

TikTok Ban and the Rise of Xiaohongshu: A Case Study on Cross-Cultural Communication in Social Media

Zhang Hongchen, Moniza Waheed, Nor Azura Adzharuddin
Department of Communication, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication,
Universiti Putra Malaysia

To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v15-i2/24784>

DOI:10.6007/IJARBS/v15-i2/24784

Published Date: 27 February 2025

Abstract

This study examines the phenomenon of cross-cultural communication following the migration of American users to Xiaohongshu in the wake of the TikTok ban. As an increasing number of American users join Xiaohongshu, the platform has not only become a new gateway for them to explore Chinese culture but has also facilitated interactions and cultural exchanges between Chinese and American users. The findings indicate that American users establish connections with Chinese users and gradually integrate into Xiaohongshu's social ecosystem through language adaptation, lifestyle sharing, and cultural experience exchanges. Drawing on Communication Accommodation Theory, this study analyses the communication strategies employed in cross-cultural interactions. It reveals that most users adjust their language and interaction styles to enhance cross-cultural understanding and foster cultural identity. Furthermore, Xiaohongshu's recommendation algorithms and interactive features play a crucial role in promoting cultural dissemination. However, due to differences in communication styles and social habits, some users face challenges in the adaptation process, where mismatched expressions may lead to misunderstandings or cultural friction. Overall, this study argues that Xiaohongshu, as an emerging social media platform, provides a new model for cross-cultural communication, demonstrating the potential of social media to connect diverse cultural groups in the context of globalisation.

Keywords: TikTok Ban, Xiaohongshu, Cross-Cultural Communication, Social Media

Introduction

Cross-cultural communication refers to the exchange of information, values, and behaviours between individuals from different cultural backgrounds (Mukhtar et al., 2022). In recent years, social media has become a key vehicle for cross-cultural communication, enabling users from different countries and regions to access information, share experiences, and build social connections through digital platforms (Aririguzoh, 2022). However, factors such as government policies, data regulations, and geopolitical tensions are reshaping the landscape

of social media usage (Feldstein, 2021). In January 2025, the U.S. government invoked the International Emergency Economic Powers Act to impose an operational ban on TikTok. This decision not only left TikTok's 120 million active users in the U.S. facing an abrupt content blackout but also triggered significant upheaval in the global social media market.

Against the backdrop of the TikTok ban, Xiaohongshu, a lifestyle-focused social media platform, unexpectedly emerged as a new destination for "TikTok refugees" (Cheung and Tayir, 2025). Many American users began sharing their lives on Xiaohongshu and engaging with Chinese users. This phenomenon has not only accelerated Xiaohongshu's internationalisation but also fostered a new model of cross-cultural interaction. This paper examines the policy background of the TikTok ban, the changes in Xiaohongshu's user demographics, and the role of social media in facilitating cross-cultural communication.

TikTok Ban and the Rise of Xiaohongshu

The Policy Background of the TikTok Ban

TikTok, a short video-sharing platform developed by the Chinese company ByteDance, rapidly became one of the world's most popular social media platforms after entering the U.S. market in 2018. With its highly sophisticated content recommendation algorithm and engaging short-video format, TikTok achieved immense success among younger demographics (Kaye et al., 2021). However, as its user base expanded, the platform also began facing increasing scrutiny from Western governments.

Since 2020, the U.S. government has attempted to ban TikTok through executive orders, citing data security concerns. Although these actions were ultimately stalled due to legal challenges, they sparked widespread debate on digital sovereignty and national security (Vidyarathi and Hulvey, 2021). By 2023, restrictions on TikTok had intensified, with multiple state governments prohibiting the app's installation on government devices and demanding that TikTok sever ties with its Chinese parent company (Zhang, 2023). These measures significantly complicated TikTok's operations in the U.S. and heightened users' interest in alternative platforms. In 2025, the U.S. government officially announced a full ban on TikTok, requiring app stores to remove the software and prohibiting domestic companies from providing technological support (Cheung and Tayir, 2025).

This ban led to a rapid decline in TikTok's user base in the U.S. and gave rise to a phenomenon known as "TikTok refugees" — users who were left without their primary social media platform and were forced to seek alternatives (Xu, 2025). Some of these "TikTok refugee" turned to Xiaohongshu, a platform that quickly became their preferred choice due to its unique content and community-driven environment.

The Rise of Xiaohongshu

Xiaohongshu was founded in 2013, initially serving Chinese users as a cross-border shopping recommendation community. Over time, it evolved into a comprehensive lifestyle-oriented social media platform covering a wide range of topics, including beauty, fashion, food, travel, and fitness (Chen, 2024). In recent years, as the platform expanded its functionalities and accelerated its internationalisation efforts, it attracted a growing number of overseas users. In particular, following the implementation of the TikTok ban, American users began adopting Xiaohongshu as an alternative platform. Over time, they came to realise that the platform

was not only a space for product recommendations and experience-sharing but also an important medium for cross-cultural communication.

Unlike TikTok, which primarily focuses on entertaining short videos, Xiaohongshu places greater emphasis on user-generated content (UGC) and the sharing of real-life experiences. This has made it a practical and reliable source of information. For example, content related to beauty tutorials, traditional food preparation, and travel guides not only meets users' everyday needs but also promotes cultural exchange (Del Mastio, 2021). Additionally, Xiaohongshu's personalised recommendation algorithm effectively identifies user interests, using interest-based tags (such as "Chinese cuisine" and "traditional culture") to optimise content delivery and enhance user experience (Ning, 2024).

More importantly, the platform fosters a highly interactive community atmosphere, making it an important space for engagement between Chinese and American users. American users often interact with Chinese users through comments and questions—such as asking, "Why do people eat jiaozi during Chinese New Year?"—to which Chinese users respond with detailed explanations, sometimes even providing step-by-step tutorials. This participatory and interactive content ecosystem has transformed Xiaohongshu into more than just a social and information-sharing platform. It has gradually developed into a vital space for Sino-American cultural interaction and cross-cultural communication.

Communication Accommodation Theory

Howard Giles (1991) first introduced Communication Accommodation Theory to explain how individuals adjust their communication behaviours to either reduce or emphasise social differences (Giles et al., 2023). Communication Accommodation Theory assumes that individuals modify their language, writing style, and non-verbal communication based on social and cultural contexts, either converging (becoming more similar) or diverging (highlighting differences) (Odhiambo, 2022). The theory has been widely applied in intercultural communication studies and is particularly relevant for online interactions where users from different backgrounds engage in digital discourse (Liu et al., 2023).

This study adopts Communication Accommodation Theory for several reasons. Firstly, the theory effectively explains linguistic and social behaviour adjustments in cross-cultural communication, particularly in social media environments, where users from different cultural backgrounds adapt their language and interaction styles (Giles et al., 2023). Secondly, Communication Accommodation Theory emphasises key concepts such as convergence, divergence, and over-accommodation, all of which are evident in the cross-cultural interactions on Xiaohongshu (Hoffman et al., 2023).

Communication Accommodation Theory identifies three key strategies in cross-cultural communication: convergence, divergence, and over-accommodation (Hoffman et al., 2023). Convergence occurs when individuals modify their communication style to resemble that of their interlocutor, aiming to increase social approval and reduce differences. This strategy is often used to foster smoother interactions and establish a sense of belonging in cross-cultural settings (Lee and Quinn, 2023). In contrast, divergence happens when individuals deliberately maintain their unique communication style to assert their cultural identity. Instead of adapting, they emphasise their distinct linguistic or social norms, which may reinforce cultural

boundaries (Aririguzoh, 2022). Over-accommodation, on the other hand, refers to situations where individuals excessively adjust their communication style in an attempt to fit in. While the intention may be to bridge cultural gaps, over-accommodation can sometimes lead to negative perceptions, as the adjustments may appear unnatural, forced, or even patronising (Sheeran et al., 2022).

As American users adapt to Xiaohongshu, they adjust their communication styles to varying degrees, and Communication Adaptation Theory provides a clear framework for analysing these changes. Moreover, the theory helps to understand the dynamic process of cross-cultural communication, illustrating how individuals modify their behaviour in different cultural environments, thereby either facilitating or hindering cultural exchange (Giles et al., 2023). Thus, Communication Accommodation Theory provides a solid theoretical foundation for this study, enabling a deeper exploration of cross-cultural interactions on social media platforms.

Cases of Interaction between Chinese and American Users on Xiaohongshu

Following the TikTok ban, a growing number of American users flocked to Xiaohongshu, viewing it not only as a new social media platform but also as a window into Chinese culture. As their engagement deepened, interactions between Chinese and American users became more frequent, taking various forms of cross-cultural exchange, including language and cultural adaptation, lifestyle sharing, and cultural experience exchange.

Language and Cultural Adaptation

American users newly joining Xiaohongshu often face both linguistic and cultural barriers. To overcome these challenges, many actively use translation software to communicate with Chinese users. For instance, an American user named Ryan shared his experience of learning Chinese and expressed his keen interest in Chinese culture. In his post, he wrote: “We appreciate Chinese culture, such as *The Three-Body Problem* and *Black Myth: Wukong*. We are sorry if we are disturbing you”. This post received an overwhelmingly positive response from Chinese users, many of whom encouraged him to continue learning Chinese and provided him with useful study resources. His sincerity facilitated cross-cultural interaction and helped foster closer connections between users on the platform.

Meanwhile, some American users on Xiaohongshu have been attempting to post content in Chinese to enhance their interactions with Chinese users. For example, some users use pinyin to input simple Chinese greetings such as “Nihao” (hello) or “Xiexie” (thank you) and ask in the comments how to express more complex sentences. Chinese users patiently provide corrections, sometimes even marking the correct pronunciation in pinyin to help them articulate their thoughts more accurately. Additionally, some foreign users learning Chinese share their experiences of practising Chinese characters, such as writing common phrases or slogans, along with their learning reflections. These exchanges not only help foreign users improve their Chinese language skills but also foster a deeper sense of belonging within cross-cultural interactions.

Lifestyle Sharing

Beyond language and cultural adaptation, American users actively share aspects of their daily lives and engage with Chinese users in discussions on Xiaohongshu. For example, some

American users post pictures of their pets, home decor, and culinary experiments, sparking conversations with Chinese users about pet care, interior design ideas, and cooking techniques. One American user documented his experience of making jiaozi for the first time and asked for advice on preparing the filling. Chinese users eagerly provided detailed suggestions, with some even sharing their family recipes. This interaction not only deepened American users' understanding of Chinese culinary traditions but also facilitated a two-way cultural exchange.

During the Chinese New Year, a Chinese user posted about decorating windows with paper cuttings and enjoying a traditional reunion dinner. The post attracted significant interest from American users, one of whom asked: "Why is the colour red so important during Spring Festival" ? The Chinese user patiently explained: "Red symbolises joy and good fortune. In traditional culture, it is believed to ward off evil spirits and bad luck". Additionally, she elaborated on the tradition of giving red envelopes, further enriching American users' understanding of Chinese festive customs. Such exchanges demonstrate how lifestyle-sharing on Xiaohongshu serves as a bridge for cultural understanding, allowing users from both countries to gain deeper insights into each other's traditions through everyday interactions.

An Experience of Cultural Exchange

Xiaohongshu has also become a platform where many American users share their travel experiences in China. One American user who had visited China posted a series of photographs taken at the Great Wall, writing: "This is one of the most breathtaking sites I've ever seen. It was beautiful and so much larger than we had imagined". The post garnered significant attention from Chinese users, who warmly welcomed her and recommended other must-visit historical sites, such as the Terracotta Warriors and the Summer Palace. Some even provided travel tips, including the best visiting seasons, local delicacies to try, and insights into the historical significance of various landmarks. This engagement enriched the American user's experience and contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of Chinese culture. Such interactions not only highlight foreign users' enthusiasm for exploring China but also inspire more American users to visit, further deepening cross-cultural exchange.

Overall, the interactions between Chinese and American users on Xiaohongshu span multiple dimensions, including language learning, lifestyle sharing, and cultural experience exchange. These engagements not only help American users gain a deeper understanding of Chinese culture but also allow Chinese users to observe and comprehend Western perspectives on social habits and cultural expressions. As more American users continue to join Xiaohongshu, the platform is increasingly positioning itself as a crucial medium for fostering cross-cultural understanding and communication (Associated Press, 2025).

The Role of Xiaohongshu in Cross-Cultural Communication

Xiaohongshu plays a significant role in fostering cultural exchange between China and the United States in several key ways:

Promoting Cultural Understanding and Recognition

Xiaohongshu's recommendation algorithm identifies users' interests and suggests content from different cultural backgrounds (Tan, 2024). For instance, some American users watch videos on the platform showcasing Chinese New Year celebrations and express their curiosity

in the comments. The seamless dissemination of cultural content helps to enhance cultural recognition. Additionally, the vast array of content on Xiaohongshu related to Chinese culture—such as Spring Festival traditions, culinary practices, and traditional crafts—provides American users with a window into Chinese heritage. Through visually engaging formats, these posts vividly convey the richness of Chinese culture, helping foreign users to better understand and appreciate different cultural traditions.

Creative Translation of Cultural Symbols

Cross-cultural communication is often accompanied by the translation and adaptation of linguistic and cultural symbols, with social media platforms playing a crucial role in this process (Mele et al., 2021). In recent times, interactions involving both English and Chinese content on Xiaohongshu have become increasingly common. Many foreign users have taken to short videos and posts to learn popular Chinese internet slang, such as “YYDS” (an abbreviation meaning “eternal god,” used to express admiration) and “Jue Jue Zi” (a phrase signifying extreme praise). Meanwhile, Chinese users have also shown a keen interest in English slang, not only adopting commonly used expressions but also creating innovative phrases infused with local cultural elements, such as “add chili oil” (a direct translation meaning to intensify an experience or add excitement). These instances of linguistic hybridisation not only highlight the role of social media in cultural translation but also reflect the way Chinese and international users are gradually forming a shared mode of expression through online interactions.

Building Bridges for Cross-Cultural Communication

The comments section serves as a primary space for user engagement, fostering meaningful cultural exchange (Dutceac Segesten et al., 2022). Through question-and-answer interactions and shared experiences, Xiaohongshu has become a platform that narrows cultural gaps and strengthens mutual understanding. For example, an American user once asked why family reunions are so significant in Chinese culture. In response, Chinese users shared personal stories that illustrated the central role of family in traditional values. Such exchanges not only deepen cultural understanding but also create emotional connections between users.

Mitigating Cultural Misunderstandings and Stereotypes

Cross-cultural communication inevitably comes with misunderstandings and stereotypes (Aririguzoh, 2022). However, Xiaohongshu provides a friendly and interactive space where Chinese and American users can engage in meaningful dialogue to bridge these gaps. For instance, in discussions about food culture, American users may initially be sceptical about ingredients such as century eggs or duck blood, but Chinese users often introduce their historical significance and unique flavours, helping to broaden perspectives. Furthermore, when debating social values, aesthetic preferences, or traditional customs, conversations on Xiaohongshu are typically rooted in personal experience rather than confrontational debate. Even when discussing sensitive topics, such as workplace culture or educational philosophies, both Chinese and American users display a strong willingness to explore and understand different viewpoints, making Xiaohongshu an important platform for cross-cultural dialogue. In summary, Xiaohongshu’s role in cross-cultural communication extends beyond merely providing information and a space for interaction. Through content recommendations, engagement mechanisms, and cultural translation, the platform actively fosters cultural

understanding and integration. As Xiaohongshu continues to expand and develop internationally, it is poised to become an essential global medium for cross-cultural exchange.

Cross-Cultural Conflicts and Adaptation

Cross-cultural conflicts on Xiaohongshu primarily stem from differences in communication styles, social norms, and interaction patterns. American users tend to express their opinions directly, whereas Chinese users generally adopt a more indirect and nuanced communication style (Barrot, 2022). This contrast can lead to misunderstandings. For example, American users may openly criticise products or social issues in comments, while Chinese users may perceive such remarks as impolite or even offensive. Additionally, Xiaohongshu's content moderation policies differ from those of Western social media platforms, with some American users feeling that their freedom of expression is restricted, whereas Chinese users may view these regulations as essential for maintaining a positive online environment (Yi and Xian, 2024). In terms of cultural perceptions, discussions about customs and social values may sometimes be influenced by stereotypes, leading to disagreements or misunderstandings.

Faced with these cross-cultural conflicts, users adopt different strategies to navigate interactions. Some American users adjust their communication style by learning Chinese internet slang and adopting a more diplomatic tone to reduce cultural differences and facilitate smoother interactions. Others maintain their original communication style, continuing to use English and employing the direct expression style typical of Western social media, which may cause discomfort for some Chinese users. Additionally, certain users attempt to bridge the cultural gap by frequently using Chinese slang or imitating Chinese cultural practices, but their expressions may come across as unnatural or overly accommodating, leading to negative perceptions.

Cultural adaptation on Xiaohongshu is a dynamic process. Users who successfully balance self-expression with adapting to a new environment tend to build positive relationships and foster deeper engagement (Jo et al., 2024). Conversely, those who insist on maintaining their original communication style without making adjustments may experience frustration due to cultural conflicts and may even reduce their use of the platform. However, as cross-cultural interactions increase, both Chinese and American users influence each other, gradually forming a more inclusive mode of communication, making Xiaohongshu a social platform that promotes cross-cultural understanding.

Conclusion

This study explores the role of Xiaohongshu in cross-cultural communication, analysing how American users adapted to this Chinese social media platform following the TikTok ban, and applying Communication Accommodation Theory to explain users' communication strategies in cross-cultural interactions. The findings indicate that Xiaohongshu not only helps American users gain a deeper understanding of Chinese culture but also provides a welcoming environment for interaction between Chinese and American users. Many American users have successfully integrated into Xiaohongshu's social ecosystem by learning Chinese, sharing aspects of their lifestyle, and participating in cultural exchanges, thereby fostering a sense of cross-cultural identity.

Furthermore, Xiaohongshu's recommendation algorithm and interactive mechanisms play a crucial role in facilitating cultural understanding, allowing users to naturally engage with and explore content from different cultural backgrounds. Although certain challenges remain in cross-cultural interactions, such as differences in communication styles, the platform overall encourages open and friendly exchanges, fostering mutual understanding and cultural recognition between Chinese and American users.

This study applies Communication Accommodation Theory to analyse how social media platforms facilitate cross-cultural communication, particularly in the context of the TikTok ban, which prompted American users to migrate to Xiaohongshu. While Communication Accommodation Theory has primarily been applied to face-to-face communication, this research expands the theory's application in digital platforms, revealing how users from different cultural backgrounds adjust their language and communication strategies to foster cultural convergence and divergence. The study also explores the impact of geopolitical changes on social media usage patterns, with the TikTok ban driving American users to Xiaohongshu, thus creating new opportunities for cross-cultural dialogue. Through this analysis, the study offers practical insights for global social media strategies and enhances our understanding of the role of social media in cross-cultural comprehension, providing valuable perspectives on cross-cultural communication in the context of global digital transformation. Future research could further examine how social media platforms contribute to cross-cultural communication in the context of globalisation, and how platforms like Xiaohongshu can refine their cross-cultural engagement strategies during international expansion. This study offers new insights into the role of social media in global cultural exchange and highlights the positive impact of digital platforms in bridging different cultural communities.

References

- Airiguzoh, S. (2022). Communication competencies, culture, and SDGs: Effective processes for cross-cultural communication. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 9(1), 1-11.
- Associated Press. (2025). TikTok refugees find a new home on Xiaohongshu, fostering cross-cultural exchange. *AP News*. <https://apnews.com/article/tiktok-refugee-xiaohongshu-rednote-855692624aa52825b30afc5474af881d>
- Barrot, J. S. (2022). Social media as a language learning environment: A systematic review of the literature (2008-2019). *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 35(9), 2534-2562.
- Chen, Q. (2024). Exploring the impact of Xiaohongshu on the psychology of young white-collar employees in China. In *SHS Web of Conferences* (Vol. 199, p. 02022). EDP Sciences.
- Cheung, E., & Tayir, H. (2025, January 14). The great social media migration: Sudden influx of US users to RedNote connects Chinese and Americans like never before. *CNN*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/01/14/tech/rednote-china-popularity-us-tiktok-ban-intl-hnk/index.html>
- Del Mastio, N. (2021). Successful strategies adopted by foreign brands to thrive in the Chinese e-commerce market.
- Dutceac Segesten, A., Bossetta, M., Holmberg, N., & Niehorster, D. (2022). The cueing power of comments on social media: How disagreement in Facebook comments affects user engagement with news. *Information, Communication & Society*, 25(8), 1115-1134.
- Feldstein, S. (2021). *The rise of digital repression: How technology is reshaping power, politics, and resistance*. Oxford University Press.

- Giles, H., Edwards, A. L., & Walther, J. B. (2023). Communication accommodation theory: Past accomplishments, current trends, and future prospects. *Language Sciences*, 99, 101571.
- Hoffman, W. B., & Zhang, Y. B. (2023). Explaining communication adjustment: Communication accommodation theory and its utility in intercultural communication. *Journal of Intercultural Communication & Interactions Research*, 2(1), 75-100.
- Jo, H., Park, S., Jeong, J., Yeon, J., & Lee, J. K. (2024). Metaverse gaming: Analyzing the impact of self-expression, achievement, social interaction, violence, and difficulty. *Behaviour & Information Technology*, 1-15.
- Kaye, D. B. V., Chen, X., & Zeng, J. (2021). The co-evolution of two Chinese mobile short video apps: Parallel platformization of Douyin and TikTok. *Mobile Media & Communication*, 9(2), 229-253.
- Lee, Y. T., & Quinn, S. (2023). Seeking commonality while preserving difference: A dynamic balancing approach for leading across cultures. In *A relational view on cultural complexity: Implications for theory and practice* (pp. 327-346). Springer International Publishing.
- Liu, S., Gallois, C., & Volcic, Z. (2023). *Introducing intercultural communication: Global cultures and contexts*.
- Mele, E., Kerkhof, P., & Cantoni, L. (2021). Analyzing cultural tourism promotion on Instagram: A cross-cultural perspective. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 38(3), 326-340.
- Mukhtar, A., Zhu, Y., Lee, Y. I., Bambacas, M., & Cavusgil, S. T. (2022). Challenges confronting the 'One Belt One Road' initiative: Social networks and cross-cultural adjustment in CPEC projects. *International Business Review*, 31(1), 101902.
- Ning, K. X. (2024, July). Research on brand marketing strategies on the Xiaohongshu platform. In *Proceedings of the 2024 15th International Conference on E-business, Management, and Economics* (pp. 264-270).
- Odhiambo, E. C. (2022). Trader-customer communication survival strategies on the Kenya-Uganda cross-border trade: A communication accommodation theory perspective. *Indiana Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 3(7), 14-24.
- Sheeran, N., Jin, Y., Pines, R., & Jones, L. (2022). *Communication accommodation theory*. Wiley.
- Tan, J. (2024). A critical research on Xiaohongshu for information sharing for Chinese teenagers. *Profesional de la información*, 33(1).
- Vidarthi, A., & Hulvey, R. (2021). Building digital walls and making speech and internet freedom (or Chinese technology) pay for it: An assessment of the US government's attempts to ban TikTok, WeChat, and other Chinese technology. *Indian JL & Tech.*, 17, 1.
- Xu, J. (2025, January 14). US TikTok refugees are fleeing to Chinese app RedNote: It's a new phase of the digital cold war. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/us-tiktok-refugees-are-fleeing-to-chinese-app-rednote-its-a-new-phase-of-the-digital-cold-war-247342>
- Yi, H., & Xian, L. (2024). The informal labor of content creators: Situating Xiaohongshu's key opinion consumers in relationships to marketers, consumer brands, and the platform. *arXiv preprint arXiv:2409.08360*.
- Zhang, Z. (2023). Paradigms for foreign tech-platforms regulation: US options after the TikTok saga. *Wash. JL Tech. & Arts*, 18, 1.