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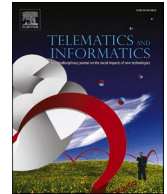
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Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Telematics and Informatics

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/tele

Exploring public perceptions of the COVID-19 vaccine online from a cultural perspective: Semantic network analysis of two social media platforms in the United States and China

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ARTICLE INFO

Keyword:

COVID-19
Vaccine
Social media
Cultural characteristic
United States
China

ABSTRACT

The development and uptake of the COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019) vaccine is a top priority in stifling the COVID-19 pandemic. How the public perceives the COVID-19 vaccine is directly associated with vaccine compliance and vaccination coverage. This study takes a cultural sensitivity perspective and adopts two well-known social media platforms in the United States (Twitter) and China (Weibo) to conduct a public perception comparison around the COVID-19 vaccine. By implementing semantic network analysis, results demonstrate that the two countries' social media users overlapped in themes concerning domestic vaccination policies, priority groups, challenges from COVID-19 variants, and the global pandemic situation. However, Twitter users were prone to disclose individual vaccination experiences, express anti-vaccine attitudes. In comparison, Weibo users manifested evident deference to authorities and exhibited more positive feelings toward the COVID-19 vaccine. Those disparities were explained by the cultural characteristics' differences between the two countries. The findings provide insights into comprehending public health issues in cross-cultural contexts and illustrate the potential of utilizing social media to conduct health informatics studies and investigate public perceptions during public health crisis time.

1. Introduction

Vaccination is one of the most critical components of public health programs and significantly contributed to inhibiting the prevalence of infectious diseases (Habibabadi and Haghghi, 2019). Currently, the rapid development and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines are global imperative to restrain the worsening of the COVID-19 pandemic (Graham, 2020). As of July 26, 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic is responsible for over 0.19 billion confirmed cases and nearly 4.2 million deaths (World Health Organization, 2021). Meanwhile, more than 200 COVID vaccine candidates are under development (World Health Organization, n.d.). Several vaccines have been rolled out in some countries (e.g., the United States, China, the United Kingdom) for the most susceptible groups. Some people are longing for the rapid development and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines for achieving sufficient herd immunity to terminate this grave global health predicament (Graham, 2020; Kaur and Gupta, 2020). Nevertheless, a considerable number of people

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2021.101712>

Received 3 April 2021; Received in revised form 28 July 2021; Accepted 30 August 2021

Available online 10 September 2021

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are hesitant to get vaccinated and even express antagonism, according to several large-scale surveys (Lazarus et al., 2021; Malik et al., 2020; Murphy et al., 2021; Ruiz and Bell, 2021).

Social media has been increasingly adopted as a major means for many people to share and seek health-related information (Habibabadi and Haghghi, 2019; Xu, 2019). On the one hand, social media serves as an ideal signal tower, helps researchers identify public opinions and perceptions of health issues (Luo et al., 2021; Rains, 2020). Investigating public perceptions through social media content is a cost-effective way. It can unravel more authentic and pluralized opinions compared to traditional public opinion surveys (Henrich and Holmes, 2011). On the other hand, online vaccine information is a mixture of scientific evidence, advocacy, misinformation, and even conspiracies (Dunn et al., 2017). People's exposure to various kinds of information is associated with their succeeding vaccination attitudes and intentions (Dunn et al., 2017; Xu, 2019). These backgrounds advocate examining public perceptions toward vaccines online, which undoubtedly benefits researchers and public health practitioners in excavating public concerns about vaccines, and further assisting the design of effective social media-based vaccination persuasive strategies.

Following the vein, this study aims to delve into social media platforms to explore public perceptions of the COVID-19 vaccine. Additionally, we incorporate the cultural perspective to further probe the relationship between public perceptions and cultural characteristics. Culture is a largely overlooked ingredient in preceding studies around public health issues (Dutta, 2007; Kreuter and McClure, 2004). However, cultural characteristics are directly or indirectly related to the acceptance and compliance of health promotion programs (Pasick et al., 1996). Understanding culture is indispensable to comprehend the health behaviors of specific groups (Kreuter and McClure, 2004). Although the most recent COVID-19 vaccine research includes several transnational studies (e.g., Lazarus et al., 2021), the researchers barely scratched the surface of culture by comparing results from a handful of countries rather than operating in-depth interpretations combining countries' cultural backgrounds.

Specifically, the United States and China, as two countries pretty disparate in culture (Tang and Peng, 2015) and vaccination intention (Lazarus et al., 2021), were selected as our analytical objects. We applied the culture-based framework and utilized the semantic network analysis (SNA) to discover prominent discussion themes toward the COVID-19 vaccine on the two countries' representative social media platforms. Regarding the findings, we illustrate the thematic differences with cultural theories to situate people's expressions in their corresponding cultural settings. The implications of this study are threefold. Firstly, we intend to exert the strength of social media as a public opinion bonanza to recognize how people perceive the COVID-19 vaccine; this is particularly necessary for the dearth of relevant research on public views of this relatively novel vaccine. Secondly, this culture-based comparative study would forward current scholarship on the connection between public opinion and culture, also demonstrates social media's efficacy in conducting multicultural public health studies. Thirdly, our endeavor aims to present a comprehensive landscape of public perceptions of the COVID-19 vaccine rather than focusing on specific aspects (e.g., vaccine misinformation, vaccine hesitancy, vaccine promotion). We believe our attempts are conducive to understanding the state of mind of the general population. The most remarkable novelty of the current work is examining public perceptions comparatively through a cultural perspective instead of targeting one specific country. We believe our endeavors contribute to a deeper understanding of the opinion climate encompassing the COVID-19 vaccine across countries, also provide a preliminary reference to future transnational health informatics studies.

In line with our research objectives, the rest of this paper is organized as follows. In sections two to four, we first outlined studies concerning vaccine discussions on social media platforms, especially the latest progress of COVID-19 vaccine perceptions exploration performed on social media derived from the automated text analysis approach. The cultural perspective and analytic objects follow. Section five describes data sources and the SNA method leveraged in this study. In section six, we demonstrate the detailed results. We also discuss our findings from the cultural perspective and the remaining limitations in sections seven and eight.

2. Vaccine themes on social media

People are more and more frequently turning to social media for vaccine information (Massey et al., 2016; Shoup et al., 2019). Social media, in turn, can influence users' knowledge and attitudes about vaccination (Lama et al., 2019). Generally speaking, social media's vaccine information can be split into two crude categories, namely the pro-vaccine theme and the anti-vaccine theme (Featherstone et al., 2020a; Ruiz and Barnett, 2015). The pro-vaccine strand emphasizes vaccines' effectiveness in preventing diseases, while the anti-vaccine strand usually revolves around adverse vaccine reactions, potential detrimental impacts, misinformation, or conspiracy theories (Featherstone et al., 2020b; Nan and Madden, 2012). Deiner et al. (2019) pointed out that anti-vaccine discourses are always deficient in scientific evidence but more prevailing than pro-vaccine discourses. Xu and Guo (2018) further pointed out that online anti-vaccine speech was more likely to garner attention because people are predisposed to share and comment on them than pro-vaccine speech. Considering the prevalence of anti-vaccine expressions online, a large number of scholars endeavored to explore the anti-vaccine landscape on social media (e.g., Johnson et al., 2020) and how to combat social media vaccine misinformation (e.g., Zhang et al., 2021).

Researches concerning specific kind of vaccine provide a more inclusive picture of vaccine themes. For instance, Henrich and Holmes (2011) used news articles' online comments to unearth themes regarding the H1N1 vaccine. The major themes include fear of H1N1, media responsibility, government competency, government trustworthiness, and so on. Lama et al. (2019) conducted HPV vaccine research on Reddit. They found that the most popular topics were HPV vaccine political debate, followed by HPV disease and immunity, the HPV vaccine schedule, and HPV vaccine side effects. A topic modeling analysis based on discussion forums excavated six themes pervaded in vaccine-related discussions, including prominent figures, reports of side reactions, the duration of vaccine immunity, eradication of diseases through vaccination, risk assessments for child vaccination, and trust or distrust in the medical industry (Skeppstedt et al., 2018). Featherstone et al. (2020b) exploited the Twitter corpus to explore childhood vaccination themes. Results revealed that HPV vaccination as a preventative measure was the most prominent theme; subsequent themes included MMR vaccine-

autism link and measles outbreak rates.

When it comes to exploring public perceptions of COVID-19 vaccines on social media, the most prominent approach is examining public opinion with the power of topic modeling and automated sentiment analysis. For example, [Hu et al. \(2021\)](#) investigated the spatiotemporal trends of public perception and sentiment toward COVID-19 vaccines with the help of sentiment analysis, emotion analysis, topic modeling, and word cloud mapping. [Saleh et al. \(2021\)](#), [Lyu et al. \(2021\)](#), and [Guntuku et al. \(2021\)](#) wielded comparable strategies to answer similar questions. This series of studies provide an excellent reference to our work on exerting the advantages of a plethora of automated text analytical techniques. However, we are aware that there still exists space for improvement. On the one hand, the antecedent study failed to illuminate words' associations in their studies. Topic modeling or word cloud merely displays prominent words under specific topics or semantic clusters independently. We desire to employ SNA's associative schema, which is more intuitive, to supplement the underlying isolated schema of the topic modeling approach. On the other hand, most extant studies about COVID-19 are country-specific (e.g., [Gever et al., 2021](#); [Lee et al., 2021](#)), with a heavy focus on the U.S. ([Hu et al., 2021](#)). Our research is one of the few studies that implement a cross-national perspective by emphasizing the role of culture.

In summary, former scholars' efforts illustrate the appropriateness of adopting social media data to scrutinize public perceptions of vaccines, along with the potential of automatic text analysis, which outperforms manual coding in processing large-scale data. Moreover, previous attempts often relied on a single platform or particular context to outline public perception toward vaccines, leaving a research space for cross-cultural public perception comparison. Since social media carries voluminous expressions, reflecting the public's views and attitudes about vaccines, we believe our effort could portray the current opinion contour of the COVID-19 vaccine in two countries and inform concerted, tailored health communication efforts to raise the COVID-19 vaccine uptake rates in the two cultures.

3. Cross-country perspective and cultural differences

Culture has been a seriously overlooked component in health communication studies. Most health promotion efforts linger on the individual level ingredients (e.g., cognitive process, behavioral logic) but are insensitive to the sociocultural-economic contexts within which health experiences are inhabited ([Dutta, 2007](#)). [Kreuter and McClure \(2004\)](#) argued that a group's cultural characteristics might directly or indirectly connect with its health-related priorities, decisions, and behaviors. Thus, culture functions as a pivotal audience-segmentation variable. Bearing culture in mind also enhances the effectiveness of health communication efforts by informing a reasonable arrangement of source, message, and channel factors.

Although examining culture's role in health communication is still in its infancy, some studies have presented the value of recognizing culture's roles. For example, [Pan et al. \(2020a\)](#) carried out an online survey concerning HPV vaccination intention in the United States and China. The results illustrated cross-cultural differences in how contradictory information exposure and social norms affect intentions to receive the HPV vaccine in the two countries. Americans are less tolerant of uncertainty so that contradictory message exposure significantly diminishes American respondents' vaccination intentions. In contrast, injunctive norms were positively associated with Chinese respondents' vaccination intention due to the collectivistic culture's profound influence. [Tang and Peng's \(2015\)](#) research on health reporting in the United States and China revealed significant reporting differences in controllability attribution, temporal orientation, statistics usage, and citing authorities. Those disparities can partly be attributed to the two countries' cultural traits, including individualism versus collectivism, long- and short-term orientation, and power distance.

Enlightened by the aforementioned, we take the cultural sensitivity approach as a reference. [Dutta \(2007\)](#) conceptualized culture as a relatively stable set of shared values, beliefs, and practices within a community, which can be a criterion to differentiate a community from another. The hidden cultural dimensions include individualism-collectivism, power distance, and so on. Adhering to the cultural sensitivity approach implies comprehending specific cultural needs of given communities and anchoring health-relevant information in a particular cultural context. Only in this way can a researcher recognize certain health communication phenomena' underlying logics. Accordingly, Hofstede's cultural dimensions model can be a concrete guide for applying the cultural sensitivity approach ([Hofstede, 2011](#); [Hofstede and Hofstede, 1993](#)). [Hofstede \(2011\)](#) also views culture as a differentiating indicator for groups. The four fundamental pillars of Hofstede's model include power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism, and masculinity versus femininity. These four dimensions are essential and enduring, representing a given cultural group's collective mindset, which affects affiliated individual's daily perceptions and behavioral patterns. According to [Hofstede \(2011\)](#), power distance stands for how the less powerful members accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. Uncertainty avoidance denotes a society's tolerance for ambiguity and variability. Individualism versus collectivism alludes to the degree to which individuals in a community are integrated into groups. Masculinity versus femininity reflects the distribution of values between gender in society. Country comparisons are realizable based upon the identified dimensions, such as the "Compare Countries" function in Hofstede Insights ([Hofstede Insights, 2021](#)) website derived from the cultural dimensions model.

4. Why the United States and China?

This study picks two countries - the United States and China, as analytic objects. First of all, the two countries all experienced a crucible owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. China was once the epicenter of the COVID-19 outbreak. However, the Chinese government adopted numerous effective preventive and control measures to mitigate the contagion, making China one of the world's first countries to tame the spread of COVID-19 ([Luo et al., 2020](#)). The United States also suffered huge impacts from COVID-19, but its countermeasures did not meet public expectations. [Tanne \(2020\)](#) argued that the U.S. government downplayed the pandemic's urgency at first, let alone worked out an efficient national plan to combat the COVID-19. The sluggish counteracting resulted in a surge in

infection rate and mortality rate within a short time. Things turned better after the new president took office in January 2021, mainly credited to the Biden administration's firm battle plan, mandatory requirements, and scientific precautions (Siemaszko, 2021). As two superpowers, the United States and China devote themselves to the COVID-19 vaccine development, manufacture, and deployment. The most remarkable instances include the mRNA vaccine manufactured by the American pharmaceutical corporation *Moderna* (Haque and Pant, 2020) and the inactivated vaccine produced by the Beijing-based biotechnology company *Sinovac* (Tan, 2021).

Second, the U.S. and China show significant differences in cultural characteristics. The Hofstede indexes exhibit clear distinctions on power distance (for the U.S.: 40, for China: 80), individualism versus collectivism (for the U.S.: 91, for China: 20), uncertainty avoidance (for the U.S.: 46, for China: 30) between the two countries (Hofstede Insights, n.d.). In addition, prior studies illustrated the rationale and potential to compare China and the U.S. based on the culture-sensitive approach in the health communication context (e. g., Ding and Zhang, 2010; Pan et al., 2020a; Tang and Peng, 2015). In this vein, it is viable for us to compare public perceptions of COVID-19 vaccines under the cross-country perspective and infer the reasons behind perception differences from the cultural dimensions. All the aforementioned informs our research questions.

RQ1: What central themes about the COVID-19 vaccine emerged on American and Chinese social media platforms?

RQ2: Are there any thematic differences exist between the two countries' public perceptions of the COVID-19 vaccine on social media? If any, do they reflect cultural differences?

Jiang et al. (2018) proposed that sentiment analysis is often bound up with thematic analysis because it facilitates understanding attitudes toward an attitudinal subject. Sentiment analysis is particularly indispensable in vaccine studies because anti-vaccine sentiment has prevailed online for a long time (Featherstone et al., 2020b). Whether the negative sentiment still plays the dominant role in the COVID-19 vaccine context needs empirical validation. Hence, we put forward the last question.

RQ3: What's the sentiment distribution toward the COVID-19 vaccine on American and Chinese social media platforms, respectively?

5. Methods

This study employs SNA to explore the hidden themes of social media discussions, through which the researchers can grasp the principal dimensions of public perceptions toward the COVID-19 vaccine. SNA is a popular branch in computerized content analysis, which can supplement traditional human-coded content analysis by enhancing reliability and overcoming the crude categorization of the analytic framework (Danowski, 1993; Doerfel and Barnett, 1999). Rooted in the cognitive paradigm and the linguistic theory of frame semantics, SNA extracts latent semantic structures by analyzing concept associations (Calabrese et al., 2019). Therefore, we can identify the importance of words in an interrelated approach instead of an isolated perspective and comprehend discussion themes arisen from emerging clusters of concepts (Featherstone et al., 2020b; Li et al., 2019; Smith and Parrott, 2012).

5.1. Data collection

Social media is suitable for conducting comparative studies and enables researchers to obtain miscellaneous digital traces (including multilingual social media posts) unobtrusively (van Atteveldt and Peng, 2018). Here, we select Twitter as the representative of American social media platforms for two reasons. On the one hand, Twitter is a popular social media platform with a large user base and carries heated discussions about vaccines and vaccination (Featherstone et al., 2020a; Featherstone et al., 2020b). On the other hand, Twitter has been a social signal tower amid the COVID-19 health crisis. Heterogeneous users actively expressed their concerns and perceptions on Twitter, making it an outstanding field for infodemiology study (Chandrasekaran et al., 2020; Saha et al., 2020).

Likewise, Weibo, one of China's leading social media service providers, was chosen as the representative of Chinese social media. Weibo has been lauded as the Chinese equivalent of Twitter. It also has numerous users and contributes to the rise of civil society and the public sphere in China (Lu and Qiu, 2013). During the COVID-19 period, Weibo serves as an information aggregation platform where people can find epidemic-related information quickly and effectively (Huang et al., 2020). Furthermore, Weibo's user-generated posts have the potential to predict COVID-19 infected cases (Shen et al., 2020), indicate public reactions as well as psychological conditions (Su et al., 2020).

The time range was designated from December 1, 2020, to February 20, 2021. According to statistical results from the *Our World in Data* (n.d.), the COVID-19 vaccine doses administered per 100 people in the United States and China were close to 0.1 on December 1, 2020, which means the vaccination process in the two countries were at the initial stage. The closing date was set as the day before our formal analysis.

We utilized an advanced web scraping tool named *Twint* (twintproject, n.d.), which can bypass Twitter's official API limits to get all eligible tweets under specified search conditions. Following the work of Featherstone et al. (2020b), the search terms are comprised of "vaccine," "vaccination," "shot," "immunization," "immunisation" in combination with COVID-19 terminologies "COVID-19," "coronavirus," and "COVID." We only kept the original tweets (i.e., discarded retweets and quotes) to eliminate replicated and redundant information, which may dilute the genuine public perceptions (Calabrese et al., 2020). After excluding non-English tweets, duplicates, and tweets sent outside the United States, 756,118 tweets were preserved for further analysis. Weibo posts were retrieved in a similar approach. An automated web crawling platform named *SocialSensor* (SocialSensor, n.d.) was adopted to collect qualified posts. Given the unique feature of Chinese words, four search terms were assigned, including "COVID-19 vaccine," "COVID-19 pneumonia vaccine," "coronavirus vaccine," and "SARS-CoV-2 vaccine" (see [Supplementary Data 1](#) for the Chinese meaning of the search terms). 362,950 Weibo posts were kept after filtering.

5.2. Analytic strategies

Drew on previous SNA studies (Calabrese et al., 2019; Calabrese et al., 2020; Featherstone et al., 2020a; Featherstone et al., 2020b; Kwon et al., 2009; Ruiz and Barnett, 2015), we analyze the Twitter and Weibo corpus in the subsequent three steps.

First of all, we performed preprocessing on the two corpora, including converting the posts to lowercase for term unification, removing URLs, stopwords, punctuations, special characters, and mentioned users. We also merged synonyms and ruled out syntactic function words for accuracy (relevant terms are displayed in Supplementary Data 1). Lemmatization was conducted afterward, which outperformed stemming for it would not collapse derivationally related words (e.g., “organized” to “organize” rather than “organ”) (Maier et al., 2018). Tokenization was adopted on the processed corpora; words with frequencies above the mean frequency in each corpus (mean frequency of the Twitter corpus: 100.01, mean frequency of the Weibo corpus: 112.14) were saved in the analysis. Two widely used natural language packages named spaCy (spaCy, n.d.) and jieba (fxsjy, n.d.) were applied to handle the tweets and Weibo posts in the Python programming environment.

In the second step, we implemented semantic matrices generation from the processed corpora. Danowski (1993) argued that word-pair link strength could be operationalized as the number of times each word occurs with another when it comes to co-occurrence measurement. Miller (1956) and Cowan (2016) congruently suggested that the number of chunks a person can process in memory is five. Hence, words that occurred within a five-word window were considered linked, and the co-occurrence frequency of each word pair was accumulated. This task was also fulfilled in Python.

In the third step, an open-source network analysis software Gephi was used to visualize the semantic networks (Bastian et al., 2009). Given our corpora’s large size, the top 100 words by frequency were included in the network visualization. We further carried out modularity analysis in Gephi to detect semantic clusters and calculated network statistical indicators to measure words’ importance. Three measures were considered following Hanneman and Riddle’s (2005) suggestions. Network density is the sum of edges divided by the number of all possible edges, representing how intertwined the words are. Degree refers to the number of edges connecting each word, which is a straightforward way to assess each word’s centrality. Eigenvector centrality is another way to gauge centrality by finding the most central words based on the network’s overall structure. These three network evaluation metrics were widely used in former semantic network studies (Calabrese et al., 2020; Featherstone et al., 2020a; Featherstone et al., 2020b).

Sentiment analysis can unveil the overall attitudes (positive, negative, or neutral) toward the COVID-19 vaccine. Also, sentiment analysis is crucial to capture the public’s reaction towards an emerging infectious disease (Albahli et al., 2021; Samuel et al., 2020). We selected two automated sentiment analysis tools for the posts. The LIWC (Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count) reads English texts and counts the percentage of emotional words (Tausczik and Pennebaker, 2010). It has been proved as a powerful tool in analyzing tweets’

Table 1

The top 30 central words in the overall semantic networks.

No.	Twitter			Weibo		
	Word	Degree	Eigenvector centrality	Word	Degree	Eigenvector centrality
1	covid	5848	0.049	vaccine	8511	0.066
2	vaccine	5848	0.049	covid	8190	0.066
3	vaccination	5717	0.049	vaccinate	7459	0.063
4	shot	5574	0.049	epidemic	7063	0.062
5	coronavirus	5283	0.047	china	6709	0.060
6	people	5242	0.048	america	6400	0.059
7	health	4802	0.046	coronavirus	6223	0.058
8	shoot	4800	0.045	country	5618	0.056
9	need	4749	0.046	pneumonia	5491	0.055
10	new	4736	0.045	global	5129	0.053
11	work	4587	0.045	work	4977	0.052
12	today	4555	0.044	uk	4909	0.052
13	time	4460	0.044	time	4889	0.052
14	day	4444	0.044	company	4667	0.050
15	know	4433	0.044	user	4621	0.049
16	year	4349	0.044	virus	4562	0.049
17	news	4308	0.043	scheme	4354	0.049
18	receive	4284	0.043	situation	4279	0.049
19	week	4268	0.043	market	4203	0.047
20	good	4233	0.043	government	4124	0.047
21	use	4215	0.043	provide	4096	0.047
22	come	4164	0.043	coverage	4068	0.046
23	help	4163	0.043	shot	4063	0.046
24	state	4153	0.043	health	3979	0.045
25	vaccinate	4126	0.042	relevant	3967	0.046
26	think	4119	0.042	influence	3918	0.046
27	dose	4108	0.042	test	3892	0.045
28	want	4094	0.042	beijing	3866	0.044
29	start	4053	0.042	international	3841	0.045
30	look	3887	0.041	world	3807	0.044

Note. Words from the Weibo corpus are translated into English for ease of comparison. All words are presented in lower case.

Table 2
The summary output of modularity analysis of two semantic networks.

Network	Theme	Top associations		Association count	Cluster color	Share of the network (%)
Twitter	Vaccine promotion and anti-vaccine discourses	old	year	5065	Purple	39.0
		die	people	5029		
		people	vaccinate	4341		
		high	risk	3881		
	Personal vaccination experience	flu	year	3592	Green	17.0
		dose	receive	11,012		
		dose	second	9420		
		administer	dose	4839		
		dose	pfizer	3488		
	Vaccination priority groups	moderna	pfizer	3408	Blue	12.0
		health	worker	7695		
		care	health	6365		
		health	public	4875		
		care	worker	4618		
	Government's constantly updating vaccination policies	care	home	3378	Orange	12.0
		mass	site	3846		
		open	site	2560		
		biden	trump	1490		
		biden	plan	1357		
	Challenges from COVID-19 variants	mass	open	1347	Black	10.0
new		variant	4760			
case		new	2842			
case		death	2620			
death		report	1916			
Vaccination progress worldwide	live	update	1698	Red	10.0	
	good	news	2461			
	drive	world	2311			
	drive	india	1825			
	begin	drive	1784			
Weibo	Vaccination policies and priority groups	india	world	1608	Purple	40.0
		group	vaccinate	51,917		
		group	key	33,976		
		work	vaccinate	31,514		
	Domestic vaccines' research and development	vaccinate	key	30,439	Green	22.0
		free	whole people	23,308		
		sinopharm	corporation	19,861		
		china	sinopharm	18,959		
		china	corporation	16,656		
	Challenges from COVID-19 variants	china	biology	13,960	Blue	13.0
		china	sinovac	10,997		
		epidemic	prevention	25,975		
		variant	virus	20,294		
		global	epidemic	11,370		
	The global epidemic progress	variant	uk	10,162	Orange	9.0
		variant	influence	5227		
		case	confirmed	25,436		
		increase	confirmed	13,302		
		death	case	12,208		
	WHO's advocacy and evaluation	increase	case	11,630	Black	8.0
confirmed		sum	11,270			
who		organization	20,943			
nucleic acid		test	14,553			
health		hygiene	6070			
Epidemic development in the United States	press	organization	2417	Red	8.0	
	conference	antibody	test			
	antibody	test	2043			
	president	america	8594			
	biden	america	7440			
	time	america	6324			
	president	biden	5823			
	coverage	america	5376			

Note. Words from the Weibo corpus are translated into English for ease of comparison. Some Chinese words may correspond to two English terms. All words are presented in lower case.

policies, the rollout of vaccines for emergency use, and key groups in the immunization plan. The second-largest theme talks about domestic vaccines' research and development (22.0% of the network). Some typical corporations such as *Sinopharm* and *Sinovac* frequently appear in this cluster. The third theme addresses challenges from COVID-19 variants (13.0% of the network), especially the impacts of the mutant virus in the U.K. on existing preventive measures' effectiveness and the stability of the world economy. The global epidemic progress comes after the third theme (9% of the network), mainly refers to the increasing trend of confirmed and death cases worldwide. The fifth theme is tightly related to the World Health Organization (WHO, see [Supplementary Data 3](#) for all abbreviations and their original forms), concerning WHO's advocacy of nucleic acid and antibody tests as well as WHO's evaluation of Chinese vaccines (8% of the network). The last theme talks about epidemic development in the United States (8% of the network). The most central words in this cluster are *president*, *Biden*, and *America*.

6.2. Sentiment analysis

Sentiment analysis indicates that neutral tweets occupied the largest territory in the Twitter corpus with a percentage of 49.99% ($n = 377,951$), followed by positive tweets (30.62%, $n = 231,507$) and negative tweets (19.40%, $n = 146,660$). In comparison, the majority of Weibo posts are positive (40.64%, $n = 147,521$), followed by neutral posts (37.44%, $n = 135,871$) and negative posts (21.92%, $n = 79,558$).

7. Discussion and conclusion

To echo the research questions and cultural sensitivity approach, we elucidate the results in a comparative way. One of the most remarkable distinctions between the two corpora is personal vaccination experience occupied a large area in Twitter's semantic network. However, Weibo users rarely mentioned self-experience and vaccination feelings. This narrative discrepancy can be partly ascribed to the inherent difference between individualism and collectivism. [Triandis \(2001\)](#) claimed that people from individualist societies are relatively autonomous and independent from groups; they always set their personal goals above the group aims. People in collectivist cultures are likely to have close interactions with their in-groups and prioritize group aims. Furthermore, when integrating individualism versus collectivism into the health communication context, [Lu et al. \(2020\)](#) and [Lu et al. \(2021\)](#) claimed that individualistic cultures endorse self-reliability and personal control over health risks. Contrarily, collectivistic cultures highlight interdependence and external social norms to handle health risks. In this logic, individualists are inclining to make vaccination decisions out of their own will. They also have more freedom to express their thoughts and attitudes on the premise of self-determined health behaviors. For collectivists, they need to be highly embedded into their surroundings. Due to the restrictions from group norms and pressure, they are more likely to hide individualized feelings and dispositional thoughts to keep coherence with others or avoid negative social sanctions. Besides, China's somewhat compulsory group vaccination scheme contributed to this disparity. Xinhua Net once reported that China is administering COVID-19 vaccines to susceptible groups all over the country for a sufficient vaccination rate to avoid the resurgence of the pandemic ([Sun et al., 2021](#)). According to [Ajzen's \(1991\)](#) theory of planned behavior, people's behavior is substantially affected by normative beliefs and subjective norms. It is highly probable for people to follow the perceived social standards and significant others' actions to reach a behavioral decision, which is quite remarkable in collectivistic cultures. This finding coincides with [Pan et al. \(2020a\)](#) research to some degree, which discovered that perceived injunctive norms were positively related to behavioral intention for the Chinese respondents but did not work for the American respondents. To summarize, living in a country deeply influenced by collectivism, Chinese people are prone to follow communal rules and hide self-experience.

Another incongruity resides in the great quantity of anti-vaccination discussions on Twitter, but similar discourse is rare on Weibo. The anti-vaccine narrative on Twitter has been repeatedly accentuated in former studies ([Kang et al., 2017](#); [Kata, 2012](#); [Murphy et al., 2021](#); [Radzikowski et al., 2016](#)). Possible determinants of the anti-vaccine mind include individual-level factors (e.g., vaccination knowledge), group-level factors (e.g., community pressure), and factors from the broader socio-cultural context ([Dubé et al., 2013](#)). We postulate that the flourishing anti-vaccine narrative on Twitter is partly due to American culture's high uncertainty avoidance characteristic. Individuals from high uncertainty avoidance circumstances are likely to feel uncomfortable in the face of ambiguity and transition. One comparative study on HPV vaccination intention corroborated contradictory vaccine messages directly decreased intention among American respondents than Chinese respondents ([Pan et al., 2020a](#)). COVID-19 vaccine is still an innovative therapeutic intervention for human beings; its efficacy and adverse reactions need more scientific tests and continuous monitoring ([Luo et al., 2021](#)). Therefore, people from a culture with less tolerance for uncertainty are probably exuding mistrust, opposition, and psychological resistance toward the new medical invention. Apart from Chinese people's high tolerance for uncertainties, another reason for the lack of anti-vaccine narrative on Weibo could be the strict control of online content in China. Since authorities greatly endorse the COVID-19 vaccination plan, it is hard and less tolerant to post contradictory narratives against the national will ([Xu, 2014](#)).

Users from the two platforms were unanimously concerned about COVID-19 vaccination policies, priority groups, mutant virus, and the epidemic trend of COVID-19 worldwide. But Chinese users paid more attention to international organizations like WHO. Furthermore, the positive tone dominates Weibo posts compared to the overwhelming neutral tone among tweets. We believe the power distance difference between the two countries accounts for this phenomenon. [Perea and Slater \(1999\)](#) summarized that persons from a culture high in power distance tend to have less doubt of authorities. While those from the low power distance culture generally show weaker deference toward authorities. Moreover, preceding studies revealed that paternalistic leadership and vertical guidance are more effective in achieving group goals and evoking ideal performance in cultures with high power distance ([Aycan, 2006](#); [Gelfand et al., 2007](#)). This finding is particularly true when coping with communal risks; people are accustomed to following superiors and accepting the hierarchical structure in a high power distance environment. Chinese people have the disposition to depend on

established agencies and take their assessments as golden standards. For instance, many Chinese social media users were curious about WHO's evaluation results of Chinese-made vaccines' effectiveness. In the meantime, their attention evolved with media coverage and official statistics, such as the fluctuation of confirmed case counts, signals from the government's press conferences. Regarding the predominant positive tone in Weibo scope, former researchers reported that stricter rules always exist in high power distance settings; those rules suppress ordinary people's expression of negative emotions (Grandey et al., 2010; Moran et al., 2013). Our results partially bolster this finding. Chinese social media users may subconsciously control their negative emotional expression under the background of cultural settings. In brief, compared with the American people, the Chinese showed high deference to official institutions and were less likely to express negative sentiments regarding the COVID-19 vaccine issue.

Overall, this study supplements the jigsaw puzzle of the COVID-19 vaccine research by applying a cultural lens to understand differentiated public perceptions toward the same issue. As two countries differ significantly in cultural characteristics defined by Hofstede (2011), the United States and China were selected for comparison. American and Chinese social media users' horizons overlapped with each other on vaccination policies, priority groups, challenges from COVID-19 variants, and global pandemic situation themes. Incongruities dwell in Twitter users' preference for disclosing personal vaccination experience, expressing anti-vaccine attitudes, along with Weibo users' apparent deference to authorities. Moreover, Chinese social media users demonstrated more positive feelings toward the COVID-19 vaccine than their American counterparts. As Dutta (2007) implied, the study of culture provides a fertile ground for understanding health communication phenomena across diverse socio-cultural contexts. The cultural sensitivity approach can always explain a series of discrepancies in the public health field (Tang and Peng, 2015), but we can't subsume all inconsistencies under culture for granted. In a nutshell, we need to respect all the thematic differences because they facilitate the current understanding of public perceptions about a new vaccine, also assist policymakers in devising effective vaccination promotion strategies. However, those differences call for a cautious interpretation. We only made reasonable conjectures on the differences rather than strictly verify how cultural characteristics influence public perceptions in the two countries.

8. Limitations

Findings in our study need to be interpreted within several constraints. Firstly, the speed of development and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines is unprecedented (Graham, 2020). Our study only captured a snapshot of public perceptions toward the COVID-19 vaccine at its initial stage. Thus, more efforts should be made in the future to examine the perception change in a longitudinal perspective, such as possible transformations in public views after momentous events (Calabrese et al., 2020). Secondly, social media footprints' representativeness needs to be pondered (Hilbert et al., 2019). Although vaccination is a hotly discussed issue on social media platforms, whether the insights distilled from social media users' expressions can be generalized to the entire population is clouded in uncertainty. It is sensible for future researchers to retrieve corpus from multiple channels to extend external validity. Thirdly, topic modeling and other machine learning techniques are also widely used in excavating public perceptions. A reliable way to elevate robustness should be comparing the results from semantic network analysis and machine learning approaches.

Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2021.101712>.

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