

The Positive construction of UGC Content to Cultural Communication from the Perspective of Fan Nationalism

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the rapid development of digital media has enriched people's information lives, while nationalism has taken on new dimensions in this digital era. The phenomenon of "Tik Tok refugees" flooding into little Red Book during January 2025 serves as a case study. This paper analyzes cultural phenomena emerging from cross-cultural interactions between Chinese and foreign netizens, focusing on how fan nationalism shapes UGC content production models that positively contribute to cultural dissemination. By constructing a three-dimensional analytical framework of "fan nationalism-UGC content production model-cultural communication," we explore how Chinese users leverage innovative UGC content distribution and personal agency to actively promote their nation's cultural heritage through three dimensions: platform cultural differences, cross-cultural communication, and "depoliticized cultural affinity circles."

KEYWORDS

Fan nationalism; UGC; Cultural communication; Cultural shock

1 Introduction

For years, U. S. government officials have politicized Tik Tok's operational issues by framing China's potential exploitation of American mobile data for surveillance as a pretext. This culminated in the U.S. government's plan to enforce a Tik Tok ban on January 19, 2025 (requiring ByteDance to divest its U.S. operations under national security grounds, or face a complete shutdown). In protest against this policy, users began exhibiting platform-shifting behavior. In today's digital society, where social media platforms and societal systems are increasingly intertwined, netizens worldwide have come to view digital interactions and self-presentation on these platforms as essential needs. To both prevent imminent Tik Tok bans and fulfill their social demands while maintaining platform self-perception, these "Tik Tok refugees" chose to migrate to little Red Book as ^[1]. The influx of primarily American users labeled as "Tik Tok refugees" into little Red Book began with Chinese users sharing daily content like cute pets and food. Chinese users also helped them learn Chinese, requested English homework assistance, and even spawned cross-cultural memes like "cat tax," creating cultural exchange phenomena. How did these refugees rapidly flood little Red Book in such a short time? What cultural phenomena emerged from this international exchange during the event? What insights can we draw for future international communication and telling China's story effectively?

2 Literature review

First, Liu Hailong (2017) noted that new media technology has enabled nationalism to emerge in a "new guise as fan nationalism," demonstrating its protection and maintenance of the nation through behavioral logic such as organizational structure, interaction, and emotional investment within fan communities ^[2]. Peng et al. (2022) further pointed out that fan nationalism represents an emotional shift from "star-chasing" to "patriotism." Fans sanctify the nation as idols and achieve identity recognition through organized behaviors, though their research also mentioned that existing studies predominantly focus on politicized collective activities like "Imperial Bar Campaigns" while paying insufficient attention to everyday, individualized cultural nationalist practices ^[3]. Current research explains the deep integration between fan nationalism and new media platforms, but lacks exploration of cross-platform scenarios—such as the migration of Tik Tok refugees to little Red Book. Individual users' innovative and autonomous participation in cultural dissemination through UGC creation remains limited, particularly lacking discussions on symbolic expressions of depoliticized cultural affinity in national sentiment.

In the field of UGC content creation and algorithmic interaction research, UGC has emerged as a core form of content in the web2.0 era, significantly transforming information dissemination ecosystems with algorithms playing a pivotal role. From the perspective of UGC production, it empowers ordinary users to create and share content. Within the context of fan nationalism, UGC content serves as a vital medium for fans to express ethnic sentiments and disseminate cultural heritage. Zhang et al. (2022), focusing on the fan community of Chinese idol group INTO1, found that fans engage in collective content creation through multimodal texts, leveraging their emotional connection to the idol and associated cultural elements ^[4]. While most existing studies concentrate on the binary interaction between entertainment idol fan

communities and algorithms in UGC content creation, there remains insufficient exploration regarding how UGC production under nationalist ideologies can achieve cross-cultural and cross-platform dissemination through algorithmic mechanisms.

Finally, this paper focuses on the three-part analytical framework composed of fan nationalism, UGC content production and cultural communication through the little Red Book refugee incident, so as to discuss and study the possible lack of attention and deficiency in the current research on fan nationalism.

3 Research process (Method)

This study primarily employs literature analysis and textual examination of representative case studies from specific historical periods. The framework construction and analytical perspectives are established through systematic organization of existing research. To ensure data selection's practicality, accessibility, and scientific validity, we analyzed video content featuring cross-cultural interactions between Chinese and foreign users regarding the Tik Tok refugee incident on little Red Book (a popular Chinese social media platform) after January 13, 2025. Specifically, we identified top 10 highly-upvoted comments in the comment sections (prioritizing foreign user posts and subsequent replies), as well as trending keywords and phenomena in video tags. This includes analyzing cultural exchanges behind terms like "China-US reconciliation" and "cat tax". By integrating existing theories of UGC content creation models and fan nationalism perspectives, this study conducts an analytical discussion on bilateral cultural exchange phenomena.

Then, based on the research and analysis of different levels of cultural communication content construction system, as well as the content characteristics and phased characteristics of the event in different periods, this paper constructs the following three perspectives as a starting point:

3.1 Steady "grafting" of platform culture

The long-standing monopoly of Western media (primarily the three major and four regional powers) in global discourse power, coupled with their active practice of media imperialism through China's information blockade——, demonization, and stigmatization (Yellow Peril theory and China threat theory), has severely hindered foreign netizens' fundamental demand for depoliticized social interaction. This demand seeks to break free from the media pseudo-environment that the West has persistently constructed, enabling face-to-face dialogue. Meanwhile, due to China's adherence to grand narratives since modern times, lack of contemporary communication concepts, and the demonization propaganda by Western media, international audiences struggle to develop cognitive engagement and media literacy necessary for understanding Chinese narratives. This results in cultural discounting and cognitive gaps regarding China's actual conditions.

Tik Tok specializes in short videos and strong user engagement. While little Red Book initially gained prominence through text-based content, its short video ecosystem has also seen rapid growth in recent years, with both platforms now emphasizing lifestyle sharing as their core theme. The two platforms share similar characteristics in terms of community ecosystems and minimal operational gaps. This enables refugees to smoothly transition between these platforms during their relocation process, effectively bridging the cultural divide.

3.2 The exchange and collision between national cultures

After the refugee migration, the little Red Book community platform saw a surge in user-generated content (UGC). Initially, foreign netizens shared life posts, primarily showcasing their interactions with Chinese users through greetings and impressions. Meanwhile, trending topics like "Tik Tok Refugees" garnered 1.11 billion views and 19.13 million discussions, becoming a viral cross-cultural communication phenomenon. The increasing UGC content facilitated rapid cultural integration between Chinese and Western cultures following the influx of refugees. However, this paper emphasizes that digital culture conflicts are inevitable in today's era due to inherent diversity, exacerbating cultural shock effects^[5]. Cultural Shock, proposed by American anthropologist Kalvero Oberg in 1958, describes profound anxiety caused by cultural conflict and adaptation barriers in non-native environments. It refers to social disorientation or rejection due to the disappearance of familiar cultural symbols, distinct from medical shock. The theory outlines four stages: honeymoon phase, shock phase, adjustment phase, and full adaptation phase. How do refugees swiftly transition through these phases? Unique cultural phenomena emerge during this process, with cat tax being the most notable example.

The "Cat Tax" phenomenon primarily refers to a cultural phenomenon observed on little Red Book (China's social media platform) in January 2025. When refugees first joined the platform, their lack of shared communication patterns led them to showcase photos of their fluffy pets. Chinese netizens reciprocated by sharing their own cats in comment sections, creating what became known as the "Cat Tax". As of January 15, 2025, the trending topic "cat tax" had garnered over 30 million posts with 1.7 million views and 50,000 discussions. This meme—born from user-generated content (UGC)

to counteract cultural shock—has been co-created by global netizens through their enthusiasm. It has built emotional bridges and shared meaning spaces between Chinese and Western users, enriching the platform's multi-modal interactions (text, images, videos). This spontaneous, innovative, and autonomous interaction demonstrates Chinese netizens' proactive acceptance of refugees as cultural subjects. Through editing existing content and freely disseminating information, it highlights the inter-subjectivity and participatory culture shaped by UGC-generated communication.

In addition to the birth of "cat tax", a product of customer service culture shock, some foreign Internet celebrities and Chinese users have also contributed to the rapid passage of the first two stages of cultural shock for refugees and the rapid breakthrough of digital cultural differences.

(1) @TikTokRefugeeGuide (US user) voluntarily posted under the identity of a "veteran refugee" using mixed Chinese-English text to explain popular internet memes like "cat tax" and "morning C evening A". The content included: "Newcomers take note! Posting cat videos is called 'paying cat tax' – it's your ticket to join the Chinese netizen cat-farming brigade" (with self-made cat emojis); "Time difference meme' morning C evening A' = Active in Chinese mornings, flooded with American evenings – remember to stagger parenting/baking posts" (explaining platform time zone culture). These posts became ice-breaking templates for US users, driving the cat tax topic's views to exceed 1.7 million.

(2) @JennyInShanghai (a Chinese-American blogger), who recorded bilingual Chinese-English videos demonstrating how to interpret internet slang using "homophonic puns" like "Shuan Q" (thank you) and "amazing guy" (amazing). She also taught American netizens how to reply to Chinese comments: "When someone compliments you with 'cute', you can respond with 'Mua~' instead of 'Thank you' for a more friendly approach!" The video was shared by American users on X platform (formerly Twitter), garnering over 20,000 likes and earning her the title of "Cultural Translator".

3.3 Deeper cultural communication and cultural export

After the cultural shock between Chinese and foreign netizens dissipated, intense clashes emerged in daily life and culture, including Sino-American account reconciliation. This direct confrontation fueled a surge in cultural confidence among Chinese netizens. For instance, they urged foreign users to translate their social media posts into Chinese annotations, while little Red Book (a popular Chinese social platform) saw an explosion of high-quality self-media videos. Users actively practiced fan nationalism in the digital era, promoting China through diverse and high-quality content. Fans enthusiastically linked their cultural expressions with positive national images, intentionally connecting them to the country either directly or indirectly. These discussions contained nationalist rhetoric, employing various methods to construct nationalist narratives and establish positive national identities ^[6].

4 Conclusions

The widespread use of media not only influences the organization and mobilization mechanisms of fan communities but also fosters the formation of collective sentiments. The abundance of information and convenient communication channels on the internet provide fertile ground for collective emotions and actions[3]. Fan nationalism emerges through the collective actions of fans in countless similar events, where they actively engage in autonomous creation via user-generated content (UGC) to produce multimodal texts infused with emotional resonance. These fans then actively disseminate such content across platforms, maintaining their spiritual identity with their homeland through this unique emotional cohesion. With the rapid development of the internet and the rise of China's younger generation, we must continue to monitor and evaluate the potential of this cultural phenomenon in international communication, as it offers valuable insights and perspectives for effectively telling China's story and informing government policies.

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