



Encountering China on TikTok: youth engagement and cross-cultural interpretation

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Abstract This paper examines how non-Chinese young users in Australia and New Zealand engage with and interpret Chinese cultural content on TikTok. Using uses and gratifications theory as its analytical framework, the study draws on data from a large-scale survey and in-depth interviews. The findings indicate that lifestyle oriented content attracted broader interest than symbolic culture forms because it better matched users' entertainment-oriented motivations. Most participants engaged through low-effort actions, such as liking and sharing, whereas high-effort behaviors, including commenting and producing derivative videos, were associated with stronger needs for identity expression and social interaction. Users' interpretations were shaped primarily by personal gratifications rather than by political or ideological considerations. By demonstrating that users' motivations influence not only content selection and engagement but also interpretive frames, the study extends the explanatory scope of uses and gratifications theory. It also offers practical insights for improving the communication of Chinese culture to young audiences in Oceania.

Keywords Chinese culture on TikTok · Uses and gratifications theory · Non-Chinese young TikTok users · Engagements with Chinese culture · Interpretations of Chinese culture

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Introduction

China is the world's second-largest economy by nominal GDP and the largest when measured by purchasing power parity (PPP) (World Bank 2025). Alongside its rapid economic development, the Chinese government has intensified efforts to expand its global soft power. The "Chinese culture going out" initiative is one of several national strategies aimed at strengthening China's cultural influence abroad (Yang 2022 & Ocónb, 2023). Historically, the international dissemination of Chinese culture relied primarily on official channels and traditional media that adopted a relatively formal tone. However, these efforts have produced limited results. Although Chinese cultural content circulates internationally, it has struggled to resonate emotionally with overseas audiences (Yang 2022 & Ocónb, 2023). In response, President Xi Jinping (2025) has emphasized the need to develop innovative approaches to cultural communication. Among various digital platforms, TikTok has become a prominent venue for sharing Chinese culture globally due to its broad user base and interactive affordances (Highhouse 2022).

Studies have shown that TikTok exposes global audiences to a wide spectrum of Chinese culture, ranging from traditional practices, such as Hanfu, calligraphy, and martial arts, to contemporary forms, including street fashion and regional cuisines (Hu 2022). Additionally, studies have also indicated that strategies such as incorporating popular music, launching thematic challenges, and aligning cultural content with commercial trends can significantly enhance the visibility of Chinese culture on TikTok (Hu 2022). However, these studies are primarily producer-oriented, focusing on how Chinese cultural content is created and made appealing. Few have examined cultural dissemination from the perspective of content receivers, even though cultural exchange is fundamentally interactive and depends on audiences' active engagement, interpretation, and meaning-making (Jung & Seo 2021; Yang 2022). If viewers encounter cultural material passively without reflecting on, evaluating, or re-contextualizing it, the impact of cultural exchange is inevitably constrained (Li et al. 2023). Furthermore, most existing studies rely on qualitative content analysis to identify the strategies that producers employ to enhance the visibility and popularity of their videos (Highhouse 2022; Yang 2022). While valuable for illustrating specific production techniques, this approach offers limited explanatory power in identifying broader patterns, such as which types of Chinese cultural content attract audiences most and how TikTok users typically interact with the content.

To address the research gap, this study shifts attention to the receiver side and uses mixed methods to investigate three core questions: (1) Which types of Chinese cultural content most strongly attract young TikTok users?¹ (2) How do these users

¹ This study adopts a broad conception of Chinese cultural content, encompassing both traditional elements, such as calligraphy, acupuncture, and classical performing arts (e.g., Peking Opera, Kunqu Opera) and contemporary forms, including Chinese pop music, film, and online games. It also includes Chinese philosophical traditions, such as Confucianism and Taoism, along with related cultural expressions. During the in-depth interviews, participants were encouraged to describe any TikTok content they personally regarded as related to Chinese culture, which allowed for an open and inclusive understanding of cultural engagement.

engage with such content? and (3) How do they interpret their encountered content? Because engagement and interpretation are directed toward specific cultural forms, it is necessary to identify which types of Chinese cultural content most strongly attract young users' attention. Addressing this question provides an analytical foundation for examining how young users subsequently engage with and interpret Chinese cultural content on TikTok. These questions together facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of how effectively Chinese culture circulates globally through TikTok and how international audiences interpret what they encounter.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section Two provides an overview of TikTok as a global platform for disseminating Chinese culture and introduces uses and gratifications theory as the analytical framework guiding the examination of user motivations, interactions, and interpretive practices. Section Three explains the data collection and analysis methods. Section Four presents and discusses the findings in three subsections corresponding to the three research questions. The first identifies the types of Chinese cultural content that most attract young users. The second analyzes the modes of user engagement, and the third examines how users interpret and construct meaning from the content. The final section concludes by summarizing the study's key contributions and acknowledging its limitations.

Literature review

TikTok: a helpful platform for the global distribution of Chinese culture

TikTok has emerged as a prominent site for cross-cultural communication. By January 2025, it ranked as the world's fifth most popular social media platform, with approximately 1.59 billion active users (Statista 2005). Its global popularity enables users from diverse cultural backgrounds to share various cultural contents and engage in cross-cultural communications. Unlike network-based platforms like X and Facebook, which prioritize interactions among friends, TikTok is primarily driven by content. Its algorithmic recommendation system selects videos based on users' interests and interactive behavior, such as likes, comments, and shares (Felaco 2025). TikTok also regularly introduces novel and trending videos that are popular worldwide to expand users' horizons (Zhang et al. 2025). These features enable users to interact with novel materials beyond their existing networks, stay up-to-date with the latest global trends, and engage in cross-cultural communication (Lu 2024).

In addition to its recommendation system, TikTok is designed for high levels of interactivity. The prominently placed "create/+ " button at the bottom of the screen encourages users to produce their own videos. Features, such as a broad selection of background music and flexible video lengths (ranging from 15 s to three minutes) lower the barriers to content creation. These affordances enable ordinary users to become creators, promoting self-expression and intercultural communication (Kaye et al. 2022).

Building on its role as a cross-cultural communication platform, TikTok has become a significant channel for the global circulation and reinterpretation of

Chinese culture. Prior studies have shown that traditional cultural content, such as classical arts, intangible cultural heritage, historical relics, and museum collections, has gained significant popularity on the platform (Hu 2022). Scholars have also found that traditional festivals and associated practices are also frequently featured themes (Lin & Zuo 2023). Influencers such as Li Ziqi have further stimulated international interest in Chinese cuisine, contributing to its visibility on TikTok (Li et al. 2023; Lin & Zuo 2023). However, existing literature indicates that few videos have presented contemporary Chinese culture or reflected the diversity of Chinese modernity (Lin & Zuo 2023). Although Chinese philosophical traditions such as Confucianism and Taoism are globally influential, scholars have found that high-quality explanatory content remains scarce on TikTok (Lin & Zuo 2023). These findings from existing literature suggest that while TikTok facilitates the global dissemination of Chinese culture, its content distribution is uneven and heavily skewed toward traditional themes. Moreover, existing literature indicates that most of these studies adopted a producer-centered perspective, emphasizing content categories, representational strategies, or the narratives of prominent creators (Li et al. 2023; Lin & Zuo 2023; Soto-Vásquez 2022; Yang 2022). By contrast, few scholars have examined how audiences encounter, evaluate, and engage with such content, or how users' preferences and gratifications shape different modes of interaction and interpretation (Hu 2022). We believe that Cross-cultural communication is an interactive process. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of the global distribution of Chinese culture requires us to investigate both the producers' and receivers' sides.

The effectiveness of cultural dissemination largely depends on the depth and quality of audience engagement. Existing literature demonstrates that high-cost and high-effort interactions, such as commenting or creating derivative works, often reflect deeper cognitive and emotional involvement than low-cost behaviors like liking or sharing (Guo 2025). Research shows that users who participate more intensively tend to develop a deeper understanding of cultural content and exhibit more sustained interest, precisely because such engagement requires a greater cognitive and affective investment (Yang 2022). Consequently, scholars have argued that fostering environments that encourage deeper forms of interaction could enhance the global dissemination and meaningful appreciation of Chinese culture (Gong 2025). Understanding the motivations driving these high-effort behaviors is therefore essential, as it enables the development of strategies that effectively stimulate and sustain users' in-depth engagement.

Scholars have also identified several challenges that hinder the global dissemination of Chinese culture on TikTok. A major barrier arises from ideological and political divergence between China and many Western societies. Users who held negative preconceptions about China's political system often resisted or misinterpreted its cultural expressions (Lin & Zuo 2023). Differences in communication styles further complicate cross-cultural transmission. As Hall (1990) explains, high-context cultures convey meaning through implicit cues and shared assumptions, whereas low-context cultures rely on explicit and direct communication. Based on existing findings, scholars have pointed out that as a high-context culture, Chinese culture often conveys meaning indirectly through relational norms and situational cues. However, when presented to low-context audiences, these implicit messages

could be overlooked or misunderstood, thereby reducing communicative clarity and weakening cultural resonance (Lin & Zuo 2023). Moreover, scholars have observed that the current international media environment includes voices that portray China and Chinese culture in an unfavorable light, which further undermines global dissemination efforts (Gong 2025). Together, these factors constrain both the reach and effectiveness of China's cultural presence worldwide. It is also necessary to investigate whether these factors will influence TikTok users' preferences for and engagement with Chinese cultural content.

In summary, while existing literature has cataloged the types of Chinese cultural content circulating on TikTok, fewer studies have examined audience preferences or interactive processes. The literature further suggests that ideological differences and contrasts between high- and low-context communication constitute important factors that may influence global audiences' perceptions and interpretations of Chinese culture.

Uses and gratifications theory: an analytical framework to understand the global distribution of Chinese culture

This paper examines which types of Chinese cultural content most strongly attract young TikTok users and how they interact with and interpret such content. Uses and gratifications theory provides a useful framework for this inquiry. The theory conceptualizes social media users as active, purposive, and selective in their media use. Rather than passively consuming media information, individuals actively choose media content to satisfy specific psychological, social, and informational needs (Stafford et al. 2004). From this perspective, identifying the Chinese cultural content that appeals most to TikTok users requires understanding their motivations for seeking and consuming China-related materials on the platform. Moreover, the theory suggests that users' interaction with social media content depends on the extent to which such content fulfills their needs and expectations.

The uses and gratifications theory rests on five core assumptions. First, it posits that audiences are active media users who select platforms and content based on their needs and expectations for media use (Deng et al. 2024). Second, it argues that users' needs and expectations are translated into desired satisfactions, such as access to information, self-identification, social interaction, or entertainment. These expected satisfactions, in turn, shape users' media choices and engagement patterns (Dolan et al. 2016). Third, the theory assumes that users intentionally choose media that best satisfy their needs from available alternatives. Consequently, content that aligns closely with users' motivations attracts greater attention and engagement, whereas content perceived as irrelevant receives limited engagement (Falgoust 2022). Fourth, the theory acknowledges that audiences actively interpret media content through their individual media consumption needs, which explains why different individuals derive different meanings from the same content (Eginli & Tas 2018). Finally, it argues that audiences' obtained gratifications from media use will feed back into their future media behavior (Deng et al. 2024). When users' needs

are fulfilled, they are more likely to continue consuming similar content and deepen their engagement.

Uses and gratifications theory helps explain why certain types of Chinese cultural content are more appealing than others. Building on its emphasis on active audiences and need-driven media selection, the theory suggests that TikTok users are neither passive recipients of algorithmic recommendations nor random consumers of Chinese cultural content. Instead, they selectively seek out videos that correspond to their motivations. For example, prior studies indicate that users motivated by entertainment and relaxation tended to prefer humorous, visually striking, or aesthetically appealing content (Eginli & Tas 2018). In contrast, scholars have noticed that users motivated by learning were more likely to consume videos introducing China's history, philosophies, or cultural traditions (Gao 2024; Gong 2025). Therefore, we argue that differences in users' motivations provide an important explanation for their varied preferences for Chinese cultural content on TikTok.

The theory also helps explain audiences' diverse engagement behaviors by linking their actions, such as liking, sharing, commenting, or recreating videos, to different gratifications obtained from media use. Previous studies indicate that users who left comments often sought social interaction with video creators or other viewers, using comment sections as spaces for discussion or debate (Du 2025; Gao 2024). In such cases, commenting behavior was primarily driven by social-interaction gratifications. Meanwhile, prior studies suggest that users who invest time and effort in reproducing or creating cultural content tend to pursue gratifications related to self-expression, identity construction, or community affiliation (Deng et al. 2024). For example, Li et al. (2023) and Kang (2021) found that many ethnic minority users on TikTok shared videos that presented their daily lives and cultural practices as a means to express their identities and reinforce their sense of belonging. Thus, we believe that uses and gratifications theory offers a systematic framework for understanding the logic behind diverse forms of media engagement.

The theory also theoretically recognizes that users' motivations and gratifications shape how they interpret media content (Eginli & Tas 2018). However, the existing studies have rarely offered empirical evidence to verify this assumption. The lack of evidence in this aspect is closely related to how scholars widely applied the uses and gratifications theory in their empirical studies. Most existing studies primarily focused on viewers' selection of and interaction with media content. They treated interpretive processes as secondary outcomes. Therefore, few have systematically examined how viewers' motivations and gratifications influence their interpretations of media content (Deng et al. 2024; Falgoust et al. 2022). However, we believe users' motivations and gratifications heavily influence how they interpret their consumed content. For example, when viewers watch the same video about Hanfu, those motivated by learning may regard it as a valuable educational resource. Users who prioritize social connection may view it as a popular trend and share it with friends who share similar interests. In contrast, users motivated by entertainment may view Hanfu simply as a visually novel or exotic cultural practice, without seeking deeper historical understanding. Therefore, this study aims to find empirical evidence to connect interpretive processes with viewers' motivations and gratifications.

Overall, the uses and gratifications theory provides a coherent and systematic framework for analyzing how TikTok users select, engage with, and interpret Chinese cultural content. By focusing on users' motivations and needs, it offers a nuanced account of the psychological and social mechanisms underlying users' cross-cultural media consumption. On the one hand, it explains why certain forms of cultural content attract stronger attention and why users derive distinct interpretations from the same cultural materials from a user's needs perspective. On the other hand, it discusses how different gratifications motivate diverse engagement behaviors.

However, the theory also has some limitations. Scholars have pointed out that its strong focus on individual agency may overlook the impact of structural forces, such as AI-driven recommendation algorithms and broader sociopolitical narratives, on shaping users' exposure and engagement patterns (Xie et al. 2024). Noticing this limitation, we added relevant questions during in-depth interviews. We asked interviewees whether TikTok's recommendation model, the ideological differences, and the current unfriendly international public opinion climate towards China would affect their viewing and interaction with Chinese culture on TikTok.

Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods design to address the three core research questions. In the first stage, we used a survey to identify the types of Chinese cultural content that attracted TikTok users and how they engaged with these videos. The second stage consisted of in-depth interviews that explored why certain content types were appealing and how participants interpreted Chinese cultural content in relation to their motivations for using TikTok. The interviews also examined the diversity of participants' engagement behaviors by examining the gratifications derived from watching Chinese cultural videos. Since the primary aim of this paper was to explain how TikTok users interacted with and interpreted Chinese culture, rather than mapping general patterns of preference, our analysis focused primarily on the interview data.

This study intentionally chose young TikTok users aged 18–35 for two main reasons. First, TikTok's global audience is concentrated in this age group, with 27% aged 18–24 and nearly 40% aged 25–34 (Statista 2005). Second, young foreign audiences play a pivotal role in advancing the “Chinese culture going global” initiative. Scholars have argued that the effectiveness of cultural dissemination globally depends on how well foreign audiences receive, identify with, and circulate Chinese cultural elements (Gill & Huang 2023). When young non-Chinese users learn Chinese, wear Hanfu, or adopt Confucian-inspired practices, Chinese culture becomes integrated into their personal identities rather than remaining a distant curiosity.

Cultural vitality also depends on fluidity and reinterpretation (Gill & Huang 2023). Once non-Chinese youth are exposed to Chinese cultural traditions, these traditions interact and integrate with broader global youth culture and will constantly evolve. Conversely, if global dissemination of Chinese culture is limited to the Chinese community, Chinese culture risks being reduced to a mere “ethnic culture”,

failing to achieve broader impact. Therefore, this study intentionally targeted non-Chinese young TikTok users. Although this demographic is globally diverse, fieldwork was limited to major cities in New Zealand (Auckland and Wellington) and Australia (Melbourne and Sydney) due to time and budget constraints.

Data collection

Data collection proceeded in two stages. Stage one relied on a survey, and stage two used semi-structured interviews. We recruited survey participants based on three criteria: (1) non-Chinese ethnicity or nationality, (2) aged 18–35, and (3) active TikTok usage.² We posted advertisements under TikTok videos tagged with #ChineseCulture and #China, as well as on the websites of voluntary associations in New Zealand and Australia, and on posters displayed at universities in these two countries.³ Although the online survey received responses from various countries, only responses from New Zealand and Australia were analyzed to ensure the survey and interview datasets aligned geographically.⁴ A total of 871 participants completed the survey. Among them, 62% were aged 18–25, and 38% were aged 26–35. Approximately 51% identified as female, 47% as male, and 2% preferred not to disclose.

In the second stage, we invited survey participants who provided email addresses showing their willingness to discuss their experiences with Chinese culture on TikTok in follow-up interviews. Additional participants were recruited through voluntary associations, community centers, local churches, and universities in New Zealand and Australia. Purposeful sampling ensured that participants were active TikTok users who had viewed Chinese cultural content and met the same eligibility criteria used for the survey. Snowball sampling was also used. We conducted 57 interviews in total. Among them, 67% of were aged 18–25, and 33% were aged 26–35. About 52% identified as female and 48% as male.

The survey consisted of three sections. The first captured demographic information. The second examined general TikTok use, including frequency, duration, and content preferences. For content preferences, we asked participants to choose from broad categories like Chinese food and cuisine, travel and landscape, Chinese

² Active TikTok users were identified based on participants' self-reported frequency of use and weekly time spent on the platform. Specifically, respondents were asked how often they visited TikTok each week and how many hours they spent on TikTok per week. Frequency options ranged from "every day" to "not at all", while duration options ranged from "more than 7 h per week" to "less than 30 min per week". Participants were classified as active users if they reported using TikTok at least several times per week (i.e., 4–6 days/week) and spending at least one hour per week on the platform.

³ We acknowledge that data from Australia and New Zealand alone cannot fully capture the global dissemination of Chinese culture on digital platforms. Patterns of preference, engagement, and interpretation among non-Chinese TikTok users may vary across regions such as Europe, Southeast Asia, and North America. However, due to financial constraints and practical limitations, the physical fieldwork was conducted in Australia and New Zealand during our visiting scholar appointments in these two countries.

⁴ Survey data from other countries were analyzed separately in another paper.

news and events, traditional clothing, cultural practices, and Chinese festivals.⁵The third consisted of two sub-sections and focused on engagement with Chinese cultural content. Participants were asked how often they viewed such content, how they encountered it (e.g., “For You” page, search, hashtags, shares, follows), and which content types they found attractive. One subsection assessed behavioral engagement by asking participants how frequently they liked, shared, commented on, or created Chinese cultural content, and whether they joined culture-related challenges. Additional items examined motivations for liking or sharing (e.g., entertainment value, educational value, emotional resonance, support for the creator) and factors that discouraged deeper engagement (e.g., fear of adverse reactions, limited cultural knowledge, low motivation).

Another subsection addressed participants’ interpretations of Chinese cultural content. We raised questions to measure perceived authenticity (e.g., whether videos reflected contemporary or traditional culture, offered partial or one-sided views, or relied on stereotypes), emotional responses (e.g., curiosity, confusion, admiration, skepticism), and overall attitudes (ranging from very positive to very negative). To ensure clarity and content validity, the survey was reviewed by three experts in cross-cultural communication.⁶Twenty pilot questionnaires were distributed, and several questions were revised based on the feedback received.

Interviews were conducted both online and offline with participants’ informed consent. Each interview lasted approximately 93 minutes. The interview guide included four sections: (1) demographic information and general TikTok habits, (2) preferences for Chinese cultural content and motivations for watching, (3) engagement behaviors and gratifications, and (4) perceptions of China and Chinese culture before and after exposure to Chinese cultural videos. Participants were asked to rank their preferred content types, recall memorable videos, and explain why these videos were meaningful. Probing questions such as “Can you describe the last Chinese cultural video you watched and what you did afterward?” were used to elicit detailed narratives.⁷We also asked participants to describe how they interacted with Chinese cultural videos, why they preferred certain forms of engagement over others, and

⁵ Because few studies have examined viewers’ preferences for and engagement with Chinese cultural content on TikTok, we had limited guidance for designing our survey questions (Gao 2024; Li et al. 2023; Soto-Vásquez 2022). To solve this problem, we drew on relevant research about the dissemination of Chinese culture on YouTube and synthesized it into six broad categories. Participants were also invited to list other types of Chinese cultural content they had encountered that did not fit these categories, but only a few provided additional examples.

⁶ A few studies have used surveys to systematically examine TikTok users’ preferences for, interactions with, and interpretations of Chinese cultural content. Therefore, the survey instrument was developed based on our prior research experience and informed by relevant literature in the fields of uses and gratifications theory, cross-cultural communications, and the global dissemination of Chinese culture.

⁷ To allow for a wider range of perspectives on preferred types of Chinese cultural content, we did not impose a strict definition of “Chinese culture”. Instead, interviewees were encouraged to identify the content they considered Chinese and to discuss their viewing experiences in their own terms. Nevertheless, in order to cover broader Chinese cultural categories, we originally designed questions regarding to six broad types in common cross-cultural communication studies. They were traditional Chinese arts, contemporary Chinese arts, lifestyle practices, food culture, historical or philosophical content, and tourism-related content.

how they interpreted the content they viewed. Five pilot interviews were conducted, and several questions were refined to improve clarity and depth.

Data analysis

Data analysis was divided into two steps. In the first step, we used descriptive statistical analysis to capture participants' demographic profiles, TikTok usage patterns, and engagement with Chinese cultural content. Frequency distributions and percentages illustrated overall trends, such as usage frequency and duration, preferred types of Chinese cultural content, and modes of interaction. As this step aimed to offer an overall descriptive profile rather than test causal relationships, we did not conduct regression analysis for further discussions.

In the second step, interviews were analyzed using reflective thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2021), guided by uses and gratifications theory. Data collection and analysis proceeded simultaneously. We transcribed all interviews and deductively coded them according to pre-identified themes (i.e., viewing habits, motivations, engagement behaviors, gratifications, and interpretations). Coding proceeded in three cycles. First, open coding identified recurring patterns in frequently mentioned content types and the reasons for their appeal. Second, axial coding grouped findings into broader categories, such as preferences for traditional culture, lifestyle, entertainment, or history, and engagement behaviors ranging from passive viewing to active creation. Constant comparison across interviews was used to highlight similarities and differences in interviewees' experiences with Chinese culture on TikTok. In the final cycle, connections were drawn between preferences, engagement patterns, and underlying motivations, highlighting the gratifications that participants derived from using TikTok.

To enhance reliability, we coded independently, compared results after the first round, and reconciled differences through discussions. Coding notes were then reviewed and refined, and the final thematic structure was developed collaboratively based on the results of the second coding round.

The quantitative and qualitative datasets were integrated following a sequential explanatory design. Survey findings helped us gain an overall understanding of TikTok users' preferences, interactions, and interpretations, which guided us in developing interview questions. In turn, interview narratives were used to contextualize and interpret the survey findings, enabling us to triangulate the results and examine both the convergence and divergence between the survey and interview data.

Results and discussion

Users' exposure to and selection of Chinese cultural content

Survey results indicate that 76% of respondents have encountered content related to China or Chinese culture on TikTok within the past 30 days. They discovered these videos through multiple pathways. Most participants discovered such content on the

“For You” page (55%), while others found it via hashtags (34%), direct searches (28%), or friends’ shares (26%). As shown in Fig. 1, we found that algorithmic recommendations, rather than deliberate search, served as the primary route through which young users encountered Chinese cultural content on TikTok. This finding echoes scholars’ previous findings that algorithmic recommendation systems played an indispensable role in shaping users’ media consumption behaviors (Felaco 2025).

Interview findings reflect a similar pattern but also highlight important nuances. Although most interviewees (nearly three-quarters) first encountered Chinese cultural content on the “For You” page, they did not view themselves as passive consumers. As Interviewee 39 explained, “TikTok’s recommendation system suggests videos based on our interests and viewing habits, but we still decide whether to watch what appears.” Other respondents expressed similar views and emphasized their sense of control over their viewing choices. We noticed that some interviewees expressed concerns that algorithmic recommendations might encourage addictive use. Nevertheless, these concerns did not change their belief that they retained full autonomy in selecting what to consume. This perception of personal agency aligns with the uses and gratifications theory’s perspective, which treats audiences as active selectors rather than passive recipients (Deng et al. 2024).

In addition to algorithmically suggested content, we noticed that many respondents and interviewees intentionally searched Chinese cultural videos or engaged with content shared by friends. These users often had preexisting interest in or background knowledge of China or Chinese culture. For example, Interviewee 6 described learning Chinese cuisine from a childhood friend’s family and later searching TikTok for cooking tutorials. Interviewee 12, an art student, regularly explored traditional Chinese art on TikTok to generate creative inspiration. Those who watched Chinese cultural content shared by their friends were also interested in China. Two of them joined Chinese Studies associations at their universities. Such

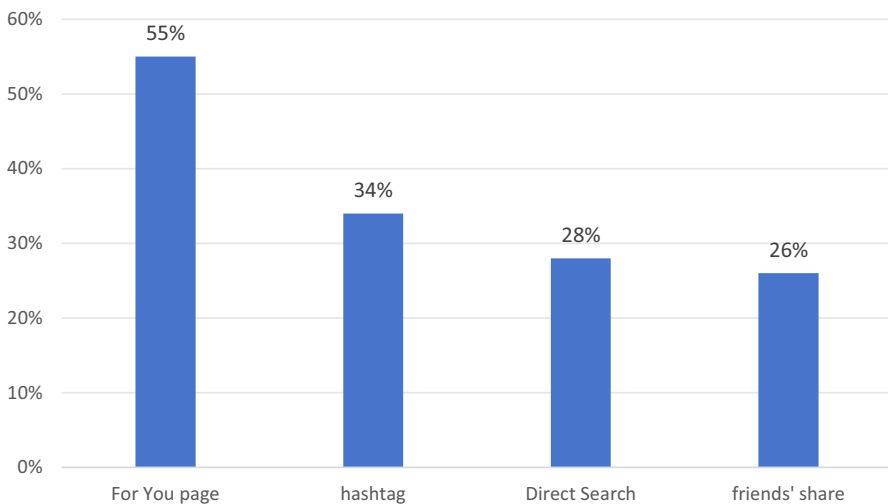


Fig. 1 TikTok young users’ discovery pathways

intentional behaviors illustrate that many users had clear, goal-oriented motivations when watching Chinese cultural content on TikTok, which is consistent with the uses and gratifications theory's emphasis on users' motivation-driven seeking (Dolan et al. 2016).

Our comparative analysis of users who encountered Chinese cultural content through the "For You" page and those who actively searched for such content shows that the latter group demonstrated more stable and sustained engagement with Chinese culture. This difference could be attributed to their preexisting interest, which enabled them to develop a deeper understanding through repeated exposure to content aligned with their preferences. In contrast, although some interviewees in the "For You" group gradually developed sustained interest, others reported that algorithmic recommendations were overly homogeneous. While the recommended videos were initially perceived as engaging, we found that repeated exposure to similar content led to boredom and declining interest. These findings suggest that algorithmic systems primarily serve as entry points for content discovery, whereas active search and social networks play a more decisive role in sustaining motivated engagement with Chinese cultural content. Consequently, maintaining the interest of users who first encounter Chinese culture through the "For You" page is critical for enhancing its reach and influence on TikTok.

Taken together, the survey and interview results indicate that young TikTok users encounter Chinese cultural content through multiple channels, with varying levels of intentionality. While algorithmic recommendations provided initial exposure, users actively decided which videos to watch, ignore, or explore further. Those who searched Chinese content or followed hashtags exhibited even stronger motivation-driven behavior. They watched Chinese cultural content to meet their specific needs. Thus, we believe that, despite the prominent role of TikTok's algorithm, the overall findings support the assumption of the uses and gratifications theory. Young TikTok users remained active and selective media consumers, choosing Chinese cultural content based on their interests and motivations.

Users' preferences for Chinese cultural content

Most survey respondents reported visiting TikTok for entertainment (62%) and education (46%). Lifestyle (38%) and global cultures (35%) were the third and fourth most common motivations for people using TikTok, reflecting their interest in everyday practices and cultural diversity. Additionally, 28% reported using TikTok to keep updated on current affairs. These diverse preferences suggest that TikTok serves as both a leisure platform and a medium for engaging with social and political issues.

Regarding preferences for Chinese cultural materials, Chinese food and cuisine were the most popular (82%). It adheres to previous scholars' findings that the global appeal of culinary culture as an accessible entry point to Chinese culture (Li et al. 2023; Lin & Zuo 2023). Travel and landscape content also attracted strong interest (64%). Other categories attracted more selective attention, including Chinese news and events (58%), traditional clothing (47%), cultural practices such as calligraphy

and martial arts (43%), and Chinese festivals and ceremonies (39%). Figure 2 illustrates these preferences.

Interviewees' reported content preferences showed some differences from the survey results. On the one hand, Chinese food and travel remained the most appealing categories, which aligns with the survey findings. On the other hand, interviewees also identified categories not captured in the survey, such as China's technological development, Chinese online games, Chinese web novels, and China's broader sense of modernity. These differences highlight the importance of in-depth interviews in uncovering overlooked interests and refining our understanding of young users' engagement with Chinese cultural content.

Eight interviewees expressed a strong interest in videos showcasing China's technological advancements, particularly in newly released digital products such as laptops, smartphones, and drones. Another three highlighted their attention to China's AI development. These users were already interested in high-tech content, and watching such videos helped them stay informed about recent innovations and deepen their understanding of China's technological advancement. Their responses demonstrate how information-seeking gratifications motivate content selection, which is consistent with the uses and gratifications framework.

Seven interviewees shared their views on videos about Chinese online games, such as Genshin Impact, Arena of Valor (also known as Honor of Kings), and Black Myth: Wukong. Some had played these games beforehand and intentionally searched for related content on TikTok. Others encountered short gameplay clips by chance. Although their initial exposure was not motivation-driven, they reported gaining enjoyment and entertainment from these videos. Additionally, after watching these game clips, their interests in China expanded beyond the games. Their view of these game videos initiated their further interests in Chinese history and its traditional mythology. For example, Interviewee 18 stated, "At first, I had no interest in Arena of Valor. One day, I watched a clip about this game on my 'For You'

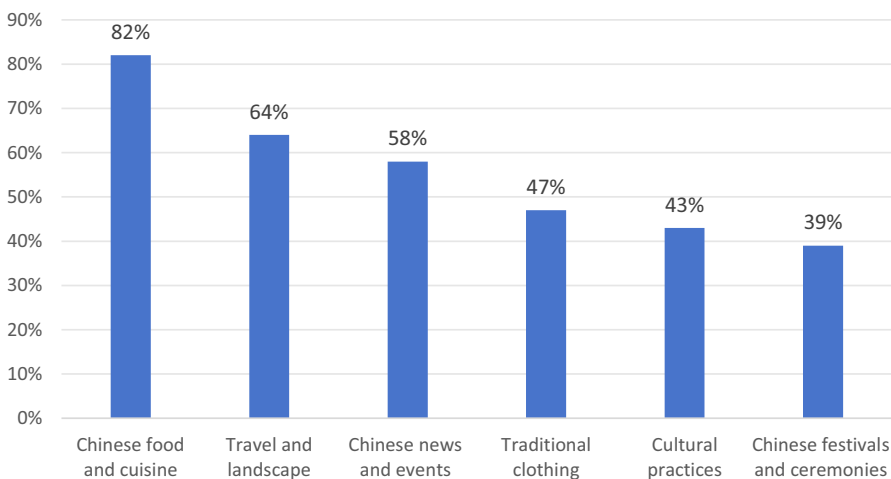


Fig. 2 TikTok young users' content preferences

page. Then, TikTok continued to recommend related videos, and I watched them all. Now, I am not only interested in this game. By playing it, I also became interested in Chinese history and have read historical books about China.” Their experiences illustrate how even incidental viewing could lead to gratifications, reinforcing the uses and gratifications theory’s assumption that audiences actively derive gratifications from the content they consume, regardless of whether their media consumption is intentional or accidental (Falgoust 2022). Their experiences also align with uses and gratifications theory’s assumption that audiences’ obtained gratifications from media use will feed back into their future media behavior (Deng et al. 2024). The interviewees’ initial interests influenced their perspective on videos related to Chinese games. In turn, the Chinese games sparked their interest in Chinese history and mythology, further encouraging them to watch related videos on these two aspects on TikTok.

Taken together, the survey and interview findings suggest that lifestyle-oriented cultural content, including food, travel, and online games, has attracted broader attention on TikTok. This type of content was accessible, entertaining, and easy to integrate into everyday viewing routines. In contrast, our data analysis showed that symbolic cultural content, such as traditional clothing, festivals, calligraphy, and martial arts, tended to appeal to smaller but more culturally invested audiences because it carried more profound historical and symbolic significance. From the viewers’ use and gratification perspective, lifestyle content primarily satisfies their entertainment and relaxation needs. In contrast, symbolic content meets more specific gratifications related to their cultural identities, learning, and meaning-making needs. Since most people visit TikTok for entertainment, it is reasonable to find that their most preferred Chinese cultural content is lifestyle-oriented.

Based on these findings, we argue that strategies to enhance the visibility of symbolic cultural forms need to align with the gratifications that drive young users’ TikTok consumption. Since most viewers use the platform for entertainment and prefer content that is easy to watch and emotionally rewarding, symbolic cultural elements are more likely to gain traction when embedded in entertaining, lifestyle-oriented formats. Creators could use narrative hooks, humor, or practical everyday scenarios to connect symbolic practices with viewers’ entertainment gratifications. For users seeking learning, identity expression, or cultural exploration, creators may also add brief contextual cues or visually appealing demonstrations to support deeper forms of gratification. By linking symbolic content to both entertainment-oriented needs and higher-level motivations, creators can broaden their appeal and encourage more sustained engagement with Chinese culture on TikTok.

Users’ engagement with Chinese cultural content

The survey respondents’ engagement behaviors exhibited a clear hierarchy. “Like” (62%) was the most common engagement method, followed by “shares” (41%), “leaving comments” (37%), and “creating related videos” (15%). This stratification reflects the layered nature of participation on TikTok. The predominance of likes suggests that most users preferred low-cost, low-effort actions to signal interest in

Chinese cultural content. Shares and comments, though less frequent, indicated more selective and active participation. Sharing required users to evaluate whether the content was worth circulating within their personal networks, while commenting demanded a willingness to articulate opinions in a public space. Content creation represented the most demanding form of engagement, requiring confidence, digital skills, and often a stronger personal or cultural identification with the material. These patterns collectively show that while passive or semi-active engagement was widespread, only a small subset of highly motivated individuals acted as cultural intermediaries by generating new content. Figure 3 illustrates these varied engagement behaviors.

Interview findings reinforced these survey results. Most interviewees opted for low-effort behaviors, such as liking and sharing, over commenting or producing derivative videos. About two-thirds said they would “like” a video when they found it interesting, and nearly half reported sharing such videos with friends or across other platforms, a slightly higher proportion than their counterparts in the survey. In contrast, only about one-fourth of the participants commented on Chinese cultural videos, with comments ranging from brief reactions to more reflective interpretations. A few interviewees had created related content, such as joining challenges like #WearingHanfu, #Papercutting, or #CookingChineseCuisine. Some also reinterpreted the content creatively. For example, Interviewee 4 posted videos of herself wearing Hanfu in public spaces. However, instead of using traditional Chinese music as background music, she paired her videos with Taylor Swift songs. This cross-cultural remixing made her videos stand out and attracted significant engagement.

Consistent with uses and gratifications theory, interviewees’ engagement choices were strongly connected to the gratifications they sought. However, their decisions were also shaped by practical considerations. We observed that time and effort were

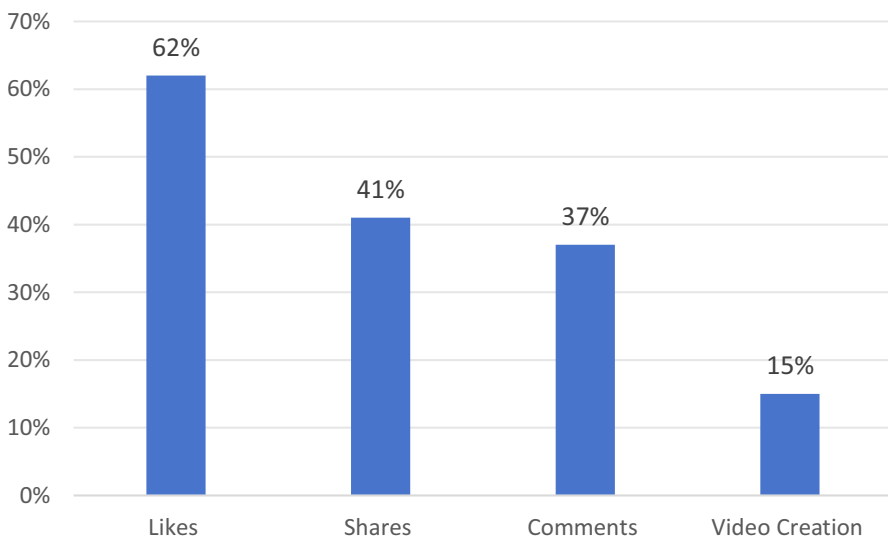


Fig. 3 Users' engagement behaviors

major barriers to commenting or creating derivative content. Potential risks, including fear of negative judgments, misunderstandings, or online hostility, further discouraged high-effort engagement. Despite these impediments, individuals with strong motivations or gratifications were more likely to engage in active or creative participation (i.e., commenting or producing derivative videos).

For low-effort engagement, interviewees reported obtaining simple gratifications, such as appreciation or momentary enjoyment, by liking or sharing video content. Interviewee 8 claimed, “I like videos when they make me feel happy, but I rarely comment because I do not want to spend more time on TikTok. I am there for entertainment, not deep involvement.” Interviewee 21 offered a similar response, noting that although TikTok made video creation accessible, producing high-quality content still required basic editing skills that he found “troublesome”.

In contrast, individuals who commented or created derivative videos were driven by higher-order needs, including self-expression, identity construction, social connection, or cultural reinterpretation. For example, Interviewee 4’s Hanfu videos fulfilled her desire to reinterpret cultural symbols and enhance the global visibility of Chinese culture. She took pride in creating content that resonated widely. She said, “I feel a strong sense of achievement when my videos become popular.” Interviewee 26, an avid Genshin Impact fan, frequently commented and occasionally posted his cosplay of game characters on TikTok. By doing so, he expanded his social network. He explained, “Leaving comments and posting videos on TikTok helps me make friends with global Genshin Impact fans. It also helps me quickly find the big community of cosplayers who are interested in Genshin Impact.”

However, some interviewees avoided high-effort engagement due to perceived risks. Interviewee 14 preferred not to comment or post videos. She expressed her concerns about online conflict. “If I leave comments, others may criticize me because we may have different opinions on the video content, or they disagree with what I said. I do not want others’ comments to disturb me. I know some bloggers who experienced online assaults because of their video content. Therefore, I never leave comments or post videos. It protects me from online assaults.” Interviewee 10 experienced such hostility after posting videos about her reactions to different Chinese dishes. Although some viewers accused her of disrespecting Chinese culture, she clarified that her comments reflected her personal preferences. She, in fact, enjoyed Chinese cuisine and visited Chinese restaurants several times a month.

Interview data further indicate that users’ motivations for using TikTok and their preferences for specific types of Chinese cultural content shaped how they engaged with videos by defining which forms of engagement were sufficient to achieve their desired gratifications. Users who preferred lifestyle-oriented content typically visited TikTok for entertainment and relaxation. They often sought immediate gratifications, such as momentary enjoyment or visual pleasure. For these users, low-effort actions (i.e., liking and sharing) were sufficient. As Interviewee 14 noted, “I mostly watch Chinese food or street market videos because they are interesting and relaxing. I do not really think too much about them, but if something looks cool or tasty, I will like it or send it to my friends.” In contrast, users who preferred symbolic cultural content tended to pursue higher-level gratifications, such as identity expression and social network expansion. Achieving these goals required high-effort

engagement (i.e., commenting and producing videos). This pattern was reflected in the responses of interviewees 4 and 26.

Overall, both survey and interview results demonstrate that individuals' engagement with Chinese cultural content on TikTok is shaped by the needs and gratifications outlined in uses and gratifications theory. We noticed that users seeking light entertainment or fleeting emotional rewards tended to choose low-effort behaviors (i.e., liking and sharing). Those motivated by deeper needs, such as the expression of identity, social connection, or cultural reinterpretation, were more likely to comment or create content. However, we also found that practical constraints (time, effort, required skills) and perceived risks (criticism, misunderstanding, online incivility) also played important roles in limiting high-effort engagement. Together, these findings demonstrate that TikTok engagement is a negotiated process in which users balance their desired gratifications against the costs and risks associated with more active participation.

Users' interpretations of Chinese cultural content

Individuals' interpretations of Chinese cultural content are crucial for effective cross-cultural communication. Existing literature suggests that successful cross-cultural exchange can reduce the perceived distance between cultural groups and foster mutual trust (Guo 2025). However, scholars have also noticed that ideological differences, divergent communication styles, and even intentional cultural distortion would hinder meaningful cross-cultural communications (Lin & Zhou 2023; Gong 2025). Despite these challenges, our survey findings reveal generally positive interpretive tendencies among young TikTok users. Approximately 92% of respondents believed that the Chinese cultural content they viewed authentically reflected life in China by selecting the option "I believe what I watch reflects the real China." Similarly, nearly 96% reported gaining a deeper and more updated understanding of China, which often changed their previous stereotypes.

Interview responses reinforced the survey results. For instance, Interviewee 33 reflected, "I used to think China was a backward country. Nevertheless, after seeing the latest mobile phones and laptops released by Chinese tech companies, I realized China is already a powerful player with advanced technology." Others agreed with his view. They stated that watching Chinese-related content on TikTok allowed them to see a more diverse and modernized China than what they had previously learned from Western mainstream media. It suggests that TikTok provides a valuable platform for disseminating Chinese culture and enhancing China's global image.

Prior studies show that ideological and political differences are frequently cited as significant obstacles to the global dissemination of Chinese culture (Bolsover & Howard 2019; Gill & Huang 2023). However, our survey and interview results indicate that such differences exerted only a limited influence on how respondents appreciated and interpreted Chinese cultural content on TikTok. About 72% of respondents reported that ideological disparities did not prevent them from watching or enjoying Chinese cultural videos. Interviewees expressed similar views, emphasizing that they did not approach TikTok as a political arena. As Interviewee 23

explained, “I know TikTok was developed by ByteDance, and I have heard about its relationship with the Chinese government. But that does not stop me from watching Chinese culture on it. Culture should not be associated with politics or ideology. What matters is that TikTok helps me learn about a diverse and authentic China, which I rarely see in the BBC or NBC.”

Many interviewees further stressed that their primary motivations for using TikTok were entertainment, information seeking, or educational curiosity rather than political engagement. Because users approached Chinese cultural content with these non-political motivations, they were less inclined to activate ideological frames when interpreting what they watched and rarely associated cultural expressions with the Chinese government’s political agenda. This pattern is consistent with the core proposition of uses and gratifications theory, which holds that individuals’ needs and gratifications guide the interpretive frameworks through which media content is understood.

Moreover, interviewees’ feedback indicate that even though interviewees watched the similar content, such as Chinese food or Hanfu exhibition, they interpreted the content differently primarily because of their varied media consumption motivations. Those who watched Chinese cultural content for entertainment tended to interpret the cultural content simply as an interesting and exotic culture that could bring them visual appeal. However, those who were motivated by learning and information seeking tended to care more about the authenticity of the content, the cultural depth it embedded, and its connection to their everyday social practices. Therefore, different motivations significantly shape the interpretative frames the users adopt when they interacted with Chinese cultural content.

Scholars have found that cultural misunderstanding is frequently cited as another barrier to the global dissemination of Chinese culture (Gong 2025). Interviewees gave more nuanced reactions on its impact. About nine interviewees argued that misunderstanding could, in some cases, facilitate the spread of Chinese culture. Interviewee 13 mentioned the phenomenon of *soramimi*, where viewers reassigned new meanings to Chinese song lyrics based on phonetic resemblance to English words. These playful reinterpretations sometimes propelled lesser-known Chinese songs to global popularity. In such cases, misunderstanding functioned less as a distortion and more as a creative reinterpretation. It produced new cultural meanings and enhanced enjoyment, which further expanded the global influence of Chinese culture. In contrast, seventeen interviewees regarded cultural misunderstanding as a challenge, emphasizing that misinterpretation could dilute or distort the original cultural message.

The rest of the interviewees adopted a more pragmatic stance. They explained that, because they primarily used TikTok for entertainment rather than formal cultural learning, they did not view occasional misinterpretations as a serious issue, as long as such misunderstandings did not intentionally misrepresent Chinese culture in a harmful way. Several even stated that humorous misunderstandings increased their enjoyment and made them more likely to like or share a video. The finding again echoes the core assumption of the uses and gratifications theory. Since users’ major motivation was entertainment rather than cultural learning, they placed less value on cultural accuracy and prioritized its entertainment function.

Overall, both survey and interview findings demonstrate that young TikTok users interpreted Chinese cultural content through a complex interplay of gratifications and personal motivations. While we noted that ideological differences exerted minimal influence, users' needs, such as entertainment, information seeking, and meaning-making, played central roles in shaping their understanding of the content. We also found that cultural misunderstandings were viewed as either creative reinterpretations or minor challenges, depending on individual expectations and gratifications. Additionally, we observed that users' interpretations were guided less by political considerations and more by the gratifications they sought and the ways they navigate cross-cultural symbols on a globalized platform like TikTok.

Conclusion

This paper examined how young foreign (non-Chinese) TikTok users prefer, interact with, and interpret Chinese cultural content through survey and interviews. The findings demonstrate that users' consumption of Chinese culture were strongly shaped by their needs and gratifications. Lifestyle-oriented content met users' entertainment needs and attracted broad attention. In contrast, symbolic cultural content appealed to those seeking identity expression, learning, or cultural exploration. Users' engagement behaviors were also influenced by their needs and gratifications. Low-effort engagement (i.e., liking and sharing) was associated with light entertainment gratifications, whereas high-effort engagement (i.e., commenting and producing new videos) reflected deeper motivations, such as maintaining social networks or building communities. However, their engagement behaviors were also constrained by time, digital skills, and perceived risks. Users' interpretations were likewise guided by personal gratifications rather than ideological or political considerations. Cultural misunderstandings were often viewed as playful reinterpretations rather than problems due to users' entertainment-oriented motivations.

The study offers two main contributions. Empirically, by shifting analytical attention from content producers to users, this study demonstrates which types of Chinese cultural content attract young international audiences on TikTok and why they do so from a gratification perspective. Rather than treating content popularity as a function of production strategies alone, the findings show that lifestyle-oriented cultural content attracts broader attention because it aligns with users' entertainment-driven motivations. Such motivations dominate TikTok use among young viewers, making lifestyle content a practical entry point for cross-cultural exposure. In contrast, symbolic cultural forms gain greater visibility and sustained engagement when they are reframed to satisfy entertainment gratifications, for example through narrative hooks, humor, or relatable everyday scenarios. At the same time, brief contextual cues or visually engaging demonstrations can support users who seek learning or cultural exploration. For example, instead of presenting Chinese cuisine or specific cultural practices as isolated or exotic spectacles, producers could show how food relates to family or regional identity, or what social norms shape a particular ritual. By situating cultural practices within familiar human experiences, producers could reduce misinterpretation and facilitate more nuanced cross-cultural understanding.

Taken together, these findings suggest that effective cultural promotion depends on connecting symbolic practices to both entertainment-oriented needs and deeper gratifications, combining accessibility with meaningful context to foster sustained engagement and appreciation.

Theoretically, this study contributes to uses and gratifications research by empirically specifying how motivations and gratifications operate not only at the levels of content selection and engagement, but also in shaping users' interpretive frames in cross-cultural digital media use. The existing studies have shown that uses and gratifications theory are useful to explain why audiences choose particular media and how they engage with it (Du 2025; Gao 2024; Li et al. 2023 and Kang, 2021). This paper demonstrates that gratification-oriented media use also shapes how cultural meanings are constructed, emphasized, or bracketed. In the context of Chinese cultural content on TikTok, entertainment- and curiosity-driven users tend to interpret cultural materials in experiential and non-political ways and ignore the ongoing ideological and geopolitical competition between China and western democracies led by the United States. It further suggests that gratifications could actively delimit interpretive horizons in geopolitically sensitive settings.

The study has several limitations. First, some survey measures lacked prior validation. This is because a few studies have systematically investigated the interactions of non-Chinese users with Chinese cultural content on TikTok. Therefore, we had limited references to consult. Additionally, as mentioned in the method section, this paper primarily relied on the results of interviews to illustrate how users interacted with and interpreted Chinese culture on TikTok and revealed the reasons behind their media consumption behaviors. Although in-depth interviews provided rich insights to answer these questions, the results of qualitative interviews are weak in presenting general patterns. Follow-up studies will utilize the survey data more effectively to address this gap. Lastly, this study focused on young users in New Zealand and Australia, which may not accurately reflect the cultural dynamics in other regions. We will also conduct a series of studies to include larger and more diverse samples beyond Oceania. Comparative analysis across regions will help build a more comprehensive understanding of the preferences, engagement patterns, and interpretations of Chinese culture by young non-Chinese users on TikTok.

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Code availability Yu Du has contributed to the data analysis and paper writing works. She is the funding provider.

Data availability The data at the current stage is not available for the public due to the Confidentiality Form signed with participants.

Declarations

Conflict of interest No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Ethical approval This research was approved by Aotearoa Research Ethics Committee/TE ROOPU RAPU I TE TIKA (AREC25_19).

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