Generational and Regional Differences in Media Consumption Patterns of Chinese Generation X Consumers

Wenyu Dou, Guangping Wang, and Nan Zhou

Abstract: This study applies generational cohort theory, as well as uses and gratifications theory, to investigate the media program preferences of China's Generation X (Gen X) consumers. Using syndicated data from a large random sample of urban Chinese consumers, we find that the Gen X cohort consumers, compared with their preceding generational cohorts, tend to pay more attention to entertainment-based media programs such as television drama series and radio pop music, and shun information-based topics such as news or business reports. Furthermore, while cohort effects on preferences for media program types exist, the effects are less pronounced in more developed regions in China. Compared with their counterparts in Xi'an, a less developed city, Gen X consumers living in Guangzhou, a more developed city, are more attentive to information-based programs on television and in newspapers, and show less preference for entertainment-based content.

Many multinational corporations (MNCs) target young, urban consumer segments in emerging economies because these young consumers, when compared with previous generations, are better educated, have greater disposable incomes, consider themselves cosmopolitan, and are the main consumers of foreign brands (Alden, Steenkamp, and Batra 1999; Li 1998). For marketing and advertising managers in these MNCs, a pressing issue is to understand how and why certain groups of young media users prefer and consume more of certain types of media programs. This understanding will help MNCs select appropriate media vehicles and programs to effectively deliver advertising messages to the young consumers (Alden, Steenkamp, and Batra 1999; McQuail 2002; van Eijck and van Rees 2000).

In mainland China, young, urban consumers are predominately called Generation X (or Gen X) consumers. Growing up with China's reform and modernization since the late 1970s, they are the most important target group for many MNCs in China (ACNielsen China 2001; Cheng and Schweitzer 1996; Tang 2000). While existing studies on advertising in China have illuminated many important areas for marketing and advertising managers (e.g., Li 1998; Sin, Ho, and So 2000; Swanson 1997; Wei 1997; Zhang and Neelankavil 1997; Zhang and Shavitt 2003; Zhou, Zhang, and Vertinsky 2002; Zhou, Zhou, and Ouyang 2003), few studies have examined the media consumption patterns of Chinese Gen X consumers, although Kuo (1999) has explored media habits of Gen X consumers in Taiwan.

The purpose of our study is threefold. First, we draw on generational cohort theory (Inglehart 1977) and uses and gratifications theory (McQuail 1994) to examine how Gen X consumers' media usage preferences may be different from those of older generations in mainland China; second, as the Chinese market has been characterized as highly heterogeneous, largely due to uneven levels of economic development and market openness (Lau, Tse, and Zhou 2002; Law, Tse, and Zhou 2003), we investigate how regional differences may influence the media usage preferences of these young consumers; third, we evaluate the interaction effect of generational cohort and region on the media usage preferences.

In the remainder of this paper, we first review generational cohort theory, as well as uses and gratifications theory, to develop research hypotheses with regard to Chinese Gen Xers' preferences for media program types. We next explain the method that we used to test the hypotheses and the data that

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we used from a large national survey. We then report study results and discuss the implications of the findings.

**CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES**

Media usage has been a central topic of audience research in communication and marketing disciplines (e.g., Delener and Neelankani 1990). In this respect, marketing researchers are often interested in studying the media habits of specific consumer groups to provide a basis for companies to make judicious decisions in media planning and audience targeting (e.g., Burnett and Paul 1996). For our study, to gain an understanding about media preferences of Chinese Gen X consumers, insights from generational cohort theory within the cultural sociology literature, as well as uses and gratification theory within the communication literature, provide a theoretical framework (van Eijck and van Rees 2000).

**Generational Cohort Theory**

Generational cohort theory, developed by Inglehart (1977), maintains that historical incidents of national significance shake the foundation of existing social orders and value systems, and give birth to new generational cohorts. The theory is based on two assumptions: a socialization hypothesis and a scarcity hypothesis. The socialization hypothesis proposes that adults' basic values reflect the socioeconomic conditions of childhood and adolescence. Although societal conditions can change, the relative importance that a generation attributes to various personal values remains relatively stable (Inglehart 1977).

In comparison, the scarcity hypothesis of generational cohort theory proposes that cohorts tend to place the greatest subjective value on the socioeconomic resources that were in short supply during their youth. Thus, generations growing up during periods of socioeconomic insecurity (e.g., social upheaval) learn survival values (e.g., economic determinism, rationality). On the other hand, generations growing up during periods of socioeconomic security learn postmodernist values. Consequently, a nation's history can reflect the differences in values and attitudes across its generational cohorts (Conger 1997; Rogler 2002). In particular, differences in values, attitudes, and lifestyles across cohorts tend to be largest in countries that have experienced the highest rates of economic growth (Abramson and Inglehart 1995).

**Uses and Gratifications Theory**

Uses and gratifications theory (McQuail 1994) seeks to interpret the motives for media program choices in terms of the audience's psychological and sociological needs (Conway and Rubin 1991). The main objective of uses and gratification theory is to explain why people use the media and what psychological needs motivate them to engage in certain media-use behaviors (Lin 1999; Rubin 1994). The theory assumes that media users' behaviors are goal-directed (Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch 1974). In other words, users are aware of their needs and will select the appropriate media to gratify their needs. Furthermore, different people can use the same mass media for very different purposes (Severin and Tankard 1997). Uses and gratifications theory suggests that media use can be primarily motivated by one's desire to satisfy two types of needs—surveillance needs and diversion needs—which are influenced by one's life experience, attitudes, values and belief system, and the environment in which one works and lives (Ruggiero 2000). Surveillance needs are related to people's desire to monitor and understand the changes in their environment, whereas diversion needs motivate people to escape from daily mundane activities through entertainment.

Correspondingly, media programs can be classified into two broad categories: those with more information content and those with more entertainment content (Albarran and Umprey 1993). Information-based media programs, such as news programs and business reports, may satisfy people's surveillance needs, as the audience can learn about the environment and monitor current events through such programs (Vincent and Basil 1997). Similarly, people's diversion needs can be satisfied by entertainment-based media programs, such as music, movies, and talk shows (Conway and Rubin 1991).

**Chinese Gen X Consumers' Media Preferences**

Together, generational cohort theory and uses and gratifications theory suggest that Chinese Gen X consumers may seek distinct gratifications in different media programs when compared to the older generations in terms of media consumption (Feather 1985; Parish, Rosenblatt, and Kappes 1980). During the second half of the 20th century, several distinct and momentous events occurred in China, including the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the Anti-Rightist and Great Leap Forward movements in the 1950s, the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, and the Economic Reforms since 1978. These significant events have resulted in four distinct generational cohorts among today's Chinese (Wang and Wu 2002).

According to Wang and Wu (2002), the first cohort is the Red Generation. Members of this cohort were born before or around the founding of the PRC in 1949, and suffered economic hardship during the Anti-Rightist and Great Leap Forward movements in the 1950s. Self-sacrifice is inherent in their value system. They were once firm believers in communism, but experienced disillusionment after the Cultural Revolution, which ended in 1976. The second cohort is the Pre–Cultural Revolution Generation. Members of this cohort
were born just after the founding of the PRC, between 1951 and 1964. Entering their formative years during the Cultural Revolution, this group was disillusioned by the collapse of communist ideals in China and is cautious in their social perspectives, much like the Red Generation. The third cohort is the Post–Cultural Revolution Generation. Members of this cohort were born between 1965 and 1973, shortly before or after the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. Becoming teenagers during China's economic reform years, these consumers take pride in individual accomplishments and have stronger interests in themselves than the previous generations.

The fourth generation, the youngest cohort, is termed Generation X. Born between 1974 and 1984, people of this generation came of age during China's economic reform years and witnessed the rapid development of the market economy. They enjoy more educational and personal development opportunities, and as a result, a higher proportion of them has received or is receiving a college education. They are well exposed to Western popular culture through their experience with foreign music, movies, television shows, magazines, and other media programs. They have a strong interest in self-indulgence and personal entertainment, and tend to hold materialistic values.

Consistent with the predictions of generational cohort theory, substantial intergenerational differences have been documented between Chinese Gen Xers and the older cohorts (e.g., Lu and Alon 2004; Yardley 2003). Given that their formative years have been spent amid an era of rapid economic development and explosive commercialization, Chinese Gen Xers have a broad range of interests, are especially media savvy, and possess two traits that differ from the older generations ("China's Youth Generation" 2004; "Golden Boys and Girls" 2004; Li 1998; Masaru, Yasue, and Wen 1997; Wiseman 2000). On the one hand, they are individualistic and willing to try new things, and they care about their personal enjoyment. On the other hand, as the Chinese economy today has become essentially capitalist, they encounter numerous challenges trying to find a good career when they enter China's competitive workforce.

Whereas the older generations have gone through significant tumultuous events during their lives, Chinese Gen Xers have grown up during a relatively stable period of social and economic development in contemporary China (Wang and Wu 2002). The primary focus of the government has been on economic development and maintaining social stability. Based on generational cohort theory and uses and gratification theory, people in this generation should feel less need to constantly monitor current events nationally and internationally, indicating a low surveillance need. Thus, they may show lower preference for information-based media programs that primarily satisfy surveillance needs (e.g., news programs, economy/business reports). On the other hand, due to the tremendous pressure to succeed in the freewheeling Chinese economy today, their feeling of a need for diversion to relieve their stress and to enjoy themselves may be heightened (Lu and Alon 2004). Consequently, they would most likely derive gratification from entertainment-based programs. Therefore, we posit that Gen X Chinese consumers, compared with their preceding cohort counterparts, will prefer more entertainment-based media programs and less information-based ones. In particular, we hypothesize:

\[H1: \text{Compared with preceding cohorts, Chinese Gen X consumers have less preference for information-based media programs.}\]

\[H2: \text{Compared with preceding cohorts, Chinese Gen X consumers have greater preference for entertainment-based media programs.}\]

Regional Differences in Chinese Gen X Consumers' Media Preferences

Generational cohort research, while emphasizing the shared experiences of social groups, also recognizes the existence of heterogeneity within each cohort (Elider and O'Rand 1995; Griffin 2004). Regional differences between China's more developed coastal regions and less developed inland regions, especially with regard to the differences in economic conditions and social values, have been well documented (Child and Stewart 1997; Cui and Liu 2001; Fram, Lu, and McHardy 2004). These prominent regional differences are likely to result in distinct needs in life's pursuits, and subsequently in various kinds of gratifications derived from media usage (McQuail 2002). Consequently, there may be discernable regional differences in media consumption patterns, even for Chinese consumers belonging to the same generational cohort.

Compared with less developed regions in the west, coastal cities in the east and south of China have a longer history of economic reform and more exposure to a market economy. In these cities, economic activities are more vibrant, yet life is busier and more competitive. Due to this heightened competition and the uncertain nature of their career and life prospects, Gen X consumers in more developed regions are more likely to feel insecure, and thus they would likely monitor the outside world to identify opportunities for their careers and other aspects of their personal welfare (Cui and Liu 2001; Zhang 2004). Thus, we infer that they may have stronger information-gathering needs than their counterparts in less developed regions. They are more likely to pay attention to information-based programs such as news and economy/business reports so as to decipher the implications of current events for their careers and lives. Correspondingly, as the job market is more competitive and the jobs are more demanding in more developed regions (Einhorn and Roberts 2004), many young
TABLE I
China's Top Media Program Types by Media Vehicle

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media type</th>
<th>Program type</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Note</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>News</td>
<td>Information</td>
<td>A combination of pop music, dance, and comedy shows.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Variety shows</td>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper</td>
<td>Domestic news</td>
<td>Information</td>
<td>Economy or business-related issues. Reviews of arts, music, theatre-related events and activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>International news</td>
<td>Information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Economy/business reports</td>
<td>Information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Arts/music/theatre reviews</td>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>News</td>
<td>Information</td>
<td>Reviews of movies and television programs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pop music</td>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Economy/business reports</td>
<td>Information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Programs mean all self-contained units of media content, including newspaper articles, although this term is typically applied only to products distributed by broadcast media.

workers are spending more time working, and after work hours, they are often engaged in activities aimed at recharging their skills (Liu and Alon 2004). Compared with their counterparts living in the less developed regions of China, they have a more stressful life and can afford less time for entertainment-based programs. Thus,

H3: Compared with their counterparts from less developed regions, Chinese Gen X consumers from more developed regions have greater preference for information-based media programs.

H4: Compared with their counterparts from less developed regions, Chinese Gen X consumers in more developed regions have less preference for entertainment-based media programs.

Interaction Between Cohort Membership and Regional Differences

Last, given the substantial regional differences between China's more developed regions and less developed regions (Child and Stewart 1997; Cui and Liu 2001), we expect that the general effect of cohort membership may be masked by the regional difference factor. Thus, we put forth the following hypothesis on the possible interaction effect between the two factors.

H5: Cohort membership and region interact to affect media program preference of Gen X Chinese consumers.

METHOD

To test our hypotheses, relevant data were acquired at academic price from the syndicated China National Readership Survey (CNRS) that involved 48,000 consumer respondents aged 15 or above living in 22 major cities across China. The CNRS is conducted annually by CTR China and focuses on urban consumers' media and consumption habits. According to advertising professionals and marketing research firms, the CNRS is a comprehensive media behavior survey in China (Huichong Net 2004). The data we used were collected between 1999 and 2000 via personal face-to-face interviews. The respondents were randomly selected from each city using the Probability Proportional to Sizes (PPS) method, which ensures sample representativeness of the urban Chinese consumer population. A small gift was provided to each respondent.

Media and Program Types

Our study focuses on three major media vehicles: television, newspaper, and radio. They are the most important media vehicles in Chinese people's daily life. Statistically, every Chinese family owns a television set. About 54% of people watch television everyday, while 32% read a newspaper and 35% listen to the radio every day (CVSC-Sofres Media 2004). Table 1 lists the major media and top program types based on CVSC-Sofres Media's (2004) "Annual China Media Rating Report."

For each medium, we examine the top-rated information-based programs and entertainment-based programs. The former includes news programs and economy/business reports, whereas the latter category includes variety shows, arts, music, movies, and programs with related topical content. Although there are other program types available in each media, our examination is limited to these most popular program types. (Here "programs" mean all self-contained units of media content, including newspaper articles, even though this term is typically applied to products distributed by broadcast media.)

Our dependent variables, preferences for media program
TABLE 2
Generational Cohort Distribution by City

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Guangzhou</th>
<th></th>
<th>Xi’an</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort 1: Red Generation</td>
<td>883</td>
<td>34.44%</td>
<td>1,079</td>
<td>41.04%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort 2: Pre–Cultural Revolution Generation</td>
<td>937</td>
<td>36.54%</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>32.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort 3: Post–Cultural Revolution Generation</td>
<td>425</td>
<td>16.58%</td>
<td>427</td>
<td>16.24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort 4: Generation X</td>
<td>319</td>
<td>12.44%</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>10.38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total sample</td>
<td>2,564</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>2,629</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

types, were measured by asking the respondent to indicate his or her most favorite type of program for television, newspaper, or radio (e.g., television, drama series, radio news). The responses were dummy-coded. For example, if the respondent indicated that his or her most favorite television program was a drama series, then preference for television drama series was coded 1 and preference for other television program type was coded 0.

Regional Differences

To examine possible regional differences, we chose to compare consumers from two cities, Guangzhou and Xi’an, due to the dramatic differences between them in terms of economic and social development levels. More important, Guangzhou is representative of economically more developed regions in China, whereas Xi’an is representative of less developed regions (Cui and Liu 2001). Guangzhou in the south is among the first Chinese cities to be opened to the outside world, and now has a well-developed modern economy. Its economy, workforce, and consumers are considered similar to those of other coastal cities such as Shanghai and Shenzhen. Xi’an in the northwest is in China’s less-developed western region, and is representative of other inland cities such as Chengdu and Chongqing. Its level of socioeconomic development is well below that of Guangzhou and other coastal cities (Li et al. 2004). According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2004), Guangzhou’s per capita GDP (gross domestic product) was RMB38,568 ($4,658) in 2003, more than double that of Xi’an, which was RMB15,493 ($1,871). Therefore, a comparison of these two cities may be generalizable to other economically disparate cities and regions in China.

All respondents from the two cities were used in the analysis. The sample sizes were 2,564 for Guangzhou and 2,629 for Xi’an. For respondents from Guangzhou, 51.7% were female, 56.5% had a high-school education or higher, the median household monthly income was RMB1,000–1,500 ($121–$182), and the average age was 46.4. For respondents from Xi’an, 52.3% were female, 64.2% had a high-school education or higher, the median household monthly income was RMB1,000–1,500 ($121–$182), and the average age was 46.0. In Table 2, we present the frequency distribution of the respondents in each generational cohort.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

To test the study hypotheses, binary logit models were estimated with preference for a particular media program type (e.g., television news) as the dependent variable. Independent variables were cohort membership (i.e., cohort 1 through cohort 3, with cohort 4 or Gen X as the reference category coded 0) and city (Xi’an = 1 and Guangzhou = 0). To test for the interaction effects hypothesized in H3, interaction terms (i.e., city × cohort 1, city × cohort 2, and city × cohort 3) were also included in the binary logit models. Three common used demographic variables—income, education, and gender—were originally included as control variables, but were removed from the final models due to their insignificance.

Since interaction terms were examined, interpretation of a particular main effect should be conditioned on the reference categories of other variables in the model (Jaccard 2001). All of the binary logit models for various program types in television, newspaper, and radio were highly significant (p < .0001). Tables 3 and 4 list the parameter estimates and their significance levels (based on Wald χ² statistics), for information- and entertainment-based programs, respectively.

Information-Based Media Programs (H1)

H1 proposes that Gen X Chinese consumers have less preference for information-based media programs when compared with the preceding cohorts. We find that Gen X (cohort 4) consumers tended to watch much less television news than the Red Generation (cohort 1; odds ratio = 2.404), the Pre–Cultural Revolution Generation (cohort 2; odds ratios = 3.558), and the Post–Cultural Revolution Generation (cohort 3; odds ratio = 2.546). Thus, the evidence supporting H1 is strong with regard to television news programs.
### TABLE 3
Logit Model Results for Preference of Information-Based Program Types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent variables</th>
<th>Television news</th>
<th>Newspaper domestic news</th>
<th>Newspaper international news</th>
<th>Newspaper economy/business reports</th>
<th>Radio news</th>
<th>Radio economy/business reports</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>7.485***</td>
<td>6.887***</td>
<td>4.490***</td>
<td>.429***</td>
<td>.346***</td>
<td>.024***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City</td>
<td>.411*</td>
<td>.515**</td>
<td>.501**</td>
<td>.602**</td>
<td>1.329*</td>
<td>2.619**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort 1</td>
<td>2.404***</td>
<td>.679**</td>
<td>.765**</td>
<td>1.296**</td>
<td>1.058</td>
<td>1.032</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort 2</td>
<td>3.558***</td>
<td>3.929***</td>
<td>2.739***</td>
<td>2.125***</td>
<td>1.033</td>
<td>1.555</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort 3</td>
<td>2.546***</td>
<td>5.066***</td>
<td>2.267***</td>
<td>2.239***</td>
<td>.760**</td>
<td>1.206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort 1 × city</td>
<td>1.624**</td>
<td>1.249</td>
<td>1.175</td>
<td>.883</td>
<td>1.042</td>
<td>1.180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort 2 × city</td>
<td>1.123</td>
<td>.681</td>
<td>.716</td>
<td>.990</td>
<td>.648**</td>
<td>.827</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort 3 × city</td>
<td>.781</td>
<td>.376**</td>
<td>.777</td>
<td>.937</td>
<td>.841</td>
<td>1.190</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*  $p < .10$.  
**  $p < .05$.  
***  $p < .0001$.  

In the newspaper category, it appears that Gen X consumers were less interested in reading information-based content than two of the three older generations, as indicated by the greater-than-one odds ratios in domestic news, international news, and economy/business reports (see Table 3). The exception here is that when compared with the Red Generation, Gen X appeared to read more domestic and international news content. This particular finding probably could be attributed to the fact that as seniors citizens, people in the Red Generation may be losing their physical reading ability and get their news from television (Chen 2002).

For radio news programs, the odds ratios indicated that cohorts 1 and 2 did not differ significantly from Gen X. Whereas cohort 3 differed from Gen X, they seemed to listen to news programs less than Gen X (odds ratio = .760). In addition, no significant cohort-based difference was detected for business and economy programs. Thus, no support was found for H1 for information-based programs in radio. Overall, though, H1 is considered partially supported.

### Entertainment-Based Media Programs (H2)

Hypothesis 2 proposes that Gen X Chinese consumers have greater preference for entertainment-based media programs when compared with the preceding cohorts. The results presented in Table 4 demonstrate that Gen X Chinese consumers were generally more interested in entertainment-oriented media programs (on television, in newspapers, and on the radio) than their predecessor cohorts, thus supporting H2. Specifically, Gen X (cohort 4) consumers tended to watch more variety shows than the Red Generation (cohort 1; odds ratio = .756) and the Pre–Cultural Revolution Generation (cohort 2; odds ratio = .782). However, Gen X exhibited no significant difference in their preference for such programs when compared with the Post–Cultural Revolution Generation.

The pattern that Chinese Gen X consumers, when compared with the older cohorts, tended to read more entertainment-based newspaper content such as arts, theatre, music, movie, and television content was demonstrated by the less than 1 odds ratios. Clearly, Gen X Chinese consumers seemed to favor leisure content in newspapers. Last, in a consistent manner, Generation X Chinese consumers appeared to listen to pop music more than the Red Generation (odds ratio = .416), the Pre–Cultural Revolution Generation (odds ratio = .705), and the Post–Cultural Revolution Generation (odds ratio = .625). Thus, support for H2 was evident.

### Regional Effect (H3, H4)

Hypothesis 3 posits that when compared with their counterparts from less developed regions, Gen X Chinese consumers from more developed regions have greater preference for information-based media programs. There was overall support for H3, especially for television and newspapers. As shown in Table 3, compared with their counterparts from Guangzhou, Gen X consumers from Xi’an tended to pay less attention to television news programs (odds ratio = .411) and read less domestic news, international news, and economy/business columns in newspapers (odds ratios = .515, .501, and .602, respectively). In contrast to our hypothesis, Guangzhou Gen X consumers had lower preference for radio news and economy/business reports than their counterparts from Xi’an (odds ratio = 1.329 and 2.619, respectively). This could probably be
TABLE 4
Logit Model Results for Preference of Entertainment-Based Program Types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent variables</th>
<th>Television variety shows</th>
<th>Newspaper arts/music/theater reviews</th>
<th>Newspaper movie/television reviews</th>
<th>Radio pop music</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>.429</td>
<td>.151</td>
<td>3.118***</td>
<td>.283***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City</td>
<td>2.682***</td>
<td>1.357***</td>
<td>.879</td>
<td>2.065***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort 1</td>
<td>.756***</td>
<td>.474***</td>
<td>.327***</td>
<td>.416***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort 2</td>
<td>.782***</td>
<td>.562***</td>
<td>.690**</td>
<td>.705**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort 3</td>
<td>.812</td>
<td>.740**</td>
<td>.807*</td>
<td>.625**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort 1 × city</td>
<td>1.389*</td>
<td>.630**</td>
<td>.350***</td>
<td>.191***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort 2 × city</td>
<td>1.558***</td>
<td>.898</td>
<td>.416***</td>
<td>.308***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort 3 × city</td>
<td>1.263</td>
<td>.973</td>
<td>.609**</td>
<td>.608**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .10.
** p < .05.
*** p < .0001.

attributed to the fact that overall radio usage is lower in the east and south of China (e.g., Guangzhou) than in other regions of China (e.g., Xi'an) (Cui and Liu 2001).

Hypothesis 4 suggests that compared with their counterparts from less developed regions, Gen X Chinese consumers from more developed regions have less preference for entertainment-based media programs. In general, there was strong support for H4. As shown in Table 4, Gen X consumers from Xi'an, compared with their counterparts from Guangzhou, showed greater preference for television variety shows (odds ratio = 2.682), newspaper arts/theater/music columns (odds ratio = 1.357), and radio pop music (odds ratio = 2.065), even though the two groups did not differ significantly in reading movie/television review content in newspapers.

Cohort and Regional Interactions (H5)

Hypothesis 5 postulated that cohort membership and region interact to affect the media program preferences of Gen X Chinese consumers. In summary, the interaction analysis in the logit models detected some signs that the effect of cohort membership on media program preferences may be moderated by region. In particular, we found that the cohort effect seemed to be stronger in the less-developed region (i.e., Xi'an) than in the developed region (i.e., Guangzhou), especially for entertainment-based media programs (see Table 4).

For television news, cohort 1 interacted with city. The coefficient estimate of 1.624 for cohort 1 × city was obtained by dividing the odds ratio for the cohort 1 effect in Xi'an by the odds ratio for the cohort 1 effect in Guangzhou (2.404). We calculated that the odds ratio for the cohort 1 effect in television news in Xi'an was 3.904 (2.404 × 1.624). Thus, while the main effect of the cohort suggests that the Red Generation tended to watch more news than Gen X, the relative magnitude of the odds ratios of 3.904 (for Xi'an) and 1.624 (for Guangzhou) indicate that such a tendency was much greater in Xi'an than in Guangzhou. On the other hand, the interaction coefficients for cohort 3 by city in newspaper domestic news (.376) and for cohort 2 by city in radio news (.648) indicated a different direction. While the Post-Cultural Revolution Generation (cohort 3) consumers read more newspaper news than Gen X consumers, this tendency was stronger in Guangzhou (odds ratio = 5.066) than in Xi'an (odds ratio = 5.066 × .376 or 1.90). Although overall no significant difference was found between cohort 2 and Gen X in Guangzhou in terms of radio news consumption (odds ratio = 1.033), the interaction coefficient of .648 indicates that Gen X consumers in Xi'an actually showed more preference for radio news compared with cohort 2 (odds ratio = .648 × 1.033 or .67). Overall, cohort membership and region interaction effects for information-based media programs seem to be weak and inconsistent.

On the other hand, the interactions for entertainment-based programs appear strong (see Table 4). Whereas the Red Generation and the Pre-Cultural Revolution Generation tended to watch fewer television variety shows than Gen X consumers in Guangzhou (odds ratios = .756, .782, respectively), the Red Generation and Pre-Cultural Revolution consumers in Xi'an were, in fact, slightly more likely to view such programs than Gen X consumers (calculated odds ratios = 1.05, 1.22, respectively). In this case, cohort effects were stronger in Guangzhou.

In the entertainment category, the clearest pattern of interaction occurred for the cohort effect on the newspaper read-
ing preference for movie/television reviews. The calculated odds ratio for the cohort 1 effect for movie/television review columns in Xi'an was .114 (.35 × .327), suggesting that the tendency of the Red Generation to read less newspaper movie/television review content than Gen X was much more pronounced in Xi'an than in Guangzhou. In a similar vein, the calculated odds ratios for the comparison between cohorts 2 and 3 and Gen X (.287, .491, respectively) indicated that the tendency for the Pre- and Post-Cultural Revolution Generations to read less newspaper movie/television review content was more prominent in Xi'an than in Guangzhou.

For radio programs, the most obvious covarying pattern occurred for the cohort effect on the listening preference for pop music on the radio. The calculated odds ratio for the cohort 1 effect on preference for pop music in Xi'an was .08 (.191 × .416), which indicated that while the Red Generation tended to listen to less radio pop music than Gen X, this tendency was much more pronounced in Xi'an than in Guangzhou. Likewise, the calculated odds ratios for cohorts 2 and 3 (.217 and .380, respectively) indicated that the tendency of the Pre- and Post-Cultural Revolution Generations to listen to fewer pop music programs on the radio was also more prominent in Xi'an than in Guangzhou.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the differences in preferences for media program types between Generation X and older generational cohorts in mainland China. We found that Chinese Gen X consumers, compared with their predecessor cohorts, tended to pay more attention to entertainment-based media programs such as television variety shows or pop music on the radio while shunning information-based programs such as television news or newspaper economy/business reports. In general, our findings provide support to generational cohort theory and uses and gratifications theory within the media consumption setting in China. Furthermore, Chinese Gen X consumers living in more developed regions tended to be more attentive to news and economy/business report programs on television and in newspapers, but they were less interested in entertainment-based content. Last, we observe that while a cohort effect on the media consumption patterns of Chinese Gen X consumers exists, the effect appears to be of lesser magnitude in more developed regions of China, especially for entertainment-based programs.

Managerial Implications

Our study sheds important light on how global marketers can more effectively reach the Gen X Chinese consumers via careful selection of media programs. The notion that generational cohort may play a significant role in media preference should definitely not be overlooked, and media planners should go beyond chasing China’s most popular media programs in order to find the best match between the appropriate media program types and Gen X consumers. For example, even though Chinese Central Television’s daily evening news is the most watched television program in China and commands a premium advertising rate, it may not be the best vehicle to reach Gen X consumers. Instead, marketers may want to advertise on entertainment-based television programs. If there is not a great variety of such programs on China’s state-run television stations, global marketers could look to satellite television stations that provide more entertainment offerings. The same strategy would also work for the other two major media vehicles: newspaper and radio.

Marketers should also be aware of and take full advantage of the substantial regional differences in media consumption patterns between China’s more developed and less developed regions, even when promoting to the same Gen X consumer class. For instance, compared with their counterparts from more developed regions, Gen X consumers from less developed regions seemed to prefer television variety shows to a much greater degree. Thus, a plausible strategy for MNCs like Coca-Cola targeting Chinese Gen X consumers living in less developed regions could be to advertise their product in conjunction with television variety shows.

Finally, as Chinese consumers are more diverse in economically more developed regions, MNCs need to be aware of the potential interaction effect between cohort membership and region of residence. They should look at media consumption patterns beyond simple cohort membership category or city of residence. For instance, we found that while Gen X consumers were more likely to watch television variety shows than other cohorts, this was less the case in more developed regions (e.g., Guangzhou). On the other hand, while the older generations (e.g., Red and Pre-Cultural Revolution Generations) watched less variety shows, the pattern was less obvious in less developed regions (e.g., Xi’an). These findings present significant challenges for MNCs in tackling China’s diverse regional markets. They cannot rely on cohort membership or city of residence alone. Instead, their media decisions should be based on more detailed and specific media research that takes both factors into consideration simultaneously.

Limitations and Future Research

Our study has provided an initial application of generational cohort theory and uses and gratifications theory in the Chinese media setting. While our results have demonstrated differences in preference for information- versus entertainment-based media programs between China’s Generation X consumers and the older generations, as in any cohort analysis study, one should
be cautious in interpreting the uncovered cohort effect based on a cross-sectional design (Egri and Ralston 2004). Future researchers can build on the present research by examining longitudinal or panel data in order to unequivocally establish such effects. In addition, the cohort by region interaction effect we explored provides another interesting direction for future research to develop or extend theory. We believe that the present study lays a foundation for more ambitious research endeavors.

In comparing media consumption patterns, we selected two cities, Guangzhou and Xi'an, to represent economically disparate regions. While they are representative for the purpose of identifying regional differences, there might be factors other than economic development that could affect consumers' media consumption. Some of the differences we observed may be attributable to the particular historical or cultural differences between the two cities, which may not be generalizable to other regions and cities in China. Future studies could select other cities from developed and less developed regions in China to test whether our results hold for other city-based comparisons.

The study examined television, newspaper, and radio, which are the three top traditional media vehicles used by Chinese consumers. Recent years have witnessed the explosive development of the Internet as a new communication medium in China. Future research is encouraged to include the Internet as a competing as well as a complementary medium and to examine the factors influencing media program preferences in the digital landscape.

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