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The Differentiation of Intercultural Communication: Taking Xiaohongshu and the Overseas Media "TikTok" as Examples

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Abstract. With the rapid development of globalization and digital media, transcultural communication has gradually presented the phenomena of diversification and differentiation. This article takes the phenomenon of "a large number of TikTok users migrating to Xiaohongshu" as a research case and takes Xiaohongshu and TikTok as research objects to comparatively analyze the diversity and complexity of transcultural communication. Research has found that Xiaohongshu emphasizes the expression of community-based and life-oriented content, which has the characteristics of local culture and the function of identity construction. Xiaohongshu has effectively achieved transcultural communication and met users' personalized needs through the user generated content (UGC) model and community interaction mechanism. TikTok emphasizes entertainment and popularity under big data algorithms and adopts differentiated communication strategies for different countries. For example, there are significant differences in page design between the American and Chinese versions, as well as the diversity of overseas cultures and the ability to spread global cultures. Based on the performance of both in the dissemination of user culture, cultural identity and the transmission of values, it shows the trend of transcultural communication from one-way output in the past to the joint action of multiple parties now.

Keywords: transcultural communication, social media, xiaohongshu, tiktok, cultural identity

1. Introduction

This study focuses on January 2025. With the possible ban on TikTok in the United States, over 3 million users have flocked to the Chinese social media platform Xiaohongshu, giving rise to the phenomenon known as "TikTok Refugees." According to statistics, the topic "TikTok Refugee" has received over 800 million views and over 1.51 million interactions. Xiaohongshu once ranked first on the free download list of Apple Store in the US region. This phenomenon not only reflects the trend of user migration among digital platforms in the era of globalization but also engenders novel paradigms for cultural dissemination. The research facilitates the connection of diverse cultural systems, enhances the comprehension of intercultural distinctions and commonalities, and aids in the analysis of cultural strategies, user preferences, and the evolving dynamics of cultural rights, thereby fostering improved understanding and communication among nations.

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With the rapid advancement of science and technology, traditional ways of cultural dissemination are constantly being broken and reshaped, and the role played by emerging social media platforms in transcultural communication has gradually become prominent. This study mainly focuses on the analysis of transcultural differences, Maletzke's communication theory, and cultural hegemony. This study mainly uses literature analysis to search and read relevant materials and literature. The advantage of this methodology lies in its ability to effectively analyze the distinct differences between Xiaohongshu and TikTok in terms of content orientation, cultural dissemination approaches, and user interaction patterns during their global proliferation, transitioning from unidirectional output to multidirectional engagement. The ultimate research objective of this study is to use Xiaohongshu and TikTok as the analysis objects, explore their specific practices and cultural significance in transcultural communication, and provide a more novel theoretical perspective for understanding the changes in the global media environment driven by user migration.

2. Background

2.1. The essence and development of transcultural communication

Transcultural communication encompasses the dissemination of high-context and low-context cultures. The conceptual framework of "high-context culture" and "low-context culture," as proposed by American anthropologist Edward T. Hall, has provided novel perspectives for interpreting and analyzing cross-cultural communication dynamics. The differences in cultural dissemination arise from the combined effect of various factors such as different historical origins, humanistic environments, and ways of thinking in different regions, countries, and ethnic groups. According to Hall's conceptual framework, Asian nations such as China, Japan, along with African and Latin American countries, are classified as high-context cultures, whereas North American countries including the United States and Canada, along with most of European nations, are categorized as low-context cultures [1]. Consequently, the relative weight of the information transmission function assumed by "context" varies significantly in the process of cross-cultural communication between different nations and regions, particularly in the cultural exchanges between "high-context countries" and "low-context countries."

An important opportunity for transcultural communication is globalization. Globalization not only drives the development of the world economy but also uses this to continuously communicate and disseminate culture, broadening the channels and scope of cultural communication. Economically, China's "Belt and Road" and "Maritime Silk Road" trade exchanges are spreading Chinese history and traditional culture while economic exchanges. On the other hand, domestic and foreign self-media bloggers also voluntarily showcase and spread traditional Chinese culture on social platforms such as Xiaohongshu, Douyin and Instagram.

2.2. Specific manifestations of transcultural communication

Against the backdrop of a significant influx of overseas users engaging with Chinese social media platform Xiaohongshu and interacting with domestic users through posts and comments, the distinct communication patterns employed in their exchanges have revealed notable cultural differences between Chinese and foreign users. However, rather than creating communication barriers between international and Chinese users, these cultural distinctions have demonstrated the unique value of cross-cultural communication from a different perspective. For example, Li Ziqi, a Chinese intangible cultural heritage blogger, spent several months creating videos related to China's

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intangible cultural heritage. While not affecting the aesthetics of the picture, Li Ziqi also attaches Chinese and English subtitles under the video for users to understand and has both aesthetic and dissemination [2]. Overseas netizens have found common topics with Chinese users of Xiaohongshu by sharing their pets, thus earning the "recognition" and "acceptance" of the "natives" of Xiaohongshu. This behavior was jokingly called "paying Cat/Dog Tax", serving as an ice-breaking bond between "TikTok Refugees" and "native users", and it was also the first post made by most overseas users on the Chinese social platform Xiaohongshu [3]. As the exchanges between the two sides deepened, the "refugees" found that Chinese netizens were very friendly and funny, and gradually moved from the initial ice-breaking topics such as "animal tax" to sharing daily life, and sincerely communicated with Chinese netizens to discuss what they saw and heard. This phenomenon reflects a bottom-up form of cultural exchange, transcends the traditional promotion model of national cultural soft power, and promotes real and effective bidirectional transcultural communication and understanding.

3. Cultural differences and the formation of maletzke's theory

Maletzke first proposed the Maletzke's Communication Model in 1963. This model is used to emphasize the personal value and social role of the communicator, as well as the constraints they are subject to by the media or external forces and the feedback from the recipients during the communication process. It primarily emphasizes the connection within the propagation path rather than the external connection. This had an inseparable connection with the social environment and policy connection at that time.

3.1. Cultural differences inspire cultural sharing

Cultural motivation, social networks, transcultural communication and other aspects may all cause cultural differences and stimulate the desire to share by influencing individuals' behaviors. For example, China places greater emphasis on emotional resonance and strengthening interpersonal connections. This cultural phenomenon manifests itself prominently across social media platforms. Local users in Xiaohongshu generally believe that "sharing = planting grass + building a sense of identity" is more inclined to some emotional categories, such as exploration of shops, scenery, and copywriting. Chinese users exhibit a pronounced inclination towards establishing affinity-based communities through content sharing, seeking resonance and a sense of belonging. They demonstrate a strong community affiliation, actively engaging in interactions through likes, collections, and comments [4]. Conversely, overseas users of Xiaohongshu perceive "sharing" as a means of self-expression and individuality display, particularly in countries such as the United States and Germany. Influenced by the quintessential cultural backdrop of "individualism" prevalent in the United States, international users exhibit a stronger inclination towards emphasizing "who I am" and "how I stand out." The content they share typically leans towards documenting, exploring, and expressing personal perspectives, often articulated through original, professional, and opinionated vocabulary, thereby forming the core themes of their posts, rather than focusing on "recommendations" or "product endorsements." At the same time, there are fewer comments and interactions, and a preference for content presentation and audience feedback.

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3.2. The formation mechanism of transcultural interaction within the social field

The formation of transcultural interaction lies in communication and integration between cultures. It is a slow process. You must learn to respect and understand other people's cultures not only in terms of language but also in many aspects such as values, beliefs and behaviors. This article holds that the most important point of transcultural communication is - language. Because language serves as a bridge for communication among various cultures, in addition, education and ability cultivation also play an important role. The "content tension" arising from cultural differences between China and foreign countries serves as a pivotal catalyst for intercultural curiosity. Through the platform Xiaohongshu, overseas users are exposed to Chinese culture, where the unique expressions of Chinese culture not only pique their curiosity but also stimulate their desire for expression and knowledge acquisition. This dynamic fosters a constructive community interaction model, subsequently giving rise to phenomena such as "cultural imitation," as evidenced by trending topics like "foreigners preparing Chinese cuisine" and "learning Chinese." Under such cultural disparities, a phenomenon of "difference as content" has emerged, which essentially represents an alternative form of "cultural breakout" and "soft dissemination." Xiaohongshu has consequently evolved into a novel platform for cultural exchange and propagation, inadvertently facilitating the global dissemination of Chinese culture [5].

3.3. Dynamic dissemination process of cultural integration phenomenon

As illustrated in Figure 1, panel (a) presents the payoff matrix of social interactions, delineating the outcomes of cooperative and defection strategies within societal contexts. Panel (b) demonstrates the horizontal transmission relationship between social interactions and cultural levels. Panel (c) represents the specific process of horizontal cultural transmission, while panel (d) illustrates the vertical or oblique processes of cultural inheritance. Under the phenomenon of cross-cultural integration, cultural communication activities are no longer merely a simple and single process of "cultural output" or "cultural input", but rather a process involving platform collaboration, user participation, and dynamic evolution of content. Cultural integration is not only spread within the same generation, but also across different ages. The Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory in the United States has put forward the theory of the cultural communication model and demonstrated the process of how a person is transferred from an individual to a group. This communication model is not only about language and customs but also cultural behavior patterns - in today's star chasing culture, the dazzling radiance of celebrities is attributed to the support of numerous fans. The continuous growth of such support, in essence, reflects a way of the spread of the fan culture [6].

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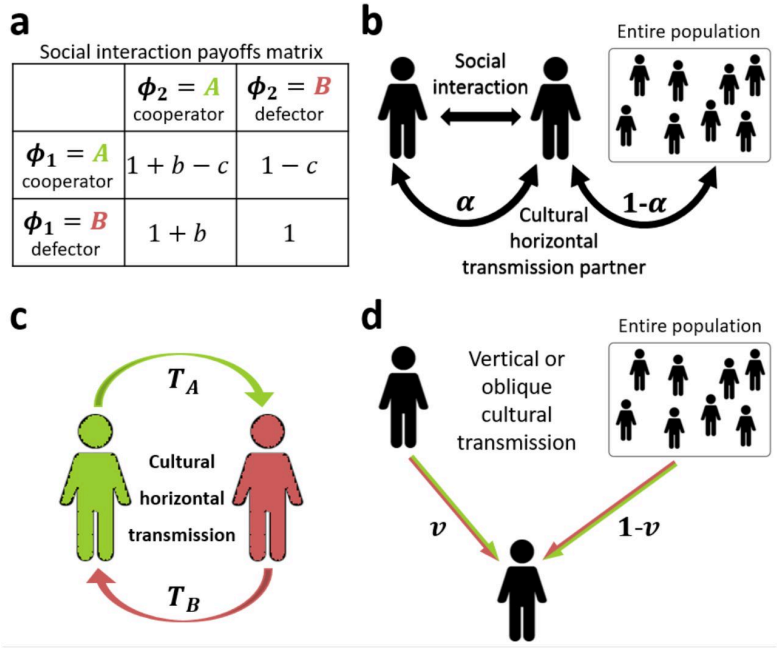

Figure 1: Dynamic dissemination process of transcultural integration phenomenon

4. Motivations and impacts of user migration behavior

From the perspective of communication studies, this migration is not only a change in technological choices or usage habits, but also a manifestation of the trend of cultural structure diversification in the global media ecosystem. The migration behavior of users from TikTok to Xiaohongshu has been influenced by multiple layers of communication motivations. When confronted with changes in the platform environment, users will proactively select a platform environment that better aligns with their personal preferences, based on their diverse needs in aspects such as information acquisition, identity construction, social connection, and emotional belonging [7].

The content creation mechanism of TikTok platform emphasizes traffic and visual impact, while Xiaohongshu encourages "authentic expression", "daily recording" and "knowledge sharing", which has more advantages in meeting users' emotional communication and sense of belonging in life. Particularly for users seeking in - depth information, cultural exchanges, and community resonance, the interactive forms on Xiaohongshu are more characteristic of an "immersive community". Although Xiaohongshu demonstrates a distinct advantage in user stickiness, its content structure and communication strategies are relatively reliant on Chinese local culture and lifestyle. This highly localized feature has exposed the problem of insufficient adaptability of Xiaohongshu when facing global users.

This reality indicates that future transcultural communication not only requires innovation in technology and strategies but also necessitates continuous exploration in cultural understanding, value - based dialogues, and modes of expression. Only when genuine equal cultural exchanges and multi - cultural coexistence are achieved can the global media ecosystem move towards a new, more open and coordinated phase [8]. Meanwhile, the fact that Xiaohongshu, a non-Western platform, has been actively chosen by some international users indicates that global users are no longer confined to the single media channels offered by mainstream platforms. Instead, they tend to make decisions on media usage based on their own interests, identifications, and needs. User migration is not merely an act of media selection but also a process of reconstructing cultural identities, which contributes to

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the evolution of the global social platform ecosystem towards a more balanced and diversified structure [9].

4.1. The influence of american culture is highlighted and reconstructed in the "tiktok refugee" phenomenon

The phenomenon presented in the case of this article, although seemingly manifested as a user migration event on the surface, reflects the interaction and adjustment relationship between the cultural narrative dominated by the United States and other cultural platforms in the current global digital media cultural structure. It is undeniable that as a platform with a very high globalization, TikTok's algorithm logic, content trends and visual style have continued to a certain extent the dominant form of local culture. Fast-paced editing, entertainment-centric narrative approach, and "creator economy" that emphasizes individual charm [10]. These characteristics are accepted and imitated by users, to a certain extent, constructing a "media culture template" with wide influence.

This choice allows users to have a certain degree of initiative and reflection when facing globalized media content, to explore platforms that are more in line with their own interests and sense of community belonging. This migration trend has prompted non-Western platforms to establish their own characteristics in content ecology, expression styles, and user interaction mechanisms, thereby gaining more cultural expression space in the global platform system. The emergence of the "TikTok refugee" phenomenon is another way for users to choose cultural expression against the backdrop of platform diversification.

4.2. Evolution of cultural influence

Just from the perspective of globalization and digital networks, the United States does have a dominant advantage. A certain amount of capital has been accumulated through the evolution of information technology. However, with the rising influence of Chinese social platforms among global users, the interaction between Chinese and American users has begun to present a more diversified communication pattern, bringing innovation to traditional cultural imperialism. As a new platform, Xiaohongshu gives users different network environments and cultural experiences. More and more overseas users are not only actively joining but also participating in creating and imitating the expression styles of Chinese users. Culture is not one-way input. Instead, it achieves two-way or even multi-directional flow through social interaction, algorithmic recommendation and community feedback [7]. This also indicates that the influence of cultural imperialism is gradually weakening in actual dissemination.

4.3. New trends in platform governance and cultural power transformation in digital media

In the contemporary communication ecosystem dominated by social media, platform governance mechanisms not only determine the visibility and dissemination path of content, but also invisibly reshape the distribution pattern of cultural power. This phenomenon indicates that while users are choosing a platform, they are also participating in the process of shaping the platform culture together; Platform governance plays a crucial role in organizing, guiding, and coordinating diverse cultural expressions behind the scenes. The logic of platform governance is no longer the traditional sense of "content regulation" or "information review", but more inclined to achieve collaborative balance of content ecology through algorithm regulation, community norms, and user empowerment [11].

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When the platform supports decentralized content production and when the audience shows more initiative in a transcultural environment, the originally inherent cultural hegemony structure will be loosened or even rebalanced. Through user-generated content, local cultural reinforcement and soft news dissemination methods, Xiaohongshu reduces the confrontational sentiment brought by cultural output, and allows cultural communication to transform from competition to mutual integration and growth together. This change not only gives non-Western cultures more say in global dissemination but also establishes a more equal and diverse environment for global cultural exchanges.

5. Conclusion

The phenomenon of “TikTok refugees” migrating to Xiaohongshu is not only a hot topic of user mobility between platforms, but also a representative case in the evolution of the global digital communication landscape. This form of expression provides a new perspective and theoretical space for the study of contemporary transcultural communication, platform governance mechanisms, and global user behavior patterns. This study focuses on this user migration phenomenon and analyzes the structural differences and user participation characteristics of mainstream social media platforms in China and the West in transcultural communication. Research has found that Xiaohongshu provides a more intimate and participatory communication environment for transcultural users by emphasizing life-like expression, community-based interaction and local content production. In contrast, TikTok's mechanism of short-term entertainment and algorithm-driven content distribution forms a sharp contrast. Meanwhile, the platform's cultural strategy also has a significant impact on user behavior and the path of cultural dissemination and acceptance.

This study extends audience initiative and cultural communication theory in combination with practical platform cases, enriching the dimension of platform comparative research in transcultural communication. In the past, academic circles focused on content output and media discourse analysis of transcultural communication, while this study focused on users' migration behavior, cultural adaptation and expression strategies between different platforms, emphasizing users' cultural selection ability and expression autonomy in the context of globalization. This phenomenon also provides practical reference for the governance of digital media platforms and the construction of content ecology. The content recommendation mechanism, community operation strategy, and user culture guidance method of Xiaohongshu demonstrate a relatively flexible and diverse governance approach, providing practical experience for other platforms on how to balance content diversity and cultural adaptation in promoting globalization strategies. It reminds platform builders that in the process of going international, they should not only rely on technological advantages or capital-driven forces, but also deeply understand the needs and expression methods of different cultural communities, thereby enhancing cultural inclusiveness and user stickiness.

For international communication research, the expansion of cultural influence does not necessarily rely on grand narratives and strong discourses but can achieve "subtle" cultural understanding and resonance through the dualization of platform content and interactive community interaction. This "depoliticized" communication path has significant practical significance in the future global communication pattern and provides new clues for subsequent scholars to study how to promote cultural understanding and enhance international cognition in a non-confrontational environment.

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Authors contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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