

The Cultural Phenomenon of TikTok Users Migrating to Xiaohongshu: Investigating Underlying Motivations via Machine Learning and Mixed-Methods Analysis

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Abstract. This study examines the phenomenon of “TikTok refugees” migrating to Xiaohongshu (RedNote) as a novel, affectively-driven form of digital cross-cultural adaptation. Moving beyond functionalist explanations for platform switching, we argue that this migration is primarily motivated by emotional responses to geopolitical pressures. Using a mixed-methods approach that integrates computational social science techniques—including MDCOR (Machine Driven Classification of Open-ended Responses) for thematic analysis and SENA (Sentiment and Emotion Network Analysis) for emotion detection—with qualitative interpretation, we analyse user discussions drawn from YouTube commentary concerning this migration. Results show that negative emotions (e.g., anxiety, frustration) regarding the potential TikTok ban were the main drivers for migration (H1 supported). Afterwards, migrants demonstrated a significant increase in positive emotions (e.g., joy, belonging) on Xiaohongshu, indicating successful affective adaptation (H2 supported). Discourse analysis highlighted a predominant preference for Berry’s integration strategy in acculturation, where users retain their original digital cultural identity while actively engaging with Xiaohongshu’s community (H3 supported). A positive correlation was also identified between users’ emotional attitudes towards migration and their level of cultural engagement on the new platform (H4 supported). By combining computational social science with cross-cultural adaptation theory, this study emphasises the crucial role of affective factors in shaping digital migration and grassroots community formation within global social media ecosystems.

Keywords: Digital Migration, TikTok, Xiaohongshu (RedNote), Machine Driven Classification of Open-ended Responses (MDCOR), Sentiment and Emotion Network Analysis (SENA)

1. Introduction

Since the early 21st century, the rapid advancement of digital technologies and the widespread adoption of the Internet have profoundly transformed social structures and how information is shared. For the younger generation growing up alongside the Internet, social media has become an essential platform for emotional expression and social interaction. TikTok, with its precise algorithmic recommendations, lightweight content formats, and high interactivity, quickly established itself as a globally influential social platform.

By 2024, TikTok had over one billion monthly active users worldwide, spanning more than 150 countries and territories [1]. However, in April 2024, the U.S. government passed the Protecting American Users from Foreign Adversary-Controlled Apps Act (PAFACA), which requires ByteDance to divest TikTok to a non-Chinese entity within 270 days; otherwise, TikTok would face a total ban in the United States as of January 19, 2025 [2].

Faced with regulatory pressure, ByteDance refused to sell TikTok, raising widespread concern and uncertainty among American users about the platform's future. As the January 19, 2025, deadline approached, a broad, user-led search for alternative platforms began. TikTok attempted to redirect users to its affiliated platform, Lemon8, through in-app prompts and algorithmic recommendations [3]. Although this temporarily increased Lemon8's downloads, its close connections to ByteDance prompted doubts among users about its long-term viability and similar regulatory hurdles [4]. More importantly, Lemon8's product design and content ecosystem, which closely resembled the Chinese platform Xiaohongshu (RedNote), inadvertently offered American users an entry point to explore and eventually migrate to its more established and dynamic Chinese counterpart.

This resulted in an influx of Tik Tok users. Since the middle of January 2025, there was a distinct trend of migration towards Xiaohongshu. The app went to the top of the U.S. Apple App Store free app list very fast, and in those few days, tens of thousands of new American users were registered [5]. On Google Play, the number of downloads by Xiaohongshu in the U.S. grew more than double year to year. As of 19 January, Xiaohongshu was among the top charts in the free apps in 43 countries around the world.

It is worth noting that this migration continued despite the fact that the service of TikTok in the United States was officially suspended and then the ban was postponed due to political developments. This continuity represents the fact that what happened was more than a mere replacement of the platforms. It is evidenced by the fact that the migration of TikTok users to Xiaohongshu is the manner in which social media allows users to overcome geopolitical boundaries, opting to embrace digital citizenship and restructure communities akin to how people form friendships and succumb to preferences in terms of emotions and culture. This culturally inspired migration of grass roots emerged, which provided a unique platform of cross-cultural contact with a unique opportunity to experience massive, real-time cross-platform cultural adaptation. It is one of the main evidences of the digital migration motivated by the cultural appeal and participation of emotions, instead of mere technical demands.

Despite the fact that the current research on this phenomenon has primarily centered on the emotional aspects of cross-cultural adaptation, e.g., thematic expression, stance-based affect pattern, and the response to identity within the context of Xiaohongshu use, the analysis has mainly focused on the participants who have been using Xiaohongshu as well as the content that they have been publishing. More so, the research methods have remained mainly qualitative in nature. Such transfers are not sufficiently addressed with regard to the underlying emotional rationales by such a restricted range of topics and procedures. To be able to deal with this problem, we studied and

analyzed remarks under two official YouTube videos of this event that used different methods of reporting, though they were aimed at the audiences of various demographics. We employed MDCOR-software, which was able to effectively and rigorously mark the open-ended attitudinal or sentiment responses of the survey using machine learning and text classification to avoid the limitations of a quantitative study and involve comparison of the differences in sentiment distribution across defined groups, in addition to SENA, which involves using network modelling which avoids aggregation of results and can compare differences in sentiment distribution among different groups.

Therefore, based on cross-cultural theory, our study aims to explore the underlying emotional motivations behind this migration by combining computational methods with mixed research approaches. The goal is not only to interpret this specific phenomenon but also to uncover how modern digital citizens seek identity recognition, create ideal communities, and how emotional factors become the main driving force behind the development of networked social structures.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical legitimacy: the development of cross-cultural adaptation theory

The number of studies on cross-cultural adaptation began in the early 20th century as a large influx of immigrants and short-term visitors flocked to the United States, as well as other countries such as Australia, Canada, England, and Germany [6]. The widely accepted concept of Cross-Cultural Adaptation is Acculturation, which originates from an archaeological theory and describes a phenomenon where direct, sustained contact between different cultural groups causes changes in their existing cultural patterns [7]. It is a macro-level perspective focused on interactions among two or more groups. Just as archaeology examines it at this level, sociology also considers only structural issues involving groups [6]. Unlike archaeology and sociology, social psychological studies focus on individual change during acculturation, also known as the “ABCs,” referring respectively to affective, behavioural, and cognitive aspects [8], which is considered a micro-level phenomenon [6].

Several theoretical models, including various factors, have been proposed to generalise patterns of adaptation, such as the Acculturation Strategies Model introduced by Berry in 1997. Kim noted that existing models lacked consensus, meaning they were based on differing perspectives of cultural adaptation. Therefore, adopting a systems theory perspective, she regards the various factors and levels of cross-cultural adaptation as an interconnected and mutually influencing whole [9]. Kim has developed a structural model that examines factors influencing cross-cultural adaptation, providing an overall description of the reasons for differential rates or levels of intercultural transformation within a given time period.

The structural model comprises six dimensions (host communication competence, host social communication, ethnic social communication, environment, predisposition and intercultural transformation), all of which interact with one another. Similar to the earlier proposed cross-cultural adaptation framework [10-12], Kim's structural model concentrates on individual psychological factors, highlighting that the emotional aspects of the stranger's host communication competence are among the key elements affecting the adaptation process [6]. Moreover, in the social environment dimension, Kim was the first to incorporate a mass communication perspective into cross-cultural adaptation, thereby expanding the scope of previous theoretical approaches.

Together, these studies suggest that we can understand the process of cross-cultural adaptation simultaneously from the perspectives of individual emotional drivers and social communication

media.

2.2. Conceptual refinement: digital migration as platform switching behaviour

Currently, there is a lack of specialised terminology in academic circles to describe the phenomenon of social media user migration. Tracing its origins, Prensky introduced a similar concept of digital immigrants, referring to individuals born before the digital age who only began learning and adapting to digital technologies in adulthood, in contrast to digital natives, who grew up immersed in a digital environment [13]. The core of this definition lies in the technological generation gap rather than the physical migration of populations. Although this concept is widely cited, it bears no direct relation to the notion of “migration” as understood in migration studies. In the migration studies literature, the terms "Digital Immigrant" or "Digital Migrant" have been adopted to denote migrant groups who rely heavily on and utilise digital technologies throughout their migration process and settled life. However, this usage lacks a unified and operationalised definition. It is frequently conflated with terms such as “Connected Migrants” and “Mediatized Migrants”, resulting in blurred conceptual boundaries and the absence of a widely accepted academic consensus [14].

The Digital Diaspora is more mature and well-presented as compared to the amorphously defined Digital Immigrants. It issues to do with actual-world migrant communities who use information and communication technologies (ICT) to sustain or even reconstruct their diasporic networks. Its major characteristics comprise: (1) mediated communities, which manifest themselves as virtual communities and networks built on a virtual platform like the internet and other social media [15]; (2) transnational relations and identity formation that are mainly meant to maintain the connection between the members to the homeland and other members of the diaspora and achieve the reinforcement of shared cultural memory and collective identity [16].

Online Migration entails the study of decentralised networks, the re-creation of online social relations as well as the quantitative study of Twitter. Largely, Behavioural Analysis and large language models (LLMs) are the primary research tools used to study online migration, as the two are the primary methods. Kumar et al. share the results of user migration behaviour on various social sites, having found out that Reddit users tend to migrate more often [17]. Jeong et al. have used large language models (LLMs) and preference analysis to look at Twitter users who have migrated to other websites after Twitter acquisition [18].

In summary, Digital Immigration remains a concept that requires further clarification within the field of migration studies. Digital Diaspora focuses on how technology sustains transnational community identity. Online Migration refers to the phenomenon of moving from one digital platform to another, with primary research centred on Twitter and similar platforms. Our study, however, examines the migration of users from the American TikTok platform to the Chinese Xiaohongshu platform. Applying the aforementioned concepts to this phenomenon proves inadequate. In existing research studying this phenomenon, authors have employed Digital Platform Migration [19,20] or Digital Migrants [21] to define it. Given the interpretative differences between migration and migrants, we have opted to employ the term 'migration' in light of its connotations, which refer to the seasonal movement or temporary removal of a person, people, social group, etc., from one place to another [22]. We define the phenomenon of TikTok users flocking to Xiaohongshu as Digital Migration.

2.3. Existing research: the key role of emotion in the digital migration phenomenon

Numerous studies have been conducted on TikTok users migrating to Xiaohongshu since this phenomenon erupted in January 2025. Most discussions focus on topics related to cross-cultural communication, particularly the emotional drivers involved.

Regarding the entire phenomenon of cross-cultural communication, Ma and Huang suggested that the theory of emotional contagion could be used to analyse the mechanisms of emotional spread during 'overseas users flocking to Xiaohongshu' across three aspects: emotional arousal, emotional resonance, and emotional diffusion [23]. Lu and Huang explained the phenomenon as being driven by the dual forces of technological pressure and cultural identity, which enabled American users to build digital co-presence spaces that unfolded in two distinct stages, based on Collins's interaction ritual chain theory [24]. These two stages facilitate the transformation of emotional energy from symbolic resonance to shared values, forming a closed-loop progression from superficial resonance to profound resonance.

Concentrating on the platforms and users in cross-cultural communication events, Guo et al. observed that the affective propensities of the platform, combined with internal and external stimuli toward this phenomenon consists of group identity and relationship networks [25]. On the same note, Wang and Li posited that online communities established through sites establish a level of attachment beyond the emotional distance, moving to the sense of affective attachment, and thus the importance of emotional attachment in human daily incidences [26]. In a mass communication world, the media influences the perceptions between groups of dissimilar cultural background, whereas the diverse daily experiences are breaking the stereotypes [27]. Similarly, real-world accounts of everyday interaction will also allow eliciting mutual emotional comprehension and culturally relevant situations among users to be successfully encouraged by using contextualised narratives about them [28]. Zhao also explored this process of the empathetic contagion [29]. His sentiment analysis and semantic network analysis of comments made on Xiaohongshu on different relevant topics allowed discovering that the content created by the Tik Tok users about their everyday life includes specific localised Chinese features, thus establishing an emotional connection with Chinese users. This interaction mechanism of the platform enables the understanding of the culture and mutual recognition among youths in China and the United States.

2.4. Research extension: further studies on cross-cultural adaptation in the digital migration

The other element that is crucial in the phenomenon of digital migration is cross-cultural adaptation. Examining 586 user comments using the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) method, Xiong et al. were able to identify a set of discursive patterns that were employed by domestic and foreign users, indicating the cultural resistance and accommodation at the same time [30]. Simultaneously, a large number of case studies have requested more focus on the area of cultural adaptation [31,32] to streamline the platform and perfect the paradigm of industrial diplomacy in the digital age [33].

Considering the cross-cultural adaptation introduced by Kim in the mass communication perspective, Zhao, who also studied the digital migration phenomenon of TikTok users flocking to Xiaohongshu, expanded the concept to the interpretative boundaries of cross-cultural adaptation theory in digital spaces. By combining online ethnography with in-depth interview methods, Zhao discovered that, to integrate into new cultures and communities as quickly as possible, TikTok users exhibit platform-technology-oriented cross-cultural adaptation behaviours on Xiaohongshu [29]. Furthermore, based on differing reliance strategies, they can be categorised into three distinct types, driven respectively by cultural, emotional, and technological strategies. Regarding emotional

strategies, Zhao observed that empathy, which resolves cultural conflicts through emotional connection, is one of the core strategies for building cross-cultural communities [29]. Moreover, this precisely echoes the affective competence mentioned in cross-cultural adaptation:

The concept of affective competence thus embraces various existing concepts that have been employed in communication and social psychological studies, including “ambiguity tolerance”, “empathy”, “empathic motivation”, “psychological distance”, “intergroup anxiety”, “ethnocentrism”, and “prejudice”. These and related concepts are integrated in the present theory into three main components: adaptation motivation, identity orientation, and aesthetic/emotional orientation [6, p. 109].

Some scholars have also used other methods to explore related topics. Grounded in Emotional Contagion Theory and Platform Governance Theory, Zhao et al. employed PLS-SEM and Necessary Condition Analysis (NCA) to analyse data collected from the questionnaire survey [32]. They ultimately found that moderation by comment mechanisms and algorithmic recommendations is crucial for emotional dynamics to emerge from the relationship between emotional contagion and interaction frequency; other factors are insufficient. Analysing 1,862 posts and 403k comments via LLM sentiment classification and BERT topic modelling, Li et al. identify significant affective asymmetry in cross-group engagement with TikTok refugee content [20]. Their findings reveal systematic differences in thematic expression, stance-driven emotional patterns (Pro-China/Neutral/Pro-Foreign), and identity-topic affective responses.

In order to explore further the cross-cultural adaptation in the process of digital migration, especially in terms of emotional motives, our study will focus on a number of factors. First, given that the existing data is mainly directed to Xiaohongshu, we will attempt to collect various views concerning TikTok users adopting Xiaohongshu and build a more comprehensive picture of the emotional drivers behind it. Thus, the content of YouTube-related video comments is used as data used to perform cross-platform analysis. Also, much of the current studies are based on manually coded process and apprehensive to the qualitative approach. This is bound to add human error and subjectivity to the data processing process, and also the constraints of using one type of research. To solve these problems, we use MDCOR software to categorize the data of the comments in question, and this software applies machine learning and text classification methods. It handles open-ended responses extremely rigourously and effectively, without losing any context, or the original voice of the respondent, but, at the same time, being sensitive to the nuances that human reasoning contributes to qualitative and mixed-methods analysis [33]. Meanwhile, in analysing sentiment data, we use the SENA software. This methodology does not aggregates results i.e the analysis output is not based on the characteristics of the participants nor does it facilitate the individual analysis of the experiences of participants. More importantly, it will not be able to figure out whether the reactions being voiced are coherent or opposite [34].

3. Research hypotheses

3.1. Affective adaptation motivation hypothesis

The affective component is the key driver of successful adaptation in the host environment [6]. Taft defined affective components as the ability to connect with the dynamic aspects of strangers and cultures, enabling individuals to meet their need for self-expression [35]. One of the affective components is adaptation motivation, which refers to the willingness to participate in and adapt to the host environment and its influences, and is shaped by how strangers perceive their relationship with the host environment [6]. Under political and regulatory pressure in the United States, users

migrated from TikTok to Xiaohongshu, creating a unique environment for observing real-time emotional transmission and cross-cultural adaptation on digital platforms because they carried emotional baggage such as uncertainty, frustration, or curiosity [32]. Additionally, Huang and Lai noted that Xiaohongshu emphasises community-based, lifestyle-oriented content expression, which possesses distinct local cultural characteristics and identity-building functions, helping to foster greater emotional resonance with users [31]. To understand the specific role of emotional factors in users' cross-cultural digital migration, based on the definition of adaptation motivation proposed by Kim [6], we formulate the following hypotheses:

H1: The main reasons motivating TikTok users to switch to Xiaohongshu originate from negative feelings about the possible ban of their original platform (TikTok), rather than simply a need for functional replacement.

H2: Migrated users exhibit increased positive emotions on the Xiaohongshu platform, indicating that the new platform provides emotional security and a sense of belonging.

3.2. Cultural integration strategy hypothesis

Berry emphasised the importance of integration as maintaining one's original culture while engaging in daily interactions with other groups within acculturation strategies [6]. Identity flexibility and aesthetic co-orientation are the other two factors of the affective components, providing further explanation for integration. A flexible identity refers to the stranger's willingness to adopt the identity of the host culture, which is closely related to a positive intergroup orientation [6]. The aesthetic co-orientation reflects the extent to which they can satisfy their aesthetic needs in their adopted environment; the more strangers' aesthetic/emotional co-orientation with local people, the better able they are to empathise with the surrounding cultural productions, including art, music, and sports, as well as to appreciate the culture's everyday experiences of fun, joy, humour, and happiness, and of anger, despair, frustration, and disappointment [6]. In the context of this cross-cultural phenomenon of digital migration, we argue that similar adaptation strategies persist. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3: There exists an enabling sentiment towards an integration strategy, whereby people are able to maintain their original cultural identity, as they adopt the culture of the new platform under this phenomenon of digital migration.

H4: The emotional attitude to this digital migration has a positive relationship with the level of acceptance of the new platform culture.

4. Methodology

This paper applies a mixed-methods research process to investigate the digital migration phenomenon of Tik Tok refugees to Xiaohongshu, incorporating both computational social science methods with the qualitative analysis (to include the macro-scaled and more detailed user experiences). The approach to conduct the research is rooted in digital migration research, a relatively young discipline, investigating the role of digital technologies in influencing the process of migration, transnational networks, and identity construction [36]. In this context, we make use of the notion of digital migrants to encompass people whose migration patterns are greatly mediated by digital processes [14], although we acknowledge the older term digital diaspora which views the transnational relationship of migrant communities by use of ICTs [16].

Analysis of the large amount of textual data produced as result of this migration phenomenon is done using MDCOR (Machine Driven Classification of Open-ended Responses). It is a novel tool of

software that applies machine learning and natural language processing to classify text. MDCOR will be used to rigorously analyze open-ended responses without losing the contextual subtleties or the original voices of the respondents [33]. We will complement this method with the use of SENA (Sentiment and Emotion Network Analysis) to analyze emotions and sentiments. In this manner we will be able to retrieve the affective aspects of the process of cross-cultural adaptation that deal with what Ward known as the ABCs of the adaptation to a culture: affective, behavioural, and cognitive dimensions of cultural adaptation [37]. In contrast to other possible traditional sentiment analysis tools that can lose track of contextual meaning when undergoing text normalisation mechanisms, SENA preserves the inherent emotional innuendo of responses of participants [34]. The strategy we intend to use in data collection is centered on the commentary on YouTube regarding the Tik Tok refugee phenomenon by narrowing down to videos with high discussion (100 or more comments) addressing the migration to Xiaohongshu directly. This multi-platform strategy provides variety of perspectives that is not only limited to Xiaohongshu itself and therefore eliminates the bias related to the platform. A set of these computational techniques and cross-cultural adaptation theories [6] can be combined to enable a thorough process of analyzing the navigation of digital migrants towards new cultural settings by platform switching to avoid them. This type of methodology is helpful in overcoming some of the limitations of the earlier studies that based their findings on either the manual coding process or on quantitative techniques only, thereby resolving the problem of the subjective bias and low scalability, but still preserving the richness of the insights collected during the qualitative analysis. Through this mixed-method modeling, we expect to produce both computational knowledge of general patterns of digital migration on the large scale and rich qualitative attention to the process of cultural adaptation that happens during the transition of a user between culturally different digital platforms.

4.1. Machine-Driven Classification of Open-ended Responses (MDCOR)

MDCOR provides a sophisticated model of analysis of open-ended responses based on machine learning and natural language processing. It was developed by Gonzalo Canchez and is a way to overcome some of the major disadvantages of techniques of manual coding, which are frequently limited by time, subjectivity of the coder, and do not scale to large volumes of data. MDCOR moves beyond the impersonality and objectivity of computational systems to interpretive delicacy, as it allows the researcher to analyze large quantities of qualitative segments without sacrificing the contextual richness or original vocalizations of participants [33]. This trade-off is realized by incorporating automated machine-based classification with human interpretive supervision in the LACOID model (Learning and Classification of Open-Ended Responses). The model combines Machine-Assisted Code Identification (MACOID) and Human Code Identification (HUCOID), such that the efficiency and quality of computation is equally considered during analysis.

The application of MDCOR to a massive amount of YouTube comments connected to the phenomenon of the TikTok refugees was used in the current study. Preprocessing of all textual data (including normalisation, stop words removal, lemmatisation) was carried out to ensure semantic clarity of data whilst being able to standardize data. The subsequent step used probabilistic and representational models to find latent semantic codes in an unsupervised form and thus the interpretive depth was upheld. More importantly, such a process maintained the identifiability of each machine-classified theme in its original context. The findings provided a thematically structured system of user discourses, where recurring anxieties about Tik Tok being banned, exasperation with the platform in its unstable condition, and interest in Xiaohongshu in cultural ecosystem were revealed. The empirical basis of the testing of hypotheses presented in the study on

affective motivations and cultural integration strategies are made by systematically categorizing these emergent themes and made possible by MDCOR.

4.2. Sentiment and Emotion Network Analysis (SENA)

Although MDCOR allows them to classify discourses thematically, SENA offers the analytical tool that allows one to analyze the emotional and affective aspects of the said discourses. Conventional sentiment analysis software tends to simplify the rich sensual displays to simplified expressions, including positive, negative, or neutral, and hence conceals conflicting or co-existing sentiments. SENA aims to overcome this drawback by using affective expression in networks, which in turn eliminates the possibility of outcome aggregation bias and preserves affective expression as multidimensional [34]. It is based on NRC emotion lexicon to understand eight main emotions that include anger, anticipation, disgust, fear, joy, sadness, surprise, and trust as well as assisting multilingual analysis in 17 languages. Such an opportunity will be essential to the current study that will investigate cross-cultural communication between Tik Tok users based in the U.S. and a mostly Chinese-speaking group of Xiaohongshu members.

In the framework of this research, SENA assisted in mapping of emotional processes on both individual and collective levels. But through the frame of modeling emotions as interdependent networks, SENA was not only able to track the prevalence of negative affective responses, including anxiety and frustration, in pre-migration interactions, but also pinpointed the latter rise in positive affective responses, including joy and belonging in posts migration interactions. The technique also allowed group comparisons, including network visualisations and Quadratic Assignment Procedure (QAP) correlations that indicated that there were significant differences in emotional structures between groups. These discussions showed that although the threat of losing TikTok was the first reason why users had to find alternative applications, their ultimate change to Xiaohongshu led to affective adaptation, which is consistent with the integration strategy as suggested by Berry [12]. This reduction of conflicting terms and the point in emotional paths brought to light by SENA the functioning of emotional resonance as a trigger cause of migration and the bases of cross-cultural adjustment in online communities.

5. Data analysis

In selecting the videos, we considered four criteria: high view count, approximately the same release date, high levels of discussion, and similar content. Ultimately, among the thirty-eight relevant videos, we searched for the keyword “TikTok refugee” on the YouTube platform. We selected two videos based on these criteria. The first video was published by the South China Morning Post on 17 January 2025. There are 2,565 comments in total, with 920 parent comments actually crawled. Based on the content of its homepage videos and profile description, which predominantly cover Asia-related topics, it is inferred that its audience primarily consists of Asians. NBC News published the second video on 17 January 2025. There are 1,607 comments in total, with 500 parent comments actually crawled. Based on the content of its homepage videos and profile description, which primarily focus on news events in Europe, it can be inferred that its audience is mainly European. Both videos cover the migration of numerous TikTok users to Xiaohongshu following the ban on TikTok. Their narrative structure unfolds by showcasing relevant short video clips from either TikTok or Xiaohongshu. Consistency in publication date, comment number, video content, and format ensures our experiment maintains a single variable. Meanwhile, the differing channel audiences enable us to draw comprehensive conclusions. As of the time we obtained the data

(Beijing Time Zone, August 6, 2025), the two videos collectively yielded 1,421 comments through an R programming language. It should be noted that all comments collected in this experiment are parent comments, as these are directly and strongly related to the video content. For analytical convenience, we categorised the comments. The relevant data was written into a CSV file for further analysis.

After completing the above data collection, we employed Machine-Driven Classification of Open-ended Responses (MDCOR) and Sentimental and Emotional Network Analysis (SENA) to examine the main themes and emotions expressed in people's comments regarding the event on TikTok users migrating to Xiaohongshu.

Here are our MDCOR results:

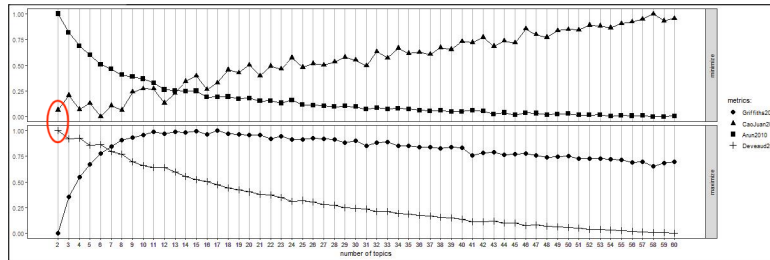


Figure 1. MDCOR assessment metrics showing the convergence of two metrics: Cao et al. (2009) and Deveaud et al. (2014)

As shown in Figure 1, the resulting metrics plot shows the four assessments of the optimal number of codes associated with all 1,421 open-ended responses. Based on the guidance of Manuel S. Gonzalez Canch'e, we executed the metrics with the recommended 500 burn-in samples and 5,000 MCMC/Gibbs resamplings [38]. Ideally, all four metrics would converge into a unique solution for the optimal number of codes; however, based on text complexity, the convergence of at least two metrics in detecting an optimal number of codes may suffice to make an informed decision regarding the optimal number of codes that capture meaningful information [39]. With this information in mind, we executed the final text classification, based on the metrics proposed by Deveaud et al. and Cao et al. [40,41]. The optimal number of topics is two, as indicated by the maximisation and minimisation indicators, respectively (we added the red oval for clarity).

As shown in Figures 2, 3, and 4, after executing MDCOR, there are two main outputs. One is the interactive word and code summary, and the second is the classified responses. This latter output is divided into two subsets: one containing the most representative responses displayed in the UI, and another set comprising all classified responses for download. The following section will analyse the aforementioned results.

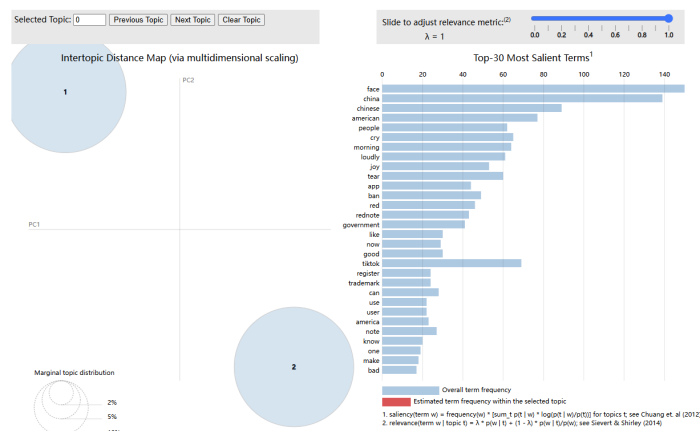


Figure 2. Word summaries of each latent code

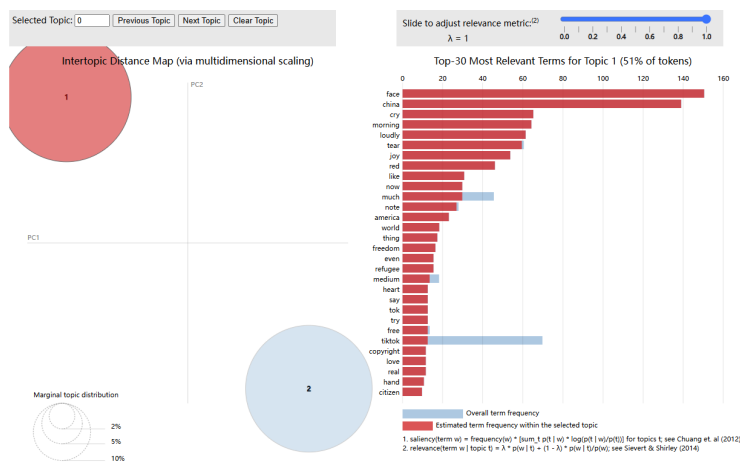


Figure 3. Rationale code and word selection in the interactive summary—code 1

Contextualised meanings of most representative responses:

Code 1: Perspectives on the Differences Between China and the United States.

As observed, the classification performed exceptionally well. This code consistently captured core themes, including the interaction between Chinese and US social media platforms (such as TikTok and Xiaohongshu), the US government's national security-related bans on Chinese apps and the resulting shifts in user behaviour, as well as contrasting perceptions of living costs (housing, medical care, groceries, cars) and freedom of speech between China and the US. The most representative text was quite clear on these issues, extensively comparing China-US differences in expenses (ID 3171: "China Law school cost 670 a year America 400000 dollars," "China Free ambulance America average cost 3000"), discussing the TikTok ban and the rise of Xiaohongshu's popularity among Americans, and debating the authenticity of "freedom" promoted by both countries (ID 3171: "Why is Chinese media more open to free speech than American whom is being control by the rich?"). This is supported by other parts of the text, such as ID 3179 mentioning that "many Chinese in China use VPN to escape the great China firewall to access Facebook" and "many Americans who entered the Chinese app Xiaohongshu were very concerned about China's prices... felt that they were deceived by the US government, which further highlights the cross-border flow of users seeking information and the contrasting perceptions of life". However, some sections,

although related to this code, concentrated more on specific phenomena like stock market speculation (ID 3197: “the share price of the company that lay the internet cables between the two sides of the Pacific ocean will go up. Start to buy the share”) and the historical origin of Xiaohongshu (ID 3197: “Xiaohongshu was originally called Xiaohongshu Shopping Guide... a PDF file written by the founder for Chinese students studying abroad”). These narrower focuses on specific events contributed less to the overall code, despite still being connected to the broader context of China-US social media and perception dynamics.

The following vocabulary is predominantly present in the comments which also justify the message of this theme of V1: face, China, cry, morning, loudly, tear, joy, red, like, now, much, note, America, world, thing, freedom, even, refugee, medium, heart, say, tok, try, free, TikTok, copyright, love, real, hand, citizen. The words, freedom and real, strongly imply with the main theme of the discussion above, which is the contrast in the Chinese and US perception of freedom. Meanwhile, the real also represents exploration and challenge of the plausibility of the reality of the freedom as in the above reference of the debate on the authenticity of the freedom being propagated by both countries. These words also contribute to this mental divide by implying that this reflection is what commentators make on the nature of the definition of freedom after comparing it in China and the US. Moreover, the birth of a concept of refugee is especially critical. Combined with Tik Tok and medium it directly refers to the theme of the Tik Tok refugee phenomenon. This is the circumstance in which those using the platform are now digitally homeless because of the U.S. ban of Tik Tok. It is a factual piece of evidence of the aforementioned ban on Chinese apps by the U.S. and ensuing change in user behaviour, which proves the actual influence of the ban on the lives of common users.

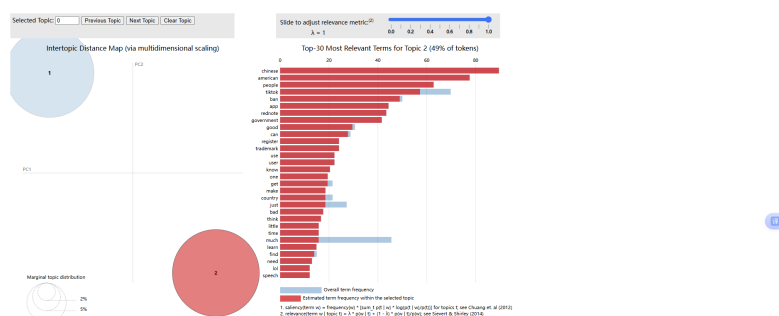


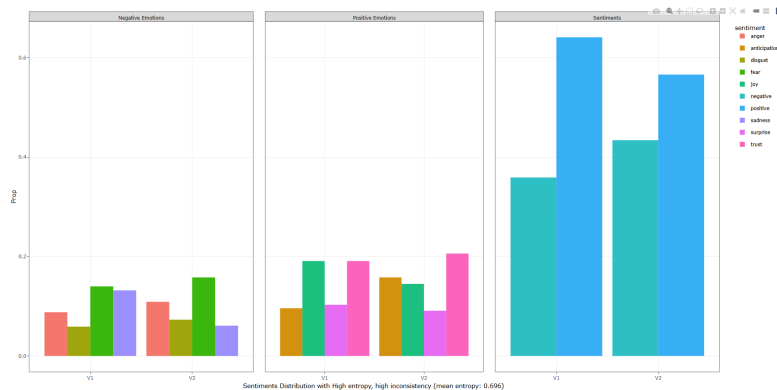
Figure 4. Rationale code and word selection in the interactive summary—code 2

Code 2: National and Policy Perspective.

As observed, the content consistently emphasises the interaction between Chinese and American social media platforms and the associated policy debates. The most prominent focus is on the phenomenon of TikTok users switching to Xiaohongshu amidst potential U.S. bans on TikTok, illustrating ordinary users' choices between social media platforms. This is supported by discussions on whether the U.S. government will extend bans to Xiaohongshu, with various viewpoints—some arguing that U.S. politicians' attempts to ban Chinese apps oppose public opinion (ID:3406 contradicting “democracy” claims). Note that some content also addresses secondary topics, such as comparisons between China and the U.S. in areas like living standards and freedom of speech, as well as critiques of the media (ID:3383, for instance, the so-called “Jiuish media” accused of spreading falsehoods). Although these broader issues create a somewhat scattered focus, they remain

closely connected to the central theme of “Chinese and American social media interaction and policy debates,” as they arise from the context of platform bans and cross-border user exchanges.

The comments mainly feature the following vocabulary, which also supports the content of this V2 theme: Chinese, American, people, TikTok, ban, app, RedNote, government, good, can, register, trademark, use, user, know, one, get, make, country, just, bad, think, little, time, much, learn, find, need, lol, speech. “TikTok,” “ban,” and “government” act as key policy-related keywords, strongly backing the previous theme of “U.S. TikTok Ban and Policy Extension Discussions.” “Ban” represents the central aspect of policy action, while “government” clarifies the policy-making authority. Their frequent connection with “TikTok” confirms that the “U.S. ban on TikTok” remains a significant focus of public policy debate. Furthermore, discussions implicitly assess the policy's legitimacy, as indicated by the earlier remark that “some viewpoints argue U.S. politicians banning Chinese apps goes against public sentiment.”



(a). Negative emotion (b). Positive emotion (c). Sentiments

Figure 5. Aggregate analysis of SENA

As shown in Figure 5c, there was a difference in people's emotional attitudes towards the two topics. From Figure 5c, we can see that negative emotions in V2 are higher than in V1.

Likewise, we can observe changes in people's emotional reactions to the event in Figures 5a and 5b. In terms of positive emotions, the proportion of “trust” is relatively high in both V1 and V2, while “joy” also accounts for a notable share, and “anticipation” has a moderate proportion. Regarding negative emotions, “fear” has a comparatively larger share than other negative emotions, such as “anger,” “disgust,” and “sadness,” with “fear” in V2 showing a greater proportion than in V1. The other negative emotions have relatively lower proportions.

6. Discussion

6.1. Interpreting proposed hypotheses and data

The data we collected will validate the hypotheses proposed earlier. In H1, we assume that negative sentiment (uncertainty/concern over TikTok's potential ban) is the main factor driving migration, rather than solely functional substitution. MDCOR reveals that two policy-focused topics (51% vs. 49% of tokens), dominated by terms such as “ban”, “government”, “TikTok”, and “RedNote”, indicate that migration is framed by regulatory uncertainty. Consistently, SENA shows higher negative affect in V2, with fear being the most prominent negative emotion, supporting H1, which

suggests that emotional reactions to a potential ban, rather than functional replacement, motivate switching.

Concerning the H2, we are sure that migrated users are more inclined to express positive emotions at Xiaohongshu which means that it gives them emotional safety and a sense of belonging. The data obtained makes it very obvious that the positive sentiment in both videos is in many ways higher than the negative sentiment. The highest percentage of positive emotions is given to the trust, then joy and anticipation. The concept of trust could be regarded as an expression of emotional security or reliability. Meanwhile, the normative words such as freedom and citizen are also used with V1, which gives the impression that users consider the platform as the place where they will be able to express themselves freely. In an extension of previous studies that analyze the mood of the users who have left Tik Tok and moved to Xiaohongshu, Zhao crawled user comments and found that positive engagements were prevalent in posts with the 'TikTok refugee' topic. The information of both platforms confirms each other and this means that the destination platform does possess the perceived emotional security and a sense of belonging, which can, then, support H2 [29].

In H3, we suppose that the users will embrace the culture of the new platform without losing the original cultural identity. The results of the MDCOR analysis indicate that both subjects focus on the following words, Chinese American/China US, speech, freedom, people and user, which exist as cross cultural comparison and interaction, not one-sided assimilation or dissociation. Moreover, the themes are clearly distinct, though they have an equally significant percentage of tokens (51% versus 49% of tokens), which is an indication of the coexistence of dual orientations: not only the native cultural values (speech, institutions), but also new platform practices (registration, usage, applications). The two equal-weight topics antipose identity-saturated comparisons (e.g., freedom, speech, Chinese/American) with an actual use of the destination platform (register, app, user), which implies an integration-oriented approach that aligns with H3.

The final hypothesis is that there is a positive relation between the migration sentiment and adoption of the culture of the new platform. The inter-group comparison outcomes of SENA indicate that V1 is more positively correlated to trustful one; V2 is more negatively correlated to fearful one. This is aligned with the common mistrust of V2 towards words like: ban, government, and speech in the thematic keywords. This trend means that the less cultural receptivity is the more negative sentiment is linked. This dissimilarity in videos confirms that H4 is true, meaning that the acceptance to the culture of the destination platform has a positive relation to the attitudes towards migration.

6.2. Highlighting new insights and advances

Not only does this study provide new information regarding the phenomenon of the migration of TikTok users to Xiaohongshu, but it also provides a theoretical and methodological basis of extensive cross-cultural studies and social media studies. It recast the theoretical insight of cultural fit and digital migration. First, it pays attention to the essentiality of emotional aspects in user migration and states that the affective motivations are not only answers to the technological needs but also the manifestations of cultural belonging. The results of these findings contradict older functionalist views and imply that emotional attachment and cultural affiliation can play a central role rather than technical characteristics in choices made by users in choosing social media platforms. The research combining both MDCOR and SENA paradigms presents new learners to elucidate the emotional aspect of user comments by applying a set of new analytical tools, which make one realize how complicated affect is in social media communication. Moreover, this study broadens the boundaries of the cross-cultural adaptation theory, stating that the digital migration is

not just the direct exchange of platforms but an elaborate process that entails emotions and cultural identity as well as social interaction. By examining the emotional reactions of users on Tik Tok and Xiaohongshu, the paper shows how people rebuild their self in an online space and look to extract emotional safety and feel of belongingness in new social networks. Through this redefinition of theory, new insights get provided in how new digital citizens are adapting culturally in a globalised world.

Socially, it has been found that this research can provide useful information on the role of social media in the contemporary society. Social media is the right place where users can be able to express emotions and undertake social interactions as digital technology has grown at a very rapid pace. Studies also show that people tend to use social media platforms that are more aligned with emotional and cultural aspect and not necessarily because of the excellence of an application feature. This underlines the great importance of the social media platform in terms of creating the emotional state and social relations of the users, whereby operators of the social media platforms should consider the emotional needs of the users and their cultural experiences in order to provide the most appropriate user experience and fulfil expectations. Moreover, the research results hold significant practical measures to the policy makers. In the case of regulatory issues raised by such a platform as Tik Tok, the emotional motivational factors that drive people to migrate can help to create more effective policies that would ensure the safety and well-being of users in the online environment. The social media policies can accommodate the positive evolution of the service as the needs of the users pertain to their emotions and cultural preoccupation thus encouraging cross cultural sharing and comprehension.

6.3. Noting current limitations and future work

Despite the implications, our research has several limitations. Firstly, there is a lack of analysis involving diverse subjects. While our study on TikTok users migrating to Xiaohongshu extends beyond simply analysing data from the Xiaohongshu platform, we have still limited our analysis to data from YouTube. Additionally, in selecting YouTube videos, we only considered view counts and engagement metrics, choosing the two most representative videos for data analysis. This approach does not sufficiently emphasise the broader significance of the digital migration phenomenon. Secondly, the application of cross-cultural adaptation theory is incomplete. As previously mentioned, Kim describes six different dimensions within the cross-cultural adaptation framework [6]. Our study has only examined the most significant factors related to emotional influences. The manner in which other factors manifest and interact within the cross-cultural adaptation of digital immigrants has not been analysed in detail. Lastly, the contingent nature of the research phenomena must be acknowledged. Social media enables users to transcend geopolitical boundaries, willingly adopting digital citizenship and reshaping communities based on emotional bonds and cultural preferences — a rare phenomenon of digital migration. We observe this only in the migration of TikTok users to Xiaohongshu. However, since this constitutes digital migration, it aligns with the core theories of cross-cultural adaptation in emotional terms, much like any form of physical migration. Whether similar digital migration events will occur in the future, and whether these theories can be fully applied to explain digital migration, remains open for discussion.

In the view of the research limitations discussed above, some future research might consider a number of areas. To begin with, other than increasing the scope of data-scraping sites, researchers can also consider analysing child comments, as well as child comments and their relationships. This will allow reviewing different opinions regarding migration of Tik Tok users to Xiaohongshu, and the reasons behind the perspectives in more detail. Secondly, on top of delving into the emotional

causes of digital migration, researchers might include other components of cross-cultural adaptation theory or similar other theories to have a better understanding of what causes network migration phenomena in the digital era. Finally, in the event that similar digital migration phenomena that are beyond the boundaries of geopolitics emerge in the future, a comparative and longitudinal research would be carried out to determine the similar trends that guide online migration during the digital era.

7. Conclusion

This paper discussed the phenomenon of TikTok refugees moving to Xiaohongshu (RedNote), which showed that a new affectively-based digital cross-cultural adaptation exists. After combining computer social science methods and qualitative analysis we examined user debates about this migration in the areas of how users had emotional changes which affected their cultural participation. The results show that the negative attitudes towards the possible ban of TikTok (realizing anxiety and frustration) were the driving power of migration. On the other hand, the level of positive emotions (joy and belonging to some group) also improved greatly among users on Xiaohongshu, which means that affective adaptation was successful.

One of the strongest aspects of this study is that Machine Driven Classification of Open-ended Responses (MDCOR) was combined with Sentiment and Emotion Network Analysis (SENA), having been the first to consider the computation techniques with the cross-cultural adaptation theory. Such a methodology increased the quality of performance of analysis of large amounts of textual data, moreover, it maintained the emotional specifics of the user expression so that the findings remained rich and full. Also, we found out that the users were more likely to use acculturation approaches as they migrated, maintaining their initial digital cultural identity but participating in the Xiaohongshu community. This observation highlights the importance of affective variables in determining digital migration and development of grassroots community.

In future, this study is a fresh opportunity to understand how social media can be utilized in the modern society and specifically in handling geopolitical tensions and cultural identities. As digital technologies improve, social media have become the main source of clients to share their feelings and have productive communication. Future research on the role of emotional incentives in determining the choice of platforms will provide useful information to platform providers and policymakers. Also, further research can add to the data-base on user remarks on other social media and investigate the topic of migration behaviour through different demographic layers, which will further inform the research of the dynamics of digital migration.

Generally, the given study, besides offering a systematic theoretical framework of the explanation of the so-called Tik Tok refugees phenomenon, preconditions the establishment of new research lines, related to cross-cultural adjustment and transition to digital migration. Focusing on the cultural contexts and emotional needs of users, we get a better insight on how digital platforms are being developed and its great impact to users.

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