

Cross-cultural interpretation of western TV comedy: an ethnography study of Chinese audiences' reception of *the young offenders*

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Abstract. With globalization and digital media development, Western TV comedies have gained increasing popularity among Chinese young audiences despite significant cultural differences. This study examines Chinese audiences' cross-cultural reception of Western TV comedy and explores gender-based differences in text interpretation. Taking the BBC Irish comedy *The Young Offenders* as a case study, this research adopts a focus group approach with 26 Chinese participants (13 male, 13 female). Drawing on humor theories and Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory, the study analyzes participants' interpretation patterns of humorous elements. Findings reveal that Chinese audiences clearly prefer non-verbal (visual) humor over verbal humor in cross-cultural comedic reception. Gender differences are evident: male audiences tend to adopt dominant-hegemonic decoding positions, while female audiences demonstrate confrontational positions. This study highlights the role of visual humor in facilitating cross-cultural comedy communication and demonstrates that viewing experience and cultural background shape audiences' interpretive patterns, providing insights for cross-cultural media production and dissemination.

Keywords: cross-cultural communication, audience reception, humor perception, encoding/decoding, gender difference

1. Introduction

The rapid proliferation of the internet and the continuous advancement of communication technologies have led to an explosive growth of information, reshaping how individuals perceive and engage with the world. In the digital era, transnational and cross-cultural exchanges have become increasingly frequent, with cultural boundaries being constantly challenged and reconfigured. As a prominent carrier of cultural values and social narratives, television dramas play a significant role in facilitating cross-cultural information exchange. Enabled by digital distribution platforms, high-quality television productions from one country can readily attract substantial overseas audiences and garner international acclaim.

As a distinct genre of television programming, TV comedy merges artistic expression with entertainment value. Beyond depicting everyday life and social issues, it offers subtle insights into human nature through mundane and relatable scenarios. Against the backdrop of globalization, the cross-cultural circulation of TV

comedy has emerged as a noteworthy cultural phenomenon. The inherent accessibility and broad audience appeal of television comedy equip it with the capacity to traverse cultural barriers and enable the exchange of cultural meanings across borders.

Since the 1990s, Western television dramas—predominantly British productions—have been introduced to Chinese audiences via official import channels. Classics such as *Mr. Bean* and *Doctor Who* left enduring impressions on early Chinese viewers. As digital infrastructure developed and online media resources expanded in China, British television dramas reached progressively wider domestic audiences. In 2010, the BBC series *Sherlock* became one of the most popular and highly rated foreign dramas in Chinese media history. That same year, *Downton Abbey* catalyzed a broader wave of Anglophone cultural importation, amassing over 160 million views on Chinese platforms. Beyond high-budget prestige dramas, low-budget British sitcoms including *Miranda*, *The IT Crowd*, and *Vicious* also achieved considerable popularity and earned high ratings on *Douban*, China's leading film and television review platform. In 2012 and 2013, British drama exports to China consistently ranked first globally, with sales reaching nearly £17 million in 2013.

Entering the mid-2010s, British television continued to diversify its generic appeal to Chinese audiences, extending beyond detective dramas and period pieces. The dystopian anthology series *Black Mirror*, with its incisive satire of digital technology and modern society, garnered a substantial cult following among young Chinese viewers for its filmic production quality and thought-provoking narratives. Meanwhile, female-led comedic dramas such as *Fleabag* broke new ground with their fourth-wall-breaking narrative style and raw depictions of contemporary urban life, earning critical acclaim and widespread discussion on Chinese social media platforms. British comedy in particular demonstrated remarkable cross-cultural resilience, with its distinctive dry wit, social satire, and understated humor resonating with educated young audiences despite linguistic and cultural distances.

Post-2020, the proliferation of global streaming platforms and fan-run subtitling communities further accelerated the cross-border circulation of British television in China. A broader range of comedy productions—from mockumentary-style family comedies such as *The Other One* to darkly humorous youth dramas—reached increasingly segmented viewer groups. Throughout this evolution, British comedy has remained a core pillar of cross-cultural media appeal, continuously attracting dedicated Chinese audiences and generating rich interpretive practices that merit closer academic examination. The cultural impact of British television dramas in China merits sustained academic attention, particularly the cultural significance of TV comedy as a quintessential form of British televisual output.

Television comedy presents serialized comedic narratives on screen, with humor serving as its defining characteristic. It elicits laughter by portraying absurd situations and idiosyncratic character behaviors. Rooted in classical Aristotelian theory, comedy traditionally operates on the principle of representing "people worse than ourselves," often employing family dynamics, domestic relationships, and petty delinquency as narrative backdrops. By foregrounding the humorous dimensions of ordinary life, comedy engages with ethical and value-laden questions, prompting audiences to reflect beyond moments of amusement.

This study selects *The Young Offenders*, a BBC-produced Irish comedy series, as its primary research text to examine Chinese audiences' reception of cross-cultural television. Several factors justify this choice. First, the series' grounded, youth-oriented narrative resonates with young adult viewers. Set within Irish society, it chronicles the school lives of two adolescent boys. Centered on themes of juvenile delinquency, educational institutions, and platonic friendship, the series humorously depicts the growing pains of two rebellious teenagers while reflecting broader Western social values, rendering it a suitable case for cross-cultural analysis. Second, audience metrics on *Douban*, China's leading film and television review platform, corroborate its sustained popularity: as of 2026, Season 1 of *The Young Offenders* has accumulated over

16,000 short comments and more than 6,000 long-form reviews, with a stable rating of 9.2 out of 10 from approximately 9,000 registered users.

For decades, Western television dramas have cultivated a loyal Chinese fan base spanning diverse genders, age groups, educational backgrounds, and income levels. Existing scholarship has extensively examined the demographic composition of this audience. Huang [1] argues that accessing Western television dramas requires specific cultural capital—including linguistic proficiency and media access—thereby excluding large segments of the Chinese population. Wen [2] identifies the core audience for English-language foreign dramas as individuals aged 19 to 40, concentrated among college students and urban white-collar workers, with the 19–25 age cohort being the largest group. Most viewers hold tertiary-level education, reflecting the classed dimensions of transnational media consumption.

While prior research has predominantly focused on audience demographics and the unilateral effects of television on viewers, some scholars have applied Uses and Gratifications theory to examine Chinese audiences' motivations for consuming transnational television dramas. Nevertheless, studies addressing the active interpretive agency of audiences remain relatively scarce. Responding to this gap, the present study investigates Chinese audiences' meaning-making of cross-cultural television texts from an active audience perspective. As Stuart Hall [3] posits, television communication must move beyond linear transmission models to account for audience agency across the full circuit of production, circulation, distribution/consumption, and reproduction. Contemporary audiences in the digital media era exercise greater interpretive agency than their predecessors, actively negotiating and interacting with media texts rather than passively absorbing encoded meanings.

Employing focus group interviews, this study explores the cross-cultural reception and interpretation of *The Young Offenders* among young Chinese audiences—specifically college students and young urban professionals. By analyzing gender-based variations in interpretive patterns and assessing audiences' critical capacities in textual reception, this research maps the current state of Western TV comedy dissemination in China.

This study addresses two core research questions:

1. Which humorous elements—verbal or visual—in *The Young Offenders* are most readily comprehended and recognized by Chinese audiences in a natural viewing context?
2. Do male and female Chinese audiences exhibit divergent decoding patterns when engaging with *The Young Offenders* as textual decoders?

2. Results

2.1. Theoretical and analytical framework

Against the backdrop of global media circulation, cross-cultural reception of television comedy remains a core concern in media and communication studies, as humor is deeply embedded in specific cultural contexts and thus subject to significant "cultural discount" [4]. To examine how Chinese audiences decode Western comedy and reconstruct its meanings, this study draws on two interrelated theoretical strands: humor element classification and audience reception theory.

Scholarly work on televised humor generally distinguishes between verbal humor and non-verbal (visual) humor as two fundamental categories [5]. Verbal humor operates through linguistic manipulation, including semantic ambiguity, phonetic play, and rhetorical devices such as sarcasm and puns [6]. Due to its strong cultural rootedness, verbal humor often fails to translate across linguistic boundaries, even with subtitling. In contrast, non-verbal humor—encompassing body language, physical comedy, object-based gags, and visual

wordplay—relies less on linguistic competence and thus enjoys greater cross-cultural accessibility [7]. This classification provides a framework for assessing which comedic elements travel most effectively across cultures.

For analyzing audience interpretation, this study adopts Stuart Hall's [3] encoding/decoding model, a foundational paradigm in reception studies. Hall posits that meaning is not transmitted linearly from producers to audiences; instead, audiences actively decode texts from three possible positions: dominant-hegemonic (accepting the encoded meaning in full), negotiated (partially accepting and partially modifying the meaning), and confrontational (understanding the encoded meaning but rejecting it in favor of an alternative framework). Complementing Hall's structural model, Liebes and Katz's [8] cross-cultural study of *Dallas* further differentiates between referential reading (emotionally invested, connecting fictional content to real life) and critical reading (distanced, evaluating the text as a constructed artifact), each with "hot" (emotionally engaged) and "cold" (analytically detached) variants. This dual framework captures both the ideological stance and the emotional tone of audience interpretation.

Gender has long been recognized as a significant social variable shaping media reception. As McQuail [9] notes, gendered social experiences produce distinct preferences and interpretive patterns in media consumption. Jenkins [10] further demonstrates that male audiences tend toward critical readings focused on narrative logic and textual authority, while female audiences often engage in referential readings centered on character emotions and lived experience. Building on these findings, this study examines how gender structures Chinese audiences' decoding of *The Young Offenders* in the cross-cultural context.

2.2. Research design and data collection

This study employs a qualitative research design using focus group interviews, a method well suited to audience reception research for its ability to approximate natural viewing contexts and capture the interactive dynamics of meaning-making [11]. Group discussion stimulates participants to articulate implicit interpretations and exposes shared as well as divergent understandings of the text.

2.2.1. Case selection

The BBC-produced Irish comedy *The Young Offenders* (2018) was selected as the research text for three reasons. First, its youth-centered, grounded narrative resonates with the young adult demographic that constitutes the core audience for Western television in China. Second, the series balances verbal and non-verbal humor, allowing for comparative analysis of cross-cultural receptivity across humor types. Third, it has established a notable audience base in China, earning a 9.2/10 rating on *Douban* and generating thousands of viewer reviews, which signals its relevance as a case of successful cross-cultural comedy circulation.

2.2.2. Participants

Twenty-six Chinese participants (13 male, 13 female) were recruited based on three criteria: aged 20–30, holding a bachelor's degree or above, and having prior experience watching English-language television dramas. This sample reflects the demographic profile of the primary cross-cultural audience for Western TV in China [2]. Participants were divided into four single-gender focus groups: two female groups conducted in Leeds, UK, consisting of postgraduate students, and two male groups conducted in Beijing, consisting of young urban professionals. Gender-segregated groups were designed to encourage uninhibited discussion of gendered viewing experiences.

2.2.3. Procedure

Each session lasted approximately 90 minutes. Participants first watched Episode 1 of *The Young Offenders* Season 1, followed by a semi-structured interview exploring their perceptions of humor, evaluations of characters and themes, and interpretations of the show's cultural implications. All interviews were audio-

recorded with participant consent and fully transcribed for analysis. Transcripts were coded according to the combined theoretical framework of Hall's decoding positions and Liebes and Katz's reading models, with attention to both individual interpretive patterns and group interaction dynamics.

2.3. Audience reception of humorous elements

Analysis of focus group data reveals a clear hierarchy in the cross-cultural accessibility of different humor types, with non-verbal visual comedy consistently outperforming verbal comedy in eliciting laughter and recognition among Chinese audiences.

2.3.1. *Reception of verbal humor*

Participants identified a total of six verbal humor moments across the episode, most falling into the category of semantic humor. Commonly cited examples included the characters' use of profanity (perceived as humorous due to its contrast with stereotypical British politeness), the semantic debate over the word "prick" in the principal's office, and the running gag about naming an inflatable doll with a male name. In all these cases, participants relied heavily on Chinese subtitles to grasp the joke; as one participant noted, many wordplay moments would be entirely lost without translation.

Notably, phonetic and rhetorical forms of verbal humor went largely unrecognized. No participants spontaneously commented on intonation-based humor or sarcastic wordplay, and several explicitly acknowledged missing potential layers of meaning, such as the cultural reference behind "carrots and sticks". This pattern confirms that without shared cultural background knowledge, audiences struggle to detect nuanced verbal irony, exaggeration, and culturally specific allusions. In sum, verbal humor suffers from substantial cultural discount in cross-cultural transmission, and only the most straightforward semantic jokes reliably land with non-native audiences.

2.3.2. *Reception of non-verbal humor*

In stark contrast, participants recognized and reacted strongly to twelve distinct non-verbal humor moments, describing them with vivid, emotionally charged language. The most universally cited highlight was the physical comedy of Conor lying on top of a giant stolen fish; many participants recalled laughing intensely at this scene. Other widely appreciated visual gags included the failed kiss between Conor's mother and Officer Healy due to seatbelts, the boys jumping off a roof into a garbage pile, and the paint-stained naked walk through town that gradually accumulates followers.

Participants' stronger and more immediate emotional response to visual humor aligns with Collins' [4] thesis on cultural discount: audiovisual content with minimal linguistic dependence travels far more successfully across cultures than text-heavy or language-dependent forms. Body language, slapstick, and situational physical comedy rely on broadly shared perceptual schemas rather than culturally specific knowledge, enabling them to generate laughter even when verbal jokes fall flat. This finding underscores the central role of visual comedy in facilitating cross-cultural appreciation of television comedy.

2.4. Gendered patterns of textual decoding

Beyond humor reception, significant gender differences emerge in how male and female audiences position themselves ideologically toward the text and engage with its narrative world. These differences manifest in both Hall's decoding positions and Liebes and Katz's reading modes, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Emotional investment and reading types in decoding modes

Decoding mode	Characteristics
"Hot"	Higher emotional investment
Referential Reading: real keyings	Acknowledge characters' behaviors and values; connect televisual events to lived experience
Critical Reading: ideological	Evaluate thematic content and textual implications
Critical Reading: pragmatic	Connect televisual events to lived experience but do not fully accept embedded values
"Cold"	Lower emotional investment
Referential Reading: play keyings	Adopt character perspective with strong playful identification
Critical Reading: aesthetic	Maintain distance from the text; do not connect to life, but may discuss character function and production craft

2.4.1. Male audiences: dominant-hegemonic position and referential reading

The majority of male participants adopted a dominant-hegemonic decoding position, broadly accepting the show's narrative perspective and value orientation. Many expressed strong empathy for the two protagonists, framing their rebellious behavior as a relatable expression of adolescent impulses rather than moral failure. As one participant put it, "Everyone has had ridiculous ideas when they were young... I can understand them because I've been there." Male participants frequently recommended the show to others and described it as both entertaining and thematically meaningful, highlighting its insights into friendship, family, and juvenile delinquency.

In terms of reading mode, 50% of male participants exhibited hot/real keyings/referential reading, readily connecting the fictional plot to their own adolescent experiences and treating characters as if they were real people. A smaller but notable portion (18%) adopted hot/ideological/critical reading, engaging with the show's social themes—such as the role of family, school, and police in youth development—while maintaining awareness of its fictionality. Overall, male audiences tended to be emotionally invested in the narrative and inclined to accept its underlying messages, particularly when the content resonated with their own life histories.

2.4.2. Female audiences: confrontational position and critical reading

Female participants, by contrast, predominantly occupied a confrontational decoding position. While they understood the comedic intent of the protagonists' misbehavior, they rejected it on value grounds, expressing discomfort with frequent profanity, theft, and disrespect toward authority. Many described the show as "crude" or "vulgar" and stated they would not actively recommend it. Importantly, this resistance was not a failure of comprehension; rather, it was a deliberate ideological stance. As several participants noted, they recognized the exaggerated nature of the plot but still found the characters' actions morally unacceptable by their own standards.

Correspondingly, female audiences leaned toward critical reading modes. The most prevalent pattern was cold/aesthetic/critical reading (35%), in which participants maintained emotional distance from the text and evaluated it as a constructed media artifact. They discussed the show's genre conventions, documentary-style shooting, character design, and entertainment function without conflating fictional events with real life. A further 30% adopted hot/pragmatic/critical reading, acknowledging the show's humor but refusing to endorse its values. This critical orientation is closely associated with participants' greater exposure to Western media and firsthand experience of Western culture through overseas study, which equips them with the cultural

literacy to deconstruct the text rather than absorb it passively. Group discussion dynamics further reinforced this critical stance, as initial negotiated positions often shifted toward confrontational readings through peer exchange.

2.5. Summary of key findings

Three principal findings emerge from this analysis:

First, in cross-cultural reception of Western television comedy, Chinese audiences demonstrate a clear preference for non-verbal visual humor over verbal humor. Visual comedy experiences significantly lower cultural discount and serves as the primary vehicle for cross-cultural comedic appeal.

Second, gender operates as a robust social axis of differentiation in audience interpretation. Male audiences tend toward dominant-hegemonic decoding and emotionally engaged referential reading, driven by personal identification with adolescent male experiences. Female audiences tend toward confrontational decoding and analytically detached critical reading, shaped by value differences and higher levels of cross-cultural media literacy.

Third, despite these differences, both male and female participants acknowledge the entertainment value of the series. The variation lies not in whether they find it amusing at all, but in how they contextualize that amusement—whether as a window into real adolescent experience or as a stylized fictional construction. Overall, audiences' interpretive patterns are shaped by the interplay of gendered social experience, prior exposure to Western media, and cultural capital.

3. Conclusion

Since the early 2010s, Western television comedies—predominantly British productions—have gained substantial traction and cultivated a dedicated young audience base in China. The cultural significance of these transnational media products, whether in terms of industrial production, textual construction, or cross-cultural communication outcomes, is ultimately forged through audience interpretation rather than being inherent in the texts themselves. Against the backdrop of global digital media flows, the acceptance of foreign television comedy cannot be reduced to a one-way transmission process from producers to audiences via media platforms. Instead, meaningful cross-cultural exchange occurs only when audiences actively engage with, interpret, and reconstruct the encoded meanings of media texts, a core proposition of reception studies that underpins the present inquiry.

Grounded in audience reception theory, this study examines Chinese young audiences' interpretive patterns and critical capacities when engaging with cross-cultural television comedy, a genre saturated with culturally specific connotations and value assumptions. The findings reveal a clear preference for non-verbal visual humor over verbal humor among Chinese viewers in cross-cultural comedy reception. Relative to language-dependent jokes—including wordplay, sarcasm, and culturally embedded allusions—physical comedy, bodily expressions, and situational visual gags are far more readily recognized and appreciated by cross-cultural audiences. This pattern aligns with the theoretical framework of cultural discount: visual humor operates on broadly shared perceptual schemas and requires far less cultural background knowledge, thus incurring a much smaller cultural penalty in cross-border transmission. From a practical standpoint, this finding underscores the pivotal role of visual comedic strategies in facilitating transnational comedy circulation, and offers actionable insights for content creators seeking to enhance the cross-cultural appeal of television comedy productions.

Furthermore, this study identifies gender as a salient social axis shaping audiences' textual decoding of *The Young Offenders*, with marked divergences in interpretive modes between male and female viewers. On the

whole, male participants hold more favorable evaluations of the series, predominantly adopting a dominant-hegemonic decoding position paired with "hot" referential reading. They readily identify with the adolescent male protagonists, frame their delinquent behaviors as relatable youthful mischief, and accept the values embedded in the narrative. Female audiences, by contrast, largely occupy a confrontational decoding position and lean toward "cold" critical reading. While they recognize the comedic intent of the plot, they reject the protagonists' misconduct on normative grounds and maintain a distanced, evaluative stance toward the text.

Multiple interconnected factors account for these gendered patterns. Thematic content such as juvenile delinquency and physical slapstick aligns more closely with conventionally gendered media preferences among male viewers, but the deeper drivers lie in structured differences in gendered socialization, lived cultural experience, and media repertoires. For the female participants in this study—all international students with extensive exposure to Western culture—higher levels of cross-cultural media literacy enable them to deconstruct the text as a constructed fictional artifact rather than accept its meanings at face value. For male participants, by contrast, identification with the protagonists' lived experiences overrides critical distance, leading to more immersive, referential engagement. Across both groups, audiences' capacity for critical analysis of foreign cultural information remains largely tied to accumulated viewing and life experience, operating for the most part as an implicit, spontaneous disposition rather than a systematically cultivated competency.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that young Chinese audiences approach cross-cultural television texts with considerable openness and interpretive flexibility, capable of engaging with diverse cultural information and deriving pleasure from culturally unfamiliar content. In this regard, they function as receptive and adaptive recipients of foreign cultural products. Nevertheless, openness to cultural difference does not automatically translate into sophisticated critical engagement with transnational media. While contemporary college students and young urban professionals enjoy unprecedented access to cross-cultural media resources, their intercultural media literacy remains a domain in need of deliberate cultivation. Strengthening critical analytical capacities toward foreign cultural products should be a core priority of media education in the context of global cultural exchange. With enhanced intercultural media literacy, audiences can more effectively discriminate between the varied values and narratives embedded in cross-cultural texts, engage with them from a balanced, reflective standpoint, mitigate potential normative or ideological impacts, and selectively appropriate positive cultural elements.

As with all qualitative audience research, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. Cross-cultural media reception is an inherently complex, multilayered process, and it is methodologically challenging to fully capture the depth of participants' textual comprehension and their selective appropriation of information within the scope of a single focus group session. While the study sought to approximate natural viewing conditions as closely as possible, the findings remain subject to the interpretive framing of the researcher and the constraints of a small-scale qualitative design. In addition, the sample composition presents limitations for generalizability: female participants were all postgraduate students based in the UK with high levels of Western cultural exposure, while male participants were young professionals based in mainland China with comparatively less immersive cross-cultural experience. This systematic difference between the two groups means that observed gender disparities may be partially confounded by variations in educational background and cultural capital, and the findings cannot be straightforwardly generalized to the broader population of Chinese young audiences. Despite these constraints, the study offers empirically grounded insights that carry useful implications for television comedy production and cross-cultural media communication practice.

The findings of this study carry meaningful implications for both academic research and media practice. Theoretically, by integrating humor classification with Hall's encoding/decoding framework and Liebes and Katz's reading models, this study demonstrates the utility of combining micro-level cognitive analysis with macro-level ideological critique in cross-cultural audience research. This multi-layered analytical approach can be fruitfully extended to other genres and regional contexts, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of how cultural specificity and interpretive agency interact in transnational media reception. For media practitioners, the identified primacy of visual humor in cross-cultural appeal offers concrete guidance for content producers and distributors seeking to enter global markets: investing in physically expressive, visually driven comedic storytelling can substantially reduce cultural discount and enhance cross-border accessibility. For media educators and policymakers, the finding that critical media literacy remains largely experiential and unreflexive underscores the urgency of developing systematic intercultural media education programs that equip young audiences with the analytical tools to engage critically with global media content rather than consuming it passively.

In an era of pervasive internet connectivity and rapidly evolving communication technologies, audience practices and interpretive capacities are constantly being reshaped, rendering audience behavior ever more complex and difficult to fully delineate. Yet this very dynamism also presents new intellectual opportunities for communication and media studies. Understanding audiences—their interpretive logics, value orientations, and socio-cultural conditions of reception—remains the foundational step for understanding contemporary media and cross-cultural communication. As such, sustained, empirically grounded inquiry into audience practices remains an indispensable endeavor for media scholarship seeking to make sense of global cultural flows.

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