

Temporary Migrants' Reactions to Immigration-related Content on Social Media Platform: Taking Australian Chinese Temporary Migrants on Red (Xiaohongshu) as An Example

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Abstract: This study examines the impact of RED (Xiaohongshu), a Chinese social media platform, on the perceptions and experiences of Australian Chinese temporary migrants regarding immigration. Using a qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews and guided by Actor-Network Theory (ANT), the research focuses on interactions within the RED network involving the platform, immigration-related content, and users. It explores how algorithms and user-generated content (UGC) on RED affect information consumption, decision-making, and community engagement among migrants. The findings highlight a nuanced interplay between agency-driven content and personal narratives, both shaping users' understanding of immigration. The study emphasizes the dual role of algorithms in content filtering and the importance of accessing diverse information sources for a well-rounded comprehension of immigration issues. RED offers valuable insights and a space for experience-sharing, yet its impact is influenced by algorithmic constraints and the subjective nature of UGC. The research advocates critical information consumption and a holistic approach in engaging with social media on sensitive topics like immigration.

1. Introduction

In a digital era, social media platforms have become integral public spheres, playing a crucial role in fostering connections, disseminating content, and cultivating communities. This report specifically centers on the Chinese social media platform RED, which is often considered the equivalent of Instagram in the Chinese context. Complemented by textual elements, RED stands out due to its emphasis on visual and short video content, facilitating user interactions such as liking, commenting, and sharing through links [1].

The principal methodology employed in this study is semi-structured interviews that benefits the investigation of interactions between temporary migrants in Australia and the diverse actors within the network under the immigration-related topics. Actor-Network Theory (ANT) serves as the theoretical framework for this study, accentuating the interconnected relationships between human and non-human entities within social networks [2]. ANT posits that both human and non-human actors possess agency and can initiate actions, viewing them as autonomous yet interdependent within the network [3]. Central to ANT is the concept of 'translation,' where actors interpret and articulate their interests in their own terms and share these with others in the network, thereby linking diverse actors and creating a dynamic and evolving actor-network [4]. This study aims to identify these actors, to explore these intricate dynamics, and to understand how

they shape the interactions of individuals within the social media landscape.

This research aims to comprehend the manner in which Australian Chinese temporary migrants navigate immigration-related content on RED. The study scrutinizes the intricate interplay among the platform's algorithms, user-generated content, and migrant engagement, with the aspiration of providing a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics characterizing Chinese migrants' interactions with immigration-related subjects. This exploration is poised to yield valuable insights into the experiences of migrants, their information-seeking behaviors, and the evolution of their community and support networks.

2. Literature Review

Transnational migrants frequently uphold robust connections with both their societies of origin and residence. Participating in discourse pertaining to their home country within these communities not only offers psychological stability but also reinforces transnational identities [5]. Nevertheless, there is a noticeable scarcity of existing research on immigration-related content on social media platforms within the countries of origin of migrants [6]. This study aims to address this void by concentrating on the users and content prevalent on Chinese social media platforms.

The advent of Internet Communication Technology (ICT) has notably augmented transnational connections

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within migrant networks. According to Sun (2021), media consumption plays a pivotal role in cultural orientation [6]. The contemporary landscape of social media platforms has revolutionized the dissemination of information, conduct of communication, and expression of emotions [7]. Temporary migrants encounter challenges such as disruptions to familiar life patterns, separation from loved ones, cultural shocks, and legal disadvantages, thereby complicating the formation of their group identity [8]. Social media serves not only as a means of communication with friends and family but also facilitates the expansion of social capital through the establishment of new connections [5]. Given the often negatively biased portrayal of China in English-language media, Chinese migrants tend to rely on Chinese social media for news consumption [9]. Consequently, for Chinese migrants, engaging in social media emerges as a vital avenue for navigating the public space while assuming the role of cultural intermediaries.

Previous studies have predominantly focused on the media consumption patterns of migrants within their host countries. Research conducted by Sun & Yu (2020) underscores the psychological satisfaction derived from social media use and the cultural adaptation of Chinese migrants in Australia [9]. This study, in contrast, redirects its focus towards the Chinese social media platform RED, acknowledging its success in fostering UGC [10]. Functioning as a platform that facilitates bidirectional interactions, RED assumes the role of a pivotal "cultural broker" for Chinese temporary migrants. It provides insights into local culture, policies, societal norms, and enables the sharing of personal experiences. Diverging from prior studies that primarily examines unidirectional information dissemination, such as mainstream media's portrayal of asylum seekers in Australia [11]; or the influence of WeChat's Chinese-language news on Chinese immigrant groups [9], this research aims to transcend these approaches by examining the multidirectional communication within RED's user network through the ANT perspective.

The study mainly addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: Who are the actors in the network of Australian Chinese temporary migrants engaging with immigration-related content on RED?

RQ2: How do Australian Chinese temporary migrants interact and engage with other actors in this network?

3. Methodology

This research employs a qualitative methodology to delve into the responses of Chinese temporary migrants towards content and users on the social media platform RED, particularly concerning immigration. The significance of this study is accentuated by the escalating global population of temporary migrants [12], wherein China ranks as the third-largest source of immigrants in Australia. This migrant cohort, predominantly comprising students, skilled workers, and working holidaymakers from middle-class backgrounds [13], encounters a distinctive set of challenges attributed to the ephemeral

and transitory nature of their status. This contrasts starkly with their established lives in China [14]. The inherent transience of their status underscores the pivotal role of identity formation for these temporary migrants. In this research, the use of semi-structured interviews as a methodology presents significant advantages over alternative approaches such as surveys, especially in examining the experiences of Chinese temporary migrants on the RED social media platform. Unlike surveys, which may offer breadth but lack depth, interviews provide a nuanced understanding of the migrants' perspectives, allowing for in-depth exploration of their thoughts and experiences. This method surpasses the rigid structure of surveys, offering the flexibility to adapt and probe deeper into responses, uncovering richer insights. This approach is particularly adept at explaining the subjective and complex nature of migrants' digital interactions and social relationships.

The methodological approach of this study is centered on semi-structured interviews, that is strategically designed to uncover the dynamics of audience interaction with RED's platform, its content, and its users. The initial phase of the interview process incorporates two questions aim at ascertaining the interviewee's general perspectives on immigration-related content and their specific concerns in this domain. Subsequently, a series of questions is posed to the interviewee, focusing on their personal experiences and reactions to RED's content and users. A more profound exploration is facilitated through an additional set of five questions, delving into how RED's content and users influence the audience's perceptions and attitudes toward immigration, as well as the ramifications of the platform's technology on information dissemination. The final question seeks insights into the interviewee's relationship with both the platform and its users. This exhaustive interview, which is spanning a duration of 37 minutes on June 11, 2023, provides a comprehensive understanding of the interaction dynamics between Chinese temporary migrants and the digital realm facilitated by RED.

4. Findings

4.1. Actors in the Network

The ANT posits that actors exist independently while simultaneously exerting influence on one another [15]. Within a network where social media platforms serve as the foundation, actors engage in the filtration and reorganization of the information they receive, subsequently sharing it through their unique methods with other actors who express interest. For instance, the platform, having obtained highly relevant user-generated content, employs technologies such as algorithms to translate and disseminate it to other users with potential interest. Within this conceptual framework, this report identifies key actors as the audience (Australian Chinese temporary migrants), the social media platform RED, immigration-related content, and other RED users existing within the network. The interviewee emphasizes this dynamic, remarking, "Immigration-related content on

RED can be explained as a broker to let me better grasp the information I need," signifying the platform's pivotal role in mediating the flow of information among actors.

4.2. Platform and Its Audience: Exploring the Interests and Algorithm

Functioning as public spaces, social media platforms curate content that closely aligns with the interests of their respective audiences. Interest serves as the foundational element of media consumption, affording users time to engage with social media platforms. The interviewee expresses a pronounced interest in information pertaining to immigration and actively engages with immigration-related content on RED, with a specific focus on information concerning immigration policies. By prioritizing the alignment with audience interests and employing processes of filtering and mediation, social media platforms establish meaningful connections with their users [15].

Interest serves as a foundational element in building connections within the actor network. Although the availability of information and the influence of algorithms shape audience interest in related content. The abundance of information may lead to information overload for individuals seeking accurate and relevant immigration content. The interviewee highlights spending time browsing content on RED to structure her framework of immigration and connect with users sharing a similar background. Yet, the sheer volume of information on RED contributes to her sense of uncertainty regarding immigration. The interviewee points out, "Algorithms fill my page with too much immigration information, since there's so much content, I feel like I need to verify and fact-check everything because it's hard to tell what's true." The influence of algorithms on the visibility of information significantly impacts the user-platform relationship. As Arias (2021) elucidates, the participatory and technological nature of social media challenges the passive role of online audiences, empowering them to establish and share their narratives [16].

4.3. Users and Their Audiences: UGC Platform Dynamics

UGC on RED is distinctly categorized into two groups based on the user's identity. Firstly, online immigration agencies utilize RED as their primary marketing platform to introduce immigration policies, discuss various immigration plans, and promote their services. Typically, these immigration agencies sponsor RED by paying advertising fees to enhance traffic to their platforms. The interviewee observes that RED, functioning as a marketing platform for these agencies, frequently provides structured guides that "make people feel more in control about immigration." She emphasizes that most agencies on RED offer user-friendly lists, guidelines, and even translated policies to assist their audience in determining visa eligibility. This type of content enhances the users' sense of control when considering immigration.

Individual users predominantly engage in sharing information related to their subjective immigration experiences and emotions. These shared stories align with the specific interests of the interviewee in this study, who anticipates gaining a deeper understanding of migration realities through such content. Given the growing significance of social media as a cultural context, users are employing increasingly intricate and diverse methods for sharing and communication [17]. Individual users play a crucial role by providing insights and real-life feedback to their audiences on immigration-related content. This collective effort results in the formation of an online community of Australian Chinese migrants, offering mutual support and camaraderie among fellow companions.

In conclusion, RED's UGC plays a crucial role in shaping the audience's comprehension of immigration issues. The diverse perspectives presented by both business accounts and individual users contribute to a more profound understanding of the opportunities, challenges, and complexities associated with the immigration process. As a platform fostering interactions, RED provides a forum wherein audiences, particularly temporary migrants, can actively share knowledge, pose questions, and cultivate a sense of community and support.

4.4. Challenges and Limitations for Audience

However, despite providing users with an online community that facilitates identity recognition, audience engagement on the platform remains constrained by user preferences and habits. The interviewee expresses frustration with the platform's design, which places a primary emphasis on visual content, resulting in difficulties in locating pertinent information. This challenge is inherent to the nature of the RED platform, which, as a substitute for Instagram, mandates that content be accompanied by images or videos. Consequently, a number of users share key information within images or comments, impeding other users' ability to search for information and diminishing the efficiency of information access. This highlights a broader challenge in navigating UGC platforms where the format may impede efficient information retrieval. The interviewee elaborates that she often had to rely on big data or algorithms to deliver the information, as the keyword search function did not consistently provide the precise information she needed. She remarks, "I feel frustrated and annoyed when it is challenging for me to find someone on RED with a similar background as mine."

The interviewee's experiences illuminate a nuanced relationship with RED, characterized by a mixture of appreciation for the insights it offers and skepticism towards its commercial aspects. Individual users who share personal immigration experiences offer a more nuanced and realistic perspective. The interviewee values these personal narratives for their authenticity, noting, "I believe they are mostly from a pure perspective." This emphasis on authenticity highlights the importance of genuine and unfiltered content in fostering trust and credibility within the user community. However, there is

a sense of doubt expressed by the interviewee towards the sponsored content from immigration agencies on RED: "I don't trust much about them, to be honest." This skepticism reflects a cautious approach to sponsored content, even when it appears to be informative. The interviewee perceives the platform as primarily serving the interests of sponsors, stating, "I often think I'm a potential customer." This perception underscores a critical challenge for social media platforms: reconciling commercial interests with the imperative to provide authentic and useful content to users.

5. Conclusion and Limitations

The examination conducted in this study of the RED platform reveals a complex interplay of actors within the network, each contributing uniquely to the discourse surrounding immigration. Australian Chinese temporary migrants, serving as the primary audience, actively interact with a diverse array of content that significantly influences their comprehension, attitudes, and decision-making processes concerning immigration.

The platform's algorithm assumes a dual role: on one hand, it assists in customizing content to align with user interests; on the other, it contributes to information overload, necessitating discernment and fact-checking on the part of users. The interviewee's experience serves as a poignant illustration of this dynamic, as she grapples with an inundation of information, frequently experiencing a sense of overwhelm due to the sheer volume. Consequently, she finds it imperative to seek clarity and verification beyond the confines of the platform.

UGC on RED manifests in two primary forms: structured, informative content disseminated by immigration agencies and personal narratives shared by individual users. Although agency content furnishes practical guidance, its commercial underpinnings give rise to a certain level of skepticism among users. Conversely, personal stories present a realistic portrayal of the immigration experience, delivering valuable support and insights. However, there is a conspicuous absence of robust community engagement on the platform, with users predominantly centered on individual experiences.

The findings suggest a nuanced user-platform relationship, where RED functions as both an information broker and a space for community interaction, albeit with limitations. The interviewee's careful scrutiny of the platform's content, particularly sponsored posts, aligns with a broader trend of critically consuming online information. Additionally, her reliance on multiple sources for information underscores the significance of adopting a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach to understanding immigration, recognizing the limitations of relying solely on social media for such complex topics.

In conclusion, RED offers a valuable platform for Australian Chinese temporary migrants to access information and exchange experiences; however, its effectiveness is shaped by the characteristics of its content, the constraints of algorithmic curation, and the subjective experiences of its users. This study sheds light on the

intricacies involved in navigating immigration-related content on social media and emphasizes the significance of approaching such content with a critical mindset and seeking information from diverse sources to foster a comprehensive understanding of immigration issues.

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