Collectivism and Individualism in the *Bake Off* Franchise : An Analysis of the Expression and Construction of Culture in Reality Television

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Abstract
Reality television--unscripted or semi-scripted shows, often competitions--has become a popular genre of entertainment worldwide due to its relative lack of expense to produce and its emotional involvement for the viewer. Various reality franchises like *Love is Blind, Big Brother,* and *The Voice* have developed into international franchises featuring localized versions of the show for different markets around the world. Because such programs generally have a strictly structured format that carries across every show in the franchise, they become an appealing source of data about differences in behavior across cultures in areas like romance, friendship, and competition. This study analyzes and compares the British and Japanese versions of the *Bake Off* reality series, in which amateur bakers compete against each other. By looking at differences in competitive and cooperative behavior between the contestants and the ways that such behaviors are codified in the structure and editing of the show itself, we can see ways that cultural values are made part of entertainment at more than one level.

Keywords

Reality Television, Collectivism, Individualism, Culture, Media Studies

Introduction

The scene is a reality competition baking show. A group of amateur bakers struggles to execute the same complex or obscure recipe. The baker who does worst risks being judged unworthy and eliminated from the program, while the others will move on to the next stage of the competition. One of the bakers holds up the unhelpful instructions from the judges and wonders, loud enough for everyone to hear, exactly how long the dish should be left in the oven. How do the other bakers respond to this implicit request for help? Given that cultural values and norms shape how people communicate, we might expect that bakers in different cultures would respond differently. Interestingly, the rise of franchise reality television programs gives us the opportunity to easily compare these kinds of behaviors.

Reality television is a genre that defies easy categorization, a sort of catch-all for a variety of shows from “slice of life” celebrity shows like *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* or the *Real Housewives* franchise to competitive programs where contestants vie to win some kind of prize, whether it be love, money, or fame. An early definition of the genre in 1994 was more focused on true-crime re-enactments, but in the definition one can see the base assumptions of the many different kinds of reality-based programming that have evolved in the intervening decades:

- recording ‘on the wing,’ and frequently with the help of lightweight video equipment, of events in the lives of individuals and groups;
- the attempt to simulate such real-life events through various forms of dramatised reconstruction;
- the incorporation of this material in suitably edited form into an attractively packaged television programme which can be promoted on the strength of its reality credentials. (Kilborn 1994, 421-39).

The second point, that of “dramatised reconstruction,” has become less prominent in recent reality programming, but the first and third points serve as an excellent summary of the genre: footage shot on fly

to capture events in the life of people, edited after into an appealing final product that is then marketed and sold as "reality." The result is what Murray and Ouellette, in their book *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture* (2009), call an "unmediated, voyeuristic, yet often playful look into the 'entertaining real'" (2). That mix of entertainment and reality, and the blurred lines between the two, are both compelling viewing and a compelling topic of study.

In part because it is relatively inexpensive to produce compared to traditional fictional television, reality television has become increasingly popular worldwide across the last few decades. As it has proliferated, there have become so many that the Emmy Awards, for example, have been forced to deal with the bewildering variety of shows based in reality by establishing in 2014 three different categories: "reality competition program," "structured reality program," and "unstructured reality program" (Andreeva). Reality competition programs feature an attempt by a group of people to beat out other competitors and achieve a prize (i.e. *The Masked Singer, Top Chef*). Structured reality programs have a consistent overarching format but lack competition between the people involved (i.e. *Antiques Roadshow, Queer Eye*). And unstructured reality programs are the shows that promise a peek into the unscripted life of real people (i.e. *Deadliest Catch, Intervention*).Reality television formats are also fairly easy to copy and replicate in localized style, so there are a plethora of shows--especially competitive reality shows, which have much more structure and similar narratives ("who will triumph in the end?") than more unstructured reality formats. Franchise competitive reality shows feature nearly identical formats, adapted only slightly beyond using contestants from the local culture. Obviously this is not comparable to a scientific study, but at a certain level the rigid structure of a franchise competitive reality TV show helps to eliminate random variables, leaving the communicative behavior of the contestants in different cultures easier to compare and contrast.

Different reality programs can provide different points of comparison. For example, different adaptations of *The Voice*, in which amateur singers compete to gain the favor of a panel of judges, can give us insights into how people from different cultures express criticism or praise and the reaction to them. Different adaptations of *Love is Blind,* in which men and women meet with an opaque screen between them, get engaged without seeing each other, then try to negotiate a relationship, can reveal a great deal about how a culture approaches communication in romantic relationships. Another reason reality programming has become increasingly popular is implied in its very name: the perception that such shows reflect reality in a way that openly fictional media does not. However, as will be discussed more later, "reality" is quite a fluid term when it comes to this type of programming, and there are various layers of influence that shape the final product into a compelling meld of unscripted authenticity and satisfying narrative. Thus, not only the behavior of the participants in reality programming reveals cultural assumptions, but also the very structure of the show itself molds narratives to fulfill what the target audience is likely to experience as a satisfying ending.

In *The Great British Bake Off*, the narrative revolves around a group of amateur bakers competing to show off their skills and win the competition. Each week, one baker is eliminated by the judges until only three are left, from which the eventual winner is chosen. The structure of the show is quite formal and stylized: each week has a theme like "Bread," "Pastry," or "the 80s," and challenges are based on this theme. The first challenge is the Signature Challenge, in which each baker must put their own individual twist on a specific dish. This is followed by the Technical Challenge, in which all of the bakers must attempt to make the same recipe, often something complex or difficult. The final challenge is the Showstopper Challenge, where bakers are asked to create something spectacular using specific skills. There are two judges who set and evaluate the challenges, and two hosts who introduce challenges, set the pace, and provide jokes and support.

It's not just the structure that's distinctive, but also the overall look and feel of the show. Thirteen seasons into the flagship British version of the show, viewers know exactly what to expect: the setting is a pristine white tent in a green field, which the original show creators chose to evoke the feeling of a traditional English "rural baking competition at a village fete" (Higgins, 2015). There will be shots of the bucolic landscape between challenges: lambs skip, bees visit flowers, ducks paddle in the nearby pond. The inside of the tent is airy and pastel. Contestants' plans are illustrated with beautiful pencils to show viewers the ideal version of the bake they're aiming for. The overall cozy visuals work with the celebrated warm tone of the show, which traditionally focuses on positivity and gentle support rather than caustic criticism, to the point where the most recent season of the show came under some amount of fire for being too negative, as reviewer Scott Bryan (2022) pointed out: "Bake Off has never been a place to tear people down. It's Bake Off! A programme that has been all about celebrating the good rather than dwelling on the bad. If you want harsh critiques, there are plenty of other shows that already cater for you." In general, Bake Off structure requires that the hosts be sympathetic, the judges supportive, the contestants friendly, and the mood idyllic.

The multitude of Bake Off franchise offspring generally follow this structure as much as possible, from the pastels to the pencils to the positive tone. Because of this, it becomes easier to isolate behavior and compare it between cultures. Looking at how contestants from different cultures respond to such markedly similar situations should illuminate cultural differences.

Method

This paper compares and contrasts the *Great British Bake Off* (GBBO) with its offspring show, *Bake Off Japan* (BOJ). The twelfth season of GBBO (2021) and the first season of BOJ (2022) were the most recent at the time of data collection and were thus used as examples. The British season had ten episodes and the Japanese only eight, so the proportions of behavioral examples had to be adjusted in consideration. More specifically, the technical challenges from each show were examined closely. The technical challenges, rather than the signature or showstopper challenges, were chosen as the focus of this analysis because each baker is required to make the exact same dish in the technical challenge, therefore there is more to be gained by bakers comparing themselves to other bakers, and more to lose by giving assistance to other bakers. It's much more of a zero-sum game, and so competition and cooperation are both more heavily freighted.

The bakers' behavior in the technical challenge was watched with a particular eye to any sort of collective behavior. "Collective behavior" was operationalized as any time when contestants gave support or assistance to other contestants, whether it be emotional support (like words of sympathy or encouragement) technical support (giving useful information or advice) or actual physical support (helping contestants stabilize a precarious construction or complete a task). This concept of a "collectivist culture" has been common in anthropological and cultural studies, summed up by Harry Triandis (1995) as

> a social pattern consisting of closely linked individuals who see themselves as parts of one or more collectives (family, co-workers, tribe, nation); are primarily motivated by the norms of, and duties imposed by, those collectives; are willing to give priority to the goals of these collectives over their own personal goals; and emphasize their connectedness to members of these collectives.

Individualism, on the other hand, is

> a social pattern that consists of loosely linked individuals who view themselves as independent of collectives; are primarily motivated by their own preferences, needs, rights, and the contracts they have established with others; give priority to their personal goals over the goals of others; and emphasize rational analysis of the advantages and disadvantages to associating with others.

If, as is often asserted, Japan is a collectivist society, we should expect to see contestants on the Japanese show provide support to the other contestants, even though that support risks their own individual goal of

winning the competition. If British society is generally individualistic, we should expect to see contestants on the British show to be motivated by their own personal goals and needs rather than their connections to the other contestants. Of course, as Triandis (2001) also points out, being from a collectivist culture doesn't mean that every member is unfailingly collectivist, or that any member is collectivist all the time, and the same with an individualist culture. Rather, "people sample from both the individualist and collectivist cognitive structures, depending on the situation" (p. 909). The situation confronting these specific cultural members is a competitive reality program, so the context is already skewed heavily toward prioritizing individual goals. Any collectivist behavior in such a situation is likely to stand out dramatically.

Analysis

The eighteen technical challenges--ten from the British show and eight from the Japanese show--more than lived up to expectations. Neither show had any examples of physical support occur. Most examples of physical support tend to take place during the showstopper challenge, which frequently requires contestants to balance different baking elements in precarious ways, hang them in defiance of gravity, or create particularly fragile elements like sugar sculptures, so their general lack in the technical challenge, which focuses on puzzling out obscure and vague recipes, makes sense.

Great British Bake Off: Analysis

In the British show, there were four examples of emotional support between contestants across the ten episodes. This emotional support tended to appear during breaks in the baking, or at the end of the challenge. In episode two, for example, two contestants had put their bakes into a refrigerator to chill and encourage each other not to open the refrigerator to check on them and risk raising the temperature and ruining the bake. "Let's not open it, let's wait two minutes," one of the older female contestants said to one of the younger female contestants, who nodded and said "okay." At one point, also in the second episode, the emotional support took the form of a shared complaint about the difficulty of the challenge, when two contestants said "It's so awful" and "It's a horrible challenge" to each other. And that technical challenge ended with two bakers lifting their cookies and saying "cheers" to each other before eating them, which is a form of emotional support. However, it must be noted that the male baker ate his cookie and made a show of enjoying it and giving a thumbs-up, while the female baker declared that hers were "awful, but they're done." In episode three, as the challenge was almost over, a female baker announced to the tent "Just tell me that I can do this" and one of the other female bakers responded "You have got this, right now."

Strikingly, all four examples of emotional support took place in episode two and three of the British show, very early in the season. The last seven episodes, as competition heated up, had no shows of emotional support at all during the technical challenge. This would seem at odds with the popular image of GBBO as a source of "infectious giggles" and "contestant camaraderie" (Hogan, 2018), but the camaraderie that appears on the show the most usually takes place at the end of each episode, when contestants are nearly always seen selflessly celebrating with whoever has won Star Baker or comforting and feeling badly for whoever has to leave the show. In addition, the final episode of the season always shows the ways in which the bakers have maintained their connections after the show, getting together or even traveling together. The fabled positivity of GBBO is most definitely in evidence, but nearly always in the areas of the show when competition is officially over. Although contestants are never rude or aggressive, during the competition proper individualistic, albeit polite, competition takes precedence.

This individualistic tendency in the British show is even more in evidence when one searches for examples of technical support: times when bakers give each other pragmatic advice on how to complete the challenge correctly. There are no examples in the ten episodes of any baker giving advice that could help another baker while the challenge is underway. The one time any advice was given at all on the show was

in episode four, where a male contestant pointed out to a female contestant where she made a mistake with her bake. However, this advice came after the bake was completed, when it was too late for the baker to make any changes to her product. Bakers would sometimes address the room in general with questions or confusion, such as “Does this mean you put water in the caramel? I don’t know!” or “I've rolled it the wrong way. I've rolled it the long way where I think those guys have done it the short side.” But these statements were made to the camera, not to the other bakers, with no expectation of help, and indeed none was offered.

A person used to reality programs, especially one from an individualistic culture, would probably not find this at all surprising. A competition is a competition between individuals, after all, and helping the people one is competing against is clearly counter-productive. Thus the British version of *Bake Off* matches expectations about reality television and goes entirely as one might expect. The dramatic difference comes when one compares the British version of *Bake Off* to its Japanese counterpart and sees how strikingly different the two are.

Bake Off Japan: Analysis

Starting with a look at emotional support, it quickly becomes clear that emotional support is handed out much more freely between contestants in the Japanese version of the show. There are six examples of emotional support between contestants compared to the four on the British show, and since the Japanese series is two episodes shorter than the British the difference is even more pronounced. Also notable is the fact that unlike the British show, where emotional support tapered off quickly as the show went on, encouragement remained fairly steady across the Japanese season, with examples occuring in episodes two, three, five, and eight. Three separate instances of emotional support happened in episode five, more than halfway through the series, where competition was heating up more and more. In episode three, for example, a contestant exclaimed aloud when she realized she had made a mistake and used cream instead of milk in the recipe; another contestant responded unprompted to reassure her that she would be fine because milk and cream aren’t that different. In episode five, a baker (again unprompted) took a moment to encourage a distraught baker that the look of a dish is less important than the taste. Episodes six and seven had no examples of emotional support and episode eight only one, so this type of support does drop off as the show goes on, but not to the extreme it does in the British version. However, it is not in emotional support that the two shows are most dramatically different, but in the area of technical support--providing advice or information.

As stated previously, there was only one time on GBBO that any baker gave advice to another baker, and even then it was after the bake was done, when it was too late to help in the challenge. In the Japanese version of the show, however, there were an astonishing fifteen examples of contestants giving active advice and information to other contestants--at least one example in all but two of the eight episodes. Very few of these were quick or vague pieces of advice, either. In one case a baker gave detailed advice to other bakers about how to make meringue, explaining that because they were making Italian meringue rather than French it was okay to put the butter in all at once. Two other bakers came up to his bench to watch his demonstration, then turned away in excitement to do as he said, praising his knowledge. In another episode, a baker asked for help with the math to figure out the correct proportion for dividing ingredients, and another baker did the math and provided the correct answer. Nearly every episode featured some exchange of useful information, from discussions of how to interpret the directions on the recipe to comparisons of cooking and cooling times. Bakers often changed their behavior based on the information provided by other bakers, and the results were always generally positive--that is, there was no evidence the bakers giving advice were sabotaging their rivals.

A staple scene in the Japanese show was bakers gathering around a contestant’s oven for a collective discussion of how the process was going. Nearly every episode showed bakers wandering from bench to

bench or congregating around an oven to peer inside and discuss how the bake looked, comparing each other's work and offering support and advice. The most striking example happened in episode five, when a contestant made a mistake and had to start over while making cinnamon rolls. This meant the other five contestants completed the task well before she did. Instead of keeping their distance, they gathered around to offer sympathy and support (one person brought her a drink), overseeing her work and offering advice. As she goes to put the rolls into the oven, all of the watching contestants notice she's forgotten to sprinkle the required almonds on top, and three or four of them speak out in unison to remind her.

To put it mildly, nothing like this happened in the British version of the show. Contestants generally kept their distance from other bakers and gave them their space. While the air of the British show is friendly and supportive, in mid-competition there was no behavior that would risk the individuals' success in order to raise the collective skill level of the group.

The most obvious conclusion one can draw from this comparison is that contestants from individualistic cultures, trained to prioritize individual work over collective, were more unlikely to offer support and advice, while contestants from more collective cultures, who grew up being taught to value the group over the individual, were quicker to put aside their own goals and help others reach theirs. This is true as far as it goes, but a more interesting revelation lies at another level of the shows, when we look at the choices made in structure and editing.

Systemic Choices

A reality television show is far more than raw footage of natural behavior. Such shows are satisfying in part because they are carefully structured and edited to provide narrative closure:

> Not by accident, the scribes say, the reality stories have a beginning and middle and end, shaped by writers who are called not writers but "story editors" or "segment producers," who use the expression "frankenbites" (after Dr. Frankenstein's monster) to describe the art of switching around contestant sound bites recorded at different times and patched together to create what appears to be a seamless narrative. (Booth, 2004).

Because the creators of a show are generally from the culture of the franchise offshoot, this means that the ground rules and editing choices of the show will reflect the cultural values of the new country, in ways that are more subtle than individual behavior but perhaps even more powerful and which appear before and after the show, framing and manipulating the raw behavior of the contestants.

At the level of rules and structure, bakers on each show have a multitude of behaviors that are forbidden or mandated, strictures put into place before the show begins. For example, filming of a single show takes place over two days, and bakers are required to wear the same outfit both days to provide visual continuity. The pivotal moment of taking food out of an oven is key to the show, so contestants are required to inform the film crew before they remove anything. And bakers must wait at their own bench while judging takes place. (Chilton, 2022). All of these pre-established rules shape the behavior of individual judges.

Although this is never mentioned in such lists, there are a couple of moments in the British version of the show that reveal there must be literal rules in place to prevent collective behavior. For example, in episode two, the hosts were playfully teasing a contestant for having a messy bench and exhorted her to look at another contestant's clean bench and compare his to hers. There was general laughter, but then the cleaner of the two contestants jokingly chided the hosts, "She's not allowed to look!" and one of the hosts quickly said "That's right, she's not allowed to look!" In episode five, a host was chatting with a baker and said "*I know you're not supposed to,* but do you ever cast your eyes around the tent and see how everyone else is doing?" (emphasis mine) From these quick exchanges it's clearly either formally or informally forbidden for bakers to wander around and gather at benches in order to compare work on the British show. Any temptation toward collective behavior is discouraged by this organizational norm.

If there is such a written or unwritten rule on the Japanese program, there was no attempt to enforce it. Bakers regularly gathered in groups around benches or ovens or took long, careful looks at other people's bakes to see how they were achieving their results. Either the organizational structure of the show is different, or the collectivist ethos is so strong among the Japanese contestants that no external rule could force strictly individualistic behavior.

The second, and more powerful, level of systemic organization lies in the editing choices made after filming is complete. As the article above mentions, much of the heavy work of creating a satisfying reality program lies in the "segment producers" who take the raw footage, cut it into pieces, and arrange those pieces into a cohesive narrative. Such work is nearly invisible to the viewer, but is key to creating a reality program. The reason it is nearly invisible is that segment producers create narratives that match the expectations of the audience, and as such we can expect cultural values of collectivism and individualism to show up in post-production as well.

Indeed, in the British show it's common to see quick shots of contestants sneaking glances at other bakers' work. Nearly always, the bakers shown doing this are ones who are struggling, and very often the baker who is on track to be eliminated that week. In the sixteen or so hours of footage from multiple camera angles available, editors could almost certainly find footage of every contestant, successful or not, surreptitiously peeking at other benches. They choose to use video of the ones who they already know failed at the challenge, creating a satisfying cultural narrative that the bakers who could not function independently were the ones doomed to failure.

The Japanese show is generally lacking in this judgmental editing choice, although there is a striking scene in episode six where one of the hosts is talking to a contestant and notes that everyone else is discussing and comparing their work. The contestant smiles a little nervously and says that somehow she has confidence in herself--for this show, an unusually strong statement of individuality. This contestant is the one who eventually wins the whole competition, so in choosing to include this moment the Japanese editors, working to create a season-long narrative after knowing the results, underscore her self-confidence as a positive rather than a negative. Basically, while the Japanese show has moments of valorizing independence, it rarely if ever edits segments in a way that implies a negative judgment of collective behavior as the British show does.

The most recent season of the British *Bake Off*, while technically outside the scope of this study, offers a fascinating example of the power of editing to create narratives. A female contestant, Rebs, was heavily criticized among fans because she explicitly asked for help two episodes in a row. "She is criminal with it. Every challenge" one viewer complained on Twitter (Organic, 2022), whose wording reveals how intensely negatively such seemingly-dependent behavior is judged. In response, the baker who helped her responded, saying that he had offered to help beforehand and his offer had been edited out, making it appear that Rebs was demanding his help out of nowhere. "You don't see everything on tv," he noted (Janusz). Here the curtain slips enough to reveal the influence of the editors filtering the raw material of the show through their own cultural biases to create a narrative that the viewer can quickly understand: the young, attractive female contestant who plays the damsel in distress and manipulates men into helping her.

Conclusion

Because it features relatively unscripted behavior by people who are not actors, reality programming is a fascinating source of quasi-natural communicative behavior for study. Reality programming franchises in particular provide rich potential texts for cross-cultural studies because they hold so many factors—setting, structure, and tone—steady, meaning that culturally-influenced behavior can stand out more.

That "quasi" modifier before "natural communication" is essential, however. "Reality" television is notoriously not a window into some kind of pure, untouched reality. Instead, the pressures of cultural expectations come into play before the contestants ever arrive on the set and continue long after the competition is over. The rules governing the contestants' behavior established before shooting begins and the editing choices made after filming ends push and prod the raw material of contestants' behavior in ways that also reflect cultural assumptions.

Once we accept these different levels of cultural pressure exist, reality programming becomes even more fascinating as a cultural text: not merely for the on-screen behavior of the contestants, but as a window into the many less-foregrounded human choices that cut raw communicative material into discrete units and shape them into narratives that are a pleasure for the audience to view and digest. From beginning to end, *The Great British Bake Off*'s producers, editors, and contestants tend to make choices that express and reward individuality, while *Bake Off Japan*'s producers, editors, and contestants tend to make choices that express and reward collective behavior. A comparison of the shows reveals that cultural values are not merely a decorative garnish on the final media product, but are (if I may be forgiven the phrase), baked-in at every stage in the process.

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