

From TikTok to Xiaohongshu: A Study of Cross-Cultural Communication with “Refugee” Meme - Based on the Perspectives of Meme Theory and Cultural Translation Theory

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Abstract: As media technology continues to evolve, social media platforms have risen to the forefront of cross-cultural communication. Users are able to search for phrases based on their interests and create a personalised social space. In this study, we take the recently popular phrase “#TikTok refugee” in Xiaohongshu as an entry point, and use Octopus crawler software to collect user comments under the phrase, and complete data clustering and visualisation. The study finds that the phrase has been used as a platform to promote the dissemination of mixed Chinese and English content, and to build a “third space”. Among them, positive and neutral sentiments promote Meme, while negative sentiments mostly point to language controversy. This suggests that cross-cultural communication is shifting from professional transcoding to popular wild transcoding, and this study suggests that platforms make good use of symbols and guide positive interactions to optimise communication.

1 INTRODUCTION

Compared to TikTok’s short video-based social media format, the Xiaohongshu is a social media platform with graphics as its main format, that is, the “notes” published on the Xiaohongshu platform. At the same time, Xiaohongshu focuses on the UGC (UserGenerated Content) model, so Xiaohongshu in the information production process is particularly focused on enhancing the enthusiasm of non-professional users to create content, and at the policy level to implement the implementation of Xiaohongshu to implement the flow of content-heavy recommendation mechanism, the development of relevant content specifications and the setting of specific phrases (Yang, 2023). Most of the posts in Xiaohongshu are categorised by words, and users build a personalised Xiaohongshu community by searching for words of interest. This also creates the conditions for the generation of lexical Memes, and users imitate, mutate, and recreate the hot lexical Meme so that the lexical Meme with Meme attributes become an important part of the participation in the network culture, which promotes the development of cross-cultural communication and exchange.

“TikTok refugee” refers to the group of content creators who migrated from TikTok to Little Red Book due to geopolitical or platform policy changes. Starting in January 2025, the phrase “#TikTok refugee” appeared on the Xiaohongshu social media platform and created a social media frenzy, with more than 3.8 billion views of posts under the phrase, and mutated into “#TikTok refugee” based on the phrase “#TikTok refugee”. The phrase “#TikTok refugee” has been used as the basis for several variations such as “#教 TikTok refugee 学中文” (“#Teach TikTok refugee to learn Chinese”), “#TikTok refugee 猫咪” (“#TikTok refugee cat”), “#TikTok refugee 来的都是客” (“#TikTok refugee comes as a guest”), and a series of Chinese-English combination of words and phrases, and then in the cross-cultural communication created “#Cat tax”, “#steamed egg custard”, and other interestiFng words and phrases. Take “#Teach TikTok refugee to learn Chinese” as an example, this cross-cultural exchange of netizens from different countries has many discussions on Chinese-to-English translation, and the “wild translation” of ordinary users in the Xiaohongshu collides with the official translation of Xiaohongshu, resulting in a unique translation. The “wild translations” of ordinary users in Xiaohongshu collide with the

official translations that come with Xiaohongshu, creating a unique cultural translation phenomenon. In the process of fusion of Chinese and English cultures, a cultural hybrid is formed, i.e., a new "third space", which generates the unique cross-cultural communication symbols of the Xiaohongshu community.

In this study, we take China's lexical Meme "TikTok refugee" as a specific case study, and empirically analyse the content characteristics and emotional tendency of this lexical Meme through the Xiaohongshu platform, analyse the new cultural expressions catalyzed by cross-cultural transcoding by ordinary users under this lexical Meme, and analyse whether the emotional tendency of users' comments drives the cross-cultural communication of the lexical Meme under the lexical Meme. It also analyses whether the affective tendency of user comments has led to the emergence of a "new third space". This study attempts to analyse the special cross-cultural communication mode of "TikTok refugee" with the help of Meme theory and cultural translation theory, to provide new perspectives for cross-cultural communication.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Meme Theory

In 1976, Dawkins first introduced the term "Meme" based on the concept of "gene" in his book *The Selfish Gene*, and used the rules of evolution in biology as an analogy for cultural transmission(Dawkins,1976). In 1999, Blackmore further refined Dawkins' ideas in *The Meme Machine*, stating that "any piece of information that can be reproduced through a process broadly known as mimicry can be called a Meme"(Blackmore,1999). The definition of Meme has been the subject of academic debate since the term was coined. Limor Shifman, in *Meme in the Digital World: Reconciling with Troublemakers*, notes that the definition has been the subject of much debate, and the legitimacy of Memes has been in a perpetual state of "ongoing academic debate, ridicule, and even outright refutation." (Shifman,2013) As the concept of Meme theory continued to evolve in academia, Meme theory saw a shift from the biological metaphor stage to the cultural theory stage(Lv and Zhang,2023), with scholar Gatherer defining Meme as some kind of cultural behaviour that is replicated, imitated, or learnt in a cultural system that can be transmitted through ideas(Gatherer,2004). Before the 21st

century, the study of Memes was largely ignored by researchers in the field of communication.

With the rapid development of communication media, all kinds of social media provide a convenient soil for the reproduction of Meme culture, and Meme theory begins to be applied to digital technology and network communication. Shifman explores the cultural logic of photo-based Meme types(Shifman,2014), and scholars such as Polishchuk analyse Memes as a phenomenon in modern digital culture(Polishchuk et al.,2020). These studies not only focus on the propagation and evolution of picture Memes in social media but also dig deeper into the multidimensional meanings of culture, society and gender behind them, providing new perspectives for understanding cultural communication and social interaction in the digital era.

In terms of cross-cultural communication, Zhang, L. and other scholars have revealed the influence of the intrinsic factors of visual Memes on cross-cultural communication through empirical research, and have acknowledged that Memes can act as a bridge between different cultures and languages in the globalisation of digital culture(Zhang et al.,2024). In analysing the cultural adaptability of successful Memes, Zhou,X and other scholars found that some of the Internet Memes show strong potential for cross-cultural communication, and their generative mechanism is reflected in the deep coupling of video Memes with participatory digital culture. The study further points out that the generation of video Memes is essentially the result of multicultural participation, and this association reveals the dynamic evolution of Memes as cultural carriers(Zhou and Cheng,2016). This perspective echoes the cross-platform Meme migration phenomenon that is the focus of this study, and provides a theoretical reference for understanding users' practice of reconstructing cultural symbols through "wild translation".

2.2 Cultural Translation Theory

James Eagan Holmes, in his book *The Name and Nature of Translation Studies*, was the first to put forward the idea of "constructing translation as a separate discipline" and made a basic division of the discipline of translation(Holmes,1988). In the subsequent development of cultural translation theory, Susan Bassnett put forward the concept of "cultural turn" in her book *Translation, History and Culture*, which completely reversed the previous situation of translation theory research focusing excessively on the linguistic level, and expanded the research field to the cultural scope(Bassnett,1996).

This concept prompted the academics to re-examine translation activities and understand that translation is essentially a cross-cultural exchange and collision, in which cultural factors profoundly influence the choice of translation strategies and the final presentation of the translated text. Since its inception, many scholars have conducted in-depth investigations around the "cultural turn", promoting the flourishing development of cultural translation theory and increasing its influence in the field of translation research.

On the basis of Bassnett's research, many scholars have further enriched and developed the theory of cultural translation. Among them, Nida, E. A., in his book *Language, culture, and translating*, analyses the differences between the English and Chinese nationalities in terms of cultural psychology, thinking concepts and customary characteristics from the perspectives of linguistics, literature and culture as well as translation, Nida believes that translators should start from the three dimensions of language, culture and translation, and improve their cultural literacy by observing the language translations in the context (Nida, 1993). Venuti, L. further advanced cultural translation theory by outlining two strategies—"naturalisation" and "alienation"—in *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (Venuti, 1994).

In the study of intercultural communication, Homi takes cultural communication as the point of view, regards the handling of differences in the original text as the key to the translation process, and for the first time puts forward the theory of the "third space" in translation, in which he believes that the differences between cultures play a role (Bhabha, 1994). The product of this space is the cultural hybrid, which has the nature of two cultures. Scholar HERMANS T. explored the specific issue of complicity of translation in intercultural understanding and proposed the concept of "thick translation" by considering the practical ways in which intercultural translation research may be carried out (Hermans, 2003). Through reading the literature on cultural translation theory, the researcher found that there is relatively limited research on cultural translation theory and its derivatives, such as the "third space", in the field of social media and interculturalism. Therefore, this study hopes to combine cultural translation theory with social media and cross-cultural fields, so as to provide a reference for the application of cultural translation theory in the field of social media.

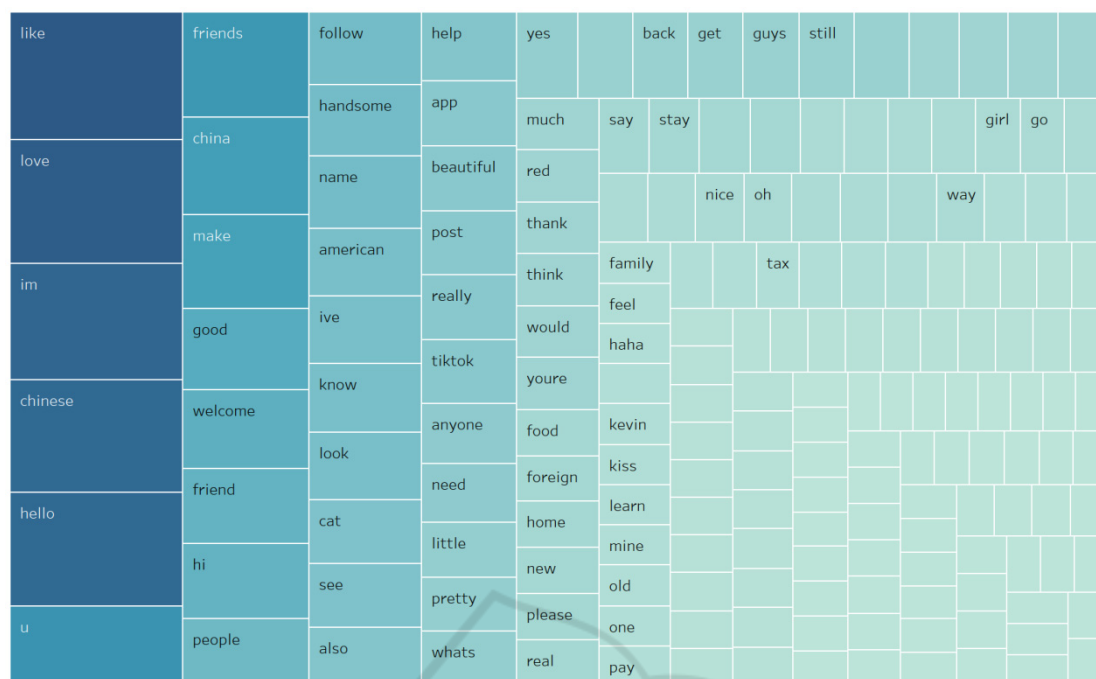
3 RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 Research Method

This study integrates two research methods, corpus text analysis and sentiment analysis, aiming to conduct an in-depth analysis of user feedback content under the "TikTok refugee" Memes on the Xiaohongshu platform.

Corpus linguistics is a research approach that performs quantitative analysis based on large-scale textual data, capable of revealing key linguistic phenomena within specific discourses. This method identifies and describes overarching textual features through word frequencies, keywords, word clusters, and phrases, providing empirical support and deeper insights for discourse analysis (Baker et al., 2008). In this study, to uncover the key linguistic patterns in user feedback content, we focus on processing user comments related to the "TikTok refugee" Memes. Specifically, for English comments, we employ the UU online tool to conduct word frequency analysis, followed by generating a word frequency dendrogram using Tableau software, which visually represents the frequency of English words and their interrelationships. For Chinese comments, the LZZ word cloud tool is used to perform word frequency analysis and visualization, making vocabulary distributions immediately apparent. These tools were selected for their user-friendliness and robust capacity to efficiently process large-scale text data while accurately extracting critical information.

Sentiment analysis, or opinion mining, is a computational discipline examining opinions, attitudes, and emotions toward entities such as individuals, events, or topics (Medhat et al., 2014). This study leverages crawled comment data to explore users' sentiment orientations in depth. We use Python's VADER library to analyze Chinese comment sentiment and the TextBlob library for English comment sentiment. By integrating TextBlob's lexicon matching mechanism with VADER's contextual semantic rules and applying a weighted algorithm, we classify cleaned text into three categories: positive, neutral, and negative. Finally, Tableau is used to create a sentiment polarity pie chart, clearly and intuitively illustrating the proportion of user attitudes. This approach was adopted because different processing libraries offer distinct advantages in sentiment analysis. By combining these strengths and applying a weighted algorithm, we achieve more accurate sentiment classification, providing a robust foundation for



Alt Text for the figure: A dendrogram visualizing English comments under Xiaohongshu's "TikTok refugee" post, showcasing high-frequency words like "china", "love", and "chinese" to reflect cross-cultural discussion themes.

Figure 2. Dendrogram of English comments on the post "TikTok refugee" on Xiaohongshu.

4.2 Construction of a New Third Space

Homi Bhabha posits that where two cultures intersect, a "third space" emerges where cultural differences come into play. This "third space" is a negotiated space arising from the "gap" between cultures, characterised by hybridity. According to Bhabha, migrants—dwelling in the interstices of two or more cultures—naturally occupy this "third space", their identities fluid, provisional, and negotiated. Against the backdrop of TikTok's unavailability due to geopolitical and platform policy shifts, TikTok users migrated to Xiaohongshu, initiating an unrehearsed "cyber migration". Initially motivated to seek a temporary substitute for TikTok's social media, these users tentatively negotiated with existing Xiaohongshu users through posts, prompting humorous calls for migrants to pay a "cat tax" and spawning threads exchanging cat photos/emojis. This practice blended life experiences and emoji cultures across linguistic divides, fostering Sino-English hybridity.

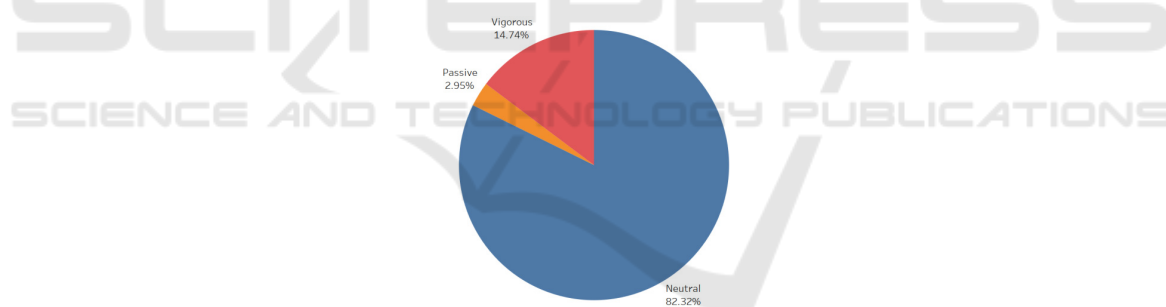
Users have merged "#Tiktok refugee" with Chinese internet culture to create pseudo-translation-style neologisms, spawning sub-topics like "# 教Tiktok refugee 学中文 (#Teach TikTok Refugees

Chinese) and "TikTok refugee 看小红书" (#TikTok Refugees View Xiaohongshu). This linguistic innovation effectively bridges cultural gaps in localized narratives. From the high-frequency interactive vocabulary network presented in the word cloud map and the tree diagram (Figures 1 and 2), the hybridity of the new third space is distinct. In user interactions, the cultural identity of the original TikTok platform (e.g. American humour) is partially deconstructed, while Chinese online cultural elements such as "Chinese terriers" and "emojis" are absorbed to form a hybrid cultural identity. Community integration behaviours, such as learning Chinese, helping Chinese students with their homework, and participating in the "egg custard making challenge", are also found in the word cloud map of "language", "help", "food", and "homework" and other related words are also mapped in the word cloud map. Users engage in localised online challenges in different re-creative word memes, through which new topics of discussion are formed. The high frequency of "humour", "communication", "curiosity" and other words in the word cloud underscores the central role of user emotions in constructing the third space - serving both as its cohesive glue and the driving force behind deep user

interactions ; although the proportion of negative emotions is low, the semantic expressions related to "resistance" implied in the word cloud diagram also force the third space to reflect on the issue of cultural conflict and evolve in a more inclusive direction. These emotion-driven interactions, with the help of the lexical interaction network shown in the word cloud diagram and tree diagram, continue to shape the third space, and create a cross-cultural social scope that belongs uniquely to the social media community of Xiaohongshu, creating a cross-cultural communication symbol that is a mash-up of the Chinese and English cultures.

4.3 Impact of User Sentiment on the New Third Space

Scholars such as Zhang, L. have noted in their research that while cross-cultural memes primarily express negative emotions and discuss broad topics, positive emotions and universal themes are more popular ((Zhang,L et al.,2024)). This finding is also reflected in our study. The emotional polarity pie chart (Figure 3) derived from our data shows that user sentiment is dominated by neutrality (82.32%), followed by positive emotions (14.74%), with negative emotions accounting for only 2.95%.



Alt Text for the figure:A pie chart illustrating user sentiment tendencies, shows "Neutral" accounting for 82.32%, "Vigorous" 14.74%, and "Passive" 2.95%.

Figure 3.A pie chart of XiaoHongshu users' emotional tendency to comment on the "Tiktok refugee" post

4.4 Inspiration from Cross-Cultural Communication Practice

This study reveals that the unique cross-cultural communication phenomenon of Xiaohongshu provides practical implications for contemporary international communication. Researchers observe that during the formation of Xiaohongshu's new "third space," non-institutionalized, playful cultural transcoding often demonstrates greater penetration than institutionalized normative translation. In the process of cultural translation, personalized

Positive emotions centred on humour, inclusivity, and curiosity fostered friendlier cross-cultural communication environments, and posts embodying these themes were more popular. Negative emotions primarily manifested as resistance to English content "invading" Chinese cyberspace, reflecting cultural identity anxiety. Users expressed concerns about their native linguistic environment being diluted by foreign cultures, demanding that foreign users translate content into Chinese via tools before engaging. Some negatively inclined users framed the "cyber migration" of "refugees" as "cultural colonialism" or "cultural hegemony." The term "refugee" itself was perceived as either implying implicit white privilege or trivializing serious social issues, leading to comments like: "Use Chinese when on Xiaohongshu—respect community rules!" and "Let's end the absurd farce of white supremacy." Although such comments represent a small proportion, they compelled Xiaohongshu to self-regulate through normative discourse, prompting the platform to rapidly introduce intelligent localized translation tools and implement "bilingual zoning" to maintain dynamic cultural balance. This corroborates that the new third space formed on Xiaohongshu is not a static container, but a dynamically reconstructed entity evolving alongside user emotions.

narratives by self-media platforms facilitate more interactive cultural dissemination. The resonance logic of hybrid symbols in cross-cultural exchanges suggests that social media platforms should incorporate decodable elements from both source and target cultures as "resonance points" for users across different cultural contexts. Additionally, researchers note that positive topics and discussions are more popular in cross-cultural communication, indicating that user emotional governance can serve as a critical factor in platforms' public opinion topic management.

Based on these research findings, the authors argue that interpretations can be made from the perspectives of content creation and platform mechanisms, providing strategic recommendations for internet-based cross-cultural communication.

4.4.1 Content Creation Level

This study suggests that, given the current trend shifting from professional translators' "precise transcoding" to ordinary users' "wild translation," future cross-cultural communication on other social media platforms could establish a collaborative mechanism of "professional translators + user co-creation." This mechanism would dissolve cultural barriers through localized narrative styles, fostering interactions among users of different language systems.

In the complex process of internet-based cross-cultural communication, strategically selecting universal symbols as cultural intermediaries is crucial for bridging psychological distances between interlocutors. Take the "#Tiktok refugee 猫咪" ("#TikTok refugee cat") meme as an example: by combining the politically charged "refugee" concept with adorable feline imagery, this term successfully depoliticizes potentially sensitive discourse. Pet-related content, which enjoys broad appeal across cultures, serves as an effective vehicle for softening political undertones. Data shows that the "#Tiktok refugee 猫咪" hashtag has garnered over 1.387 million views on the platform, demonstrating that depoliticized, light-hearted expressions resonate more deeply across cultural groups than heavy-handed or sensitive topics.

4.4.2 Platform Mechanism Level

Social media platforms should establish cultural buffer zones to mitigate the negative impacts of cultural conflicts. This study further finds that user emotional governance can provide platforms with a "balance art" for managing public opinion topics. Platforms need to develop emotional early-warning systems that protect positive user interactions while resolving cultural conflicts through soft guidance rather than coercive regulation.

Platforms should proactively channel positive user emotions by automatically adding contextual explanations to controversial meme terms. Xiaohongshu's official localization translation of "Tiktok refugee" serves as a prime example. The platform incorporated localized internet slang, translating "orz" as "跪拜" (kneeling homage), which

visually conveys emotions like helplessness and admiration. This enables users to express themselves more smoothly through localized memes during interactions, fostering the efficient circulation of creativity and emotions while energizing community dynamics. Meanwhile, platforms should optimize algorithmic weights for identifying hybrid cultural content and track negative 言论 to prevent cultural conflicts arising from over-recommendation.

5 CONCLUSION

This study takes the #Tiktok refugee meme on Xiaohongshu as its research object, analyzing users' cross-cultural meme practices and cultural translation behaviours to reveal how ordinary social media users reconstruct cross-cultural dialogue patterns through meme adaptation and symbolic fusion. This process spawns a hybrid and innovative "third space" characterized by both complexity and creativity. Research findings indicate that Tiktok users' migration behaviour represents more than mere platform switching—it constitutes a creative transmutation of cultural symbols. By engaging in "wild translation" of Chinese culture, they graft Western cultural symbols onto local Chinese contexts, forming unique cross-cultural expressions.

This study further confirms that the "third space" generated in Xiaohongshu communities is characterized by an irreversible hybridity of Chinese and American symbols. However, its sustainability highly depends on platform algorithmic logic—the platform's "content-heavy" traffic recommendation mechanism accelerates the dissemination of hybrid cultural memes. Posts containing bilingual tags, such as "#Tiktok 难民" ("#Tiktok refugee") or localized buzzwords (e.g., "求助万能网友" [Seek help from netizens]) receive preferential exposure, thereby accelerating the formation of the third space. User emotional tendencies also play a significant guiding role in this process. Data analysis shows that positive (14.74%) and neutral (82.32%) emotions are the primary drivers of third space formation. For example, the highly-liked comment "Welcome Tiktok refugees to Xiaohongshu" transforms political issues into lighthearted cultural interactions through humour, inspiring users to co-create derivative topics like "#Tiktok refugee 猫咪" ("#Tiktok refugee cat") and "# 蒸鸡蛋羹" ("#Steamed egg custard challenge"). Negative emotions (2.95%) primarily stem from users' demands to preserve Chinese

linguistic purity, manifesting as resistance to English content "invading" Chinese cyberspace or opposition to trivializing serious topics. Based on these findings, this study proposes strategic recommendations for social media platforms from two dimensions: content creation and platform mechanisms. Future platforms encountering cross-platform communication phenomena should strategically use universal symbols as cultural intermediaries to bridge psychological distances between users. Simultaneously, they should establish cultural buffer zones to channel positive emotions and mitigate misunderstandings arising from heavy/sensitive topics in cross-cultural exchanges.

Despite limitations imposed by Xiaohongshu's data interface openness, which prevented complete tracing of meme dissemination chains, and the need for further exploration into offline identities' impacts on translation practices, this study concludes that cross-cultural communication in social media has shifted from professional translators' "precise transcoding" to mass-participated "wild transcoding." This bottom-up cultural practice not only expands the digital connotations of Homi Bhabha's "third space" theory but also provides low-cost, highly inclusive solutions for **grassroots dialogue** in the globalization era. Future research could focus on how platform algorithms shape the "visibility" of cultural translation and strategies **Generation Z users** employ to navigate multiple cultural identities, thereby more comprehensively revealing the dynamic nature of cultural fusion in the digital age.

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