

Postprint: A Study on Short Videos by Foreign Influencers from a Cross-Cultural Communication Perspective

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Date: 2023-10-08T00:00:00+00:00

Abstract

Current short-video platforms have attracted a large number of “internet celebrities,” and the cohort of “foreign internet celebrities” has gradually entered the public view. These “foreign internet celebrities” build bridges for Sino-foreign cultural communication through short videos, disseminating Chinese culture to the world and constructing China’s national image. This paper first systematically reviews the characteristics and reasons for the popularity of “foreign internet celebrities,” then analyzes the content of 11 popular “foreign internet celebrity” accounts on the Douyin short-video platform, explores the content characteristics of “foreign internet celebrity” short videos and their influence on cross-cultural communication, and proposes relevant strategies to foster the healthy development of the “foreign internet celebrity” cohort on short-video platforms in the future.

Full Text

A Study of “Foreign Internet Celebrities” Short Videos from a Cross-Cultural Communication Perspective

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Abstract: Currently, short-video platforms have attracted a large number of “internet celebrities,” and the group of “foreign internet celebrities” has gradually entered the public eye. These foreign influencers build bridges for communication between Chinese and foreign cultures through short videos, transmit Chinese culture to the world, and construct China’s national image. This paper first reviews the characteristics and reasons for the popularity of foreign internet celebrities, then analyzes the content of 11 popular foreign influencer accounts

on the Douyin short-video platform, explores the content characteristics of foreign influencer short videos and their impact on cross-cultural communication, and proposes relevant strategies to promote the healthy development of this group on short-video platforms in the future.

Keywords: “Foreign Internet Celebrities” ; Cross-Cultural Communication; Short Videos; Chinese and Foreign Culture; National Image

CLC Number: G206

Document Code: A

Article ID: 1671-0134(2021)04-052-05

DOI: 10.19483/j.cnki.11-4653/n.2021.04.011

Citation Format: Wang Shumin, Du Enlong. A Study of “Foreign Internet Celebrities” Short Videos from a Cross-Cultural Communication Perspective [J]. China Media Technology, 2021(04): 52-56.

With the implementation of China’s “Culture Going Global” strategy, the country’s external communication has made certain progress. However, international perspectives such as the “China Threat Theory” and “China Free-riding Theory” still persist, with some foreign media even portraying China’s Belt and Road Initiative as a means to compete for hegemony. Many foreign audiences are blinded by the “pseudo-environment” constructed by Western mainstream media, leaving China’s external communication facing significant challenges.

According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics’ “Main Data on Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan Residents and Foreign Personnel Registered in the 2010 Sixth National Population Census,” the number of foreign personnel residing in China and registered in the census has reached 593,822. This “foreigner” group studies, lives, and works in China, becoming a bridge connecting China and the world. The development of internet technology provides everyone with opportunities to voice their opinions, and many foreign influencers have ridden the “self-media” wave to document their daily lives in China through short-video platforms, such as “Wai Guo Ren Yan Jiu Xie Hui” (Foreigners Research Association), “Lao Wai Chris,” and “Afu Thomas,” who are collectively referred to as “foreign internet celebrities.”

Foreign internet celebrities belong to a subset of the broader influencer group. Simply put, they are foreigners who have gained a certain number of followers and become popular on Chinese social media platforms. On one hand, these foreign influencers gain deeper understanding of China through various social media platforms and engage in real-time communication with Chinese netizens. On the other hand, they use their personal social media accounts to provide interpretations of various social hot topics and public issues from a cross-cultural perspective. Leveraging their popularity accumulated on these platforms, they play the role of “opinion leaders” in cross-cultural communication.

1. Characteristics of Foreign Internet Celebrities

Sample Selection: This study selected top foreign influencers by follower count across various categories on Douyin as research subjects, totaling 11 influencers. Among them, eight have over ten million followers, and three have millions of followers, covering fields such as talent, culture, society, comedy, food, education, and travel.

Based on analysis of foreign influencers on Douyin, we find they share the following common characteristics:

1.1 Cross-Cultural Background with Fluent Chinese Proficiency

Most foreign influencers have lived, studied, or worked in China in the past or present, and possess certain understanding of Chinese culture. They come from different countries and regions, with most currently living in China. The majority operate self-media accounts as individuals, independently planning video content and releasing it on social media platforms. They constitute part of interpersonal communication in international dissemination while also playing the role of transmitting cross-cultural information to domestic users through the internet. Most possess cross-cultural backgrounds, can speak fluent Chinese and their native languages, and are capable of cross-linguistic communication. Consequently, their content often provides objective and precise interpretations of cultural differences between China and other countries.

1.2 Rich Topic Selection, Primarily Sino-Foreign Cultural Comparisons

Their topics are rich, mostly interesting and narrative-driven, catering to Chinese audience preferences and willing to tell stories Chinese audiences want to hear. Foreign influencers leverage their unique “outsider” identity and distinctive cultural backgrounds to express their views and attitudes on various aspects of China. Most of their content compares Chinese culture with other cultures to express admiration for China, which effectively caters to audience psychology. Many are international students or have lived in China, and their firsthand experiences in China have shattered previous stereotypes about China and the Chinese image portrayed by foreign official media. Due to differences in language, values, and culture, foreign audiences cannot accurately and comprehensively understand Chinese culture. Foreign influencers can play the role of “decoders” to better understand Chinese culture.

1.3 Unique Personas, From Solo Operations to Joining MCN Agencies

The immediacy, ease of operation, and low cost of short-video platforms provide excellent opportunities for foreign influencers to release videos showcasing their personal traits. Different characteristics of foreign influencers are also reinforced through short-video dissemination. Each foreign influencer cultivates a unique persona in their videos to distinguish themselves from other bloggers. Many initially created videos simply out of personal interest, sharing their daily lives in China. After spending time in China and gaining understanding of the country,

they documented their observations and experiences through videos, showing the most authentic China and gradually becoming a powerful force in promoting China. Some influencers have already joined MCN agencies: “Yidali de Boni” (Boni from Italy) signed with Qijishan, Bart joined Dongcidaci Media, and when Aleks Kost had only a few million followers, Yuejia Media established deep cooperation with his team at Yangpai Network Technology.

2. Reasons for the Popularity of Foreign Internet Celebrities

As globalization accelerates, people are no longer satisfied with obtaining domestic and international news solely through official media, preferring instead to access information through self-media on online social platforms. This provides convenient conditions for foreign influencers to gain popularity in China.

2.1 Technological Development Broadens Communication Channels for Self-Expression Relying on new technological developments and the visual, immediate, and interactive characteristics of new media, cross-cultural communication channels have become more abundant and narrative styles more diverse. Short-video bloggers like Li Ziqi, who spread Chinese culture, have generated strong international influence, demonstrating the vitality of short videos and internet celebrities in cross-cultural communication. Not only are Chinese “internet celebrities” going global, but “foreign internet celebrities” are also coming to China. An increasing number of foreign influencers use Chinese social media to showcase their personal images and engage in self-expression.

2.2 “Short, Fast, and Direct” Characteristics Suit Audience Fragmented Reading Habits Short duration and fast pace are common features of these short videos, with some videos presenting more content in even shorter time by increasing speech speed during post-production. These characteristics perfectly align with the fragmented information reception and processing patterns of people in the new media era. Foreign bloggers conduct “mirror projections” of Chinese society and culture from an “other” perspective, broadening Chinese audiences’ “world imagination.” Moreover, online videos possess strong “extensibility,” expanding discourse space and creating strong interactivity with Chinese audiences.

2.3 Original Content Output by Foreign Influencers Resonates with Users The reason foreign influencers achieve success is that their short-video styles are mostly humorous and witty, capable of resonating with internet users. They focus on original content output, breaking inherent stereotypes of foreigners and aiming to eliminate cultural biases and misconceptions about China through their video content. Their video content mostly adopts storytelling approaches to narrow the distance with users. The advantage of foreign influencers entering China lies in the freshness their foreign faces bring to Chinese audiences, coupled with their sustained creative abilities. Their content fills

gaps in domestic content in this area. Chinese audiences have grown tired of Chinese influencers on Douyin and need some unfamiliar faces to bring freshness, so their videos achieve good dissemination effects on Chinese social media platforms. Cross-cultural foreign influencers have constructed a new cross-cultural communication field where previously marginalized communicators can participate in discussions on various public topics, gaining discourse power. They can also actively set agendas, express their views and positions to fans, and attract more users to participate in discussions on social issues.

3. Analysis of Foreign Internet Celebrity Short-Video Content Characteristics

This section analyzes the content of foreign influencer short videos, selecting Douyin App videos as the research object. According to the “46th Statistical Report on China’s Internet Development,” China’s current short-video user base has reached 818 million, with a usage rate of 87.0% among netizens and an average daily usage time of 110 minutes. Behind these numbers, we can see that hundreds of millions of people obtain information through short-video platforms daily and make behavioral decisions. As China’s most influential social media short-video platform, Douyin provides an excellent platform for foreign influencers to voice themselves.

3.1 Real-Time Interaction with Integrated Audio and Visuals Cross-cultural communication has shifted from past linear transmission models to current two-way communication in the form of interpersonal communication. Both communication parties express their viewpoints, influence each other, generate new cultural cognition, and construct “reciprocal understanding.” Specifically, foreign influencer groups express their views on online hot events, leading to friction and collision of ideas between different cultural groups. People can leave messages and interact through comments, and these foreign influencers collect user feedback through comment sections. Additionally, foreign influencers comment on and like each other’s content.

Foreign influencer short-video covers all feature titles and are captioned, generally using large, bold fonts that create visual impact while helping us better understand video content. Furthermore, short videos all have background music, mostly using Douyin’s popular trending songs. Users can click on the music in the lower right corner to directly create similar videos, expanding topic volume and readership. On Douyin, users can share their favorite short videos with friends, which also promotes the rapid dissemination of foreign influencer short videos. Background music is the soul of Douyin, and suitable songs naturally become factors for viral popularity on Douyin. Foreigner Bart seized this key factor. He is skilled at translating familiar Chinese songs into English versions and often covers songs by popular singers and TV dramas. The translated songs show no sense of incongruity but rather have a unique flavor.

3.2 Colloquial Expression with Micro-Level Topics Most short videos have titles containing keywords for that episode's content, mostly using colloquial Chinese with textual introductions that present keywords in tag form. Whether in video titles or content, foreign influencers adopt an accessible colloquial expression style. For example, Afu's short-video titles such as "What Kind of House Can You Buy in Shanghai's Urban and Suburban Areas for 5 Million Yuan?" and "How Much Food Can You Eat on Guiyang Streets with 100 Yuan?" both stimulate user curiosity and, through questioning, inspire users' desire to express themselves by commenting in the comment section. Wai Guo Ren Yan Jiu Xie Hui's titles like "Chinese Kung Fu in Foreigners' Eyes" and "How Foreigners View Tea Ceremony Teaching" contrast "foreigners" with "China," bringing users into a context of "other" and "self" and reducing "oppositional decoding."

It is not difficult to find that many traditional media outlets adopt grand perspectives and major topics when conducting cross-cultural communication, which easily becomes hollow and creates difficulty for users to understand. These foreign influencers' short videos create a context close to life and reality, where micro-level topics and perspectives can narrow the distance with users and make people feel familiar and intimate. For example, Ennis's short videos include complaints about buying houses before marriage, sharing love stories, discussing Chinese food delivery, and funny videos about life with his mother-in-law. Behind the humor lies culture, stories, and inspiration, allowing him to stand out among many foreign short-video creators.

3.3 Rich Themes Catering to Audience Tastes By watching videos from foreign influencers on Douyin, we can identify their main content categories: daily life, celebrity entertainment, travel and food, customs and culture, hot events, China's development achievements, and talent displays. The most prominent content relates to China, and this "China-related" content is more likely to trigger clicks and shares from netizens. In videos, they use humorous language for self-deprecation, always maintaining an equal and neutral attitude for commentary, completing respectful cultural integration under the role conversion of the "other" perspective.

Foreign influencers mostly create content by seizing on social hot topics, using their own labeling and strong topic characteristics for self-dissemination. Fans maintain constant contact with them by building "para-social relationships." Through short videos, foreign influencers provide comprehensive introductions to Chinese urban and rural streets, restaurants, parks, hospitals, and other venues, presenting a real and comprehensive China. Afu's short-video content, similar to influencer Papi Jiang, mostly focuses on complaints about daily trivialities and cultural differences. In his videos, Afu plays different roles—sometimes an uncle, sometimes an aunt—with a quirky style that brings solace to anxiety-filled contemporary people. They often use a specific event as a small entry point, using witty language to make jokes that alleviate modern people's

s anxiety. Boni from Italy integrates her unique understanding of China into her videos, focusing on mother-in-law relationships and extending to multiple levels of daily life content, coupled with a uniquely cute and labeled persona, successfully attracting users.

3.4 Displaying Multiculturalism to Reduce Cultural Barriers These foreign influencers tend to popularize and introduce misunderstandings caused by previous cultural barriers, including both acceptance of Chinese culture and introduction of foreign culture. During the epidemic prevention and control period, Afu used short videos to document the entire process from the outbreak to the gradual return to normal life. The strong immediacy and objective vividness allowed domestic and foreign users to understand China's response measures and achievements at different stages. In "How Long Are Foreign Names Really?" Lao Ma obtained 1.572 million likes and 34,000 comments by telling how foreign names differ from Chinese names. In "Taking Chinese Snacks to America to See Everyone's Evaluation," Bart spread Chinese cuisine to foreigners by purchasing mahua and latiao (Chinese snacks) in China and inviting foreigners to try them on the streets of Los Angeles.

Bart became popular by translating Chinese songs into English covers. His first video on Douyin with over 30 million views was his cover of the Chinese song "Kong Kong Ru Ye" (Empty Like This). Unlike other bloggers, Bart started from his own talent, "singing" and "acting out" the Chinese and foreign cultural differences he observed. Lao Wai Chris' s Douyin bio reads "Living in Norway with You," and his videos mostly use Chinese to 演绎 Chinese family 趣事. His entire family speaks Chinese, and in his videos, "Chang' e Flying to the Moon," "Jianbing Guozi" (Chinese crepes), "Chinese Chess," "Chinese Kung Fu," and other Chinese elements closely integrated with food, festivals, and customs transmit Chinese elements and promote Chinese culture. Additionally, his videos introduce some Norwegian customs. Regardless of the approach, these foreign influencers are using sincere methods to display multiculturalism and eliminate prejudices between different cultures.

4. The Impact of Foreign Internet Celebrities in Cross-Cultural Communication

4.1 Positive Role of Foreign Internet Celebrities in Cross-Cultural Communication

4.1.1 From the Perspective of Domestic Communication A large portion of foreign influencer content introduces Chinese culture and customs. For example, Lao Wai Chris' s videos introduce Chinese dietary culture and elements like square dancing and martial arts, which can stimulate interest and emotional resonance among Chinese audiences. Chris demonstrates the speed of Chinese food delivery by comparing Norway and China. Most videos produced by foreign influencers express admiration for Chinese culture from an

“other” perspective, which helps enhance Chinese people’s affirmation of Chinese cultural values. Wai Guo Ren Yan Jiu Xie Hui’s videos introduce foreign cultures and cuisines, allowing domestic users who have never been abroad to understand foreign cultures and recognize cultural differences between countries, viewing the world through a cross-cultural lens. The “other” perspective can help us better understand ourselves. Foreign influencers construct an “other” perspective through short videos to shape China’s image, and domestic audiences can comprehensively understand all aspects of China through this “other” perspective, stimulating national pride.

4.1.2 From the Perspective of External Communication Foreign internet celebrities play a “bridge” role in connecting Chinese and foreign cultures, providing a window for foreigners to understand China and better shaping China’s image. Before the new media era, foreigners who wanted to understand China mostly relied on their domestic newspapers, radio, and television channels. However, some foreign media harbor hostility toward China and tend to demonize it, preventing foreign users from accurately understanding China. Under media influence, they even believe China threatens the world. With the emergence of various new media forms, many foreign influencers’ creative enthusiasm has been activated. Foreign users can reduce their biases against China by watching these foreign influencers’ experiences living in China. Many short videos created by foreign influencers can also effectively promote Chinese culture, allowing foreigners to experience the beauty of Chinese idioms, cheongsam, and festivals through short videos.

4.2 Challenges Posed by Foreign Internet Celebrities to Cross-Cultural Communication Although foreign influencers play a positive role in cross-cultural communication, some negative impacts remain. Despite their strong interest in Chinese culture, their degree of identification with Chinese culture is not complete. Each foreign influencer has a different background and identity, and their integration levels vary. They might potentially use media to “smear China.” Some of their views or statements may increase cultural barriers between China and foreign countries, reinforce prejudices, and trigger conflicts.

However, we can now see that many foreign influencers seem to treat praising China as a “wealth password,” leading to homogenized and vulgarized videos that cause aesthetic fatigue among audiences. Searching “I love China” as a wealth password on Douyin reveals many foreigners already on the path to wealth. Although these exaggerated videos about China can cater to Chinese identity recognition, if homogenized videos flood the platform uncontrollably, they will not only make Chinese users blindly confident but also attract more foreigners to post “I love China” short videos to gain attention and economic benefits. For example, Fulafu’s works all praise China and Chinese food, including China’s mobile payment systems and Huawei. Such praise videos naturally enhance Chinese users’ national pride, but earning profits merely through exaggerated expressions and the slogan “I love China” seems excessive and will cause 反感

among many people. We must guard against phenomena where foreigners cater to Chinese audiences to make money in China.

A major current issue is whether these foreign influencers can monetize. Many foreigners see this blue ocean in the short-video platform and flock to Douyin. Meanwhile, Chinese audiences have developed aesthetic fatigue toward the influx of foreigners watching China videos. YouTube's profit model mainly relies on advertising revenue sharing, where bloggers can profit as long as they have sufficient video traffic. However, China's profit model is relatively single, primarily depending on video advertisements and e-commerce. Short-video creators like Guo Jierui and Lao Ma, despite MCN agencies seeking cooperation with them, still operate solo. Additionally, although their videos rarely contain advertisements or live-stream sales, they may gradually embark on commercialization paths. Therefore, we must avoid false advertising for marketing purposes and not lose the original creative 初心 for the sake of marketing. Some influencers, after gaining a certain fan base, may leverage their advantages to launch foreign language tutoring courses, purchasing agents, or product sales. Such behaviors carry certain risks, as influencers may sell counterfeit goods, so audiences should be cautious to avoid being deceived.

5. Strategies for the Future Development of Foreign Internet Celebrities

We must always remember that new media is a double-edged sword. While it provides everyone with opportunities to voice their opinions, it also brings noisy situations to the public opinion field. Therefore, we must mobilize all parties to leverage the positive influence of foreign influencers, use social media to tell Chinese stories well, and transmit China's voice.

5.1 For Influencers: Leverage Innovative Thinking and Continuously Output Excellent Works Foreign influencers should remember their unique identity, leverage their special status as foreigners, adhere to “content is king,” stay close to Chinese people's lives, and create more high-quality and down-to-earth content in this era of short-video explosion. They should maintain efficient output of original content and play a good bridging role in cross-cultural communication. Combining the “other” perspective with their daily observations and experiences, they should leverage innovative thinking to find resonance points with Chinese users. Foreign influencers should also build their unique personas to form differentiated competition with other video bloggers. Only in this way can they gain audience favor. Simultaneously, they should emphasize video 趣味性, as interesting content can enhance user readability and attract sustained user attention. Beyond their foreigner identity, foreign influencers are essentially short-video creators, so they should always use high-quality content to attract users. In the increasingly competitive short-video field, the foreigner identity can provide them with a shortcut to enter the short-video domain. However, as user demands for content become higher, accounts without strong

recognizability will struggle to develop. Therefore, they need to utilize their unique foreigner identity to find a sustainably attractive core through Chinese culture—this is key to their long-term survival in the short-video field.

5.2 For Communication Agencies: Collaborate with Foreign Influencers and Vertically Segment Content The world has transitioned from the “text era” to the “short-video era,” with a clear global “video tendency.” Short videos have won over a large number of new media users through their fragmented and readable characteristics. Foreign influencers have massive followings and influence on short-video platforms like Douyin and Weibo, making them valuable partners for international communication agencies. Collaboration content should focus on vertical categorization, systematically organizing content across different fields such as politics, economy, culture, and technology to present a vivid and three-dimensional China to the world.

Currently, most foreign influencers focus on comedy videos, while videos in health, travel, and science popularization rarely feature foreigners. Therefore, we can emphasize vertical segmentation. Previously, domestic MCN agencies’ “going global” approach involved reverse-exporting their bloggers’ content to foreign networks, such as Li Ziqi uploading her video content to YouTube. If we look overseas and customize unique content for different overseas audiences, this remains a blue ocean. Investing foreign influencers cultivated through the “China model” into overseas markets may be an excellent choice for domestic MCN agencies.

5.3 For Media: Showcase Authentic Culture and Fully Embrace New Technologies Traditional media face two misconceptions when spreading Chinese culture. First, they only excavate Chinese culture and emphasize “what we have,” transmitting Chinese culture and values to foreign countries using domestic communication methods, such as emphasizing “China’s 5,000 years of history.” Due to cultural differences, foreign audiences face certain difficulties in understanding. Second, they excessively emphasize “what foreigners want,” and if they only aim to grab foreign audiences’ attention by attributing Chinese culture to superficial elements like “Chinese food” and “face-changing,” it will only bring about shallow emotional carnivals without achieving international communication effects. From a cross-cultural communication perspective, external communication is not about making people from other cultural backgrounds identify with another culture but about hoping that through good cultural communication, foreign citizens can understand authentic Chinese culture and establish a good international image.

Therefore, to better help foreign citizens understand China, we should display authentic and vivid Chinese culture, showcasing real-life scenes of people from all walks of life in China. In cross-cultural communication, we should adopt an “equal” posture to dialogue with foreign users rather than one-way indoctrination. Current cross-cultural communication should seize development opportunities

brought by new technologies to create content that can resonate with users.

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(Responsible Editor: Li Jing)

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

Source: ChinaXiv —Machine translation. Verify with original.