

Digital Language Practices within Chinese Immigrant Communities

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Abstract. In the context of information globalization, Douyin and Xiaohongshu have become the core platforms for Chinese immigrants' digital language practices. This study addresses a significant interdisciplinary gap by examining how immigrants use multilingual and multimodal resources on these platforms to maintain transnational ties, how algorithms convert these practices into capital, and how immigrants negotiate identity under algorithmic and geopolitical pressures. Findings reveal a pattern of "Mandarin dominance, multimodal integration, and functional stratification," a three-stage algorithmic conversion mechanism, and the use of convergence, divergence, and over-accommodation strategies. This research contributes to academic discourse on digital migration and offers practical implications for supporting immigrant communities.

Keywords: Chinese Immigrants; Digital Language Practices; Identity Negotiation; Communication Accommodation Strategy.

1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of globalization, the Chinese diaspora has emerged as a pivotal force in advancing cross-border cultural, economic, and social interactions [1]. Prior to the sweeping tide of information globalization, overseas Chinese sustained cultural and social connections through offline channels—such as "qiaopi" for financial and emotional exchange, offline community organizations for structural support, and Chinese-language newspapers for domestic information access—yet these methods were marked by inefficiency and geographical constraints [2]. Today, information globalization driven by Internet popularization has injected strong vitality into the language practices of Chinese immigrants, breaking the limitations of traditional offline interactions. Their daily lives and social exchanges have increasingly shifted to virtual spaces, with social interactions becoming highly virtualized [3]. A review of existing literature reveals distinct research orientations in relevant fields. Immigration studies predominantly focus on macro-level topics, such as immigrant identity formation and cultural adaptation to host societies, with core discussions revolving around how immigrants integrate into local social structures and construct collective identities [4,5]. Digital discourse studies, by contrast, often center on general demographic groups—including adolescents' online communication patterns [6] and working professionals' digital literacy in workplace scenarios [7]—with limited attention to the specificities of immigrant populations. Within intercultural communication research, while there is growing interest in cross-border digital interaction, few studies have systematically explored how immigrant communities use digital language to maintain transnational ties, resolve daily practical issues, or negotiate cultural identities. These disciplinary divergences have resulted in a notable gap in the interdisciplinary field of "immigrant communities + digital language practices."

Academically, this project fills the above gap by pursuing three inter-related objectives: (1) Map the patterns of multilingual and multimodal resource use by Chinese immigrants on Douyin and Xiaohongshu through a literature review; (2) Integrate existing studies to reveal how platform algorithms transform linguistic resources into visibility capital; (3) Analyze how immigrants negotiate transnational identities through accommodation strategies in the literature. To attain these objectives, the study addresses the following core research questions:

- Research Question1(RQ1): What language forms (codes, dialects, symbolic resources) do Chinese immigrants primarily use on Douyin and Xiaohongshu to maintain cross-border ties and construct identities?
- RQ2: Through which mechanisms do platform algorithms transform immigrants’ language choices into visibility and economic capital?
- RQ3: How do immigrants balance the boundaries of “being seen” and “being recognized” by employing convergence, divergence or over-accommodation strategies in the face of algorithmic ranking and geopolitical risks?

This study addresses these questions through a literature review approach to fill the interdisciplinary gap. Answering these questions both academic and practical value. Academically, it can enrich immigration studies by incorporating micro-level digital language analysis, while expanding the scope of digital discourse research to include understudied immigrant groups, thereby promoting theoretical integration across related fields. Practically, insights from this research can inform the design of intercultural digital literacy programs tailored to Chinese immigrants, support policymakers in developing targeted immigrant support services, and provide community organizations with strategies to enhance cross-generational cohesion—ultimately facilitating the social integration and cultural sustainability of Chinese immigrant communities.

2. Literature Review

Social media has progressively evolved into a “mother tongue maintenance tool”. The use of digital media to maintain transnational family ties is a well-documented phenomenon [8]. This research shows that platform accessibility (free access, transnational connectivity) and multimodal functionality (voice-visual hybridity) have emerged as critical technological prerequisites for such maintenance. Building on this, studies focusing on Chinese migrants have specifically examined how platforms like WeChat serve as crucial spaces for negotiation, facilitating identity work and social integration [9].

While the above studies foreground immigrants’ digital language use, they remain WeChat-centric and largely descriptive; the mechanisms by which platform-specific algorithms convert linguistic features into visibility or monetization remain underexplored and require further theoretical synthesis through integrative analysis.

To conceptualize this conversion, the notion of “visibility labour” is pivotal [10]. It frames the strategic self-presentation of digital creators—including immigrants—as work aimed at accumulating attention and capital. Within this framework, **platform algorithms act as critical non-human intermediaries [11]**, capable of amplifying and transforming such labour, including **linguistic and multimodal accommodation strategies**, into measurable visibility and economic capital [12].

Yet, precisely *how* these algorithmic systems mediate the relationship between specific linguistic practices—such as the use of convergence, divergence, or over-accommodation strategies—and capital accumulation remains opaque. Most existing work either (a) focuses on short-term, crisis-driven migration (e.g., platform ban) rather than everyday diaspora life, or (b) treats algorithmic mediation as a black box without dissecting *how* linguistic form, hashtag ecology, and engagement metrics interact. Consequently, we still lack a systematic account of how *routine* digital language practices of settled Chinese immigrants circulate, accumulate capital, and negotiate identities under the twin pressures of algorithmic governance and geopolitical scrutiny. Thus, this review synthesizes existing insights and highlights critical theoretical gaps, particularly regarding the algorithmic mediation of everyday practices. The present study aims to address these gaps through a systematic literature review integrated with targeted case analysis.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study integrates “Language Capital Theory” [13] with “Identity Construction Theory” in digital contexts. Following Bourdieu, multilingual resources (Mandarin-English code-mixing, dialects, culturally loaded expressions) deployed by Chinese immigrants on Douyin and Xiaohongshu are treated as *symbolic capital*. Crucially, platform algorithms act as the conversion mechanism: by weighting phonetic novelty, hashtag valence, and interaction velocity, they transform symbolic capital into “visibility capital” (measurable as traffic spikes, follower accrual, or monetization). Thus, language choices function as strategic assets for winning algorithmic favor and securing economic returns.

Second, the research mobilizes identity-construction theory fused with the three-dimensional strategies of Communication Accommodation Theory (convergence, divergence, over-accommodation) to analyze how migrants negotiate transnational identities through linguistic adjustments under the dual pressures of (i) algorithmic visibility (ranking, shadow-ban risk) and (ii) geopolitical tension (e.g., platform bans, nationalism discourses). Whether emphasizing ethnic distinctiveness via patriotic narratives or accommodating host-country audiences through English captions, users dynamically balance “being seen” and “being recognized.” The two theoretical strands complement each other: the former unveils the “language-capital-platform” monetization mechanism; the latter explicates the “language-identity-power” subject-formation process, jointly accounting for the core logic of Chinese immigrants’ digital language practices. This framework will guide the literature analysis—for instance, by using Bourdieu’s Language Capital Theory to code algorithmic conversion mechanisms and employing Communication Accommodation Theory to categorize identity negotiation strategies.

4. Methodology

4.1 Definition of Research Objects and Inclusion Criteria

This research focuses on the digital language practice of Chinese immigrants in academic literature on Douyin (short video, algorithm driven platform) and Xiaohongshu (graphic, life sharing platform). The core reason for choosing these two platforms lies in their complementary functions: Douyin supports oral expression, subtitle addition and viral communication, while Xiaohongshu focuses on narrative text, bilingual annotations and interactive Q&A in the comment area. The two have jointly constructed an ecosystem dominated by Chinese, with both multilingual and multimodal features, which can reflect the core scenes of daily interaction, information acquisition, and identity display of immigrants. The characteristics of the platform are the key basis for the inclusion of the literature: only the research that explicitly analyzes the language practice of Douyin, Xiaohongshu or their equivalent platforms (such as Douyin in the immigration scene) is reserved.

4.2 Case Study Analysis

To address descriptive limitations of the literature review, this study employs case study analysis, selecting three publicly available contents from Chinese immigrant creators on Xiaohongshu and Douyin. This method enables in-depth examination of phenomena in real contexts [14]. Cases follow multiple-case replication logic, with 2 Xiaohongshu + 1 Douyin for multimodal balance. Selection criteria: (1) transnational identity/daily practice; (2) rich linguistic/symbolic resources; (3) 2023–2025, high visibility (>10k reads/plays); (4) public data only [15].

4.2.1 Analytical Framework and Theoretical Application

1). Language Capital Theory [13]:

“Language is not only a means of communication but also a medium of power and a form of symbolic capital” [13]. Multilingual resources (code-mixing, dialects, emojis) are treated as symbolic capital, converted by algorithms—via phonetic novelty, hashtag valence, and interaction velocity—

into visibility capital (traffic, followers) and economic capital (monetization) (pp. 66–68). This explains RQ2: how language becomes strategic for algorithmic favor.

2). Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) :

The Communication Adaptation Theory (CAT) suggests that "people achieve social identity by adjusting their language behavior such as actively approaching the other person's language style (convergence), deliberately highlighting their language characteristics (divergence), or over adjusting to cater to the other person (over adaptation) either by bringing themselves closer to others or maintaining their uniqueness" . Applied digitally, immigrants balance “being seen”(algorithmic ranking, shadow-ban risk) and “being recognized”(audience/geopolitical acceptance) through linguistic adjustments under dual pressures. This directly addresses RQ3.

3). Identity Construction Theory [16]:

“Identity emerges through relational and interactional principles in discourse” [16]. Focuses on how language strategies construct fluid identities (e.g., “transnational Chinese,”“global citizen”) in platform interactions—linking to **RQ1**.

4.2.2 Analytical Procedure (Three-Step Process)

1. Content Extraction and Multimodal Transcription

The analytical process for each case commenced with a comprehensive extraction and multimodal transcription of all publicly available content [17]. This involved systematically documenting the intertwined layers of communication: the linguistic texts (captions, subtitles, hashtags, comments), the visual and auditory modes (images, emojis, color schemes, voiceover language), and the visible interactive metadata (likes, comments, shares). Following a multimodal discourse approach [18], these elements were transcribed into an integrated log to preserve their contextual relationships—for example, linking the map of China with its textual description and bilingual subtitles in Case 1. This detailed, holistic transcript formed the foundational empirical dataset, enabling the subsequent systematic application of the theoretical framework to identify symbolic resources and classify linguistic strategies.

2. Cross-Platform Synthesis [19]:

An analytical matrix was constructed to systematically compare and synthesize findings across the three cases [19]. The rows represented each case, and the columns represented key analytical dimensions derived from the research questions and theoretical framework: Platform Type, Primary Language Forms, Multimodal Features, Inferred Algorithmic Triggers (e.g., suspense, novelty), and Prominent Identity Cues. This matrix facilitated the identification of cross-platform patterns (e.g., how convergence manifests differently on Douyin vs. Xiaohongshu) and ensured that insights directly addressed RQ1-RQ3.

4.2.3 Selected Cases (Publicly Verifiable, 2023–2025)

Case 1: Xiaohongshu – @Krystal Taotao(39k+ followers, UK PR, London tech worker)

Title: My Biggest Fear When Foreigners Ask: Where Exactly Are You From in China? (Aug 2024, 63k likes, 3.9k comments) Content: Simulates UK social scenario; explains Ma’anshan (Anhui) as “3-hour drive from Shanghai.”Language: Chinese-English bilingual subtitles; bolded place names; convergence via global city anchoring. RQ: RQ1 (code-mixing for hometown ties), RQ3 (convergence reduces cultural distance).

Case 2: Xiaohongshu – @nico 🌍 Travel the World with Kids(31k+ followers, Australia, Dec 2024 immigrant)

Title: Kids with Bilingual Native Proficiency – No Tiger Parenting Needed (Aug 2024, 556 likes, 42 comments) Content: Chinese dubbing + kids’ English clips; shares immersion methods (global travel, English media). Language: Chinese narration + English clips; localized terms (“tiger parenting”). RQ: RQ1 (multimodal bilingual education), RQ3 (convergence to parent audiences).

Case 3: Douyin – @Stellais Doudou(19k+ followers, Australian nurse + electrician couple)

Title: Australian Nurse + Electrician Couple – How Much Do We Earn in a Day? (Jun 2024, 28k likes, 3.5k comments) Content: Timeline work vlog; income visualized (\$46.6/h); ends with Q&A

prompt. Language: Mandarin voiceover + English terms (CPR, AHPRA) + emojis (🏠 🏠); bold yellow income text. RQ: RQ1 (multimodal professional info), RQ2 (suspense + visuals → virality), RQ3 (over-accommodation balances income hype vs. costs).

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Core Research Results

Based on a mixed-methods design combining literature synthesis and case study analysis, this study reveals the characteristics, mechanisms, and strategies underlying Chinese immigrants' digital language practices on Douyin and Xiaohongshu. The specific findings, which integrate insights from both the reviewed literature and the case analyses, are presented below.

5.1.1 Characteristics of Language Forms and Multimodal Resource Usage (Response to RQ1)

The digital language practice of Chinese immigrants presents the characteristics of "Mandarin dominance, multimodal integration, and functional stratification", which resonates with the broader understanding of digital practices as central to sustaining transnational ethnic identity in the information age [20]. The language selection is centered around Mandarin, and in cross-cultural communication, "Mandarin + English professional vocabulary/bilingual subtitles" are commonly used (such as the Chinese English bilingual subtitles in Case 1 and the Chinese defined "CPR/AHPRA" in Case 3). Within ethnic groups, dialects (such as Anhui dialect) are used as acts of identity to strengthen emotional connections and affirm in-group solidarity [21]. The multimodal resources are adapted to the characteristics of the platform. The Little Red Book focuses on "graphic narration + practical labels + geographical maps" (such as the map of China in Case 1), and Douyin favors an "oral narration + visual caption + occupation/emoticon" format, exemplified by the use of yellow bold text and the ' 🏠 🏠 ' emojis in Case 3 [18]. The language function is both instrumental (such as "a 3-hour drive from Shanghai" to meet communication needs) and symbolic (using Mandarin and dialects to uphold ethnic identity), which is in line with Bourdieu's statement that "language has both practical functions and symbolic value" [13].

5.1.2 Algorithmic Conversion Mechanism of Linguistic Capital (Response to RQ2)

The platform algorithm transforms immigrant language symbol capital into visible capital through a three-stage mechanism of "resource screening weight assignment capital conversion", verifying the view that algorithms function as core intermediaries in the digital age, shaping the circulation and valuation of cultural and social capital [11]. Priority should be given to capturing differentiated language resources during the screening stage, such as bilingual mixtures, dialect expressions, cultural vocabulary such as "tiger mother style education", and suspenseful questions from Case 3. Such content strategies can be seen as attempts to navigate or leverage the inherent biases embedded within platform algorithms [23]. In the weight assignment stage, the platform has significant differences. Douyin focuses on "voice novelty, interaction speed, and topic popularity", and inclines to the flow of colloquial content. Little red books give priority to "text practicality, label relevance, and in-depth comments", preferring bilingual annotations and experience sharing (such as the presentation of educational methods in Case 2) [12]; In the stage of capital transformation, language resources that have been filtered and weighted are converted into traffic and fans, and some highly interactive content (such as Case 3) stimulates business cooperation, achieving a chain transformation of "symbol capital visibility capital economic capital" and expanding the research on the accumulation path of digital capital [22].

5.1.3 Linguistic Adaptation Strategies for Identity Negotiation (Response to RQ3)

Faced with the dual pressure of algorithm ranking and cultural differences, Chinese immigrants balance "being seen" and "being recognized" through three strategies: convergence, divergence, and

over adaptation, echoing the "identity negotiation theory" of cross-cultural communication [24]. The convergence strategy reduces the threshold by associating cultural symbols such as Shanghai, using local vocabulary such as "tiger mother education", and adapting platform language preferences (Douyin colloquialism, small red book narration) (cases 1 and 2), which is consistent with the communication adaptation theory that "convergence promotes communication effects" [11]; The differentiation strategy strengthens ethnic identity and resists language pressure from the host country by adhering to the mother tongue, emphasizing dialects (such as the Chinese dubbing in Case 2), and using group references such as "we Anhui people" (Case 1). This over-accommodation strategy can be understood as part of the broader transnational practice of "doing family" and maintaining social ties through ICT-mediated co-presence, a key digital adaptation for migrants [25].

5.2 Discussion

5.2.1 Theoretical Dialogue: Theoretical Expansion of Immigrant Language Practices in the Digital Age

This study offers theoretical implications by re-examining and contextualizing key frameworks in light of digital platform dynamics. Firstly, it elucidates how Bourdieu's linguistic capital theory operates within algorithmically mediated environments, highlighting platforms as critical non-human intermediaries in the conversion of symbolic resources into visibility and economic value, a process governed by algorithmic logic [11]—a dimension often underemphasized in traditional applications of the theory. Secondly, the analysis elaborates on Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) by revealing that in digital spaces, immigrants' linguistic adjustments are directed not only at human audiences but also at algorithmic logics, suggesting a dual calculus of "interpersonal + algorithmic accommodation." Thirdly, it deepens understandings of transnational identity by illustrating how such identity is continuously enacted and negotiated through everyday digital practices [20], presenting it as a layered and situational construct where affiliations as ethnic members, global citizens, and local residents strategically coexist. Collectively, these insights refine and extend the applicability of existing theories to the specific conditions of digitally mediated migration.

5.2.2 Research Limitations and Future Directions

There are limitations to this study, as the focus on highly interactive content may have a survival bias, and insufficient attention has been paid to the language practice differences among immigrants from different generations and educational backgrounds. In the future, the sample can be expanded to low interactive content and marginalized groups, combined with longitudinal tracking to explore the long-term evolution of language practice [14]; It is also possible to compare the practical differences under different countries' immigration policies and platform rules, deepen cross situational comparative research, and align with the trend of "situational shift" in cross-border immigration research.

6. Conclusion

This study, through a mixed-methods approach, has systematically explored the digital language practices of Chinese immigrants on Douyin and Xiaohongshu. The findings reveal that these practices are characterized by strategic multilingual and multimodal resource integration, with Mandarin serving as a dominant anchor. A key contribution is the delineation of the algorithmic mechanism that screens, weights, and converts linguistic practices into visibility and potential economic capital. Faced with the dual pressures of algorithmic governance and cross-cultural expectations, immigrants adeptly employ convergence, divergence, and over-accommodation strategies to navigate the tensions between "being seen" and "being recognized", thereby continually constructing their transnational identities. This research bridges theoretical gaps across disciplines and provides a foundation for further studies and practical interventions supporting immigrant communities in the digital age.

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