

Digital Resilience of Cosmopolitanism: TikTok Refugees' Platform Migration and Communication Practice With RedNote Natives

Gaohong Jing  and Xueting Zhang 

School of Journalism and Communication, Jinan University, China

Correspondence: Xueting Zhang (maxzhang@stu2023.jnu.edu.cn)

Submitted: 30 October 2025 **Accepted:** 15 January 2026 **Published:** 25 February 2026

Issue: This article is part of the issue “Contemporary Research in Political Culture: A Multidisciplinary Approach” edited by Stylianos Ioannis Tzagkarakis (National and Kapodistrian University of Athens) and Martin Neumann (Alpen Adria University of Klagenfurt), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.i486>

Abstract

This study extends a three-stage framework of the digital resilience building process into the domain of hypermediated political crises by using US' TikTok ban as a critical case. Drawing on non-engagement observation of the event and systematic analysis of empirical materials, we adopt a contextualized political analysis to examine how “TikTok refugees” absorbed shocks, adapted to risks, and ultimately transformed their digital political/apolitical practices under this hypermediated crisis. In this process, RedNote natives, initially apolitical and seemingly “pure” social media users, were drawn into a playful and ironic form of digital carnival triggered by the influx of “TikTok refugees.” As the event unfolded, interactions between the two groups gradually shifted from early stages characterized by gamification and entertainment toward exchanges centered on everyday life and connections through high-cultural and artistic practices. Through this organic evolution of a media activism event, digital resilience deepened into a form of affective solidarity. Consequently, “TikTok refugees” and RedNote natives coalesced into a cosmopolitan discursive community, reactivating the openness and inclusivity that once constituted the “cultural genes” of the global internet. Beyond this case, we argue that the seemingly coincidental yet structurally inevitable diversity of their communicative practices reflects a broader geopolitical context in which global citizens, through bottom-up resistance and “the power of organizing without organizations,” subtly challenge and reconfigure a long-standing, state-centric international political-cultural order. This challenge does not operate through overt political confrontations but rather through micro-level, depoliticized, everyday communicative practices rooted in civil and interpersonal interaction.

Keywords

cosmopolitanism; digital resilience; discursive community; hypermediated crisis; platform migration; political culture

1. Introduction

With over 150 million US users, TikTok is becoming a dominant force in online entertainment and youth culture and is also a flashpoint in Sino-US technological competition (Rubbert, 2025). In recent years, the US government has increasingly framed TikTok as a threat to its digital sovereignty through macroscopic political narratives emphasizing platform governance and national security (Cristiano & Monsees, 2025). Since 2020, the US federal government has pursued a range of regulatory and political measures toward TikTok, including national-security reviews, a ban on use on federal government devices, and multiple proposals for broader restrictions; these efforts culminated in 2024 legislation requiring ByteDance to divest TikTok or face a US distribution ban (Efforts to ban TikTok in the United States, 2025).

In response to this perceived regulatory overreach, a remarkable transnational digital migration emerged in early January 2025. Millions of American users, self-identified as “TikTok refugees,” flocked to a Chinese platform similar to TikTok, Xiaohongshu (internationally known as RedNote), to protest the impending US ban on TikTok (Baptista et al., 2025). Soon, RedNote had topped the free app download chart on the Apple App Store in the US on January 14. By 3 p.m. on January 17, 2025, the hashtag “#tiktokrefugees” on RedNote had already garnered over 1.18 billion views and more than 20.17 million comments (Li & Liang, 2025). From an integrated perspective of political culture and international communication, this event not only transformed RedNote into an unprecedented site of cross-cultural encounter between TikTok refugees (American and other international users) and RedNote natives (predominantly Chinese users; Cheung et al., 2025; Fu & Cohen, 2025), but also exemplified a digital form of resilience (“Unpacking belonging,” 2025). Following this view, these grassroots political actors enacted multimodal communication practices that collectively reconfigured political cultural trends within global publics amid the hypermediated crisis surrounding the TikTok ban.

Regarding this event, existing scholarship has thus far coalesced around four analytical foci: the interaction inception of TikTok refugees’ platform migration (Yuan et al., 2025), the communicative processes and the cultural consequences of TikTok refugees’ digital place-making (Xiao & Zhang, 2025), the discourse practices embedded in the interaction rituals through which TikTok refugees’ identities are constructed (Li & Liang, 2025), and the global news discourse practices about this event (Du et al., 2025). However, these scholars have yet to address how cultural discourses, communicative actions, and political ideas of TikTok refugees and RedNote natives are interconnected within a broader societal context, or how specific cultural (communicative) practices embedded in particular political processes generate meanings in and through those processes.

Accordingly, this article takes the foregoing issues as its point of departure. Through the course of the analysis, the research focus is further refined into the following interrelated questions: Under what crisis conditions, and through which communicative practices, is digital resilience built during the platform migration of so-called “TikTok refugees”? What additional enabling conditions facilitate the emergence of such digital resilience? What defining characteristics does it exhibit? And what broader political and cultural implications arise from its formation?

By conceptualizing the TikTok ban as a hypermediated political crisis emerging from the shifting of global geopolitics, our study follows a three-stage framework about the building of digital resilience (Boh et al., 2023) and interprets TikTok refugees’ platform migration practices, together with their communication

practices with RedNote natives, as a micro-level process through which digital resilience unfolds. The building of digital resilience consists of three interrelated stages: hypermediated political crisis absorption, cross-cultural adaptation, and the transformation of political identities. All these three stages are embedded in the communication practices between TikTok refugees and RedNote natives. Collectively, although this platform migration event is transient, the digital resilience of cosmopolitanism has deeply disrupted those state-centric political narratives grounded in national sovereignty, geopolitical rivalry, and top-down political propaganda, instead fostering micro-level, individual, depoliticized, and affective forms of digital solidarity that reconfigure the political culture trending within the global publics (Özdemir et al., 2024).

2. Literature Review

2.1. *The TikTok Ban as a Hypermediated Political Crisis*

The term “TikTok ban” is used in this article broadly to refer to the various policy-based restrictions imposed on TikTok by different governments around the world. Of these regulatory actions, the US ban has been the most prominent and consequential in recent years and therefore receives particular attention in this study.

Existing scholarship on TikTok restrictions increasingly conceptualizes these regulatory interventions as a form of cyberspace territorialization, foregrounding the tension between transnational platform infrastructures and state-centered claims to digital sovereignty (Bernot et al., 2024; Kumar & Thusu, 2023). In particular, escalating Sino-US relations are widely identified as a key geopolitical context shaping TikTok’s contested regulatory status (Potipiroon, 2024). Theorizing digital sovereignty as a shared governance logic across global regulatory regimes (Falkner et al., 2024; Pohle & Santaniello, 2024), scholars have discussed how these states seek to assert territorial control over data and algorithms while simultaneously projecting authority beyond their respective national borders (Cristiano & Monsees, 2025; Su & Tang, 2023). From a cultural and platform studies perspective, global scholars increasingly argue that TikTok’s global expansion has intensified geopolitical anxieties worldwide, as China-raised platform technologies—entangled with state power—circulate beyond national borders and disrupt existing digital cultures, imaginaries, and modes of global connectivity (Lin & de Kloet, 2023; Mishra et al., 2022). In a society shaped by deep mediatization processes (Hepp, 2019), the worldwide TikTok ban can be viewed as a “hypermediated political crisis.”

Drawing on polycrisis scholarship, contemporary crises emerge from the entanglement of fast-moving trigger events and slow-moving structural tensions that become mutually reinforcing through communicative feedback loops (Lawrence et al., 2024). Media do not merely represent crises but actively constitute them by shaping temporal urgency, affective intensity, and political intelligibility (Brosig, 2025). Krzyżanowski et al. (2018) introduced the concept of a hypermediated crisis that is characterized by (a) the transnational circulation of meaning, (b) affective amplification through digital platforms, (c) blurred boundaries between material disruption and symbolic construction, and (d) the capacity to reorder political imaginaries and governance practices. In this sense, crises are not only systemic conditions but mediated imaginaries that continually reconfigure global political culture. Inspired by these viewpoints, the TikTok ban exemplifies how platform governance becomes a site where geopolitical power, media discourse, and cultural meaning converge in moments of intensified global uncertainty. Therefore, we regard it as a type of hypermediated political crisis.

2.2. Digital Resilience and Its Communicative Dimensions

The concept of resilience has its intellectual origins in ecology, where it was defined as the capacity of a system to absorb disturbances while maintaining its core functions (Holling, 1973). Over time, resilience has been extended to social, political, and organizational domains, increasingly emphasizing processes of adaptation and transformation rather than mere recovery (Allenby & Fink, 2005; Argomaniz & Lehr, 2016; Home & Orr, 1997; Jakob Sadeh, 2025; Shengchen & Yue, 2025; Yang et al., 2025). More importantly, as Buzzanell (2010) indicates, societal resilience is fundamentally communicative: It is constituted through discourse, interaction, and collective sensemaking. Processes such as crafting new normalcies, affirming identity anchors, sustaining communication networks, mobilizing alternative logics, and foregrounding productive action demonstrate how communication actively enables adaptive reintegration rather than passive recovery.

In the current hypermediated context, the concept of digital resilience has gained increasing relevance for understanding how individuals, institutions, and societies navigate cascading crises through digital infrastructures and communicative networks. Building on this growing interest, scholars have approached digital resilience through diverse empirical and conceptual lenses that foreground communication practices. For instance, Udwan et al. (2020) employed qualitative, in-depth research with Syrian refugees to examine how everyday digital communication supports coping with displacement, health challenges, and identity negotiation, while also revealing the emotional labor and inequalities embedded in these practices. By contrast, Bjola and Papadakis (2020) analyzed digital resilience by showing how digital propaganda spreads from individual experiences to institutional politics through “unruly” counterpublics. These studies highlight the significance of digital resilience in relation to political risk and transformations in political culture; however, they have yet to provide a systematic and conceptually clear account of the processes through which digital resilience is generated or the mechanisms by which it operates.

Recently, Boh et al. (2023) developed a theoretical and analytical framework to systematically examine the formation and building of digital resilience in the context of the deep mediatization of society intensified by the Covid-19 pandemic. Their framework comprises three interrelated stages: (a) shock absorption, (b) shock adaptation, and (c) transformation into a new state. At each stage, digital resilience is shaped by distinct societal and technical conditions. Moreover, the processes through which digital resilience is built vary across specific events and contextual settings. Subsequently, Park and Choi (2025) highlighted the role of technological factors in shaping the perception of risk shocks and extended this framework into four stages: (a) intelligent sensing, (b) shock absorption, (c) adaptation, and (d) transformation. However, it is important to note that such technology-mediated risk perception is context-dependent and cannot be universally applied to explain the formation of digital resilience across all scenarios.

Enlightened by these studies, our article conceptualizes the influx of TikTok refugees to RedNote in early 2025 as a bottom-up process of digital resilience building under the hypermediated crisis triggered by the TikTok ban. In this context, the communicative practices of TikTok refugees and RedNote natives constitute the primary mechanisms through which digital resilience is built. Similar to the stages proposed by Boh et al. (2023), the formation of digital resilience in this platform migration unfolds across three phases: (a) hypermediated political crisis absorption; (b) cross-cultural adaptation; and (c) the transformation of political identities. This process is enabled by several societal structures and technological conditions, including prolonged geopolitical contestation, China’s strategic support for international communication in

recent years, RedNote's long-standing platform strategy emphasizing affective solidarity, and the platform's newly introduced content translation features.

3. Method and Data

Adopting a qualitative social science research approach, this study unfolded through three sequential and progressively refined stages, which we describe in the following paragraphs.

The first stage, conducted from mid-January to mid-February 2025, functioned as an exploratory phase. During this period, the two authors initially encountered—through multiple information channels including Weibo, WeChat public accounts, and RedNote—the phenomenon of so-called “TikTok refugees” migrating to RedNote and posting images of their pets, particularly cats, as their inaugural posts (commonly referred to as a “cat tax”) to signal goodwill toward “RedNote natives.” In this phase, the authors engaged in extensive non-participatory observation on RedNote, systematically browsing posts and comment-section interactions related to TikTok refugees and cat tax practices. Simultaneously, the authors closely followed high-frequency coverage and commentary on the event across Chinese and international mainstream media. Posts exhibiting distinctive, typical, or analytically salient features—including photographs, textual narratives, videos, image-based memes, and comment interactions—were selectively collected and archived locally. These materials subsequently served as preliminary “research leads” guiding the scientific identification and refinement of formal research data. Importantly, the authors did not participate in any content production or interaction related to the TikTok refugee discourse. During this stage, “theoretical sensitivity” (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012) to the concept of digital resilience as manifested in the event gradually emerged and became analytically salient.

The second stage extended from mid-February to the end of April 2025, during which public attention to the TikTok refugee platform-migration phenomenon steadily waned. The authors maintained continuous yet lower-intensity observation of relevant content. Throughout this period, additional multimodal materials that were emotionally evocative and analytically representative of issues surrounding the building process of digital resilience were identified, collected, and preserved. Consistent with the first stage, the authors remained a non-participatory observer and did not engage in posting or interaction.

The third stage commenced on May 1, 2025, at which point public discussion of the event on social media platforms had largely dissipated. Building upon the research leads accumulated during the preceding stages, RedNote was formally designated as the primary platform for data retrieval. The authors employed RedNote's built-in search function to systematically collect posts associated with four hashtags that had generated the highest levels of visibility during the event: “#猫税” (“cat tax” in Simplified Chinese), “#tiktokrefugees,” “#cattax,” and “#tiktokrefugee.” As of May 1, 2025, these hashtags had accumulated 110 million, 330 million, 4.2 billion, and 160 million views respectively, with corresponding discussion volumes of 1.454 million, 3.284 million, 46.225 million, and 1.719 million entries. Based on insights derived from earlier observational phases, the authors constructed a sampling frame consisting of 200 posts as the study's primary dataset. Sampling quotas for each hashtag (6, 12, 175, and 7 posts respectively) were allocated proportionally according to their relative discussion volumes.

Using RedNote’s ranking functions—“most likes,” “most comments,” and “most bookmarked”—posts were manually retrieved and archived based on previously identified research leads. For each selected post, up to 50 analytically significant comments were collected, or all available comments when fewer than 50 were present. Post selection prioritized content that most clearly articulated the cross-platform migration practices of TikTok refugees. When duplicate posts appeared under multiple hashtags, supplementary materials were incorporated in accordance with the established research leads. Following data collection, the two authors independently reviewed the corpus through multiple rounds of close reading and discussion. After internal deliberation, the authors reached a consensus that the dataset exhibited sufficient richness and theoretical saturation to support the qualitative analysis, thereby enabling the subsequent analytical phase of the study. Analytically, we adopt an abductive approach (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), characterized by an iterative dialogue between empirical materials and theoretical reflection. Guided by our substantive understanding of the event and sustained engagement with relevant scholarship, we mobilized a high degree of “theoretical sensitivity” in interpreting the data. Throughout the analytic process, we engaged in ongoing discussion and critical debate, challenging and persuading one another to enhance the rigor, balance, and analytical explanatory power of our interpretations. Ultimately, these procedures have guided this research towards a “contextual political analysis” within a qualitative research framework (Tilly & Goodin, 2006, pp. 5–6).

Lastly, we should note that all materials collected and analyzed in this study were publicly available online. Data collection was carried out in strict adherence to principles of user privacy protection. One of the authors gathered the relevant public multimodal materials through reasonable and transparent methods, including screenshots and screen recordings. Overall, both the data collection and analytical procedures fully complied with the ethical principles and standards governing responsible academic research.

4. Gamified “Cat Tax” Exchange in the Initial Stage: Absorbing the TikTok Ban Crisis

Based on the available evidence to date, prior analyses indicate that posts related to TikTok refugees’ influx into RedNote during the early phase of this platform migration event were predominantly produced by users based in the US, China, the UK, Canada, and Australia (Yuan et al., 2025). However, neither existing scholarly literature nor the online materials provide a fully definitive explanation of how TikTok refugees—whether consciously or unconsciously—initiated practices of platform migration, or who constituted the first or initial wave of users migrating to RedNote that subsequently triggered a global trend. Nevertheless, drawing on the ascertainable evidence discussed above, it can be inferred that TikTok refugees’ platform migration into RedNote functioned primarily as a form of “playful resistance” (Xiao & Zhang, 2025) within the broader context of US governmental restrictions on TikTok. Thus, at the initial stage of this performative resistance, participants—predominantly from Western countries—constructed a political identity shaped by long-standing global geopolitical confrontation, particularly in the context of Sino–US tensions, self-identifying as “TikTok refugees.”

Crucially, this emergent political subjectivity was not expressed through overt ideological positioning or formal political mobilization, but rather through communicative practices characterized by anti-politicization and de-politicization, such as humor, play, and affective distancing from institutional politics. Consequently, from the outset, their platform migration and related communicative practices exhibited a simultaneous formation of political identity and a deliberate suspension of conventional political discourse. This tension

constitutes a key condition under which digital resilience emerged in this event, particularly against the backdrop of long-standing domestic media discourses in both countries that have persistently stigmatized and caricatured the other society.

Consistent with the analytical framework advanced by Boh et al. (2023), the impending enforcement of the US government's TikTok ban in early January 2025 gradually evolved into a chronic triggering risk. Under the pressure of this trigger, TikTok users, predominantly from Western countries and later self-identified as "TikTok refugees," began to confront and absorb its potential impacts, responding through active coping actions that culminated in platform migration. Yet, this form of digital platform migration, enacted as a "shelter-seeking" practice, was not capable of absorbing—let alone fully resolving—all associated risks and challenges at the outset. Soon after their migration, TikTok refugees became aware that although RedNote is technically similar to TikTok, the two platforms differ substantially in terms of user community composition and cultural atmosphere. Following the completion of their migration, TikTok refugees quickly recognized that they were not the "hosts" of this communicative space. Instead, they were required to respect, adapt to, and integrate into the communicative "habitus" and community culture of RedNote's "native" users, who are predominantly Chinese users. Within this process, a so-called "cat tax" meme emerged as a mediating mechanism that enabled social linkage between TikTok refugees and RedNote's native users. Although no available evidence provides a definitive account of the origins or initial emergence of the "cat tax" meme, it rapidly evolved into a tacitly recognized and actively endorsed form of practical "social consensus" governing interactions between TikTok refugees and RedNote natives.

A widely circulated post (Figure 1) vividly shows the standardized, gamified "cat tax" exchange ritual that emerged between TikTok refugees and RedNote native users through successive rounds of communicative practice: Step 1, submit a photo of TikTok refugees' pet; Step 2, accumulate likes (both from refugees and natives); Step 3, receive a certified but warm welcome. Upon fulfilling this symbolic obligation by "paying the pet tax," users were often issued "official tax receipts" by fellow users or fan accounts (Figure 2). Through its instructional, guide-like tone—enhanced by the strategic deployment of emojis, mock seals, and bureaucratic parody—this post reframed what might otherwise evoke the metaphor of national border governance into an inclusive and participatory scene of digital play and belonging. Borrowing its name from the US-China tariff disputes and the broader rhetoric of anti-globalization diplomacy, the "cat tax" re-coded the institutional language of "taxation" into a playful and participatory idiom of online popular culture. When TikTok refugees relocated to RedNote, users from both countries collectively transformed the cat—a globally shared symbol of cuteness—into a medium of humorous, emotional, and ritualized cross-cultural interaction. Chinese netizens, and at times even the platform itself, constructed a gamified digital arena through imaginative procedures such as "setting virtual customs," "drafting tax regulations," and "issuing tax certificates," inviting newcomers to take part in this performative and convivial bureaucracy.



Figure 1. A RedNote post introducing the “cat/dog tax” for TikTok refugees.



Figure 2. “Tax receipt” memes.

Subsequently, this gamified “tax-paying” ritual rapidly extended beyond cats to include cows, parrots, turtles, and, in some instances, photographs of users’ children. Among TikTok refugees, some humorously framed themselves as “impoverished,” claiming to own no cats and thus offering alternative forms of contribution—such as a “music tax,” “child tax,” or “dog tax”—as substitutes. Others creatively fulfilled their perceived “tax obligations” through improvised proxies, including hand-drawn cats, cats made of bread, or stuffed toy cats (Figure 3).

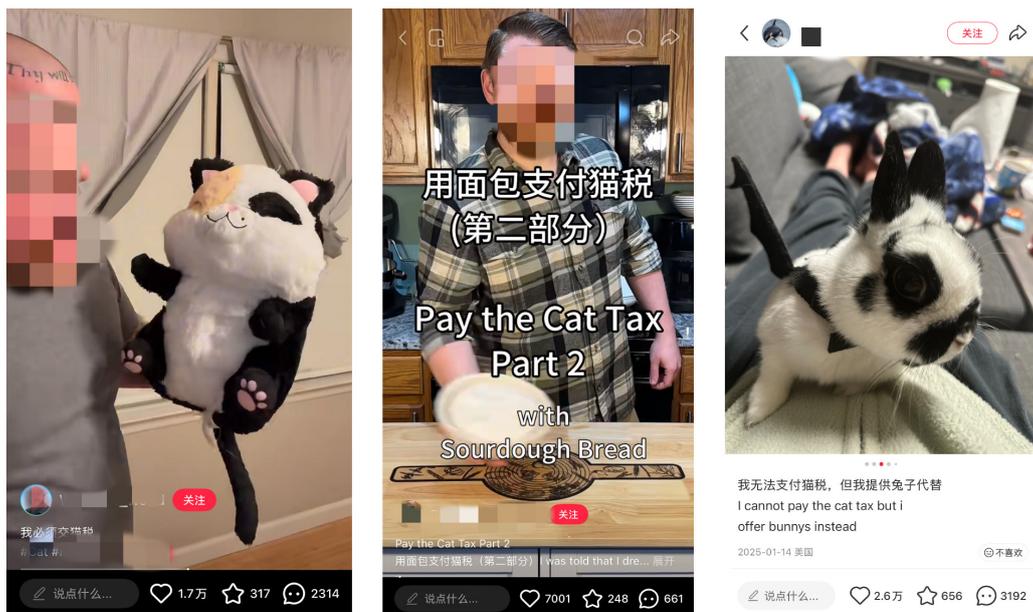


Figure 3. Multiple types of “cat tax”.

Accordingly, RedNote natives consistently responded with a playful yet benevolent orientation, reinforcing an atmosphere of mutual goodwill and affective reciprocity. These exchanges crystallized into what may be understood as “interactive ritual chains” (Li & Liang, 2025). Our observations indicate that although a small number of RedNote natives tried to post hostile or exclusionary comments, such content was swiftly removed through a combination of platform-level moderation mechanisms and other users’ mutual reporting practices. This relatively effective governance of affective boundaries sustained a predominantly playful and non-confrontational interactional environment, within which the gamified exchange could flourish. In this sense, platform affordances functioned as an enabling condition for the emergence of digital resilience between participants.

Throughout this stage, although the TikTok ban and the broader geopolitical crisis underpinning it were not directly addressed or resolved at an objective level, TikTok refugees and RedNote natives nonetheless engaged in a form of vernacular, platform-mediated digital interaction. By mobilizing cuteness imagery—particularly cats—as a symbolic “platform migration tax,” participants effectively decoupled their political subjectivities from overarching national and partisan narratives. This grassroots communicative practice fostered an emergent cosmopolitan ethos of cultural exchange and mutual recognition. As a result, at a subjective level, participants were able to temporarily distance themselves from the TikTok ban as a hypermediated political crisis, reconstituting the encounter instead as one grounded in affect, play, and shared human sensibilities.

5. From Cultural Similarity to Affective Solidarity: The Cross-Cultural Adaptation on RedNote

Based on our observations, the large-scale emergence of gamified interactive rituals—such as the sharing of “cat tax” content—was concentrated between mid-January and early February 2025, corresponding to the first phase of our research. Although some TikTok refugees continued to share various forms of “platform migration tax” in later periods, this persistence can largely be attributed to their position as late adopters in the “diffusion of innovation” (Rogers, 1981). For these users, ritualized content functioned primarily as a performative introduction, signaling their newcomer status and facilitating symbolic entry into the RedNote community. Consequently, in later phases of the migration process, these practices appeared only sporadically rather than constituting a sustained, platform-wide trend. As the novelty of these playful rituals diminished, interactional dynamics between TikTok refugees and RedNote natives gradually shifted away from meme-centered exchanges toward more substantive and diversified forms of engagement. Building on Boh et al. (2023), the initial hypermediated shock triggered by the TikTok ban was first absorbed through platform migration practices and highly visible gamified rituals such as the “cat tax.” Once this phase of symbolic adjustment stabilized, TikTok refugees entered a subsequent stage of adaptive sense-making.

Beyond the playful interactional rituals exemplified by the circulation of “cat tax” content, however, more realistic communication forms of comparative reflection emerged. When an American commenter observed that “eggs cost twenty dollars for a dozen where I live,” Chinese users began to juxtapose this experience with their own discussions of local food prices and living standards. These exchanges were collectively labelled *对账* (*duizhang*, literally “reconciling accounts”), a vernacular expression used to describe the comparison of everyday expenses and life conditions across national contexts (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Posts of *duizhang* (reconciling accounts) between TikTok refugees and RedNote natives.

What initially took the form of casual culinary banter thus evolved into a vernacular moral economy of empathy, through which participants articulated shared grievances, reflected on structural inequalities, and expressed affective solidarity grounded in everyday economic precarity. Another similar discussion unfolded surrounding healthcare and welfare. When an American user revealed that her mother's shoulder surgery had incurred medical expenses exceeding USD 100,000, a Chinese participant responded in a matter-of-fact manner by itemizing typical healthcare costs in China: "Hospital registration costs about USD 2; a CT scan is around USD 50; and an MRI approximately USD 100–200." Taken together, these similar discussions converged on a shared insight: Although TikTok refugees are predominantly located in comparatively developed countries, the everyday lives of most ordinary users are far from affluent or privileged. Instead, their living conditions closely resemble those of RedNote natives, many of whom occupy relatively lower-income positions and face comparable economic anxieties. This recognition of shared material precarity progressively displaced grand geopolitical narratives that frame global relations in abstract or ideological terms. In their place, participants formed a mode of cosmopolitan digital solidarity grounded in affective resonance, mutual recognition, and the shared experience of realistic daily life.

Simultaneously, the lighthearted communicative environment initially generated through the gamified "cat tax" ritual remained partially intact, continuing to shape subsequent patterns of interaction. As a platform primarily oriented toward young users, RedNote privileges aesthetic sensibility, creativity, and lifestyle-oriented expression. Artistic content—such as music performances, cover songs, and visual creations—constitutes a central attractor within its platform governance and operational strategies. Accordingly, TikTok-based artistic creators who migrated to RedNote frequently adopted art-sharing as an initial mode of engagement, enabling their creative works to circulate across linguistic and national boundaries. Crucially, aesthetic discourse among both RedNote natives and TikTok refugees functioned as an affective mediator in cross-cultural encounters (Figure 5).

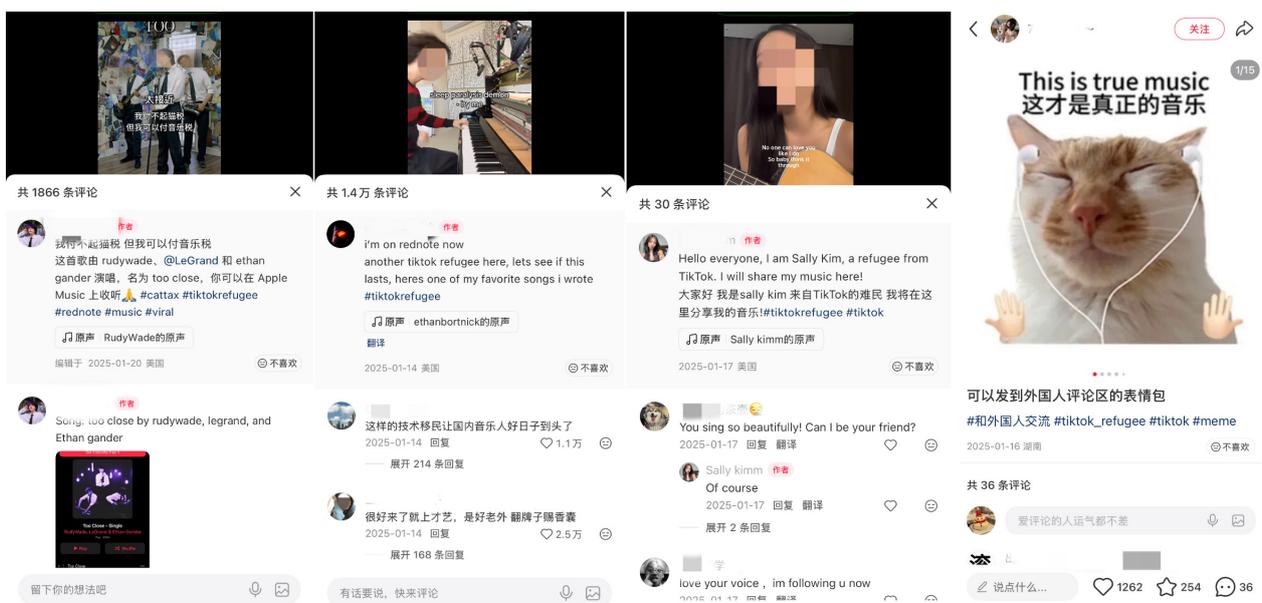


Figure 5. Cover-song posts by TikTok refugees and meme responses from RedNote natives.

By foregrounding sensory pleasure and emotional expression, artistic practices helped reduce cultural unfamiliarity and facilitated affective resonance. For instance, fashion and lifestyle creators on RedNote

curated transnational aesthetic dialogues by reinterpreting 20th-century American vintage styles through contemporary Chinese sensibilities (Figure 6).

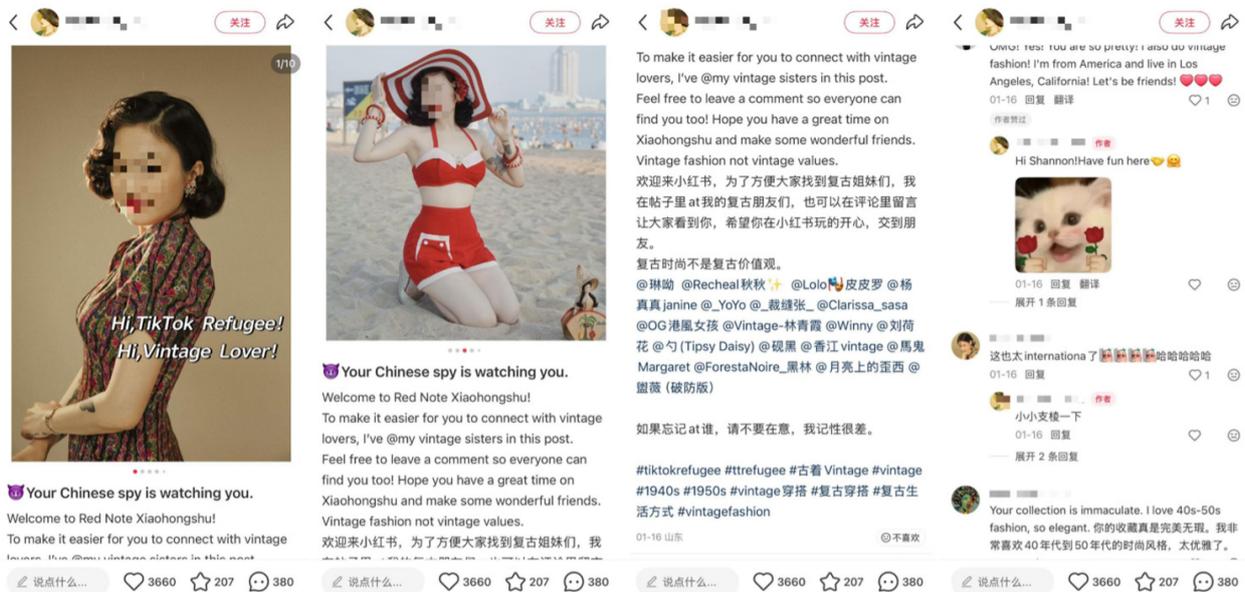


Figure 6. Localized reinterpretations and transnational communication surrounding vintage aesthetics on RedNote.

Prior studies have observed that, even before the TikTok ban, TikTok had already given rise to a participatory culture centered on street art-based visual expression, generating an atmosphere of digital cosmopolitanism and fostering emergent forms of cosmopolitan civil society (Shen, 2022). Beyond sharing original works, TikTok refugees also actively localized their creative production in response to the platform cultural environment of RedNote. These cases demonstrate that forms of street art-based display and exchange emerging on digital social media platforms did not disappear with the TikTok ban. Rather, the platform migration practices of TikTok refugees carried these preexisting modes of cultural exchange onto a new platform. Moreover, situated within the context of an intensified hypermediated political crisis, these practices were not merely preserved but further amplified through processes of affective resonance and “co-vibration” with RedNote natives, thereby expanding the scope and visibility of this cultural form.

In contrast to the early stage of migration—during which TikTok refugees occupied a structurally asymmetrical and symbolically subordinate position, encapsulated by the normative expectation to “pay the cat tax”—later interactions were increasingly characterized by intersubjective and egalitarian modes of communication. Over time, TikTok refugees and RedNote natives began to participate with comparable initiative and agency within what can be conceptualized as a cosmopolitan communicative space. Within this space, users articulated micro-level cultural affinities through two dominant interactional patterns: the sharing of mundane, everyday life experiences, and the circulation of idealized, aestheticized artistic content. These communicative practices enabled participants to move beyond surface-level cultural difference, producing forms of consensus grounded in shared affective conditions of everyday life—such as joy and sorrow, celebration and hardship—as well as common aesthetic sensibilities, artistic practices, and future-oriented aspirations. Through this process, initial recognitions of cultural similarity were progressively transformed into affective solidarity grounded in shared everyday experiences and emotional resonance.

Under conditions where their ideals and realities can be fully communicated and discussed, TikTok refugees and RedNote natives increasingly coalesced into a cosmopolitan discursive community, within which ongoing processes of mutual adaptation in cross-cultural communication took place.

Additionally, in this stage, RedNote positioned itself as a cosmopolitan platform through translation tools, algorithmic infrastructural support, and adaptive platform strategies that facilitated foreign creators' participation and absorbed policy-displaced TikTok users. Both Chinese grassroots media and legacy media offered largely affirmative responses through processes of opinion guidance and media representation (Du et al., 2025). These actions, taken by various actors, collectively contributed to the conditions under which digital resilience was established and strengthened in this event.

6. From Political Refugee to Cultural Cosmopolitan: The Political Identity Transformation on RedNote

On January 20, 2025, Donald Trump was inaugurated as the 47th president of the US and subsequently announced a postponement of the enforcement of the TikTok ban. In the months that followed, this postponement was repeatedly extended. As a bottom-up form of “media activism event,” the platform migration practices of TikTok refugees toward RedNote gradually lost momentum over time, shaped by both temporal dynamics and shifts in the policy environment. Despite the waning intensity of early gamified interactions, a significant number of TikTok refugees remained on RedNote, participating either as active creators and community members or as more passive content consumers.

From the vantage point of a moment when this media activism event had largely subsided, a retrospective examination of the evolution of TikTok refugees' platform migration practices suggests that, under the imminent shock of the TikTok ban as a hypermediated political crisis, TikTok refugees and RedNote natives engaged in gamified interactional rituals and processes of mutual cross-cultural adaptation. Through these bottom-up practices, participants ultimately enacted a political identity transformation—from political refugees to cultural cosmopolitans—exemplifying what Shirky (2008) conceptualizes as “the power of organizing without organizations.” Notably, the political identities of TikTok refugees and RedNote natives emerged from fundamentally different conditions. As ordinary TikTok users with limited capacity to influence global geopolitical dynamics, TikTok refugees became secondary subjects of constraint and inadvertent casualties of the US government's enforcement of the TikTok ban—beyond its stated economic, political, and cybersecurity rationales. It was within this gamified and entertainment-oriented online environment that affected users began to articulate the label “TikTok refugees” as a vernacular means of making sense of their displacement (Xiao & Zhang, 2025). By contrast, ordinary RedNote users—whose platform participation was initially nonpolitical and largely unconnected to politics, particularly international geopolitics—came to be reclassified as “RedNote natives” in response to the influx of TikTok refugees seeking a form of “digital asylum.” As TikTok refugees articulated and consolidated their self-defined political identity, the identity of RedNote natives likewise became discursively entangled with the TikTok ban as a hypermediated crisis. In this process, RedNote natives were constituted as an alternative, informal political identity situated within the dynamics of global geopolitical contestation.

Although the identities of both TikTok refugees and RedNote natives were ambiguously entangled with global geopolitical dynamics, their ongoing processes of mutual familiarization, co-constitution, and

interaction unfolded through a wide range of communicative practices. As these actors increasingly formed a shared discursive community, their internal modes of interaction gradually gave rise to a largely implicit and unintended consensus oriented toward depoliticized forms of transnational, cross-cultural, and cross-platform engagement. Within this discursive space, political difference was neither foregrounded nor explicitly contested but instead receded into the background of everyday interaction. As a result, in the later stages of the event, participants' political identities progressively shifted from that of "political refugees" toward a mode of "cultural cosmopolitanism." Through this transformation, digital resilience in response to the TikTok ban as a hypermediated political crisis was effectively consolidated. While such digital resilience proved contingent and ephemeral—diminishing as public attention waned—it nevertheless planted a durable seed for renewed forms of transnational connection. In this sense, the event gestures toward the possibility of a global civil society capable of, at least momentarily, "falling in love with the internet again" (Yuan et al., 2025).

In brief, the political identity transformations of both TikTok refugees and RedNote natives proceeded through three distinct stages: mutual identity display, the emergence of shared discussion and collective meaning-making, and the eventual consolidation of a culturally cosmopolitan user identity. The identity display processes enacted by both groups have been systematically documented, analyzed, and empirically supported in the preceding sections. With regard to the emergence of shared discussion and collective meaning-making, as well as the eventual consolidation of a culturally cosmopolitan user identity, a particularly illustrative case can be found in the revival of "Li Hua," a fictional character deeply embedded in China's English-language education system.

In recent decades, English writing examinations in China have widely required primary and secondary school students to compose letters to their fictitious foreign friends under the fictitious name of Li Hua, rather than their own name. Against the backdrop of globalization and China's reforms, this English examination tradition has been institutionalized as a standardized testing format, aimed at enhancing Chinese students' cross-cultural communicative awareness and skills. As TikTok refugees flocked to RedNote, Chinese netizens humorously remarked: "Li Hua finally received a reply." The Li Hua meme was subsequently adopted by TikTok refugees in cross-cultural communicative practices. Numerous TikTok refugees produced videos titled "Letter to Li Hua" (Figure 7), in which they introduced themselves and greeted Chinese users in warm, playful, and personalized ways. Chinese commenters described these videos as "letters across time and space," interpreting the exchanges as the belated fulfillment of an emotionally charged transnational dialogue. Although English-language education has long occupied a central position in China's formal schooling system—closely intertwined with the country's engagement with globalization (Li, 2020)—"Li Hua" had never functioned as a genuinely reciprocal communicative subject. In this event, the cross-cultural communicative practices of TikTok refugees—predominantly English-speaking users—enabled many Chinese RedNote natives to encounter those foreign friends who had previously existed only as imagined figures in China's English examinations. In this sense, "Li Hua" became both a symbolic mediator of cross-cultural communication and an emblem of an emergent transnational affective community, crystallizing processes of shared meaning-making and cultural cosmopolitanism in everyday digital interaction.

Overall, through these homogeneous communicative practices and interactional exchanges, TikTok refugees and RedNote natives were able to collectively withstand the hypermediated political crisis precipitated by the TikTok ban and, in the process, cultivate a form of cosmopolitan digital resilience that was transnational,

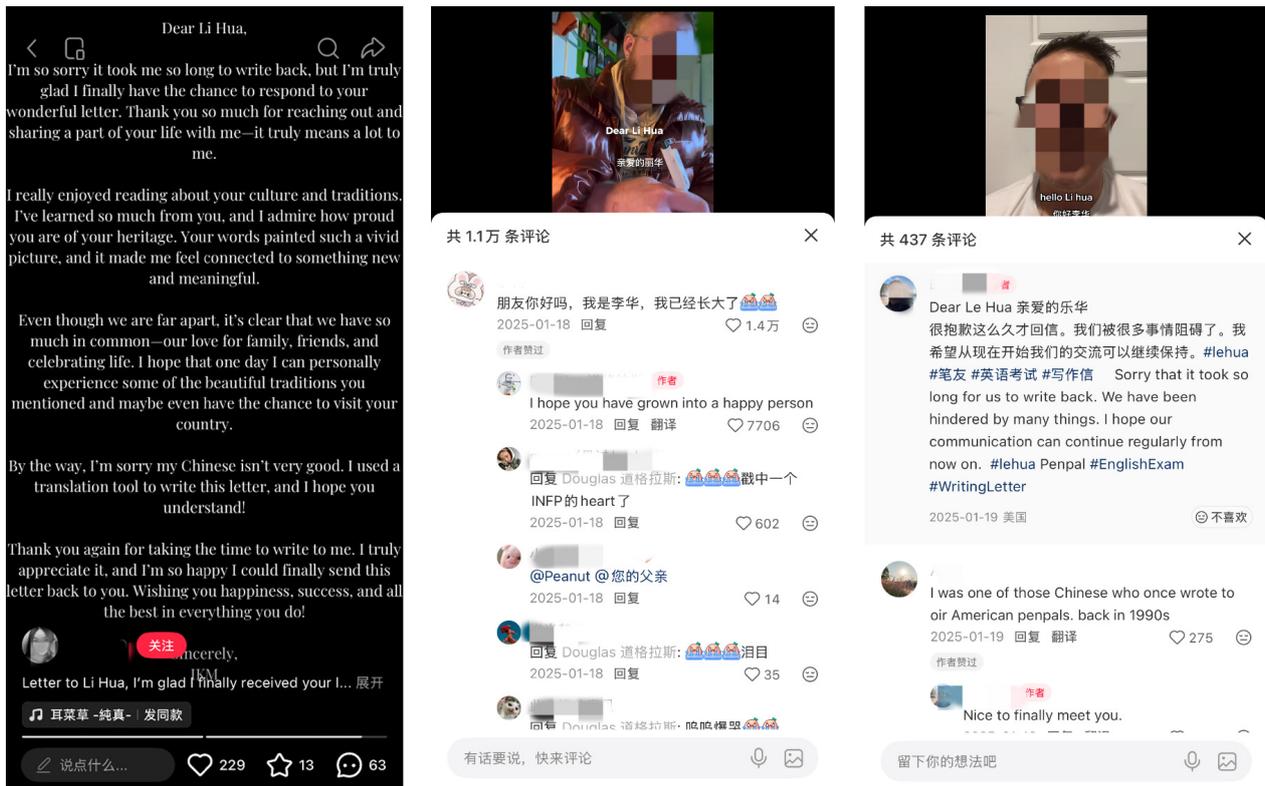


Figure 7. “Letter to Li Hua” posts and other users’ responses.

cross-platform, and cross-cultural in nature. This form of digital resilience partially countered the dominant political grand narratives and negative media representations circulating within their respective national contexts. Moreover, by operating through micro-level, personalized, and culturally grounded modes of interaction, these practices contributed to a bottom-up reconfiguration of prevailing trajectories in international political culture.

7. Conclusion and Discussion

In summary, our study extends the three-stage framework of digital resilience building proposed by Boh et al. (2023) into the domain of hypermediated political crises by using the TikTok ban as a critical case. Drawing on non-engagement observation of the event and systematic analysis of empirical materials, we adopt a contextualized political analysis (Tilly & Goodin, 2006) to examine how TikTok refugees absorbed shocks, adapted to risks, and ultimately transformed their digital political/apolitical practices under this hypermediated crisis. In this process, RedNote natives, initially apolitical and seemingly “pure” social media users, were drawn into a playful and ironic form of digital carnival triggered by the influx of TikTok refugees. As the event unfolded, interactions between the two groups gradually shifted from early stages characterized by gamification and entertainment toward exchanges centered on everyday life and connections through high-cultural and artistic practices. Through this organic evolution of a media activism event, digital resilience deepened into a form of affective solidarity. Consequently, TikTok refugees and RedNote natives coalesced into a cosmopolitan discursive community, reactivating the openness and inclusivity that once constituted the “cultural genes” of the global internet. Beyond this case, we argue that the seemingly coincidental yet structurally inevitable diversity of their communicative practices reflects a

broader geopolitical context in which global citizens, through bottom-up resistance and “the power of organizing without organizations,” subtly challenge and reconfigure a long-standing, state-centric international political-cultural order. This challenge does not operate through overt political confrontation but rather through micro-level, depoliticized, everyday communicative practices rooted in civil and interpersonal interaction. While such practices and the digital resilience they engender may not fundamentally destabilize hypermediated political crises, they nonetheless offer an important insight: In an era increasingly defined by digital territorialization and the assertion of digital sovereignty, digital citizens are primarily ordinary users and living individuals—who neither need nor ought to be governed by grand political narratives in their everyday online interactions.

It is important to note that this event was not solely orchestrated by TikTok refugees and RedNote natives. Beneath the surface, multiple politically related actors also contributed to the emergence of cosmopolitan digital resilience in this case. First, in recent years, the Chinese state has actively promoted national strategies centered on international communication and cultural soft power. Second, although RedNote and TikTok differ in platform positioning—including usage logics, operational strategies, and target markets—they nonetheless maintain a latent competitive relationship within the global social media ecology. Third, certain Western political figures (most notably Donald Trump) appeared willing to tolerate or even encourage this situation, as delaying or recalibrating TikTok-related bans could serve their own strategic political interests. Within a mobile internet environment increasingly shaped by political correctness and pervasive platform moderation, it was precisely the convergence of these conditions that enabled the interactions between TikTok refugees and RedNote natives to unfold in ways that appeared “normal,” spontaneous, and organically ephemeral.

Finally, while we acknowledge the limitations of our data and the partial nature of our empirical coverage, we contend that the foregoing analysis sufficiently demonstrates that the TikTok refugees’ platform migration under a hypermediated political crisis—and their communicative engagements with RedNote natives—constitutes a compelling case of a cosmopolitan digital resilience building process. But this form of digital resilience proved to be inherently temporary and fragile. Whether, and in what ways, such episodic manifestations of cosmopolitan digital resilience may exert more sustained and consequential political-cultural effects on the future global internet remains an open question—one that calls for further longitudinal and comparative research.

Acknowledgments

We sincerely thank the three anonymous reviewers and the editorial team for their insightful comments and constructive suggestions, which substantially improved the quality of this manuscript. In addition, we also thank Lv Zhixian and Li Ping, master’s graduates (Class of 2022) in communication studies at Guangzhou University, for proofreading the English language of this manuscript. Both individuals hold a bachelor’s degree in English and are proficient English speakers, including one who has obtained TEM-8 certification.

Funding

This research was funded by the Society of China University Journals – Digital Publishing Research Youth Scholar Support Funding 2025 Research Project (grant no. CUJS2025-DPRB04).

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

All data collected and analyzed in this study are publicly available online. Researchers and readers interested in the event examined in this study can independently access the relevant information via the RedNote (Xiaohongshu) application.

LLMs Disclosure

ChatGPT 5.2, DeepL, and Google Translate were used in a systematic and comparative manner by the two authors to enhance the accuracy of some translations in this study.

References

- Allenby, B., & Fink, J. (2005). Toward inherently secure and resilient societies. *Science*, 309(5737), 1034–1036.
- Argomaniz, J., & Lehr, P. (2016). Political resilience and EU responses to aviation terrorism. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 39(4), 363–379.
- Baptista, E., Hu, K., & Oladipo, D. (2025, January 15). Over half a million 'TikTok refugees' flock to China's RedNote. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/technology/over-half-million-tiktok-refugees-flock-chinas-rednote-2025-01-14>
- Bernot, A., Cooney-O'Donoghue, D., & Mann, M. (2024). Governing Chinese technologies: TikTok, foreign interference, and technological sovereignty. *Internet Policy Review*, 13(1). <https://doi.org/10.14763/2024.1.1741>
- Bjola, C., & Papadakis, K. (2020). Digital propaganda, counterpublics and the disruption of the public sphere: The Finnish approach to building digital resilience. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 33(5), 638–666.
- Boh, W., Constantinides, P., Padmanabhan, B., & Viswanathan, S. (2023). Building digital resilience against major shocks. *MIS Quarterly*, 47(1), 343–360.
- Brosig, M. (2025). How do crises spread? The polycrisis and crisis transmission. *Global Sustainability*, 8, Article e11. <https://doi.org/10.1017/sus.2025.14>
- Buzzanell, P. M. (2010). Resilience: Talking, resisting, and imagining new normalcies into being. *Journal of Communication*, 60(1), 1–14.
- Cheung, E., Jiang, J., & Tayir, H. (2025, January 15). The great social media migration: Sudden influx of US users to RedNote connects Chinese and Americans like never before. *CNN*. <https://www.cnn.com/2025/01/14/tech/rednote-china-popularity-us-tiktok-ban-intl-hnk>
- Cristiano, F., & Monsees, L. (2025). Beyond the ban: TikTok and the politics of digital sovereignty in the EU and US. *Politics and Governance*, 13, Article 10461. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.10461>
- Du, J., Gong, J., Li, R., & Adnan, H. M. (2025). 'We're here to spite our government': Intertextuality and comparative representations of TikTok migrants in Chinese and Western news discourse. *Journalism*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849251395509>
- Efforts to ban TikTok in the United States. (2025, December 18). In *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Efforts_to_ban_TikTok_in_the_United_States&oldid=1328198391
- Falkner, G., Heidebrecht, S., Obendiek, A., & Seidl, T. (2024). Digital sovereignty—Rhetoric and reality. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 31(8), 2099–2120.
- Fu, T., & Cohen, D. (2025, January 18). TikTok refugees are pouring to Xiaohongshu: Here's what you

- need to know about the RedNote app. *AP News*. <https://apnews.com/article/tiktok-refugee-xiaohongshu-rednote-855692624aa52825b30afc5474af881d>
- Hepp, A. (2019). *Deep mediatization*. Routledge.
- Holling, C. S. (1973). Resilience and stability of ecological systems. *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics*, 4(1), 1–23.
- Home, J. F., III, & Orr, J. E. (1997). Assessing behaviors that create resilient organizations. *Employment relations Today*, 24(4), 29–39.
- Jakob Sadeh, L. (2025). Maintaining organizational resilience amidst socio-political turmoil: Lessons from the Jewish-Palestinian context. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 42(3), 373–385.
- Krzyżanowski, M., Triandafyllidou, A., & Wodak, R. (2018). The mediatization and the politicization of the “refugee crisis” in Europe. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 16(1/2), 1–14.
- Kumar, A., & Thussu, D. (2023). Media, digital sovereignty and geopolitics: The case of the TikTok ban in India. *Media, Culture & Society*, 45(8), 1583–1599.
- Lawrence, M., Homer-Dixon, T., Janzwood, S., Rockström, J., Renn, O., & Donges, J. F. (2024). Global polycrisis: The causal mechanisms of crisis entanglement. *Global Sustainability*, 7, Article e6. <https://doi.org/10.1017/sus.2024.1>
- Li, H. (2020). Changing status, entrenched inequality: How English language becomes a Chinese form of cultural capital. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 52(12), 1302–1313. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1738922>
- Li, H., & Liang, Y. (2025). Study on identity construction of affinity group from the perspective of interaction ritual chains: A textual analysis of the “TikTok Refugee” discourse on REDNOTE. *New Media & Society*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448251378986>
- Lin, J., & de Kloet, J. (2023). TikTok and the platformisation from China: Geopolitical anxieties, repetitive creativities and future imaginaries. *Media, Culture & Society*, 45(8), 1525–1533.
- Mishra, M., Yan, P., & Schroeder, R. (2022). TikTok politics: Tit for tat on the India-China cyberspace frontier. *International Journal of Communication*, 16, 814–839.
- Özdemir, Ö., Görgün, M., & Sarioğlu, E. B. (2024). Digital solidarity and adaptation: Applications developed for refugees in host countries. *Frontiers in Sociology*, 9, Article 1479288.
- Park, M. J., & Choi, H. (2025). Bending, not breaking: Digital resilience as a pathway to transformative renewal. *Technology in Society*, 84, Article 103138. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techsoc.2025.103138>
- Pohle, J., & Santaniello, M. (2024). From multistakeholderism to digital sovereignty: Toward a new discursive order in internet governance? *Policy & Internet*, 16(4), 672–691.
- Potipiroon, W. (2024). Beyond bipartisan support: Analyzing the TikTok ban votes in the US House of Representatives. *Global Public Policy and Governance*, 4(2), 197–223.
- Rogers, E. M. (1981). Diffusion of innovations: An overview. In J. G. Anderson & S. J. Jay (Eds.), *Use and impact of computers in clinical medicine* (pp. 113–131). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4613-8674-2_9
- Rubbert, E. (2025, October 21). U.S. TikTok ban: National security and civil liberties concerns. *The Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, University of Washington*. <https://jsis.washington.edu/news/u-s-tiktok-ban-national-security-and-civil-liberties-concerns>
- Shen, Z. (2022). Street art on TikTok: Engaging with digital cosmopolitanism. *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 14(2), 80–92.
- Shengchen, Z., & Yue, X. (2025). Foundation of the political resilience in China: A perspective of state capacity. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 34(152), 295–311.
- Shirky, C. (2008). *Here comes everybody: The power of organizing without organizations*. Penguin Press.

- Su, C., & Tang, W. (2023). Data sovereignty and platform neutrality—A comparative study on TikTok’s data policy. *Global Media and China*, 8(1), 57–71.
- Tilly, C., & Goodin, R. E. (2006). It depends. In R. E. Goodin & C. Tilly (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of contextual political analysis* (pp. 3–32). Oxford University Press.
- Timmermans, S., & Tavory, I. (2012). Theory construction in qualitative research: From grounded theory to abductive analysis. *Sociological theory*, 30(3), 167–186.
- Udwan, G., Leurs, K., & Alencar, A. (2020). Digital resilience tactics of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands: Social media for social support, health, and identity. *Social Media + Society*, 6(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120915587>
- Unpacking belonging: Why the Red Note app is making waves and building community. (2025, January 15). *AbsolutViolette.com*. <https://www.absolutviolette.com/articles/unpacking-belonging-why-the-red-note-app-is-making-waves>
- Xiao, Y., & Zhang, J. (2025). “No longer our place”: TikTok refugees and the politics of digital migration to Xiaohongshu. *New Media & Society*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448251368890>
- Yang, J., Jiang, H., Dai, M., & Guo, W. (2025). Resilience under the chilling effect: How social support and digital media reshape online political participation among Chinese youth. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 16, Article 1634604.
- Yuan, K., Zhang, L., Lyu, H., Pan, Z., Zhang, Y., Li, J., Guo, B., Hu, J., Guo, Q., & Ma, X. (2025). “I love the internet again”: Exploring the interaction inception of “TikTok refugees” flocking into RedNote. In *CHI EA ’25: Proceedings of the Extended Abstracts of the CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (Article 12). Association for Computing Machinery. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3706599.3719738>

About the Authors



Gaohong Jing is a PhD candidate at the School of Journalism and Communication, Jinan University, Guangzhou, China. His research interests encompass global communication, digital culture, social media governance, and journalistic innovation.



Xueting Zhang is a PhD candidate at the School of Journalism and Communication, Jinan University, Guangzhou, China. Her research interests encompass international communication, digital culture, and their intersections.