

Overseas Users' Identification with Chinese Culture and the Mechanism of Consumption Conversion on the Xiaohongshu Platform

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Abstract. The 2025 US TikTok ban has led to a substantial influx of overseas users onto Red Notes. This study therefore concentrates on the users' key challenge: strong cultural identity alongside weak consumption conversion performance. With four analytical dimensions—cross-cultural interaction, cultural perceived trust, cross-border consumption intention and commercial defects, it explores the intrinsic logic between cultural identity and consumption conversion of Red Notes' overseas users. Using semi-structured interviews, this research conducts in-depth surveys on 11 overseas users from different countries with diverse usage traits. The results show that higher cross-cultural interaction corresponds to stronger preference for Chinese culture and products, yet consumption conversion is widely blocked. Deficient platform trust leads to the diversion of consumption intention to other platforms, while commercial defects including lagging logistics, inconvenient payment and mismatched products form dual barriers to the transformation from cultural trust to consumption behavior. Meanwhile, the key difference between retained and churned users is the perception of irreplaceable platform value. The study also identifies obvious user segmentation, and incomplete commercial supporting systems are the core constraint of consumption conversion. This study provides practical references for Red Notes' cross-border e-commerce optimization and overseas operation, as well as empirical support for localized research on cross-cultural communication and cross-border consumption.

Keywords: Red Notes, Overseas Users, Cultural Identity, Consumption Conversion, Cross-border E-commerce

1. Introduction

The 2025 U.S. TikTok ban has driven a large-scale migration of overseas social media users, with Red Notes acquiring more than 700,000 passively transferred users within a short time. Relying on light daily aesthetic content including beauty sharing, home lifestyle videos and traditional cultural content, the platform has become a key field for Sino-foreign cross-cultural interaction, helping overseas users gradually form perception and identity toward Chinese culture. However, the

underdeveloped cross-border e-commerce layout and imperfect supporting infrastructure such as payment and logistics systems have led to serious loss of potential consumption power. At present, retained overseas users feature low-key yet active engagement: they maintain strong interest in Chinese culture but rarely convert cultural recognition into actual consumption, forming the typical dilemma of "high cultural identity, low participation and low consumption conversion". This situation is caused by insufficient commercial supporting facilities and the mismatch between platform strategies and users' low-intensity interaction patterns. Current research on cross-cultural consumption and content e-commerce mostly focuses on active users and mature e-commerce platforms, while paying limited attention to retained users of hybrid "content + e-commerce" platforms under passive user migration. Systematic research on user stratification and the inhibition mechanism of cultural-consumption conversion is insufficient, leaving a prominent gap between theory and practice. Therefore, this study takes Red Notes' retained overseas users as the research object, constructs an analytical framework based on four core dimensions: cross-cultural interaction behavior, cultural perceived trust, cross-border consumption intention and commercial element defects, and explores the restrictive mechanism of commercial factors on consumption conversion.

This study breaks the limitation of homogenized user analysis, enriches the research perspective of cross-cultural consumption in content e-commerce, and provides practical references for platform operation and cross-border e-commerce optimization. To achieve the research objectives, semi-structured interviews are adopted as the main method, with 11 overseas users with diverse backgrounds and usage characteristics selected as interviewees to ensure sample representativeness, so as to systematically interpret the internal logic and practical barriers of the "high identity, low conversion" dilemma.

2. Theoretical basis

2.1. Cross-cultural interactive behavior (ICB)

Cross-cultural interactive behavior (ICB) represents the core behavioral manifestation through which users engage with heterogeneous cultures and conduct online interactions in the social media environment, primarily encompassing two dimensions: interaction frequency and interaction depth [1]. Among these, interaction frequency refers to the frequency with which overseas users participate in discussions about China cultural content in the comment sections of Xiaohongshu, while interaction depth indicates the extent of users' engagement in discussions cultural connotations, lifestyles, aesthetic habits, and other related topics. Through culturally, emotionally, and technologically strategy-driven platform-based adaptive behaviors, cross-cultural individuals can effectively enhance the depth and breadth of cross-cultural interactions [2]. In the content platform ecosystem, cross-cultural interaction behaviors serve as a significant antecedent influencing users' cultural cognition. The higher the frequency of interactions and the greater the depth of content, the more pronounced users' understanding and interest in China's culture become, thereby facilitating a stronger propensity to consume China-related products [3].

2.2. Cultural perceptual trust (CPT)

Cultural perception trust (CPT) is a key psychological factor that connects behaviour and consumption decision-making in cross-cultural scenarios. It is composed of cultural emotional favourability and commodity trust perception [4]. Cultural emotional favour is reflected in the user's acceptance and love for Chinese lifestyle and aesthetic culture, and the perception of commodity

trust refers to the recognition of Chinese product quality and authenticity on the platform. Cultural distance affects cross-border e-commerce trust by causing cognitive bias and information barriers, and localised operations and improved policy guarantees can effectively alleviate this problem [5]. Differences in cultural values for customers in different countries will make them have different trusts in the same platform, thus affecting their purchasing motivations [6]. There is a significant difference between the relationship-based trust-building mechanism in collectivist and individualistic cultures, and social media interaction plays an increasingly important role in cross-cultural trust-building [7]. Cross-cultural interaction in social media can effectively improve users' cultural identity and platform trust, thus promoting the formation of consumption willingness [8]. In the Xiaohongshu platform, high-frequency and lightweight cross-cultural interaction helps overseas users establish stable cultural perception trust and provide a psychological basis for consumption conversion.

2.3. Cross-border consumption willingness (CCI)

Cross-border consumption willingness (CCI) is the core aspect of measuring users' cross-border transaction tendencies, reflecting the subjective will and behavioural possibility of overseas users to actively purchase Chinese goods on the Xiaohongshu platform [9]. Unlike general consumption interests, cross-border consumption willingness emphasises the transaction intention within the platform, which can effectively distinguish between user interests and actual conversion potential. Platform services, transaction environment and cultural cognition jointly affect the formation of cross-border consumption willingness. There are obvious differences in the conversion path and willingness intensity of users with different behavioural characteristics, which provides a theoretical basis for the hierarchical analysis of users in this study [10]. Social media is a key tool to enhance the information acquisition ability of cross-border e-commerce consumers, so that they can evaluate cross-border products and international brands in the international environment, thus forming a willingness to buy [11].

2.4. Business element defects (BED)

Business factor defect (BED) is an aspect that restricts the transformation of cross-border e-commerce, mainly including the three dimensions of payment barriers, logistics anxiety, and product selection misalignment [12]. In cross-border consumption scenarios, the completeness of commercial amenities directly impacts users' sense of transaction security and decision-making efficiency. When platform payment methods are incompatible, logistics information lacks transparency, or product offerings fail to meet overseas demands, consumers' willingness to purchase is significantly suppressed—even if they have developed cultural trust [11]. The higher the defect of business factors, the easier it is to break the conversion link of cultural trust to consumer behaviour, which is also an important reason for the dilemma of "high recognition and low conversion" of overseas users of Xiaohongshu.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Interview method

11 Red Notes Expats' users were interviewed in this research study. Nationalities include four from the USA, two from Australia, two from the Philippines, one from the UK, one from Thailand, and

one from an Arab country. They reported using the platform for one week to seven years. There were also lurkers, users, and creators.

To maintain the confidentiality of the participants, they were assigned pseudonyms, which were sample numbers, rather than using their actual usernames on the platform. All the quotes were utilized with the participant's permission (refer to Table 1).

Table 1. Basic information of interviewed users

User	Nationality	Usage Duration	User Type	Discovery Channel
Sample 1	United States	1 year	Lurker Type	TikTok Migration
Sample 2	United States	1 year	Active Type	TikTok Migration
Sample 3	Thailand	7 years	Active Type	Friend Recommendation
Sample 4	United States	1 year	Lurker Type	Curiosity Driven
Sample 5	Australia	1 year	Creator Type	Self-initiated Registration
Sample 6	Arab	1 year	Active Type	Social Driven
Sample 7	Philippines	1 week	Lurker Type	Advertisement Attraction
Sample 8	United Kingdom	1 year	Active Type	Friend Recommendation
Sample 9	Philippines	2-3 years	Active Type	BiliBili Link
Sample 10	Australia	3 years	Lurker Type	Friend Recommendation
Sample 11	United States	1 year	Lurker Type	Friend Recommendation

3.2. Descriptive analysis of core variables

3.2.1. Intercultural interaction behavior

Among the interacting behaviors, three groups were identified. The first group was highly immersive users with many interactions and a deep understanding of content, including Samples 2, 3, and 8, as well as Sample 5. The participants not only commented intensively but also discussed the cultural content on a deep level thoroughly. Sample 2 posted 25 comments a week and proclaimed that the discussions with her changed her previous attitudes. Sample 3 was a long-term, seven-year Red Notes user and commented around 10 times per week. Sample 8 managed to tell the differences of Chinese and American communication behaviors. The second group consisted of users with moderated interactions, and the members were Sample 9, Sample 1, and Sample 6. Participants in this group also interacted with lower frequency or depth of engagement. The last group was composed of low-frequency and minimal interactivity users, that is, Samples 10, 11, 4, and 7. Users would mainly spend their time browsing content and seldom leave comments or interact with others.

3.2.2. Cultural perceived trust

Cultural perceived trust had two dimensions: affective preference for Chinese culture and trust in Chinese products. Three users (Sample 3, Sample 1, and Sample 2) showed relatively high levels of cultural perceived trust. Sample 3 showed the highest level of cultural identification, indicating that she had developed "strong affection and yearning for the inclusiveness and uniqueness of Chinese culture," and trusted beauty products recommended by influencers. Sample 1 called China "manufacturing giant" and trusted Chinese electronic products very much. Sample 2 said that she no

longer had the previous bias and had a rational recognition of Chinese culture. Sample 9 and Sample 8 had a moderate level of cultural perceived trust. Sample 9 thought that Red Notes community was "very honest" and only considered buying foundation products owing to her trust in products on the platform. Sample 8 thought Red Notes was "a small window into another culture.". Other users had lower levels of culturally perceived trust or had not yet formed a clear perception.

3.2.3. Cross-border consumption intention

This study distinguished between two scenarios: the intention to purchase on the Red Notes platform and the general intention to purchase Chinese products. The analysis revealed that two users had explicit platform-specific purchase intentions.

Sample 3 stated that she would be willing to purchase beauty products, particularly those recommended by Chinese influencers she followed, if the platform optimized local logistics, overseas payment methods, and simplified identity verification. This indicated not only a purchase intention but also a clearly specified product category.

Sample 9 had considered purchasing foundation products on the platform but did not complete the purchase due to "limited shade selection." When asked whether she would be more willing to purchase on Red Notes if the platform optimized payment and logistics issues, she responded, "Yeah for sure!" and expressed further interest in purchasing "self-care products" and trying "new food." This suggested that her purchase intention extended beyond foundation products to personal care and food categories.

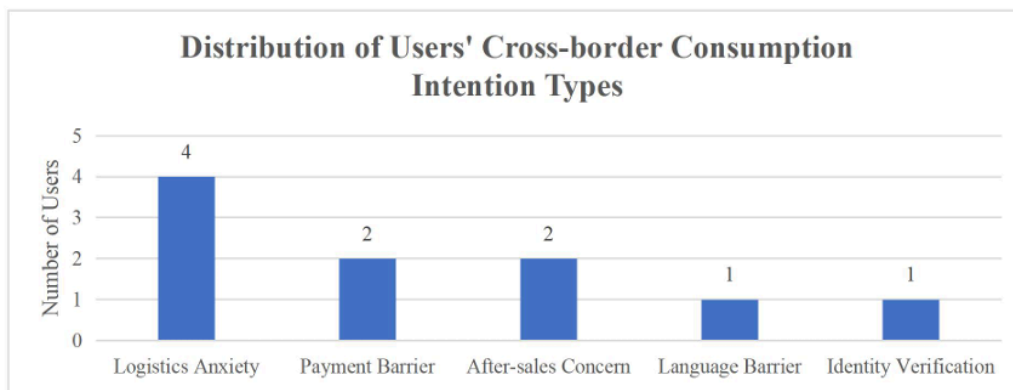


Figure 1. Distribution of users' cross-border consumption intention types

Sample 10 expressed conditional purchase intention, stating that he would be willing to purchase culture-related products if Red Notes optimized the identified issues. Two other users demonstrated purchase intentions for Chinese products but directed those intentions toward other platforms. Sample 1 explicitly stated, "willing to purchase, but prefers to buy on Amazon," and Sample 2 stated a "preference to purchase on familiar platforms." This phenomenon was termed "intention drift" by the research team. Sample 8 mentioned positive perceptions of products such as art supplies and mobile phones during the interview, referring to Red Notes as a "cultural window," but did not mention any purchase intention, indicating that her purchase intention had not yet been activated. The remaining users either did not mention purchasing or had only recently started using the platform and had not yet developed consumption intentions.

As shown in Figure 1, among the 11 users, only two (18%) had explicit platform-specific purchase intentions, one (9%) expressed conditional willingness to purchase if the platform were

improved, two (18%) expressed intentions to purchase Chinese products but preferred other platforms (intention drift), one (9%) was unable to make purchases due to language barriers (inability to understand prices), and the remaining five (46%) had no purchase intention. This distribution clearly illustrates the nature of "low conversion": the core research subjects with "intention without conversion" were Sample 3 and Sample 9, while Sample 1 and Sample 2 represented another important phenomenon—purchasing power leakage.

3.3. Analysis of business element defects

The interviews discovered various business element flaws. Logistics anxiety is the most obliged: Sample 1 is afraid of "logistics is too slow," Sample 10 discovers that "waiting several weeks for a small package feels too slow", and Sample 2 is afraid of "logistically timing and tariffs,". Sample 3 is also disturbed by logistics. Payment obstacles are obvious: Sample 3 is "unable to bind overseas phone numbers/IDs" and has "unsupported payment methods," and Sample 10 recommends optimizing "overseas payment methods.". Furthermore, post-sale concerns make another alone obstacle, and Sample 1 and Sample 2 quote concerns about post-sale services. Sample 9 do snatch foundation products because of "limited shade selection," which is a sort of assorting disability. Furthermore, Sample 11 states that he "could not understand the prices," directly because of language disability. Sample 2 also states that "accounts need to be unlocked before commenting; initially, only browsing was possible," because of identity recognition, and she has concerns about tariffs as well.

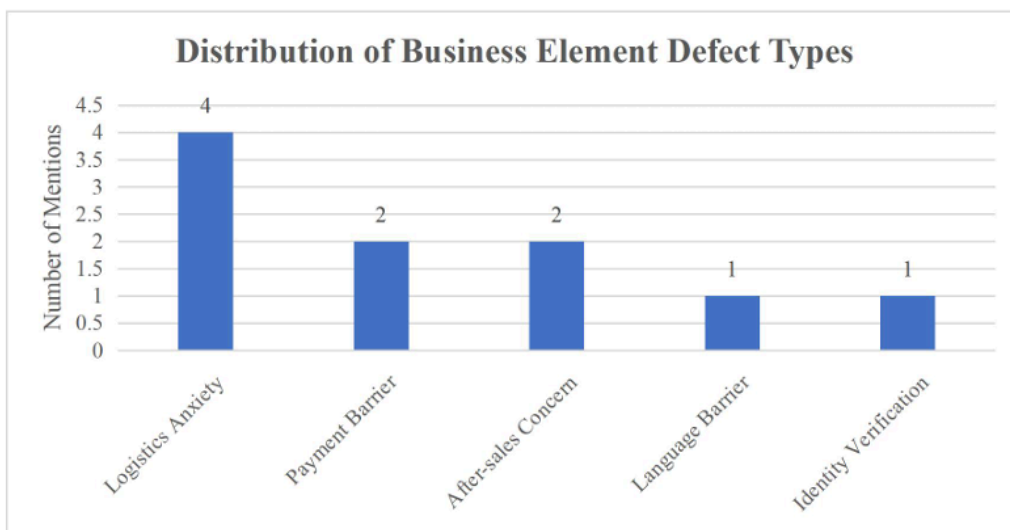


Figure 2. Distribution of business element defect types

Figure 2 illustrates the frequency of BED occurrences. Dissimilar to the other BED categories, logistics anxiety was the most common among the users who recorded the BEDs (a total of four occurrences), with payment and after-sales ambiguities tying in second place (a total of two occurrences). When grouped, the BEDs created immovable impediments to the intention-behavior conversion. It is notable that a few BEDs occurred in multiples for a small number of users. To illustrate, Sample 3 experienced three BEDs concurrently (pay, logistic and identity crisis) while Sample 9 could not effectuate a purchase because of a proper product assortment misalignment. In addition, Sample 1 and Sample 2 had intention drifting to Amazon due to logistic and after-sales dilemmas.

4. Research results

Against the background of Red Notes receiving large overseas traffic due to U.S. TikTok being banned in January 2025, this paper centers around the paradox of "high identification but low conversion" among overseas users. Through in-depth interviews with 11 overseas users, the association level between intercultural interaction behavior (ICB), cultural perceived trust (CPT), cross-border consumption intention (CCI), and business element defects (BED) were discussed. The objectives of this research are set as follows.

4.1. Mechanism of the influence of intercultural interaction behavior on consumption intention

This research concluded that intercultural interaction behavior positively affected cross-border consumption intention, while the influence of the interaction on cross-border consumption intention was mediated by the cultural perceived trust. Users who interacted with the contents of the Chinese culture on the Red Notes app frequently and deeply were more likely to have affection for it and trust Chinese products, and therefore developed the intention of buying Chinese products on the Red Notes app. Nevertheless, for this model to work, the users needed to have trust for the Red Notes app. While they may like the Chinese culture and trusted Chinese products, users' intention of purchase would be channeled towards other online shops such as Amazon due to the lack of trust for the Red Notes app.

4.2. Differences between retained users and lost users

The findings disclosed the distinctions between the retained users and the lost users. The retained users mainly indicated the irreplaceable value of Red Notes platform such as the unique atmosphere of Red Notes community, a chance to meet a Chinese friend, and the recommendation ability of the algorithm. The retained users decided to put up with the issues of fees and slow logistics, and so on, to stay on the platform. The lost users were mainly driven by the herd mentality to download the platform, and they did not have a pilgrim experience like the retained users, thus they found the platform unnecessary and decided to discontinue using it.

4.3. Dual blocking effect of business element defects

The study found that business element defects such as payment in convenience, slow delivery time, incomplete product categories, after-sales issues, language issues, and complex identity verification were the key reasons leading to "high identification, low conversion". Business element defects inhibit user's purchasing behavior in two ways: First, business element defects inhibit user's ability to turn their interest in Chinese culture into purchasing intention on Red Notes, leading to a shift in user's purchasing intention to other platforms and a loss of user's purchasing power; Second, business element defects inhibit user's ability to turn their already existing purchasing intention into purchasing behavior, resulting in inability to purchase for user's who have purchasing intention and purchase conversion failure. Among these business element defects, slow delivery time was most mentioned by interviewees.

5. Conclusion

The research findings showed that responding overseas Red Notes users are not uniform but rather include subgroups such as lurker type, active type, creator type, social type, and externally informed

type, and substantial differences in interaction habits, cultural trust, and consumption aspirations among these groups. Additionally, the four main retention motives are the community atmosphere, cultural exploration value, sociality, and algorithmically fit, while business elements such as payment threshold, logistics constraints, and product category mismatch are responsible for grave user consumption hinders, leading to "high identification but low conversion."

The results indicated that the mechanisms for user retention at digital platforms in the situation of traffic spikes depend not only on technological affinity and (trans) cultural attractiveness but also on user segmentation and differentiated interaction. There is a mismatch between the user's cultural affinity and consumption goals. Even with the relatively high user trust in platform content, the absence of a smooth business model integration doesn't allow achieving conversion from "browsing" to "purchasing."

Regarding the research implications, at the theoretical level, the study broke the limitation of analyzing foreign users as a whole group, discovered a multidimensional user classification and four major user motivations for retention, and presented an analytical framework applicable in cross-country digital platform studies. At the practical level, the results indicated a need for platforms to work out different approaches to operate on each user type (e.g., lurker, active, and creator types) and fix the conversion barriers like payment, delivery, and variety of products; otherwise, some platforms may end up in the "users enjoy viewing but do not purchase."

In terms of future research directions, future research can expand sample size through off-site surveys to quantitatively test the influence relationship of each variable in this research. Comparative studies can also be carried out with different sites to explore the impact of community atmosphere on the two platforms, such as comparing overseas TikTok and Chinese Bilibili. In addition, follow-up research is suggested to conduct longitudinal tracking studies on the same group of users to shift from cross-section research to time-course analysis to get a more detailed interpretation of the ever-changing process of cultural identification and consumption intention. Future research can also explore specific operational paths in some detail, such as the introduction of overseas payment systems, the establishment of local logistics systems, the adjustment of product inventory strategies, etc. More comparative research on lurkers, active users, and creator types is necessary to clarify the needs of different types of users, which is an important basis for platform side-oriented operational suggestions.

Authors contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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