlap. Under this cultural model, the wellbeing of the group supersedes that of the individual; thus, the smallest unit of survival is the collective (Jian, 2009).

Throughout China and neighboring territories, collectivism has been a fundamental aspect of the culture for centuries. This is generally attributed to the widespread adoption and spread of Confucianism and the associated Confucian philosophy (Wong, 2001). Briefly, the teachings and philosophy developed by Confucius outlined four core concepts: Jen, Li, Yi, and Hsiao. Jen refers to human benevolence—that is, humanity toward others as well as self-esteem for oneself. Li signifies the principles of benefit and order. It is widely interpreted as a guide to human relationships and the general order of society and life. Yi encapsulates the principles of righteousness and an inherent moral disposition to do good. The final concept, Hsiao, signifies reverence and filial piety (lander.edu, 2000). Since it was conceived over two millennia ago, Confucianism and its underlying ideals have been at the very core of Chinese culture and continue to provide a basis for the principles of Chinese society, resulting in the collectivist culture observable today (Wong, 2001).

The development of individualism in the West is far less clear. It is widely hypothesized that societal structure and the abolishment of serfdom by Louis X of France sowed the first seeds for this cultural model. The abolishment of serfdom meant that serfs would be able to buy their freedom and serve themselves instead of others (Siedentop, 2014). The notion of being able to serve oneself as opposed to measuring one's actions in terms of overall benefit to another was entirely unprecedented and widely accepted by Western populations, where a majority of constituents served under lords and kings. The centuries following the proclamation made by Louis X saw this ideal perpetuate throughout society and developed into the notion of individualism, now a dominant trait of Western culture.

Facebook and WeChat

Both Facebook and WeChat have reached and surpassed a critical number of users, bringing in over 1.3 billion and 930.8 million monthly users, respectively (Iachini, 2017). Analysis has shown that although both operate as social media platforms, Facebook functions more like a news platform whereas WeChat is more of a pure communication tool (Huang et al., 2018). There is overlap in the features offered by both platforms; however, the implementation of said features differs significantly. These discrepancies can be attributed to cultural differences, as well as differences created to target the unique audiences of both companies.

Major features offered by Facebook include messaging (peer-to-peer and groups), a personalized profile, the ability to upload images, a personal "wall" for users to post on, the ability to "like" and comment on posts, and a dating service to name a few. Users are analyzed and provided with relevant content and targeted advertisements deemed relevant to them by Facebook algorithms. Events can be organized and group pages can be created accordingly. Facebook also allows the user to set permissions controlling who can view their content. These

permissions vary from allowing just friends to view it to anyone else with an account. At its surface, the platform exists to allow users to stay keep up to date on the happenings in friends' lives. The emphasis on being able to share ones thoughts and media through comments or posts, combined with the system of likes to quantify approval of a post, has been determined to make users more self-conscious and self-centered. These patterns are suggestive of a more individualistic culture throughout the platform, consistent with the aforementioned observations made on Western culture.

WeChat was inspired by the Canadian social media platform Kik in 2010. The main focus of the platform is messaging (peer-to-peer and to groups). User profiles are sparse and do not allow for much embellishment. The size of groups is limited to 500 users, with other limitations in place to discourage larger groups as opposed to smaller ones (Harwit, 2017). Users can also post "moments" which can be viewed and "liked" only by friends. WeChat allows users to see their friends' locations, transfer money, message a random user based on proximity, and even has its own integrated search engine. The design and features implemented by WeChat, while diverse, still emphasize communication with the collective, paralleling the ideal of collectivism prevalent throughout China.

Data Privacy and Legislation

The United States federal government has yet to implement nationwide legislation regarding data protection, user privacy, or cybersecurity. These are mostly left to individual states to develop, pass, and implement (O'Connor, 2018). This creates a challenge for companies to adhere to many different sets of legislation simultaneously and ultimately harms smaller businesses with fewer resources to dedicate to adherence. China and the European Union have both passed their own pieces of legislation which covers all users within their respective borders.

The lack of federal legislation in the United States for these issues is not to say the Internet is lawless in America. The government can still punish users committing malicious acts over the Internet under other, more general laws. Additionally, the existence of such legislation in China and the European Union does not suggest that Internet users in those regions are safe from online threats.

To create a WeChat account, a phone number is required. Since the phone system is state-sponsored in China, this means that every user can be uniquely identified and their posts on the social media platform can be traced back to them (Harwit, 2017). Additionally, the Chinese government has access to all data generated by users – privacy legislation is only applicable to companies and individuals. Similarly, in the West, the liberties that can be taken by companies with regards to private data are limited, although more so in the European Union than in the United States. The governments in these regions have often denied any sort of mass-surveillance but have been caught doing exactly that on many occasions.

It has also been shown that users of both Facebook and WeChat have generally low trust in these companies and do not believe they have their best interests in mind (Huang et al., 2018). In spite of this low threshold for trust, hundreds of millions of users still put their personal information and engage in intimate conversation using these platforms. It appears as if these platforms and others like them have permeated throughout society so prominently that it is almost impossible to stay connected to friends, family, and the rest of the world without them.

Discussion

The differences in platform design between Facebook and WeChat are emblematic of the cultural differences that exist between the two societies. WeChat places very little priority in

allowing users to express themselves outside of the messages they send. Facebook, on the other hand, prioritizes self-expression and individuality. These ideals are foundational to their respective services and most additional features were created in order to attract more users and increase the overall user base of each platform. In spite of these inherent differences, the core reason behind using social media remains the same for both platforms: people want to stay in touch and communicate with other people.

Given the significance of social media and the Internet in today's day and age, it is unsurprising that governments monitor and legislate activities taking place on them. The prevailing mindset in the West is that companies and the government alike should not be able to capture this information and store it, much less sell or distribute it. Similarly, in China, people do not approve of having their data harvested by corporations. Their perception of government surveillance is different from that of Western countries, however. Instead, they see those engaging in nefarious activities as deviant and harmful to society. Thus, when the government detects such activity and punishes those responsible, they see the collective as being protected. As such, the invasion of privacy required as a counterpart to the safety it provides is seen as necessary and is generally met with approval.

Conclusion

In spite of cultural differences, looking at the most heavily trafficked websites in the United States, Europe, and China highlights certain trends and similarities between users of different regions. Social media, consumerism, and entertainment are consistently the most accessed services on the Internet, thus suggesting that a homogenization in what people use the Internet for has occurred all over the Internet, irrespective of location. Cultural differences

inspire differences within these domains and implementations of aforementioned services tend to differ accordingly. These differences do not take away from the overall purpose of the platform; rather, they are tailored to fit the needs and expectations of users while adhering to users' social and cultural norms.

As the number of daily users continues to grow and as new Internet services come to be, governments will need to continue drafting, passing, and updating legislation accordingly. The EU and China have already begun taking significant steps to ensure their constituents are protected online just as they are offline. The United States, meanwhile, still has significant ground to cover before a set of unified laws are put into place. This will be an uphill battle, as the legislative process is typically lengthy, especially when dealing with matters of serious consequence. Furthermore, lobbyists on either side of the issue will be pushing their agendas constantly.

Given the rate of innovation and the intense competition for Internet users' time amongst Internet service-based companies, it is clear that they cannot remain static if they wish to remain popular. New features are added regularly in order to attract new users and to continue engaging the existing user base. Companies are acutely aware of cultural differences that exist between different regions and thus must devise ways of appealing to people of various backgrounds in order to proliferate in international settings. These services are thus highly dynamic and could very well change drastically in the coming years to keep up with new societal trends.

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