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## CAT AS MEDIATOR

A Digital Ethnography Study About Digital Migration from TikTok to RedNote

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We live in a world of suffering, in which evil is rampant, a world whose events do not conform to our Being, a world that has to be resisted [...] That we find a crystal or poppy beautiful means that we are less alone, that we are more deeply inserted into existence.

(John Berger, *Sense of Sight*, 1985)

## ABSTRACT

In January 2025, following renewed threats of a TikTok ban in the United States, over half a million users migrated overnight to RedNote (also known as Xiaohongshu), a Chinese lifestyle-sharing platform. This unexpected influx marked the first large-scale digital migration from a Western user base into a Chinese social media space. Among these users, who are self-described as “TikTok refugees”, a unique interaction pattern emerged: the widespread posting of cat content, referred to as “paying the cat tax,” which quickly became a symbolic gesture for seeking visibility, friendliness, and entry into the new digital environment.

Focusing on this TikTok-RedNote migration, this thesis investigates how cat-related content functions as a soft, symbolic tool for self-presentation and intercultural interaction in the context of platform migration. Drawing on qualitative content analysis of 32 user-generated posts with approximately 1,200 comments on RedNote, this study explores how image-based communication replaces linguistic fluency in a context of cultural unfamiliarity. The analysis is guided by concepts from symbolic interactionism, intercultural communication, and digital media studies. Findings suggest that RedNote’s visual-first interface, affective community norms, and interest-based algorithm make it conducive to image-based interaction and create an environment that encourages ambient, low-risk participation. Cat-related content acts as a culturally neutral and emotionally resonant symbol, allowing users to perform identity, test platform norms, and establish brief but meaningful connections across linguistic and cultural divides.

*Keywords: Digital migration; RedNote (Xiaohongshu); TikTok refugees; intercultural communication; cat; meme culture; visual communication*

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## INTRODUCTION

Migration has long been associated with challenges in intercultural communication. Migrants often bring their native languages, cultural practices, and religious beliefs into host societies, which can result in ethnic enclaves that disrupt local ways of life and occasionally lead to social tensions (Kononov and Glinskaya, 2019: 61). As a result, the question of how to foster effective intercultural communication has become a major focus in migration studies and intercultural communication research (Verschueren, 2008; Del Percio, 2016; Lou and Noels, 2019). However, most of these studies have concentrated on physical, face-to-face environments.

Globalization and the rise of digital platforms have increasingly enabled encounters between people from vastly different cultural and linguistic backgrounds in virtual settings. Platform migration has become common in today's digital world. It refers to users moving from one digital platform to another, representing a new form of migration. While research on digital migration has expanded in recent years, the focus has remained largely within culturally homogenous spaces (Fiesler & Dym, 2020; Fang, 2023; Jeong et al., 2024a; Jeong et al., 2024b). Scholars have examined why users abandon platforms, whether due to algorithmic dissatisfaction, emotional detachment, or changing affordances. However, less attention has been paid to what happens when platform migration also involves a shift across linguistic and cultural boundaries. We also know little about how communication unfolds in these linguistically and culturally fragmented online settings. In such cases, users cannot rely on shared language, cultural references, or implicit norms to negotiate identity or belonging. Instead, they must develop alternative symbolic strategies to make themselves seen, understood, and accepted.

A major event in early 2025 offers a rare opportunity to examine these questions. RedNote (also known as Xiaohongshu) is one of China's most popular social media platforms. It is defined as a cross-border e-commerce and social media platform (Pemarathna, 2019: 285). In January 2025, when the U.S. government announced a potential ban on TikTok, it triggered an unexpected wave of digital migration: more than 500,000 American TikTok users flocked to RedNote within 24 hours, making it the most downloaded app in the U.S. during that period (Ewe, 2025; Soo, 2025). This shift was originally catalyzed by top-down policy intervention and served as a way of protest. These users identified themselves as "TikTok Refugees" when they entered in RedNote. They introduced themselves with posts beginning with "Hello China,

I am a TikTok refugee come from America”, which have triggered a variety of interesting intercultural interactions among them and Chinese users on RedNote, such as asking for help from each other for coursework, live broadcasting to learn Chinese and English from each other, or spontaneous discussions on life and cultural experiences (Liu et al., 2025: 5).

In my daily life, RedNote plays a vital role as a social application. So, this sudden shift quickly captured my attention when it began to unfold. In the context of China’s historically restrictive internet governance (Barry, 2022), where platforms like YouTube, X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and Instagram are largely inaccessible in our daily lives. As Permarathna (2019: 285) highlights, in China, most of the social media apps are unique to the country. The sudden influx of English-language content on RedNote was highly uncommon. It may be considered the first large-scale instance of Western users migrating into a Chinese digital space, reversing the conventional flow of platform influence (Wang, 2025). This abrupt point of contact provides a rare and compelling lens for studying transnational digital interaction and platform migration. More than a case of user displacement or technical reorientation, it highlights a deeper question of how individuals (digital migrants) interact across cultural and linguistic boundaries in unfamiliar digital environments.

Besides, the complexity of such interactions was heightened by RedNote’s initial lack of automatic translation features (Plotnick, 2025). Faced with language barriers, many American users resorted to non-verbal, symbolic modes of communication, such as emojis, memes, and animal imagery. One particularly compelling case is the spontaneous emergence of the act of “paying the cat tax”. On RedNote’s homepage, a large number of American users began posting images and videos of their cats (Zhang and Huang, 2025). These posts were often simple in form but attracted significant attention and engagement. In most cases, a user would post nothing more than a photo of himself with his cat, yet the image could garner thousands of likes and comments. Cats have long held a special place in internet culture. As Marshall (2015) notes, cat videos receive an average of 12,000 views each, more than any other content category on YouTube. But why are cats so popular on the internet? And more importantly, what makes this form of content so effective in establishing a communicative foothold in an unfamiliar, intercultural digital environment? Especially, in platform migration contexts, where linguistic fluency and cultural familiarity cannot be assumed, the symbolic use of cats in identity negotiation and community formation remains relevant important, but underexplored.

In light of this, the present study is going to explore how users adapt to unfamiliar digital environments following platform migration, particularly how they establish connections in contexts where no shared culture or common verbal language exists. Using the migration of TikTok users to RedNote as a case study, the research seeks to investigate what enables cats to function as a universal symbolic medium, and how individuals engage in the non-verbal, symbolic act of “paying the cat tax” as a means of initiating interaction and seeking belonging in a culturally unfamiliar space. Special attention is given to the role of RedNote’s specific affordances, which may facilitate such practices. At the same time, the study also aims to consider how such symbolic behaviors influence and are influenced by, the dynamics of intercultural interaction following platform migration.

These motivations give rise to the central research question of this thesis: *What role can communication with visual means play in a setting where the interlocutors lack a common language and a shared cultural background?* This question can be explored through the case of TikTok-RedNote migration and the following sub-questions:

RQ1. What enables cats to function as a universal symbolic mediator in interactions between TikTok refugees and Chinese users on RedNote?

RQ2. How do TikTok refugees choose to stage their cats as part of self-presentation within their new digital homeland?

RQ3. In what ways does cat-mediated performance facilitate intercultural interaction between TikTok refugees and Chinese users on RedNote?

By addressing these questions, the thesis aims to shed light on how soft, humorous, and affective forms of participation enable digital migrants to adapt to a new online platform, particularly in intercultural contexts, where shared language and cultural frameworks are lacking. It further examines how RedNote’s specific affordances, such as visual storytelling, emotionally resonant content, and peer-driven interaction, enable non-verbal symbolic participation. In doing so, the study approaches RedNote not merely as a lifestyle-sharing app, but as a flexible cultural interface capable of supporting improvisational transnational engagement and emerging forms of digital belonging.

Grounded in broader theoretical discussions of globalization and migration, the study approaches digital platform migration more than a technical shift, but a culturally significant movement that demands new strategies of symbolic engagement. As Marshall McLuhan once observed, media technologies reshape the structures of social life, prompting users to develop new behavioral patterns in response to ever-shifting digital environments (cited in Fang, 2023: 13). These “new behavioral patterns” are the research core and focus of this thesis.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

## I. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

### *“TIKTOK REFUGEE” AND PLATFORM MIGRATION*

Academic research on “TikTok refugees” remains limited due to the novelty of the phenomenon. However, it can be contextualized within broader studies on online migration or platform migration, which refers to an “abstract move” of users from one online platform to another (Gerhart and Koohikamali, 2019: 103).

To understand online migration, it is necessary to draw on the concept of migration in general. W.A. Clark (1986) indicates that migration refers to the relocation of individuals (“migrants”) from one geographic area to another for a defined period. Four laws of migration proposed by Everett Lee (1966) remain relevant and applicable across various contexts. He highlights that migration is influenced by factors related to the place of origin, the destination, the individual characteristics of the migrant, and intervening obstacles (ibid,1966). Lee’s framework has evolved into the Push-Pull-Mooring (PPM) model, which is widely recognized across various disciplines (Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007; Zengyan et al., 2009: 2; Hsieh et al., 2012: 1913). In this model, push refers to “negative factors” of the current location, pull factors highlight the “advantages” of the destination, and “intervening obstacles” constrain such movement (Bhattacharjee and Park, 2014: 358). In recent years, this framework has been adapted to explain online platform migration (Gerhart and Koohikamali, 2019; Newell et al., 2016; Fiesler and Dym, 2020), where users transition from one social media platform to another due to factors like dissatisfaction, policy changes, and/or the appeal of new features (Jeong et al., 2024b: 739), which provides strong support for understanding the background of my case.

A comparable case is Elon Musk’s acquisition of Twitter in 2022 (Clayton and Hoskins, 2022), which generated significant controversy and uncertainty, particularly regarding Musk’s approach to free speech. This event led to a substantial number of users seeking alternative platforms, a phenomenon that has been studied academically (He et al., 2023; Jeong et al., 2024a; Jeong et al., 2024b). He et al. (2023) examine the migration of 136,009 users from Twitter to Mastodon, a decentralized micro-blogging platform, identifying a paradox: while Mastodon is designed for decentralization, users tend to concentrate on a few large instances.

They further find that users' existing social networks significantly influence migration and post content. Building on this, Jeong et al. (2024b) explore the motivations behind such migrations, arguing that dissatisfaction with Twitter is a key driver. They emphasize that structural differences between Twitter and Mastodon affect migration patterns and user retention, highlighting the importance of cross-server interactions in sustaining engagement on Mastodon. Expanding beyond Mastodon, Jeong et al. (2024a) examine user migration from Twitter to Threads following Twitter's ownership change and policy shifts. By analyzing data from over 14,000 users within the first eight weeks of Threads' launch, their study underscores the broader sustainability challenges faced by emerging platforms in retaining migrating users. These studies provide valuable insights for understanding the dynamics of "TikTok refugees" in my research.

Besides this case, platform migration has long been studied within the field of social science. Over the past decade, the rapid growth of social networks has given rise to numerous new social media platforms. While users now have many choices, their limited time and resources force them to select specific platforms to stay socially engaged and active. As a result, the evolving social media landscape necessitates user migration (Kumar et al., 2011). Kumar et al. (2011) use seven popular social media platforms of different types to investigate online migration patterns. They divided platform migration into "site migration", where users switch to a new platform entirely, and "attention migration", where users remain on multiple platforms but shift their engagement (ibid, 2011: 1204). Newell et al. (2016) use self-reported statements from user comments, surveys, and computational analysis of the activity of users with accounts on multiple platforms, identifying the primary motivations driving user migration. Fiesler and Dym (2020) expand the research from individual to group scale and explore the causes and effects of online community migration on Reddit, suggesting that policy, design, and community issues, as catalysts for migration, can profoundly influence community migration on digital platforms. Fang's (2023) research, situated within the context of the Chinese digital environment, through an analysis of user migration between WeChat and Weibo, highlights "social fatigue" as a significant driver of user migration (ibid: 14). These studies have extensively explored the patterns of platform migration among different social media platforms.

## *ABOUT REDNOTE*

The popularity of the “paying the cat tax” practice aligns with RedNote’s community tone and cultural expectations. Since its establishment in 2013, RedNote has evolved from a cross-border shopping guide into a lifestyle-oriented social media platform with both commercial and cultural relevance. As Plotnick (2025) notes, RedNote has approximately 300 million<sup>1</sup> active users, with daily active users in the tens of millions, primarily millennial and Gen Z women (Pemarathna, 2019; Chen, 2024). These users value aesthetics, authenticity, and high-quality content. Unlike the trend-driven and highly energetic atmosphere of TikTok, RedNote offers a more curated and introspective environment centered on lifestyle, wellness, and pet content. It emphasizes peer recommendations and user-generated content, cultivating a sense of intimacy and trust (Hongchen et al., 2025: 1567). These platform characteristics provided the foundation for “TikTok refugees” to adopt the culturally resonant act of “cat tax” as a meaningful and adaptive form of engagement.

Besides, several studies have examined RedNote’s unique cultural and technological affordances. Its interface is highly visual, with over 90% of homepage content consisting of images, and its recommendation algorithm curates content based on behavioral data such as likes, comments, and shares (Pemarathna, 2019: 285). Such mechanisms enable users to quickly engage with lifestyle-related content while also fostering a sense of intimacy and self-identification. Chen (2024) found that the platform plays a psychologically significant role for young white-collar users in China, helping them meet emotional, aspirational, and social needs by offering a curated window into desirable lifestyles and identity performances.

Other research has highlighted RedNote’s role as a “digital emotional space,” particularly in its capacity to accommodate fragmented, affective self-expression through formats such as Plogs (Li, 2021; Wen, 2021; as cited in Chen, 2024). These image-based micro-blogs allow users to annotate daily experiences with visual and symbolic cues, fostering what Chen (2024: 3) calls a “warm space” for therapeutic interaction among anxious or socially fatigued users. Hou (2023) further suggests that such interactions serve as a backstage for identity negotiation, offering emotional relief and alternative modes of social belonging. This culture of visual sharing and symbolic expression makes RedNote especially conducive to soft, low-barrier participation.

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<sup>1</sup> Data statistics as of January 2025.

However, most of the existing literature focuses on domestic user behavior, particularly in the context of consumer psychology, identity construction, and emotional well-being (Sun and Ly, 2023; Chen, 2024; Yap, 2024). Less attention has been paid to how RedNote functions in intercultural contexts, especially when foreign users, unfamiliar with platform conventions or language norms, engage with the space. Although scholars have examined its cultural values, algorithmic personalization, and emotional affordances, few studies have addressed how these features may shape symbolic and non-verbal interaction across linguistic and cultural divides.

### *CAT CONTENT AS A UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE ON THE INTERNET*

“Paying the cat tax,” the practice of sharing cat-related content on social media, can be understood as a specific form of cat content. Podhovnik (2016) categorizes cat content within popular culture, encompassing news articles, memes, and videos, and emphasizes its role in shaping public discourse, particularly online. White (2020: 76) further divides the evolution of internet cat culture into three phases with different types of cat-related content: the *Webcam and Personal Blog Era* (1995–2004), where cats appeared in personal blogs and early webcam streams, reflecting their domestic and intimate nature; the *Meme Era* (2005–2011), marked by viral memes like *LOLcats* and *Keyboard Cat*, which established cats as central figures in internet humor; and the *Celebrity Cat Era* (2011–present), where cats like *Grumpy Cat* and *Maru* became global internet celebrities, achieving commercial success and cultural prominence.

Cat videos are often regarded as foundational artifacts of internet culture. Wilson (2020: 2) points out that *Puppy vs. Cat* is usually credited as the foundational artifact of the internet cat video genre. Since then, cat videos have proliferated, evolving into a dominant expression of online humor and identity. Marshall (2014) notes that cat videos average 12,000 views per video on YouTube, more than any other category, underscoring their enduring popularity. Besides cat videos, Dawkins’ (1976) concept of “meme” has been developed in the digital age, with cats becoming one of the most representative Internet memes (Thibault and Marino, 2018: 475)). For example, Miltner (2012) explores the *LOLcats* meme phenomenon, where images of cats are paired with humorous, grammatically incorrect captions, illustrating how cat content fosters entertainment, social bonding, and emotional expression. White (2020) further explored the various forms of Internet cats, while Maddox (2022: 8) resonates them with broader socio-

cultural experiences, particularly “the attention economy, cuteness and joyfulness, and neoliberalism”, blurring the lines between entertainment, advertising, and personal expression.

To understand the significance of cats on the internet, it is essential to examine their historical and cultural symbolism. Historically, the image of cats has been far from static, varying significantly across cultures and periods. In ancient Egypt, cats were revered as sacred animals linked to the goddess Bastet, symbolizing protection and abundance (Malek, 1993: 73). However, in medieval Europe, their image shifted dramatically, with cats associated with witchcraft and superstition (Nikolajeva, 2009: 250). During this period, black cats shifted from “sacred power symbolism to the representations of evil”, with St. Dominic (1170–1221) associating them with Satan (Engels, 1999: 123). In contrast, East Asian cultures have maintained a more positive and diverse view of cats, often regarding them as mystical and lucky. For example, Nikolajeva (ibid: 249) notes that cats were often attributed with magical abilities, including healing and fortune-telling, as seen in Chinese folktales. In Japan, the Maneki-Neko (beckoning cat) is a symbol of wealth and good luck (Suzuki, 2023). Despite these divergent historical meanings, cats have seamlessly transitioned into digital spaces, becoming a universal symbol in internet culture. This raises an intriguing question: why have cats, despite their culturally specific and historically variable symbolism, emerged as a global and unifying figure in the digital age?

The answer might lie in the unique characteristics of cats and the nature of internet culture. As White (2020: 7) observes Western culture has long used cats as symbols of “pathos, anger, and alienation”. Early internet communities, identifying as outsiders, embraced this symbolism, making cat images of an ironic and detached digital culture (ibid: 7). Their visual appeal allows cat content to transcend language barriers, making it easily shareable across different cultural contexts (Eppink, 2015). The internet’s emphasis on humor, emotional expression, and community-building further enables cats to move beyond their culturally specific associations, becoming a “blank slate” onto which users project their own meanings (Tucker, 2016: 178). Podhovník (2016: 127) highlights that cats “share not only people’s real lives but also their virtual world,” while Thibault and Marino (2018: 473) describe them as “totemic figures” within internet culture, uniting diverse subcultures into a shared digital symbol. Eppink (2015) attributes this phenomenon to factors such as the rise of user-generated content, the “work boredom network” (where users engage with cat content during breaks), the universal appeal of language-free imagery, and the positive emotions associated with viewing cat content.

Wilson (2020: 1) further argues that viral cat content has transformed how people engage with cats globally, solidifying them as a distinct digital genre and a form of “kitsch as a social idiom”. This shift, in turn, reflects broader transitions in digital humor—from postmodern irony and cynicism to a metamodern sensibility that blends self-awareness with an earnest embrace of absurdity (George, 2025, online).

Beyond their cultural and semiotic significance, cat content also plays a psychological role in enhancing mood and emotional well-being. Allen (2003: 236) terms this the “pet effect,” where interactions with pets alleviate stress and loneliness. Berger (2009) highlights the aesthetic appeal of animals, particularly their cuteness, as a temporary escape from the pressures of modern life. This phenomenon can be extended into digital spaces through virtual pet interactions. For example, studies suggest viewing cat-related media can reduce stress and improve happiness (Shafer, 2014; O’Meara, 2014; Nimer and Lundahl, 2007). Nimer and Lundahl (ibid) further find that watching cat videos elicits emotional benefits similar to those documented in pet-assisted therapy research. This psychological engagement can be understood through the media equation theory, which posits that users react to mediated experiences as if they were real-life interactions (Reeves and Nass, 1996). Thus, while cat memes and videos serve as cultural artifacts of humor and other entertainment factors, they also function as digital comfort objects, offering emotional relief and fostering a sense of connection in online communities.

The studies of cat content on the Internet highlight the role of cats from culturally specific symbols into universal digital icons in the digital environment. The historical and cultural variability of cat-related content has been overshadowed by their ability to transcend boundaries and serve as a shared language in the digital age.

### *HUMAN-PET RELATION IN THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT*

The relationship between humans and animals has undergone significant transformations over time. Scholars such as Baker (2001) and Berger (2009) attribute these shifts to the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century, which reshaped work, leisure, disposable income, and urbanization, reducing reliance on animals for labor or food. Historian Katherine Grier (2006) notes that during this period, people began exchanging letters written from their pets’ perspectives (particularly cats and dogs), and by the early 20th century, they were producing

printed photo plates of their animal companions to share with others. Building on these changes, sociologist David D. Blouin (2013: 279) identifies three orientations toward pets: the *humanistic* view, where pets are beloved companions; the *protectionistic* view, which grants pets an elevated status akin to humans; and the *dominionistic* view, which positions pets as subordinate but useful to humans.

In recent years, pets have increasingly been regarded as family members. Owens and Grauerholz (2019: 96) use a qualitative method to examine “interspecies” families, defined as family-like relationships between humans and their pets. Similarly, Andrea Laurent-Simpson (2021: 15) in *Just Like Family* explores the expanding role of animals in interspecies households, and highlights that “nearly 95% of adults who live with dogs and cats consider their pets legitimate family members”. These studies collectively illustrate how the human-pet relationship has evolved from one of utility to deep emotional and familial bonds, reflecting broader social and cultural shifts.

Social media has become a rich space for performing these multi-species family dynamics, often serving as a form of self-presentation for pet owners. Belk (2013: 478) argues that pets are part of the “extended self,” where objects, places, and even other beings contribute to one’s sense of identity. Similarly, Tiidenberg and Whelan (2017) highlight that visual self-representations on social media often include images of objects, animals, or fictional characters rather than the individuals themselves. On platforms like Instagram, pets are frequently anthropomorphized as “furry babies,” while their owners are referred to as “pet parents” (Maddox, 2022: 123; White, 2020; Lupton, 2023: 106). Maddox (2021) examines pet accounts on Instagram, arguing that creating and curating such accounts is a form of self-presentation rooted in Goffman’s (1959) concept of impression management. Lind (2024: 3) further explores this phenomenon, analyzing over 20,000 first-person narrative posts from dog and cat accounts on Instagram. She finds that animals are often given human, or more specifically, “baby-like voice” to shape family narratives, revealing how human-pet relationships are framed as expressions of kinship and belonging (ibid: 3). She further argues that digital infrastructure provides a space for pet parents to refine their identity through mediated discourse, gaining confidence and clarity as they encounter others engaging in similar practices (ibid: 1).

While most existing research focuses on Instagram, the use of pets for self-expression can be extended to other platforms. In my research, RedNote serves as a similar digital space for self-presentation through cats. Followers interpret these images to understand what matters to the account owner, meaning that when a pet is the focus of a post, it often reveals information about its human owner, even in their absence (Lind, 2024). This dynamic highlights how pets function as both subjects and tools for human self-expression in digital spaces.

### *CATS AS TOOLS FOR SELF-PRESENTATION ONLINE*

The evolving modes of pet companionship, particularly within digital spaces, also shape the social meanings of pet ownership. Tucker (2016: 173) posits that the internet acts as a “virtual dog park,” where people collectively share their admiration of cats. Unlike dogs, whose interactions with humans are often public (e.g., walks and dog parks), human-cat interactions typically occur in private, domestic settings. This dynamic shifts in digital spaces, where cat videos and images allow audiences to experience feline behaviors in a curated, shareable format (White, 2020). Tucker (2016) contends that part of cats’ photographic appeal lies in their ability to serve as blank slates onto which humans project their understanding of cat personality or elements of their own selves. He notes, “Cat faces are blanks that human beings, as hypersocial beings, feel compelled to fill in” (ibid, 2016: 178).

Epley et al. (2007) explore how humans anthropomorphize animals, projecting human traits onto them to fulfill social and emotional needs. Similarly, Bouma et al. (2023: 3644-1) note that the more pet owners attributed human-like intelligence to their pets (anthropomorphization), the more they engaged in camouflaging behaviors around them and experienced stronger social support from them. Consistent with this, online photo sharing reveals that people who live with cats often anthropomorphize them, endowing them with human-like traits such as intelligence, verbosity, and the ability to imagine a future, solve problems, and make choices. This tendency is particularly evident in cat memes, where cats are depicted as having human-like thoughts and emotions, which Davison (2012: 122) defines as “a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission.” Internet images of cats illustrate what Daston and Mitman (2005: 2) describe as “thinking with” animals, where animals serve as repositories of meaning. However, as Austin and Irvine (2020) observed, this anthropomorphism often reduces cats to vessels for human narratives rather than recognizing them as subjects with their own agency. The cats within these memes are rarely

considered subjects in their own right. Instead, they serve as “a canvas for expressing human emotions, values, and cultural narratives” (ibid: 444).

Therefore, these studies show that cats are not only a medium for expressing human emotions and values in digital space, but also an important tool for intercultural interaction and self-presentation through personification and symbolization, although this expression often ignores the subjectivity of cats as independent individuals.

## **II. RESEARCH GAP**

Online or platform migration has long been studied since the development of social media. Previous research has extensively explored the patterns of this kind of migration, such as user motivations, migration patterns, and platform characteristics (Newell et al., 2016; Gerhart and Koohikamali, 2019; Fiesler and Dym, 2020). However, it has largely overlooked how users adapt to new platforms after migration, particularly in terms of the strategies and practices they employ to navigate new digital environments. Moreover, existing studies primarily focus on migration between platforms within the same cultural and linguistic contexts, such as from Twitter to Mastodon, and from WeChat to Weibo (Fang, 2023; He et al., 2023; Jeong et al., 2024), whereas intercultural platform migration remains underexplored. This gap is particularly relevant in the case of TikTok users migrating to RedNote, which began as a platform for sharing lifestyle tips, travel insights, and product recommendations among Chinese users, and has evolved into an unexpected hub for facilitating intercultural learning and exchange (Li, 2025). Understanding how “TikTok refugees”, this new kind of online migration, adapt to a new ecology, particularly through the performative display of their pets (“paying the cat tax”), offers valuable insights into the role of digital practices in intercultural interaction and identity presentation.

Besides that, while cats are viewed as beloved companions and cultural icons (Thibault and Marino, 2018; Wilson, 2020), existing research finds that their image is largely controlled by humans, who use cats as a canvas to express their emotions or values (Austin and Irvine, 2020). This highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of human-cat relationships in digital spaces. While existing studies on human-cat relations have largely examined how individuals use cats for self-presentation, the communicative function of cat imagery in digitally

asymmetric or intercultural contexts remains largely underexplored, particularly in the context of platform migration and transnational digital interaction.

Furthermore, although recent scholarship has begun to examine RedNote's affective design, community logic, and user behavior within the Chinese context (Pemarathna, 2019; Chen, 2024), little attention has been paid to how the platform functions as a transnational communication space. In particular, the role of its visual-first interface, recommendation algorithm, and emotionally resonant aesthetics in shaping low-barrier, symbolic interactions among foreign users remains largely unexplored.

### **III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study draws on a layered theoretical framework to examine how TikTok refugees engage in intercultural interaction and symbolic adaptation on RedNote. It begins by situating the phenomenon within the broader context of globalization and intercultural communication. It then explores how migration theory can help to understand the background of this case, followed by how users rely on affective strategies such as posting cat content related to cuteness and conversational humor to navigate unfamiliar cultural environments. Theories of self-presentation and symbolic interactionism help explain how identity is performed in this context, while the concept of social media affordance highlights how platform design shapes the conditions for visibility and participation.

#### *INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN A GLOBALIZATION CONTEXT*

Globalization provides a broader backdrop for understanding the cross-platform movement of TikTok users to RedNote. While globalization has long involved the movement of goods, people, and ideas (Alves et al., 2021: 30), the advent of digital technologies has accelerated and dislocated these flows. Chen (2012) observed, over the past few decades, digital media, characterized by five key features: digitality, convergence, interactivity, hypertextuality, and virtuality (Flew, 2005; Lister et al., 2009; Chen and Zhang, 2010), has become a central force accelerating globalization. Flew and Iosifidis (2020: 15) highlight, that digital globalization has “revolutionized the time-space relationship” by enabling symbols, content, and cultures to circulate independently of physical geography. The internet has thus produced a condition in

which global cultural signs (such as memes, pet images, or platform rituals) are constantly detached and recontextualized across national boundaries.

Importantly, this transformation has raised fundamental questions about traditional models of human communication. Digital media do not merely alter the form and content of messages but also reshape how people relate to each other, particularly across lines of culture, language, and ethnicity. As scholars (Allwood and Schroeder, 2000; Pfister and Soliz, 2011; Shuter, 2011) have pointed out, the rise of new media challenges long-held assumptions about co-presence, verbal exchange, and shared context in intercultural communication. These shifts have spurred a growing body of scholarship that rethinks how cultural meaning is constructed, transmitted, and negotiated in technologically mediated environments.

However, existing studies have examined how social media facilitates intercultural understanding in face-to-face contexts, for instance, among international students, migrant communities, or multicultural workplaces, most of this research still assumes the existence of a shared physical or institutional environment. In such settings, the differences in values, communication styles, or social norms are negotiated through verbal dialogue, body language, and immediate feedback (Gudykunst, 2003). Social media in these cases often functions as a supplementary tool for sustaining interpersonal relationships or easing cultural adaptation. Interactions that unfold entirely within the digital sphere, detached from geographic co-presence and institutional mediation, remain underexplored. In particular, cases where users from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds encounter one another in platform-based settings, with no prior contact, no common language, and no shared social infrastructure, pose new challenges and opportunities for theorizing intercultural communication.

As Chen (2012) highlights, new media environments are marked by an intensified degree of ambiguity and uncertainty, especially in intercultural encounters. Without access to physical or verbal cues, users turn to phatic communication, acts that serve to establish a connection rather than convey information (Malinowski, 1923). Such acts also constitute what Canagarajah (2013) terms *translingual practice*: the creative deployment of diverse semiotic resources to construct mutual intelligibility in the absence of full linguistic competence. These adaptive strategies are not only functional but also identity-forming—they enable users to experiment with new symbolic repertoires and to embed themselves in emergent digital publics without relying on traditional indicators of cultural fluency.

In this light, theorizing intercultural communication in digital environments offers a valuable framework for this study. Rather than treating cultural meaning as fixed or rooted in shared physical settings, this perspective foregrounds the fluid, improvisational nature of meaning-making in platform-based interactions. It recognizes that in contexts marked by linguistic asymmetry and cultural unfamiliarity, communication often relies on non-verbal, symbolic, and emotionally resonant practices that fall outside conventional language-based models.

### *MIGRATION THEORY*

To understand platform migration as a socially meaningful process, I need conceptual tools that capture not only functional shifts in usage but also transformations in identity, belonging, and symbolic negotiation. Migration, in its traditional sociological sense, refers to the physical movement of individuals or groups across geographic and political boundaries. Classic migration theories emphasize push and pull factors, cultural adaptation, and the reconstruction of identity in unfamiliar social environments (Castles 1964; Lee, 1966; Vertovec, 2007), which provide a basic understanding of the background of my research. However, the phenomenon of platform migration, presents a new challenge: how do we apply a concept rooted in physical displacement to a process that unfolds entirely in digital space?

There are compelling similarities. Like physical migrants, online migrants leave a familiar communicative space and enter an unfamiliar one with different cultural norms, aesthetic expectations, and social grammar. They must learn to speak a new symbolic language, decode local cues, and renegotiate visibility and acceptance. Yet, online migration lacks geographic dislocation, legal borders, or formal citizenship. Instead, platforms operate as symbolic territories shaped by affordances, algorithms, and user cultures. The migration is affective, linguistic, and cultural, but not spatial.

One of the central concerns in both migration studies and intercultural communication theory is the integration of migrants into new sociocultural environments (Kononov and Glinskaya, 2019: 62). While this issue is traditionally discussed in the context of physical migration, similar dynamics can be observed in digital platform migration, especially when users move across platforms embedded in different cultural and linguistic ecosystems. In such cases, users are not merely adapting to new technological affordances, they are also engaging in a form of

intercultural adaptation, which often requires them to make strategic adjustments to their communicative behaviors, identity performances, and symbolic repertoires. Drawing on Berry's (1997: 9) influential framework, these positions are typically classified into four types: assimilation, where individuals adopt the host culture while discarding their own; separation, where individuals retain their original culture and avoid interaction with the host; marginalization, where individuals disengage from both cultures; and integration, where individuals maintain their cultural heritage while also engaging with the host culture. Applied to the context of this study, the framework offers a useful lens for analyzing the behavior of TikTok users as they attempt to establish presence and belonging on RedNote.

### *CUTENESS AND HUMOR*

Cuteness operates as a powerful affective mechanism embedded in digital interaction. As Maddox (2023: 85) argues, cuteness is a form of sociality, a way of drawing others in and prompting interaction. Philosopher Simon May (2019: 92) notes that the "cute response" triggers a desire to touch, play with, or talk to the cute entity, thus releasing the impulse for relationality. In digital environments, this manifests in behaviors like commenting, sharing, or remixing cute content, making cuteness a participatory phenomenon (Baym, 2015). The formal features of cuteness, softness, smallness, and vulnerability, elicit what Dale (2016: 5) calls the "aww effect," an intercultural emotional reaction that invites care and connection. These properties make cute content particularly potent in online spaces where emotional visibility drives participation (Ngai, 2005: 816).

On the internet, cat images and videos act as emotionally charged visual anchors that facilitate non-verbal interaction among different users. Maddox (2023: 86) suggests, that cuteness is tightly linked to joy and emotional uplift, while Tiidenberg (2020: 65–66) notes that cute effects often trigger responses of happiness and warmth. These visual cues offer a culturally neutral, easily shareable entry point into the platform's social ecology, enabling users to signal friendliness, humor, and affective alignment without needing linguistic fluency.

Complementing cuteness is often humor, which allows users to build social bonds, negotiate belonging, and navigate cultural unfamiliarity in more complex and playful ways. Unlike traditional jokes, humor, especially conversational humor is common on the internet, which refers to co-constructed, spontaneous, and context-dependent forms of amusement that unfold

in interaction (Kotthoff, 1996, 2000; Coates, 2007). It can emerge through shared memes, emojis, image replies, or short catchphrases, modes of expression particularly suited to online communication (Holcomb, 1997; Davies, 1984). Norrick (2009: 170) highlights how such humor can function as an insider code, reinforcing solidarity and shared cultural competence. TikTok refugees and Chinese users engage in humorous exchanges through memes like “cat tax” on RedNote can be better understood in this way. Shifman (2013: 41) defines, internet memes are units of cultural transmission characterized by shared content, form, and stance, created with the awareness of others and circulated through imitation and remixing. Through this lens, the cat tax meme functions as a social ritual, enabling temporary in-group formation among strangers.

While cuteness offers a gentle visual invitation into the platform, humor builds on that entry point to sustain interaction and deepen emotional engagement. As Coates (2007: 29) suggests, humorous talk fosters collaboration and solidarity, even among users with no prior connection. These playful interactions open up a symbolic space where users signal openness, test cultural fluency, and co-author meaning. Norrick (2009: 170) further emphasizes the convivial nature of such exchanges, where the mutual desire to engage and enjoy interaction becomes the basis for temporary belonging.

### *SELF-PRESENTATION AND SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM*

This study draws on symbolic interactionism to examine how users perform identity through affective and symbolic gestures in intercultural digital contexts. As Mead (1934) and Goffman (1959) highlight, identity is not fixed but continuously negotiated through social interaction. Individuals express themselves by deploying signs and symbols that are interpreted within specific social settings. While this theory originated in face-to-face contexts, it remains relevant in digital environments where self-presentation increasingly occurs through curated images, memes, and platform-specific rituals.

Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical model, particularly his distinction between front stage and backstage behavior, provides a useful lens for understanding social media performance. The front stage refers to curated, public-facing identity work, while the backstage allows for more relaxed or preparatory expression (ibid.: 69). On platforms like RedNote, these boundaries are fluid. As Boyd (2011: 39) notes, the audience is no longer physically present but networked

and often invisible. Backstage behaviors, such as irony, self-deprecation, or meme-based humor, may deliberately surface as a way to humanize the performance. Hollenbaugh (2021: 81) emphasizes that social media alters the scale and structure of self-presentation. Users now perform for overlapping and asynchronous audiences in persistent, searchable contexts (Boyd, 2011: 45). These performances are not simply about presenting the “real self,” but often involve selective revelation of aspirational or ideal identities based on perceived audience expectations and platform norms (Michikyan et al., 2014: 179). This theory can help me understand how TikTok refugees use cat-related content to perform themselves in their new digital home, RedNote.

### *SOCIAL MEDIA AFFORDANCE*

To understand how cats come to function as a symbolic medium, and how it becomes a way of self-presentation in intercultural platform migration, it is essential to consider the concept of affordances. Originating from psychologist Gibson (1979) and later developed in media and platform studies (Evans et al., 2017; Bucher & Helmond, 2018), the notion of affordances refers to the perceived and actual possibilities for action that a given environment offers to its users. In the context of digital platforms, affordances help explain how the design and sociotechnical infrastructure of a platform shape user practices and modes of expression.

Bucher and Helmond (2018: 235) emphasize affordances are not static features but relational effects that emerge through the interaction between platform design and user behavior. This perspective is particularly relevant for the current study, which examines how users with no shared language or cultural background communicate and present themselves through symbolic strategies. The affordance framework enables a more nuanced understanding of how these symbolic strategies emerge, not simply from users’ creativity, but from their interactions with the sociotechnical constraints and possibilities embedded in a platform. In this context, affordances are not only functional (e.g., allowing image uploads or hashtags), but also symbolic and cultural. They shape the modes through which users can become visible, engage socially, or perform identity. For instance, visual affordances such as image prioritization, comment threading, or the lack of automatic translation direct users toward more non-verbal, affective, and meme-based forms of expression. Cats, with their globally recognizable visual codes and low interpretive risk, are naturally suited to this ecology.

Hollenbaugh (2021: 82) further stresses that social media affordances shape identity work. For instance, platforms with low anonymity and high persistence may encourage polished identity performances, while more transient or niche platforms may afford experimental or playful self-expression (ibid.: 84). In this light, self-presentation is not a static act, but a negotiated process between user intention and technological structure. Thus, following Ronzhyn et al. (2023: 3177), it makes sense to talk about a specific platform's affordances, as they describe how the technical and cultural features of a platform shape what users can do and how they tend to do it. This study treats RedNote as more than a neutral container for interaction. It is a symbolic environment that co-produces meaning with its users. The platform's emphasis on lifestyle aesthetics, emotional tone, and visual cues invites certain types of symbolic participation and self-presentation, especially soft, humorous, and low-risk forms of engagement.

## METHODOLOGY FRAMEWORK AND METHODS

This study focuses on “observing, describing, interpreting, and analyzing the way that people experience, act on, or think about themselves and the world around them” (Bazeley, 2013: 4), which naturally leads to the adoption of a qualitative methodology and qualitative methods.

### SELECTING THE CASE

Focusing on a specific case is essential for qualitative research. As Bazeley (2013: 5) points out, qualitative analysis is fundamentally case-oriented, and Flyvbjerg (2001: 66) similarly argues that case studies provide “context-dependent knowledge” that allows researchers to grasp the situated, nuanced dynamics of social life. Rather than aiming for statistical generalization, case studies generate insight through the in-depth exploration of concrete examples, which Flyvbjerg (2001: 71) describes as the power of “the example” in social science.

Following this approach, this study delimits a specific case as its object of inquiry. As Merriam (1998: 27) notes, the defining characteristic of case study research lies in carefully “fencing in” the unit of analysis, the phenomenon, entity, or bounded system under investigation. The case in question is the migration of TikTok users, self-identified “TikTok refugees”, migrating to the Chinese social-sharing platform RedNote. Unlike most research on platform migration, which focuses on transitions within shared linguistic and cultural environments (e.g., Twitter to Mastodon or WeChat to Weibo; see Fang, 2023; He et al., 2023; Jeong et al., 2024a), this study centers on a rare instance of intercultural platform migration. RedNote, originally designed for sharing lifestyle, beauty, and product recommendations among Chinese users, has become an unexpected site for intercultural communication, with English-speaking users adapting to and reinterpreting local digital norms.

What makes this case particularly timely and valuable is its organic emergence. Given the limited access many Chinese users have to Western platforms like Instagram, Facebook, or X (formerly Twitter) and the parallel unfamiliarity Western users have with Chinese platforms, RedNote offers a unique window into depoliticized, unscripted intercultural interaction (Bai, 2025). These interactions are neither institutionally curated nor commercially orchestrated, but

emerge through everyday content practices, especially through the performative ritual of sharing pet images and “paying the cat tax”.

In the past, there have been some cases of non-English users integrating into mainstream Western platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok, but they were relatively slow and fragmented. This TikTok refugee incident can be regarded as the first time in history that such a large group of English users has reversed into the Chinese platform, reversing the conventional flow of platform influence. Moreover, the case holds value also for its representativeness of a broader class of digital migration events under globalization, where users from linguistically and culturally distinct environments are brought into sudden, unmoderated contact through platform-based interactions. Rather than treating the case as extreme, I would like to understand it as an information-rich case (Flyvbjerg, 2001) that provides conceptual insights into how users symbolically adapt, negotiate meaning, and seek belonging in unfamiliar cultural spaces.

The RedNote case, then, becomes more than a platform anecdote. It is an ethnographically rich site for exploring how digital users construct shared meaning, navigate cultural unfamiliarity, and negotiate identity in a linguistically and politically hybrid space. This aligns with Flyvbjerg’s (2001: 4) conception of phronetic research: work that is attentive to lived complexity and seeks to “clarify problems, risks, and possibilities we face as humans and societies.”

By tracing how TikTok refugees and local Chinese users engage with each other through cute and humorous cat-related content, this research investigates how translingual communication, soft performativity, and symbolic rituals help foster a sense of belonging in unfamiliar digital environments. In doing so, it is going to reveal the micro-level mechanics of platform-based identity performance and contributes to broader discussions of online migration, platform politics, and the possibilities of intercultural connection in algorithmic spaces.

Meanwhile, this case offers a productive lens for future research on asymmetric platform migration, especially in directions less commonly studied in the literature. While most scholarship focuses on users from the Global South adapting to Western digital spaces, this instance reverses the flow, shedding light on how Western users encounter, interpret, and negotiate entry into a non-Western platform culture. It thus opens possibilities for investigating:

symbolic adaptation in one-way cultural encounters; the limits and affordances of visual, phatic, and non-verbal interaction in intercultural digital settings; and platform infrastructure's role in shaping intercultural participation and inclusion.

## **DATA COLLECTION**

After the case selection, the second step is the sampling of the people within the case (Merriam, 1998). The study presented in this paper is based on RedNote posts. Empirical data collection occurred in March 2025, using hashtag and keyword tracking as methods to examine content trends and usage patterns (Lee, 2023: 411; Liu, Zhao, and Feng, 2025: 4). The data collection process primarily relied on RedNote's search function, using hashtags #cattax (3.15M<sup>2</sup> posts and 310M views) and #tiktokrefugee (25.4M posts and 1.68B views) as key search parameters. This process concluded when no new theoretical insights, themes, or categories emerged, indicating that the dataset had reached theoretical saturation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), meaning it was sufficient to explain the research phenomenon.

From this corpus, I systematically selected 32 posts (see Appendix 1) from users who are located both in the United States and China. All selected posts contained conversations centered around two keywords, "cattax" and "tiktokrefugee". For a detailed analysis of their interaction patterns, I selected the top 10 most commented comments from each post and, from each of these comments, the top 3 most liked replies, resulting in a total of around 1,200 comments for analysis. This approach ensured a focus on high engagement and meaningful interactions. To ensure data quality and relevance, posts were required to exhibit high engagement ( $\geq 500$  comments) and rank prominently in search results. Additionally, the selection prioritized posts that demonstrate sustained bilateral interactions between Chinese users and TikTok refugees (online immigrants), moving beyond one-way commenting to capture authentic intercultural exchanges.

The basic unit of analysis comprised screenshots and extracted text, which were systematically collected and archived in multiple Excel sheets. Each post, along with its selected comments and replies, was saved as a separate file, resulting in a total of 32 files (named Post #1 to Post

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<sup>2</sup> All metrics were recorded on March 11, 2025; B = Billion; M = Million.

#32). From these files, I extracted prominent texts and images as primary data, selecting those that were potentially relevant to the research questions for further analysis.

To allow patterns to emerge organically, no predefined categories were applied during the initial coding phase (Kuckartz, 2014: 23). Instead, the analysis followed an iterative process, involving multiple rounds of coding, pattern recognition, and theoretical interpretation. This approach ensured theoretical sensitivity, enabling findings to be grounded in empirical data while remaining open to emerging insights.

## **METHOD DESIGN AND SAMPLING**

This study employs a composite qualitative approach that integrates qualitative content analysis, grounded theory, and hermeneutics, to better explore how TikTok refugees use cat-related content on RedNote as a medium for soft identity negotiation and intercultural communication. Rather than merely describing surface trends, the research aims to uncover deeper social, affective, and symbolic meanings embedded in these digital practices.

The core method is qualitative content analysis, which, following Kracauer's (1952) early vision, is not treated as a mechanical technique for coding manifest content, but as an interpretive process attentive to the affective tone and communicative function of texts. Kuckartz (2014: 31) emphasizes that qualitative content analysis should uncover latent meanings, understood intersubjectively, rather than relying only on objective or probabilistic interpretations. This is especially relevant in multimodal digital environments where memes, emojis, images, and playful language cues coexist, requiring sensitivity to cultural context and humor.

In the early stages of analysis, this study draws from grounded theory principles. As Kuckartz (2014: 23) notes "open coding 'opens' the analysis." Following grounded theory's "bottom-up" analysis strategy, 10 posts are initially conducted open-coding, including their comments and replies, to identify emerging concepts and dimensions, with no preconceived notions. This process serves as the foundation for developing categories and subcategories, which help organize and conceptualize the social realities reflected in the data (Bazeley, 2013: 126). In this process, five initial themes were identified—*Cats as Emotional and Humorous Connectors*,

*Self-Presentation, Community Engagement, Intercultural Interaction, and Platform-Specific Behaviors*, which included 13 categories and 10 sub-categories (see Appendix 3). These preliminary categories were then further refined and connected through axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), allowing the analysis to move towards a more abstract and conceptual level (Kuckartz, 2014: 25), emphasizing the connection between practices such as memetic rituals, bilingual communication, and anthropomorphism and broader sociocultural dynamics such as online migration and community formation. After two additional rounds of coding, the initial codes were continually refined, cross-checked, and validated through iterative comparison with the dataset. This process allowed for greater analytical precision and the gradual enhancement of the codebook. Through successive cycles of modification and verification, the categorization scheme became increasingly stable and robust. Lastly, five main themes with 11 subcategories and 5 sub-categories were identified and finalized (see Appendix 5).

Throughout this process, the study adopts a hermeneutic stance toward interpretation. As Gadamer (1972: 279) argues, understanding is shaped by our preconceptions; interpretation is never neutral but always dialogic and iterative. Accordingly, this study follows Klafki's (2001: 126–127) classical theory of interpretation, which emphasizes moving between parts and wholes in a continuous feedback loop. Here, individual posts are not read in isolation but interpreted through their relation to recurring patterns across the dataset, such as the “cat tax” ritual, etc.,

This method was chosen over other approaches such as surveys or interviews because the research questions do not aim to measure attitudes or collect opinions in a structured format, but to uncover the strategies that users employ in an unfamiliar digital space and the specific interaction patterns. Surveys may reduce complex visual and cultural practices to simplified categories, and interviews rely heavily on participants' self-reflection, which may not accurately capture the spontaneous, performative, or playful nature of online interaction. By contrast, qualitative content analysis allows for a close, interpretive reading of real-time user behaviors through text, memes, emojis, images, and captions, as they unfold in context. It respects the multimodal, indirect, and semiotic nature of digital participation, especially in intercultural encounters where users often avoid verbal self-disclosure and instead rely on visual cues and ambient gestures. This makes it particularly well suited to exploring how meaning, identity, and social bonds are negotiated through symbolic and visual media in a platform like RedNote.

While qualitative research inevitably involves interpretive subjectivity, this study minimizes potential bias through repeated coding cycles, cross-case comparisons, and theoretical triangulation within a single corpus. From a hermeneutic perspective, such subjectivity is not a flaw but a necessary condition for understanding meaning in culturally situated texts (Gadamer, 1972). Rather than seeking objectivity in the positivist sense, this research emphasizes intersubjective validity grounded in transparent methodology and reflexive engagement.

### *VISUAL ANALYSIS*

In the process of content analysis, particular attention was given to the visual dimension of interaction, including images, short videos, and emojis embedded in posts and comment threads. Special focus was placed on frequently recurring memes and forms of visual-only communication, those that rely entirely on imagery or symbolic gestures rather than verbal language (examples see Appendix 4). These cases were analyzed using a dual framework of semiotics and iconology, allowing the study to explore how visual elements convey layered meanings, construct affective ties, and facilitate intercultural engagement in the absence of shared linguistic codes. This visual focus complements the broader thematic coding and offers insight into the symbolic and emotional mechanics of user participation on RedNote. It enables a deeper understanding of how users communicate, bond, and perform identities in ways that transcend verbal language.

Semiotics, as formulated by Ferdinand de Saussure (1916), understands a sign as composed of a signifier (the form of a word or image) and a signified (the concept it represents) (Howells and Negreiros, 2012: 419). Roland Barthes (1972) further expands this model into a second-order semiotic system, where signs become signifiers for broader cultural myths. For example, cats' visual features, big eyes, round faces, and soft fur, serve as signifiers, while their cultural associations (e.g., cuteness, mystery, companionship) act as signifieds. Together, they form first-order signs. When these signs are used repeatedly in memes or social posts, they acquire second-order meanings, such as being tokens of belonging, symbols of emotional resonance, or even digital passports in community spaces (Barthes, 1972: 114; Barthes, 1981).

These second-order signs are often ideological. As Moriarty (1991: 19) notes, semiotic analysis allows us to trace how such visual signs sustain cultural mythologies and reproduce dominant ideologies, especially through popular media. Through this lens, image-based content can be understood not simply as entertainment, but as a site of symbolic expression, social positioning, and cultural negotiation. In digitally mediated intercultural contexts, semiotics offers valuable tools for examining how users deploy shared symbols, such as memes or animal imagery, as flexible signs that carry layered meanings and facilitate subtle processes of adaptation and belonging.

While semiotics focuses on the structure and reproduction of signs, iconology, as developed by Panofsky (1982), offers a method for understanding the cultural and historical depth of images. His three-tier model proposes a progression from pre-iconographical description (recognition of forms and actions) to iconographical analysis (interpretation based on shared cultural conventions), and finally to iconological interpretation, which uncovers the underlying worldview or ideological stance encoded within the image (Howells and Negreiros, 2019: 25).

Although semiotics and iconology originate from different disciplinary traditions, their analytical processes are closely related. As Liepe (2022: 49) notes, Panofsky's model of layered visual meaning mirrors Barthes' system of signification, in which each level builds on the previous one. Similarly, Jensen (2012) suggests that semiotics' emphasis on social and political context aligns with attention to the social construction of meaning. Both approaches underscore that meaning is not inherent in an image but constructed by viewers with shared cultural frameworks. Iconology, however, makes the position of the interpreter more explicit. Unlike early semiology, which tends to abstract from the viewer's situatedness, iconology insists that interpretation is shaped by the observer's cultural, temporal, and ideological standpoint (Shin, 1990: 18f). This makes it particularly well suited for decoding meme interactions between users from different cultural backgrounds, where visual signs may evoke different associations.

In this study, users from different cultural contexts engage in humorous and emotionally resonant exchanges using only meme logic and imagery. By applying both semiotic and iconological analysis, this study unpacks how these seemingly simple cat visuals enable rich, layered communication across cultural and linguistic boundaries. The dual framework helps to highlight the symbolic function of cat imagery, and further stresses the sociocultural

imaginaries they draw upon, refract, and occasionally subvert in the context of platform migration.

Overall, by using composite qualitative textual analysis, that combines qualitative content analysis, grounded coding, and visual interpretation through semiotics and iconology, the research captures a deeper symbolic and affective layer from the analysis process.

## **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Ethical considerations regarding data access and platform terms of service are of particular concern. RedNote explicitly prohibits the use of automated tools or third-party technologies to scrape or extract data from the platform<sup>3</sup>. In compliance with these regulations, all data for this study were collected through manual observation and screenshotting of publicly available posts, ensuring that no backend systems were accessed, and no private content was retrieved. This approach aligns with recommendations in digital research ethics that emphasize informed consent, data visibility, and adherence to platform-specific constraints (Markham and Buchanan, 2012). This limitation restricts the scale and scope of data collection and reinforces the importance of respecting digital research ethics, particularly in contexts where platform guidelines are tightly controlled. However, as Zimmer (2010: 230) argues, researchers must consider not just the technical accessibility of data, but also the contextual integrity and the privacy expectations of users. Therefore, this study took a minimally intrusive, observational approach to ensure that users' anonymity and platform integrity were preserved.

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<sup>3</sup> RedNote Community Standards - <https://agree.xiaohongshu.com/h5/terms/ZXXY20221213003/-1>

## MEOW, MEME, AND THE MAKING OF A DIGITAL ‘WE’

This section explores how TikTok refugees use cat-related content to navigate cultural boundaries and adapt to RedNote. The analysis unfolds across five dimensions: from affective entry through cuteness to humor as shared grammar, to the “cat tax” as a ritual plea for acceptance. It then examines how users perform identity through cats and, how intercultural understanding emerges through curiosity, comparison, and visual dialogue.

### SOFT ENTRY: CUTENESS TRIGGER RESPONSE

RedNote was originally a largely Chinese-speaking digital space (Liu, Zhao, and Feng, 2025:2) and, in its earlier versions, did not include a translation function (ibid: 8). When an unexpected influx of TikTok refugees arrived, language quickly became the most visible barrier to communication. In this context, cat-related content, particularly the ritualized posting of cat photos known as “paying cat tax”, emerges as a low-risk, widely understood way to initiate interaction, serving as a symbolic entry ticket, offering the simplest way for strangers to “say hi”. This meme functions as what Shifman (2013: 18) describes as “cultural information” that passes along to different users and gradually scales into a shared social phenomenon.

One recurring pattern in the dataset is using “cat tax” as a deliberate icebreaker. In Post #15, a U.S. user openly asks whether the practice is “a joke on Americans,” which prompts dozens of responses explaining that it functions more like a greeting. As one Chinese user writes:

我们很欢迎你们，但是我们互相不太了解，害怕说出让对方不高兴的话。但是可爱的猫是大家都喜欢的，所以这是个让我们能打开话题的切入点。互相了解多了之后，就可以分享更多的东西了。 [We use this way to welcome you, but we don’t know each other very well and are afraid of saying something that will make the other person unhappy. However, everyone should like cute cats, so this is a starting point for us to open up the topic. We can share more things after we get to know each other better.] (a comment from Post #15)

Across posts, users refer to “cat tax” as a humorous gesture of goodwill and a shared performance of platform fluency. What begins as light participation gradually becomes a way

to demonstrate understanding, invite interaction, and take the first step toward cultural reciprocity.

For TikTok refugees, referencing the “cat tax” meme is a consistently effective way to gain visibility. Posts that include cat tax language often attract more engagement, even when the content is simple and unpolished. In many cases, TikTok refugees shared nothing more than casual snapshots of their cats. With no elaborate editing and no professional aesthetics, these posts still went semi-viral, generating hundreds of likes, comments, and shares. Most replies consisted of compliments, emoji reactions, or users sharing photos of their own cats in return. For example, in Post #18, a TikTok refugee posted the following content “TikTok refugee cat. Heard there was a cat tax! [😂]”. Just two lines of text with an emoji and four cat photos received more than 2,000 likes and more than 600 comments. This pattern shows that “paying cat tax” has become a shortcut to intercultural participation among new users.

This practice is deeply tied to the visual and emotional grammar of cuteness. Zoologist and ethologist Konrad Lorenz (1943) noted that certain features, like large eyes, round faces, and clumsy movements, can trigger a “cute response” and inspire a playful response in humans (Sherman and Haidt, 2011: 248–250). Cheok and Fernando (2012: 301) refer to cuteness as the emotional responses triggered by encounters with things that are charming, cheerful, humorous, or marked by sweetness, innocence, or purity. It often elicits feelings of affection and sympathy or stimulates the care response (ibid). This kind of emotional response emerges a lot within cat-related exchanges on RedNote.

One of the most consistent emotional reactions across posts is the expression of affection and admiration through comments like: “好可爱 [So cute]”, “wow 太可爱了 [😍][😍] [Wow, so adorable]”, and “他们好可爱，长得好看 [They’re so cute and good-looking]”. These seemingly simple phrases do more than praise. However, they signal emotional availability and an openness to connection. This affective function is often reciprocal. In Post #11, after a user posts a particularly soft-looking cat, commenters respond with “so soft,” “Thank you! She is very sweet,” and “好可爱啊啊啊啊啊 [so cute!!]” suggesting that the image served as a momentary emotional balm. The emoji [🙏] appears multiple times, indicating a kind of gratitude toward emotional care embedded in the post. Importantly, these emotional gestures function across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Whether through English phrases like

“Thank you for [your cat]” or Chinese expressions such as “太可爱了吧傲娇脸!!!” [That cat is so cute with a proud expression!!!], users find a shared emotional register even when verbal fluency differs. These expressions are short, spontaneous, and informal, but they reveal deep interpersonal texture, where cute pets become proxies for emotional support, cultural exchange, and digital belonging.

Beyond surface-level reactions, users share emotionally meaningful backstories about their cats for more interaction. For example, one Chinese user comments on a U.S. user’s post:

这是刚做完手术之后的样子，我给它的照片改成了独眼海盗[😏]它原本是流浪猫，因为老是跑进我家我就把它收养了。 [This is what he looked like after surgery. I edited its (her cat) photo to make it look like a one-eyed pirate. It was originally a stray cat. It kept sneaking into my house, so I adopted it]. (a comment from Post #1)

These details prompt supportive and curious from the original U.S. poster and she asks “OMG! Can you share your cat?”, suggesting a deeper affective interest.

The narrative of rescuing a vulnerable animal also became a way to express care, establish moral admiration, and initiate conversation. A story appears in Post #19, where the author stated plainly, “I found him in a dumpster.” Commenters respond with surprise like “流浪猫? 这么大的流浪猫? [A stray cat? That big?]”, and admiration, calling the author “真厉害 [Really impressive]” or implicitly treating them as a “hero.” These reactions show how acts of care toward animals are socially rewarded in the platform community and emotionally recognized as a form of digital virtue. In Post #11, the user recalled finding their cat “in a car,” referencing a rescue from a dangerous space. In Post #9, one comment reads: “我家有三只收养的小流浪宝贝猫 [I have three little stray cats I adopted]”, expressing pride in adoption and affirming a view of cats as cherished family members. Fiske et al. (2019: 74) describe such emotions as *kama muta* (Sanskrit for “moved by love”), which refers to sudden feelings of closeness, in which individuals experience a sense of equal belonging, mutual care, and shared trust. Steinnes et al. (2019: 387) mention cuteness can evoke *kama muta*, especially cute animal content. The interactions between TikTok refugees and Chinese users on RedNote exemplify

this dynamic. The inherent cuteness of cat content reliably evokes positive emotional responses, which often lead to deeper forms of group interaction.

Multiple studies have discussed the tension between “high connection demand” and “low initial trust” in the digital space from different perspectives (Li et al, 2014; Touray et al, 2015; Winstone et al, 2021). Such problems are even more evident for digital immigrants who want to adapt to new platforms. Cat-related content offers a low-stakes, participatory form of engagement that helps bridge this gap, since the inherent cuteness of this content often evokes a feeling of warmth, closeness, and shared belonging (Steinnes et al., 2019). Users don’t merely post and view cat photos. On the contrary, they project emotions, share personal stories, and express care, transforming the comment section into a gentle and emotionally safe space. These interactions frequently trigger prosocial behaviors, such as playful comments, meme replies, and even cross-linguistic conversations, that can reinforce intimacy and foster intercultural connection.

Besides, the communicative choices made by platform migrants are not solely a matter of individual creativity or cultural preference; they are also shaped by the affordances and aesthetic expectations of the host platform. RedNote, known for its visually driven interface, curated content culture, and emotionally resonant tone, prioritizes soft visuals, peer recommendations, and lifestyle-oriented narratives (Plotnick, 2025; Hongchen et al., 2025). Cute content is a perfect fit for such platform appeals. Meanwhile, its interface promotes image-first engagement, in which textual content is secondary to visual appeal. These affordances create an environment where image-based and symbolic expressions are not only legible but also socially rewarded. This is why cat-related content serves as a low-risk, culturally adaptive medium that allows users to align with the platform’s dominant tone upon entry, while simultaneously avoiding verbal missteps in an unfamiliar cultural environment.

## **HUMOR AS A PLATFORM GRAMMAR**

Humor plays another central role in shaping emotional interactions across the dataset. On RedNote, TikTok refugees and local users alike use cat-related content to construct a shared comic grammar, often stretching beyond simple visual amusement into layers of cultural play, misrecognition, and subversive creativity. As Nash (1985: 12) suggests, humor is “an

occurrence in a social play” that reflects the interaction of individuals within specific cultural contexts. Norrick (1993: 129) notes that humor occurs in many forms and conversational settings and that its function is “smoothing the course of interaction”. Long and Graesser (1988: 37) argue that to understand humor, it is important to rely on linguistic and conversational norms and also on social cues, speaker intent, and contextual knowledge.

A common pattern in the dataset is the humorous or playful effects of blending. In Post #10, for example, a user dresses his cat as a mermaid and declares, “Paying mermaid cat tax payment,” to which a Chinese user responds, “我也有 [I also have one]” with a picture of a “fish-cat”, a funny meme with a cat’s body and fish fins and tail. As Koestler (1964: 51) suggests, humor often arises from a sudden “bisociation” which refers to the mental linking of two normally unrelated frames of reference. When such an incongruous connection is made within the right emotional or narrative context, it can produce a comic effect (Koestler, 1964: 51). According to Coulson (2001), “Though not all blends are humorous, blending does seem to be an inherent feature of humor” (para. 11; see also Coulson 1996, 1997). These exchanges demonstrate how visual “bisociation” can invite playful misreading, and how such misreading itself becomes the shared joke. In the comment section, one Chinese user posts a photo of his own cat, also dressed as a mermaid, and asks with mock confusion: “为什么都是穿美人鱼衣服，猫跟猫之间的距离这么大 [Why are they all wearing mermaid costumes, yet the distance between the cats is so great?]” This prompts further replies such as “这一条是什么物体 [😂] [What is this object?]” and “哈哈哈哈，你家猫像钻进垃圾袋一脸懵 [LOL, your cat looks like it’s crawling into a garbage bag, totally confused].” Rather than correcting each other, users lean into the absurdity, reinforcing a communal rhythm of playful misunderstanding and mutual delight.

Davies (1984: 367) introduces the notion of conversational humor that humor in conversation is not produced by a single speaker but rather emerges through co-construction, which is an interactive process in which all participants contribute to the unfolding of the joke. Building on this idea, Kotthoff (2007, 2009) refers to such exchanges as “joint fantasizing,” a genre characterized by the collaborative development of imaginative scenarios. In these instances, multiple interlocutors offer brief but complementary inputs that incrementally build a coherent, fantastical narrative (Kotthoff, 2007: 278). This genre highlights how participants guide one another along inferential pathways, relying on shared contextual knowledge to sustain and

escalate the humor. Through this process, jokes are not merely understood, but actively extended and “topped”. That is, outdone or amplified by successive contributions (Kotthoff, 2007: 279).

Other posts reveal humor rooted in meme misinterpretation and user improvisation. In Post #5, the author submits a fox instead of a cat and labels it an “alternative tax payment,” triggering a cascade of playful replies: “What does the fox say?” “wa pa pa pa pow!” These responses reference the viral novelty song “*The Fox*” by Ylvis (2013), a global meme that many users recall from early internet culture. This moment illustrates how users draw on shared pop-cultural memory to create spontaneous humor, reinforcing group playfulness while establishing a sense of common reference, even across language and platform boundaries. The humor here becomes a way to test boundaries without exclusion, using misrecognition as a bonding tool. In addition to foxes, raccoons, kangaroos, horses, and rabbits are all common “taxes”. There are even some TikTok refugees who pay taxes using photos or videos of their children.

Many posts exhibit what is called scripted roleplay humor, where users speak in institutional tones or adopt fictional roles. In Post #11, a Chinese user posted a video of her cat’s perspective. In the video, the cat, self-introduced as a “Yoga Cat” who loves doing parkour, offers to trade data for cat photos. The effect is deliberately absurd yet welcoming, parodying bureaucratic language and creating a safe performative space. English-speaking users reply with equally light-hearted tones like “Cat tax! And I’ll gladly give you all my data”, which suggests a developing shared humor schema between culturally distinct participants.

### *IN-GROUP HUMOR*

There is also a close relationship between humor and in-group identity. In several cases, humor is not constructed by the author alone but emerges through collaborative exchanges among commenters. In Post #2, a Chinese user jokingly describes the ritual of “戴猫耳朵走到镜头前喵一声 [putting on cat ears and meowing for cat tax]” as the “official format.” Another commenter plays along in a mix of English and Chinese as “Yes, please 相信 [believe] me”, echoing the joke while adding a layer of interlinguistic play. This cross-linguistic exchange becomes a joke about platform protocol, local norms, and the foreigner’s attempt to fit in all layered with affection.

As Orthaber (2019: 162) notes, “humor fosters the development of collective identity and often functions as a powerful communication tool.” However, existing research has primarily focused on offline contexts such as political and social movements, where humor is frequently portrayed as a “weapon of the weak,” helping to cultivate a strong sense of solidarity among protesters (Hart, 2007: 1). However, on RedNote, cat content becomes a stage for in-group humor that is deliberately apolitical and egalitarian. Here, collective identity is forged not through resistance or critique but through shared cuteness, meme play, and collaborative absurdity. These interactions unfold via familiar templates, playful exaggeration, and participatory rituals, where the ability to “join in” signals cultural fluency and mutual recognition. One of the most prominent examples is the playful invention of “圣火喵喵教” (Holy Fire Meow Meow Church), an ironic cult-like community that emerged in Posts #7. A Chinese user begins with:

朋友，请加入我们圣火喵喵教！请跟我读圣火昭昭，圣光灿烂！凡我弟子，喵喵喵！[Friends, please join our Holy Fire Meow Meow Church! Please read with me: Holy Fire Shines, Holy Light Shines! All my disciples, meow meow meow!] (Post #7)

This highly performative language borrows from religious speech and anime parody, casting cat-sharing as a kind of ritualized initiation. A TikTok refugee replies by mirroring the phrase in English (“Holy fire shines, holy light shines! Meow meow meow!”), demonstrating both understanding and participation. This bilingual exchange reflects more than amusement. It marks the formation of a transcultural in-joke, where participation is performance, and repetition is recognition.

Another common pattern involves using mock criminal roleplay to express affection or admiration. Rather than simply saying, “Your cat is cute,” users jokingly threaten to “steal” the cat, often through memes or playful comments like “Say goodbye to your mom.” These lighthearted performances serve as humorous declarations of how irresistibly adorable the cat is while also reinforcing a shared meme language within the community. A commonly used meme within the platform is the “sack” meme, often with different colors, featuring a burlap sack edited with sparkling or floral elements. These images are typically paired with playful

captions like “Which color (of the sack) does your cat like.” This means “I am going to use this beautiful sack to take your cat home”. This kind of meme is shown in more than half of the posts. In some cases, users co-construct elaborate joke threads, that is one plays the thief, another the cat’s lawyer, and a third adds a wanted poster. In this intertextual meme play, where the humor lies not in individual punchlines, but in the shared rhythm of escalation, participation itself becomes a performance of alignment with the community.

What unites all these cases is the idea that humor here is not just about laughter. It is about rhythm, format, and mutual recognition. Many users replicate the structure of “cat tax” jokes to mark their presence. The cat image may be secondary to the act of using the correct meme grammar. Mastery of the joke template becomes a form of symbolic capital. For new users, especially TikTok refugees, these humorous exchanges offer a meaningful route into community norms. Participation in the meme grammar affirms belonging in ways that language proficiency alone cannot. RedNote’s in-group humor functions as a semiotic infrastructure of inclusion. As Kress and van Leeuwen (2001: 2) emphasize, digital meaning-making arises from the interplay of modes, images, emojis, layout, color, and language, rather than from words alone. From faux criminality to palace satire, users align themselves with others through stylized, culturally marked formats, transforming cats into both content and conduit for collective identity play. Through this process, what emerges is more than entertainment but the slow weaving of a shared cultural rhythm, that helps shape a sense of we among strangers navigating a hybrid, multilingual digital space.

## **PLEADING WITH A PAW FOR ACCEPTANCE**

In the meantime, the cat tax meme is more than a joke. It is a platform-native communicative protocol. Its success lies in its dual function: both as an act of participation (users “pay” to enter) and as a relational signal (users “know the rules”). As Gumperz (1982) explains, this participation is marked by coordinated interactions in dialogic exchanges, which in turn facilitate the formation of identity and soft community membership. In past studies, identity is often seen as an important issue faced by immigrants (Bhatia, 2002; Phinney, 2003). Digital immigrants are no exception. In this transitional moment of online migration, cat photos or memes are not marginal content, but a symbolic infrastructure that makes new forms of cross-platform sociability possible.

In the intercultural ecology of RedNote, cat-related content becomes a tool for self-adaptation, allowing TikTok refugees to participate in the online community built around cats by “thinking, feeling, and acting as members of collective groups, institutions, and cultures” (Padilla and Perez, 2003: 43). The informality of RedNote, its meme-driven communicative style, and above all, the mediating presence of cats enable users to navigate cultural boundaries with a light touch. A flexible way of expression emerges, which is a hybrid communicative mode that combines text, image, emoji, and affect to foster connection.

A key part of this adaptive strategy is language play. In interactions between TikTok refugees and local users, language barriers are softened through single-word comments like “完税成功 [tax successfully paid],” “same,” or “cuteeee,” which function as phatic expressions (Jakobson, 1960). Rather than conveying information, they perform a relational function, maintaining presence and signaling affective openness (ibid: 353). These short, meme-like responses contribute to a sense of ambient inclusion, allowing users with limited linguistic resources to still participate.

Moreover, many users engage in what Canagarajah (2012) describes as code-meshing. They blend Chinese, English, emojis, and symbolic references in a single utterance. In Post #18, for instance, a user writes, “Here’s me paying my cat tax [🐱] [❤️] 爱来自美国 [Love from the U.S.],” combining language, text, and cute emojis in a way that is broadly legible to both local and global audiences. This kind of hybrid literacy demonstrates users’ ability to align themselves with multiple cultural frames at once.

Some users engage with more ritualized forms of platform language that further mark social entry and signal cultural alignment. In many posts, the TikTok refugees do not merely post cute cat photos but include a localized phrase like “这是我缴纳的猫税 [This is my cat tax]”, which is immediately recognized by commenters as an appropriate form of platform entry. Many Chinese users reply with “Welcome! 完税成功 [Tax payment completed]”, using a mock bureaucratic tone that both affirms the poster’s effort and lightly reinforces the cultural code. This formulaic interaction, post-cat, declare-tax, receive-approval, recurs across the dataset and functions as a low-stakes language of adaptation, enabling users to engage even with limited language skills or cultural knowledge.

In some cases, Chinese users take the joke further by creating mock “cat tax certificates”, digital images that mimic official residence documents, stamped with approval seals and usernames. These memes, widely shared and remixed, mirror the aesthetic of formal refugee paperwork, adding a layer of playful symbolism. For many TikTok refugees, receiving one of these certificates becomes a humorous but meaningful sign of acceptance, an imagined moment of “official” entry into their new platform community.

Many users explicitly frame their posts as a response to perceived platform expectations. In Post #12, the user writes “I heard there’s a cat tax,” and in Post #18, a TikTok refugee posts, “I was told I have to pay (my cat tax),” indicating not just awareness of the meme but a willingness to comply with the social order. The use of a familiar ritual in a foreign context becomes a way to softly assert belonging without demanding it, a strategy well suited to users navigating a digital space where they are guests rather than natives.

In essence, the cat tax is framed explicitly as a petition for acceptance. TikTok refugees often use the words “please let me stay!!!” to directly link the act of paying cat tax to the desire to remain on the platform. These phrases reveal a deeper affective undercurrent: beneath the playfulness lies a form of soft self-positioning, where displaced users seek symbolic inclusion into a new digital home. Rather than demanding entry, they offer something adorable and culturally neutral, as a gesture of goodwill. In doing so, the cat tax becomes more than a joke, but a ritual of hopeful belonging.

At the same time, this form of linguistic adaptation does not require users to abandon their digital identities. A growing body of research has identified various acculturation positions that individuals adopt during intercultural adaptation (Peñaloza, 1994; Askegaard et al., 2005; Luedicke, 2011). These positions, as Berry (1997: 9) introduced, typically include *assimilation* (adopting the host culture while discarding one’s own), *separation* (retaining one’s original culture and rejecting the host culture), *marginalization* (disconnection from both cultures), and *integration* (maintaining one’s heritage culture while also engaging with the host culture). Some of the TikTok refugees on RedNote engage in a strategy of integration as Berry (1997: 7) describes as actively engaging in the rituals of a particular platform while retaining elements of their original cultural and linguistic identities. For example, while some TikTok refugees engage in “paying the cat tax,” they often use only English expressions, writing phrases like

“This is my cat tax. I hope this is enough to pay the cat tax”. Sometimes, their posts may include emojis like [🇺🇸] to subtly indicate their national background.

At the same time, in the earlier version of RedNote, the lack of built-in translation further encourages voluntary bilingualism. Many users post comments in both Chinese and English, either line by line or side by side, as a deliberate act of hospitality and intercultural accommodation. In Post #1, for instance, a U.S. user wrote in both Chinese and English, “这是我的猫税，以及更多。This is my cat tax. And more”. Such bilingual expressions share a strong desire to be understood. Furthermore, this hybrid usage reflects both a desire to connect and a comfort in preserving familiar modes of self-expression, indicating not passive assimilation but an active negotiation between cultural frameworks.

Yet as the meme stabilizes into a shared ritual, some users begin to subvert its original function through humorous inversion. One striking example comes from Post #16, where a TikTok refugee humorously demands a “cat tax refund”, writing:

在美国，现在是“报税季”，这意味着是时候收税退款了。不过，我觉得也该是中国人把我们的“猫税”退还给我们的时候了！[😂][🐱][💰] [It's tax refund season in the U.S., and I think it's time for Chinese users to return the 'cat tax' we've been paying!] (Post #16)

Here, the user jokingly reclaims the power dynamic by referencing U.S. tax culture, playfully suggesting that the cat images they've posted should now yield “refunds” from their hosts. This ironic shift from “seeking permission to stay” to “asking for cultural reimbursement” reveals how TikTok refugees do not merely adopt the host platform's language but actively remix it with their own cultural frames. This example illustrates a maturing form of participation: one that blends humor, agency, and subtle negotiation in the evolving landscape of trans platform belonging. The humor here lies in the soft assertion of cultural reciprocity, which is a sign that these users no longer see themselves as outsiders.

Through the repetitive yet playful enactment of the “cat tax,” TikTok refugees use cats as emotionally safe, culturally resonant, and socially acceptable tools to navigate an unfamiliar digital environment. These acts are not merely performative compliance, but sincere attempts

at belonging, which are often expressed through a language of cuteness, humor, and ritualized participation. Rather than passively adopting platform norms, users actively co-author them, negotiating identity, recognition, and inclusion, one cat at a time.

## STAGING THE SELF WITH CATS

For TikTok refugees adapting to a new platform and social environment, cat content becomes a subtle and flexible tool for soft self-presentation, emotional signaling, and cultural performance. These expressions range from understated self-branding to elaborate, co-authored stories in which cats are cast as protagonists, foils, or stand-ins for their human companions.

Goffman (1959) conceptualizes everyday life as a theatrical performance, where individuals give off impressions to an audience, no matter consciously or inadvertently. This dramaturgical model distinguishes between the “front stage”, where individuals are aware of being watched and thus actively manage their self-presentation, and the “backstage”, where they can drop the performance and share suppressed aspects with trusted team members. To shape these performances, people draw on a “front”, a combination of physical setting and personal attributes such as clothing, expression, and body language (Goffman, 1959: 13–15).

On RedNote, some TikTok refugees use cat content as a soft medium for self-presentation, which is a form of self-representation that actively manages oneself in the “front stage”. Posts such as “Me and Moonie just sailed” (Post #8), “Me and my children” (Post #11), or the widely shared selfie in Post #2, where commenters wrote “这个美男子深得我心 [This handsome man has won my heart]”, showcase personal fronts like facial expressions, pets, and linguistic cues that are carefully curated to create a particular impression. The presence of a cat softens the self-display, enabling users to participate in platform discourse without seeming overly self-promotional. It allows users to adopt what Goffman (1959) would call a “safe expressive front”, helping users align with audience expectations while maintaining enough ambiguity to avoid direct scrutiny. In this way, TikTok refugees present an *idealized self* (Hogan, 2010: 378), which is charming, imaginative, and animal-loving, without overstepping social boundaries.

As Madahali and Tian (2023: 0007) note, social media platforms function as stages for ongoing identity construction, where users continuously shape their personas through posting, liking, following, and being followed, which are actions that collectively reinforce their performative success. This dynamic is particularly visible in how some Chinese users strategically leverage cat-related trends to attract engagement from TikTok refugees. By combining local cultural knowledge with platform-native memes, they craft online personas that are both approachable and culturally fluent. In Post #17, for instance, a user explains the cultural misunderstanding surrounding the emoji [😊], noting that while it signifies friendliness in American contexts, it often conveys sarcasm or passive aggression in Chinese digital culture, as the user puts it: “It can mean you are so annoying, or I hate you.” Though the post appears instructional at first glance, it is strategically tagged with #cattax and #tiktokrefugee and ends with a playful call: “Follow me, know more about China” and “Show me your cat tax.” This move weaves together a cultural explanation, emoji literacy, and emotional outreach into a cohesive act of self-branding, demonstrating how identity performance on RedNote often emerges through a combination of humor, cultural fluency, and affective connection.

For some, the meme format of the cat tax itself becomes a shell through which personal promotion is reframed. In Post #6, a user writes, “我付不起猫税，但我可以付音乐税 [🎵] [I can’t pay cat tax, but I can pay music tax]” and attaches links to their latest song. In Post #9, another declares, “我是一名美国歌手 [🇺🇸] [I am an American singer]” alongside a cute cat photo. These examples show how users creatively repurpose meme logic to insert personal content while still conforming to platform expectations. The meme provides structure; the cat provides charm. Further, a co-creation is triggered. One Chinese user replied: “你们的歌曲太迷人了 [😍]。我忍不住把你们乐队画成了像素小动画，希望能喜欢 [😍]，请随意使用。并致以最多的爱 [❤️]。” [Your music is so charming. I couldn’t resist drawing your band as a little pixel animation. Hope you like it. Feel free to use it. With all my love.] This kind of spontaneous artistic response exemplifies how self-promotion, far from being one-directional, can inspire reciprocal acts of appreciation and cultural generosity.

What is notable is that these performances are often understated. Unlike influencer-style branding, they rarely involve overt self-promotion. As Holmes (2022: 356) observes, a truly narcissistic individual may avoid competing with significant others or pets for attention and comments on social media, recognizing that they would have to share the spotlight. This insight

supports the idea that on RedNote, TikTok refugees' pet-related selfies function more as a form of subtle self-presentation than as attention-seeking displays. Users offer indirect cues about who they are, what they value, and how they wish to be perceived. A sleepy cat on a cluttered desk, a joke about being "single with three cats," or a cat photo accompanied by "my only child" all signal lifestyle, humor, and emotional orientation without explicit self-disclosure.

In this process, the meme structures adopted by users also function as forms of persistent labeling (Ma and Agarwal, 2007). For example, in Post #28, a user who identifies as a TikTok refugee replaces the typical cat tax with a "horse tax," posting videos of himself riding and feeding a horse. The post attracted significant attention and engagement. Since then, he has continued sharing horse-riding content, consistently receiving high views and interaction. This illustrates how meme formats can serve as semi-permanent identity markers. By repeatedly using the "horse tax" as a self-branding device, the user establishes a distinct persona within the community, that blends playful deviation with cultural fluency.

Meanwhile, this dynamic is further shaped by platform-specific affordances. On RedNote, cute pet content is already a highly favored genre within the recommendation algorithm (Wan et al, 2025). Posts featuring animals, especially cats, are more likely to be promoted, increasing their visibility regardless of the poster's follower count or language proficiency. As a result, TikTok refugees who adopt pet-related memes tap into a platform-native mode of self-presentation that is both socially legible and algorithmically rewarded. In this way, meme-based self-branding, whether through cats, horses, or other playful substitutes, is technically amplified, making it an especially effective tool for digital newcomers seeking visibility and belonging.

Majchrzak et al. (2012: 39) describe affordances as the dynamic interplay between users' intentions and technological capabilities, which together enable certain actions. On social media, self-presentation is shaped by complex sociotechnical systems involving not only the individual but also their social network (e.g., friends, followers) and algorithmic processes that can obscure the composition or reaction of the audience (DeVito et al., 2017: 741). Unlike traditional forms of self-presentation, such as appearance, mannerisms, or behavior, digital platforms offer a distinctive array of tools and features that individuals can strategically employ to craft their online personas (ibid). This may include avatar design (Davis et al., 2009), bodily expressions such as gestures or appearance (Schultze, 2010), or persistent identifiers like usernames (Ma and Agarwal, 2007). Here, cat photos and memes serve as expressive proxies

that allow users to perform mood, lifestyle, and cultural affiliation with minimal verbal disclosure.

To summarize, RedNote’s platform-specific affordances, including its visually dominant interface, emotionally attuned community norms, and algorithmic emphasis on lifestyle aesthetics, created the ideal conditions for cat-related content to function as a shared symbolic medium. The act of “paying the cat tax” emerged not just as a playful meme, but as a culturally legible ritual that enabled newcomers to claim symbolic presence in a context where linguistic and cultural fluency were absent. These affordances collectively transformed the cat from a generic meme icon into a locally validated, emotionally resonant, and socially strategic tool for intercultural adaptation.

### *ANTHROPOMORPHISM*

Anthropomorphism serves a similar function, offering users a way to narrate themselves through the fictionalized voice or personality of the cat. Users commonly refer to their pets as “my children,” or “little bosses,” or assign them humorous dialogue. In these moments, the cat becomes an avatar, projecting affection, frustration, humor, or even politics at a safe distance. In Post #3, a Chinese user captions a cat video with:

Hello U.S. user, I’m a Chinese mini burger. Welcome to RedNote...Could u show me your cat photos? ... If you don't have a cat, it doesn't matter. The Chinese lucky cat will bring you good luck. (Post #3)

The cat here speaks on behalf of the user, turning a moment of intercultural greeting into a humorous, narrative-driven invitation. In the comments section of Post #7, a more elaborate fictional structure unfolds. A user posts a photo of a wrapped-up cat and writes:

我家有个和他很像的，刚刚因为不睡觉捣乱被判有罪立刻执行。[I have a cat just like him at home. He was just sentenced for not sleeping and making a mess.]” (Comment from Post #7)

Replies by herself with a similar picture of another cat: “这是他的同伙。 [This’s his accomplice.]” The original poster responds: “Oh! Release him [🙄],” completing the exchange with a pitiful emoji. This playful judicial language anthropomorphizes pets as criminal characters, blending elements of dark humor, domestic life, and theatrical storytelling. The pets become “performers” in a co-authored, serialized narrative that extends across comments.

While seemingly fictional and humorous, such interactions also serve as a form of indirect self-promotion. As argued by Prato-Previde et al. (2022: 11), animal anthropomorphism involves attributing human-like behaviors, personalities, psychological abilities, emotions, and intentions to animals. Anthropomorphic thinking provides a sense of social contact and connection, satisfying the human need to cope with uncertainty and gain efficacy (Epley et al., 2008; Epley et al., 2007). By constructing memorable and emotionally engaging mini-dramas, users showcase their wit, creativity, and cultural fluency. The original poster’s (in Post #3) emotional response further positioned her as a sympathetic, likable character, earning affection and reinforcing her presence within the community, both performative and relatable.

Another vivid case appears in Post #14, where a user dresses their cat in imperial-style fabrics and captions the video:

Hi, foreigners, I’m a Chinese imperial cat. I’m here to collect the “cat tax”. Big data, please push it to TikTok refugees to check out the royal cats of China. 让一让，四郎来收猫税了。大数据请推给 TikTok refugees，来看看中国皇室的猫猫~ (Post #14)

This post parodies familiar lines from Qing Dynasty dramas, widely recognized among Chinese users. What begins as a solo performance quickly evolves into a collaborative spectacle: commenters add quotes from palace dramas, mimicking character roles, and collectively building a miniature imperial narrative. TikTok refugees join in with humorous replies such as “My cat just asked me if we’re poor [😂],” enriching the parody and enhancing the sense of shared play. At the surface level, the post is humorous and theatrical. But at its core, it functions as a layered act of self-promotion. The poster deliberately frames the content as “Chinese” and “imperial”, inviting TikTok refugees to witness a uniquely localized meme culture. The phrase “Big data, please push it” suggests a calculated awareness of platform

algorithms and audience segmentation, hinting at an intention to amplify cultural visibility. In this sense, the imperial-cat performance operates as both a culturally specific joke and a soft assertion of identity. It blends humor, heritage, and self-positioning into a playful gesture of cultural pride, that borders on lighthearted digital nationalism. The cat, dressed in royal garb, becomes a symbolic envoy of Chinese cultural flair in an intercultural space.

Anthropomorphism also allows for a safe and humorous articulation of emotional states. Rather than directly saying “I’m tired,” a user might post a picture of their cat flopped over with the caption “he gave up.” This kind of substitution provides both affective distance and social resonance. It softens emotional disclosure by wrapping it in humor. When cats are portrayed as lazy, grumpy, dramatic, or overworked, they become comically exaggerated mirrors of human behaviors. As many users note in the comments, “he’s just like me fr [for real]”, highlighting a key humorous appeal: people love it when animals remind them of themselves. This aligns with Waytz et al. (2010: 220), who argue that anthropomorphism functions as a mechanism through which people relate emotionally to nonhuman agents, especially in uncertain or emotionally charged contexts. Similarly, Power (2008: 537) points out that the tendency to see animals as reflections of ourselves can increase social bonding and emotional resonance in everyday digital exchanges.

Projecting human traits onto animals serves both expressive and relational functions. It allows people to say things they might not otherwise articulate, such as sadness, anxiety, or existential exhaustion while inviting others to laugh, relate, and respond. In this way, anthropomorphic humor becomes a shared language: one that conveys emotion elicits empathy, and builds informal community through playful self-deprecation and emotional honesty.

These creative interactions sometimes rely on meme conventions, such as anthropomorphic portraying cats as judges, angels, soldiers, or public figures. One widely circulated example is the “Judge Cat” meme, which depicts a cat with a drawn-on white wig and gavel, often used by commenters to humorously “approve” or “reject” someone’s cat tax submission. The meme triggers a mock bureaucratic seriousness, reinforcing the performative structure of cat tax culture. When deployed in reply to threads, it signals participation and authority within the imagined platform order, turning ordinary users into playful gatekeepers of RedNote’s social norms. These visual jokes function as lightweight rituals of belonging, allowing humor,

cuteness, and parody to converge in the co-creation of a shared, emotionally resonant platform culture.

Importantly, these narratives are not one-directional performances; they invite interaction. As mentioned in Post #7, the interaction between Chinese and TikTok refugees on “sentenced and executed immediately.” and “Release him 🙏,” completed a narrative in meme format. This collaborative world-building turns the platform into a stage, and the cat into a social puppet, that is adorable, unthreatening, and endlessly malleable. The storytelling sustains user engagement, nurtures community feeling, and establishes a shared cultural repertoire that TikTok refugees can gradually learn to recognize, adopt, and remix.

## **BRIDGING DIFFERENCE THROUGH CATS**

Beyond memes and affective bonding, many interactions in the dataset reveal a quieter but equally meaningful form of intercultural engagement: asking questions. These questions posed out of genuine curiosity or playful comparison, serve as informal windows into one another’s cultures, particularly around topics like pet care, platform norms, and digital habits.

In Post #3, a Chinese user remarks humorously:

刷了一宿洋猫，感觉他们的猫猫都好瘦，我们的猫猫都好圆。 [I scrolled through the Western cats all night. They’re all so skinny, but ours are always so round!] (a comment from Post #3)

This comparison, though lighthearted, reflects a perception of differing aesthetic or care standards between cultures. It opens up a discursive space where users begin to notice, compare, and comment on cultural differences, without confrontation, through cats.

In Post #4, someone asks:

美国有狸花猫吗? [Are there tabby cats in the U.S.?] (a comment from Post #4)

This seemingly naive question is not just about feline genetics. It represents a genuine interest in the environment and everyday lives of foreign users, viewed through the shared lens of pet companionship. Replies to these questions often include further cultural commentary or playful elaboration, turning what begins as “curiosity” into conversation.

Even platform-specific habits become subjects of interest. In Post #1, a U.S. user comments:

I usually watch and never interact haha. I wish Western apps had emojis like this [🤔] (a comment from Post #1)

Here, the emoji is not just an expression, but a cultural artifact, prompting comparison between emoji sets, platform affordances, and even communication norms. Comments like this reveal how cultural distinctions surface through small interface features, which might otherwise go unnoticed.

The emotion of surprise also often appears in intercultural communication. In Post #4, one commenter notes “16?! 和我这三只加起来一样的年龄 [the same age as my three cats combined]” reflecting surprise at the age of the American user’s 16-year-old cat. Other Chinese users respond with stories of their own cats living to 17 or 18, but with exaggerated vernacular and theatricality (e.g., “村霸猫打了我三年” [The village bully cat beat me for three years]), transforming pet care into a generational epic.

In some cases, the intercultural fusion of phonetic misreading and visual exaggeration often triggers an intriguing form of humor. In several posts, TikTok refugees accidentally or playfully refer to their cats as “cars”. As in Post #25, a U.S. user writes: “Please accept our car tax!”, along with pictures of his cats, which brings a likely result of autocorrect, phonetic similarity, or meme remixing. What might appear as a linguistic slip becomes an unexpected joke. In China, internet users also often jokingly refer to fat cats as “trucks” or “tanks” (for example, “Where are the trucks?”). This dual misreading, both across language and visual scale, functions as an intercultural inside joke. While English speakers may conflate cats with cars through sound, Chinese users interpret feline body types through vehicular metaphors. The result is a layered comic effect: linguistic error plus visual absurdity equals shared laughter. These “mistakes” are not corrected but enthusiastically embraced, demonstrating how errors

can become affordances in hybrid meme ecologies. Here, as illustrated by Shifman (2013: 46), the joke isn't about accuracy. It's about playful convergence across cultural codes.

Sometimes, intercultural semiotic contrast arises in discussions. One vivid example is around black cats. When a U.S. user posts a black cat, the Chinese users always comment that “黑猫是好运的象征 [black cats are a symbol of luck],” which triggers further discussion on whether black cats are good or bad. In Western culture, black cats have been associated with malevolent forces since the Middle Ages, often linked to witchcraft and the supernatural. As Nikolajeva (2009: 250) notes, black cats, along with creatures like crows, frequently appear in folklore as witches' familiars, symbolizing mystery, danger, or evil. In contrast, Eastern cultures ascribe more positive meanings to black cats. In many parts of Asia, they are seen as protective figures capable of warding off misfortune. For instance, the black Maneki Neko, a variation of the “lucky cat” in Feng Shui traditions, is believed to repel evil spirits and safeguard the household (Ginny, 2018).

From a semiotic perspective, the black cat serves as what Barthes (1972) calls a mythic sign, where a culturally familiar image takes on layered ideological meaning. Depending on the historical and symbolic frameworks, the same visual sign (a black cat) can evoke contrasting connotations, misfortune in some Western contexts, and good luck and protection in many Eastern ones. In this sense, the cat image illustrates how everyday signs become “naturalized” carriers of cultural ideology through their repeated circulation (Barthes, 1972: 114).

At the same time, the lack of built-in translation tools is seemingly a limitation to RedNote at first. However, this absence indirectly promotes a shift toward non-verbal communication: images, emojis, and meme templates become the primary means of interaction. As Hutchby and Barnett (2005: 151) argue, platform affordances do not dictate user behavior directly but guide it by shaping the “conditions of possibility associated with an action.” In many interactions, verbal language recedes, giving way to nonverbal exchanges built entirely on shared visual codes.

In Post #1, for instance, a Chinese user comments with a widely recognizable meme of a cat smiling with raised paws, commonly understood as a gesture of enthusiastic approval or affection, to show her adoration of the poster's cat. Then, the poster (a TikTok refugee) replied

with a different cat meme with a flower sticker on its head and shyly pointing inward, signaling bashful gratitude. Though no words are exchanged, the emotional narrative is unmistakable: one image says, “I love this,” and the other replies “Thank you, I’m flattered.” As shown through a semiotic reading, these images function as signs that carry both affective meaning and social positioning, expressing enthusiasm, modesty, politeness, and reciprocity through visual cues alone. Similarly, in Post #8, a Chinese user comments with a popular meme of a cat aggressively “biting” a pair of fingers, signifying playful jealousy or mock territoriality (“I want your cat!”). In response, the poster (another TikTok refugee) replies with a real photo of her grumpy-looking cat, visually implying “My cat saw that and disapproves.” This image dialogue enacts a humorous role-play, where both users construct meaning collaboratively, not through words, but through visual humor and shared meme logic.

From Panofsky’s (1982) iconological perspective, these visual interactions reveal multilayered meanings. At the pre-iconographic level, the user recognizes the cat gestures and facial expressions like raised paws, shy head tilt, and biting fingers, as emotionally expressive actions. At the iconographic level, these gestures draw on shared cultural conventions around anthropomorphic cat memes, where cuteness, mock aggression, and bashful expressions are codified into a familiar meme repertoire. Finally, at the iconological level, such exchanges reflect a broader socio-cultural dynamic: the adaptation of TikTok refugees into a foreign digital environment not through language, but through a shared emotion-based visual grammar. These silent conversations become symbolic enactments of intercultural empathy and participation, illustrating how visual codes can stand in for linguistic and cultural fluency.

These moments demonstrate how humor, curiosity, and visual language create a communicative commonality. Through cat content, users forge small but significant acts of mutual understanding. Even when cultures diverge, shared affection for cats provides a script for playful misrecognition, opening space for empathy, connection, and collective laughter.

## CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this thesis is to explore what role communication with visual means plays in a setting where the interlocutors lack a common language and a shared cultural background. This inquiry is conducted through an analysis of the TikTok–RedNote migration case, examined along three key dimensions: cat-related content functions as an intercultural medium, especially enabled by RedNote’s specific affordances; the role of cat imagery in users’ self-presentation and soft identity performance; and the ways in which cat-mediated interactions fostered intercultural dialogue despite linguistic and cultural barriers. In this final section, these findings are brought together and reflected upon to offer a conclusive perspective on how affective, symbolic practices support digital adaptation and community building in unfamiliar digital platform spaces.

In response to the overarching research questions, this study identified three interrelated findings. First, RedNote supports affective and visual modes of communication through cat-related content that enable non-verbal self-introduction, allowing users to initiate contact through emotionally resonant content (cat-related content), without relying on shared language or explicit identity claims. Previous research has found that cats have long occupied a distinct position in internet culture in both Western and Eastern contexts. Their emotional ambiguity, ranging from aloofness and detachment to cuteness and playfulness, allows them to be interpreted in multiple ways without causing cultural friction (Ngai, 2005; Dale, 2016). This study further highlights that this flexibility makes cats ideal carriers of affective meaning in settings where users do not share a language or social context.

More importantly, this study found that cats can become a shared social tool because of RedNote’s specific platform structure and cultural affordance, which significantly amplifies and formalizes the symbolic potential of cat-related content. The platform’s visual interface and preference for curated, emotionally driven content (Hongchen et al., 2025: 1567) make it conducive to image-based interaction. Based on this context, for TikTok refugees, who may be unfamiliar with the Chinese language or etiquette, cat-related content offers a soft and strategic entry point. The “cat tax” ritual thus functions as a culturally legible gesture of participation and friendliness. RedNote’s algorithm further supports this dynamic by clustering content around emotional resonance and visual consistency rather than language. Meanwhile, the platform’s social grammar favors subtlety, visual storytelling, and indirect humor, qualities

that align naturally with cat-related content. In this symbolic ecology, cats become tools of ambient self-introduction, enabling users to be visible and relatable without appearing intrusive.

Second, users engage in a low-threshold, meme-based interaction ritual by “paying the cat tax”, which serves more as a performance where users can present themselves and further negotiate a sense of belonging. For TikTok refugees unfamiliar with the linguistic and cultural environment of RedNote, cats offer a tactful and low-risk mode of self-presentation. Posting cat-related content enables users to participate without overt self-assertion, signaling friendliness, adaptability, and sensitivity to platform norms. More than aesthetic choices, cats operate as soft extensions of the self, projecting warmth, humor, and relatability without requiring verbal disclosure. Besides, the practice of “paying the cat tax” sometimes becomes a meme-based format that serves both as a social entry point and a visibility strategy. Users often embed personal updates, product links, or humorous captions alongside cat images or memes, leveraging the visual appeal of pets to anchor their own content. As Shifman (2013) has pointed out, some memes not only entertain but also demonstrate a sense of belonging and cultural fluency in the community. Cat-related content plays such a role here. Sometimes, users anthropomorphize their cats, assigning them internal monologues or imagined voices, which allows users to engage with platform humor while minimizing social risk. RedNote’s culture of aesthetic curation and soft self-presentation discourages aggressive personal branding, making such indirect performance particularly effective. Within this environment, cats function as symbolic passports: facilitating visibility, fostering user engagement, and gradually supporting identity-building in a new digital context.

Third, cat-mediated participation allows TikTok refugees to develop a symbolic presence and co-construct localized forms of sociality, creating fleeting but meaningful intercultural moments that rely on affect, recognition, and improvisation, rather than fluency or formal structure. The interaction between TikTok refugees and Chinese users on RedNote shows how a seemingly trivial cultural object, a cat, can become a shared language in a space where linguistic and cultural overlap is limited. Although this online migration was triggered by political policy, the resulting interactions were surprisingly apolitical and grounded in casual, collaborative exchanges. What emerged was a set of shared practices built not on explicit communication, but on visual cues, humor, and emotional resonance. Cat memes served as low-barrier, high-flexibility tools for initiating contact and building rapport. Without a shared language, users responded to each other through images, emojis, and playful visual gestures,

creating what could be seen as lightweight moments of connection. These weren't deep dialogues, but they were enough to establish recognition, presence, and goodwill.

Humor played a central role in this process. Rather than relying on formal jokes, users co-created lighthearted exchanges through captioned cat photos, exaggerated reactions, and meme replies. These interactions often began with a post and unfolded through a series of visual comments that built a temporary shared rhythm, thereby creating an interactive process known as conversational humor. Conversational humor often functions as a form of co-constructed social play, especially in contexts where linguistic precision is less important than affective alignment. Such interactions reflect a gentle, improvisational form of cultural translation, which also embodies what this study calls soft symbolic participation: non-verbal, emotionally driven interactions that allow users to feel seen, welcomed, and connected in unfamiliar digital environments.

Rather than forming lasting communities, these encounters offered brief but meaningful experiences of shared space. In that sense, the “locality” (Appadurai, 1996: 178) produced here was not geographic but symbolic, shaped through repeated symbolic acts and affective alignments. Here, cats served as anchors for improvised cultural belonging, enabling users to imagine themselves as part of a shared digital moment. In a fragmented global media landscape, such small acts of visual intimacy matter. They show how digital migrants navigate difference not through grand statements, but through a cat, a gesture, or a joke.

## **SOFT SYMBOLIC PARTICIPATION IN A DIGITAL WORLD**

This thesis offers a new theoretical perspective on platform migration by highlighting the understudied phenomenon of intercultural digital relocation. While most existing research focuses on users shifting between platforms within similar cultural or linguistic contexts, this study examines a migration that involves significant cultural and communicative disjuncture: the movement of predominantly English-speaking TikTok users into a Chinese language-based platform, RedNote. This shift is a socially meaningful transition that requires users to renegotiate identity, visibility, and participation in an unfamiliar environment.

By framing this case not as a functional migration but as a symbolic and cultural adaptation, the study reorients digital migration research away from usability and user retention models toward questions of belonging, improvisation, and cultural alignment. It shows that users, when placed in environments with no shared language or prior cultural affinity, do not simply withdraw or resist. Instead, they may actively engage in small acts of emotional signaling and visual participation to test boundaries, seek recognition, and co-construct localized norms of interaction. This contribution is particularly relevant in an era when platform infrastructures are increasingly transnational yet still carry embedded cultural expectations. It suggests that migration across digital platforms entails more than accessing a new interface; it involves navigating a new communicative ecology shaped by aesthetics, norms, and platform-specific vernaculars. This perspective invites future research to approach platform migration not only as a technical or behavioral issue but also as a deeply cultural process, shaped by the symbolic tools users employ to make themselves understood and accepted.

While there have already been some studies recently about the TikTok-RedNote platform migration phenomenon, such as Zhang et al. (2025) emphasize language strategies and national identity in the wake of the TikTok ban, and Liu et al. (2025) highlight how RedNote enables informal English learning and bilingual identity formation, this thesis offers a complementary perspective. It shifts attention away from verbal and educational dimensions of platform migration to focus instead on symbolic, affective, and non-verbal participation, primarily with the use and interpretation of cat content.

Image-based interaction, as explored in this study, provides an alternative communicative mode that allows users to express presence, build social rapport, and negotiate belonging without relying on linguistic fluency or explicit cultural knowledge. Rather than analyzing how users learn or perform language, this research examines how visual and symbolic acts, such as “paying the cat tax”, serve as ritualized, low-barrier forms of engagement that help digital migrants gain visibility and cultural acceptance in an unfamiliar platform environment. In intercultural digital environments where users lack a shared verbal language, images serve as accessible and emotionally resonant tools that enable individuals to express presence, signal intent, and build relational ties. By analyzing how TikTok migrants to RedNote use cat-related imagery (or other cute pet images) as a form of symbolic participation, the research demonstrates how visual content can transcend language barriers, and operate as a common semiotic ground, allowing communication to occur even in the absence of linguistic fluency,

which thus well-suited for intercultural communication. In doing so, the study expands the existing scholarship on digital migration and intercultural communication by incorporating theories of symbolic interaction, platform affordances, and intercultural adaptation into the analysis of image-based and emotionally resonant content practices.

Another central contribution of this thesis is the introduction of soft symbolic participation as a unique perspective for understanding how users engage in intercultural interaction without relying on shared language, ideology, or explicit identity alignment. These non-verbal, emotionally resonant practices enable users to navigate unfamiliar cultural spaces without relying on linguistic fluency or explicit identity claims. In contrast to traditional models of self-presentation that emphasize deliberate identity performance through language or consistent branding, this study identifies a softer, less confrontational mode of presence, grounded in visuals, affect, and lightweight social gestures. Through the case of TikTok refugees on RedNote, the research shows that users adapt not by asserting who they are, but by offering small, emotionally resonant signals that invite recognition.

Cat (cute pet)-related content becomes a key medium in this process. It allows users to be visible, humorous, and approachable without demanding direct verbal interaction or exposing personal viewpoints. These symbolic gestures, sharing a cat meme, replying with an emoji, and narrating through a pet's voice, operate as low-risk but socially meaningful ways to engage in a foreign digital environment. Soft symbolic participation differs from passive lurking or detached observation. It is a tactical form of participation that enables users to test social cues, sense platform expectations, and gradually establish a presence. In doing so, it fills a gap in existing research on digital communication, which often overlooks the micro-scale, affective, and symbolic dimensions of platform adaptation, especially in intercultural contexts.

Stuart Hall (1992: 282) emphasizes that cultural studies has always been, and should continue to be, a political project. However, this study challenges this view by focusing on moments of intercultural interaction that are not driven by overt political confrontation or ideological struggle, but by ambient, emotionally resonant exchanges. This study reveals a subtle but important aspect of globalization in the platform age: not all transnational exchanges are overtly political or ideological. Although the TikTok–RedNote migration was initially triggered by top-down political policy changes, TikTok users turned to RedNote as a form of protest against these measures (Soo, 2025), the subsequent intercultural interactions on the

platform became largely depoliticized. As Appadurai (1996: 36) highlights ideoscapes vary in resonance and form across national contexts. In the case of RedNote, what emerges is not political resistance or grand ideological clashes, but rather a depoliticized interaction of empathy, playfulness, and mutual recognition, what might be called a “non-political ideoscape”. Here, intercultural communication unfolds through small talk, visual signs, and shared laughter, rather than through debate or activism. These quiet, ambient forms of digital interaction suggest that in an age where everything seems politicized, there is still space for meaning-making that is intimate, humorous, and emotionally resonant.

Moreover, this case offers new insight into RedNote’s evolving role as a platform. Initially developed as a domestic lifestyle-sharing space, RedNote was not designed to accommodate large-scale, intercultural user migration. Yet its affordances, particularly its focus on visual storytelling, emotionally expressive content, and algorithmic clustering based on user interests rather than language, made it surprisingly receptive to symbolic participation from culturally and linguistically distinct newcomers. The integration of TikTok refugees through soft, non-verbal practices reveals that RedNote’s communicative ecology is more adaptable than its original purpose might suggest. RedNote emerges here as a latent transnational interface, that can facilitate improvised, visually driven intercultural engagement.

Far from being an isolated curiosity, the TikTok-RedNote migration case reflects a broader phenomenon in digital culture. It signals how memes, affective rituals, and soft forms of humor now function as cultural currency in platform-mediated migration. Such practices are not only ways of managing differences but are also ways of imagining community, however fleeting. In a time when global digital infrastructures are both connecting and dividing us, these moments of soft, ambient interaction deserve close attention, which is not for their spectacle, but for the quiet work they perform in making cultural boundaries feel momentarily permeable.

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# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX 1. SAMPLE

Empirical data collection occurred in March 2025, using hashtags #cattax and #tiktokrefugee, and keyword tracking as key search parameters on RedNote. From this corpus, I systematically selected 32 posts and named them Post #1 - Post # 32.

Post	Hashtags	Content	language	Type	IP	likes	comments	Time of Post
这是我的猫税，以及更多 This is my cat tax. And more	#tiktokrefugee #享用 #cattax #爱猫 #小红书宠物crush	Selfie with cat/ cat alone/ raccoon 	CN/EN	pic*9	US	18k	2752	16-01-2025
Hi China! 这是我缴纳的猫税，请欣赏 小红书的网友们大家好！ 我是喜欢中国的中国原住民，这是我的两只小 猫们，非常可爱捏。please enjoy！	#我心依然是中国心 #tiktok #tiktokrefugee #交出你的 cat tax #cattax #猫自拍 #我和我的猫咪	Selfie with cat/ cat alone 	CN/EN	pic*4	CN	142k	13k	16-01-2025
hi~ I'm eggplant cat nice too meet u~ give me ur data and cat tax (RedNote emoji)	#这也太可爱了吧 #猫咪日常 #金渐层 #交出你的 cat tax #tiktokrefugee #cattax #小红书养宠倡议 #宠物生视频 #tiktok	Hello US user, I'm Chinese mini burger. Welcome to RedNote. I like all kinds of cardboard boxes and garbage bags as well. Everyone says my mother is good at raising pigs. So my brothers and sisters are all chubby. Could u show me your cat photos. I can teach you how to turn into a rabbit, an eggplant, an elephant, a dragon, a peach, a pineapple and a pair. If you don't have a cat, it doesn't matter. Chinese lucky cat will bring you good luck. 	EN	video	CN	258k	21k	15-01-2025
Here is my cat tax I hope this is sufficient payment for the cat tax I was told i have to pay	#cattax #cattax_receipt #tiktokrefugee #Tiktokrefugee	I was told if I want to come on red note I had to pay my cat tax, so here is my obligatory cat tax payment. This is my cat tax, this is Mr Boogie. He is about 16 years old. He's my old man. He loves cat treats and he loves wet cat food. he's not a fan of dry cat food, he just likes the wet because he's very lazy and he is very excited to be over here on rednote with me so. I hope that this cat tax is good enough to let me stay. 	EN with CN subtitles	video	US	71k	7160	17-01-2025
交猫税?? alternative tax payment	#交猫税 #cattax #tiktokrefugee #american #狐狸	fox pics 	CN/EN	pic*6	US	24k	3214	16-01-2025
我付不起猫税 但我可以付音乐税 这首歌由 rudywade, @LeGrand 和 ethan gander 演唱, 名为 too close, 你可以在 AppleMusic 上 收听	#cattax #tiktokrefugee #rednote #music #viral	music video 	CN/EN	video	US	52k	1958	20-01-2025
cat tax!! 用我的猫和我奶奶的猫 缴纳美国猫税(希望这个翻译是 正确的)RedNote emoji	#tiktokrefugee #cattax #缴纳美国猫税 #猫税	用我的猫和我奶奶的猫叫那美国猫税(希望 这个翻译是正确的) with cat pics 	CN/EN	pic*2	US	12k	3832	14-01-2025











Post	Hashtags	Content	language	Type	IP	likes	comments	Time of Post
CAT TAX!!! me and moonie just sailed across the sea and fought three bears and climbed two mountains to be here	#tiktok #tiktokrefugee #cattax	selfie with cat 	EN	pic*1	US	24k	3870	14-01-2025
我也来交猫税了! This is my TT refugee cat tax. Her name is Clove (although we call her Clovey). She likes to sit next to be while I'm writing music and occasionally throws up next to my piano. 这是我的美国猫税, 她叫 Clove(不过我们都叫她 Clovey), 她喜欢在我写歌的时候坐在我旁边, 偶尔还会在我的钢琴旁边吐毛。 对了, 我是一名美国歌手, 下周五发新歌, 记得关注我哦!	#tiktok #tiktokrefugee #tiktokban #猫 #cattax	selfie with cat  	CN/EN	pic*3	US	3980	855	15-01-2025
Paying cat tax payment 正在交猫税猫人鱼 Cat mermaid	#tiktokrefugee #cattax #city	Cat dressed as mermaid  	CN/EN	pic*4	US	9998	1329	15-01-2025
Give me the cat tax please !	#交出你的 cat tax #cattax #tiktokrefugee #小红书宠物crush #宠物过六年	Hi Don't scroll away! I'm Niangao and I'm from Shanghai, China. You may not know my name, you must have seen the video of me doing parkour and pouncing on the sofa. I really love sports. A lot of people like my perky butt because I look so soft. I'm also into cat yoga. Stretching everyday is my most enjoyable moment. Could u show me your cat? I'd like to make friends with it!	EN with CN subtitles	video	CN	104k	15k	16-01-2025
你好洋抖人! 咪在 Rednote 欢迎你! TikTok refugees welcome to Rednote! Im mimi dundun! (灵感来源: 油百万 Baiwan)	#猫 #tiktokrefugee #cattax #tiktok #洋抖 #难民 #欢迎 #抵债猫 #宠物	(video content) hello! US user! I'm Chinese mimi dundun! Welcome to Rednote. Could u show me your cat photo or be my English teacher! I'm Chinese boy. I can teach u cat maths! i guess we're besties now.	EN with CN subtitles	video	CN	110k	25k	14-01-2025
DATA for Rednote Beginners 小红书催语 Slangs & everthing else you need to know on Day 1	#TisonRED #cattax #tiktokrefugee #英语口语	Summarizing the cat tax phenomenon and teaching TT refugees some Chinese Internet terms	EN/CN	video	CN	92k	7179	15-01-2025
hi foreigners, im chinese imperial cat im here to collect the "cat tax" Big data, please push it to Tiktok refugees to check out the royal cats of China 让一让, 四脚宠猫税了 大数据请推给tiktok refugees, 来看看中国皇室的猫猫~	#后宫作猫传 #甄嬛传 #我家宠物好可爱 #交出你的 cat tax #cattax #猫税 #后宫猫	video of Royal harem life of Chinese cat	CN/EN	video	CN	317k	16k	15-01-2025
猫税是美国人的笑话吗? Is the cat tax a joke on Americans?	#cat #cattax #tiktokrefugee	Hello everybody, I have one quick question, I saw one creator post why are all of your Americans posting cats? And then, I thought I had to do that on this App. Everyone's cat taxing me, so was this a virus joke on Americans? cause if it was, it was very funny. Anyway, I will always post my cat if you ask me to or not. Im glad you like her. And I like you guys too. Thanks for being my friend on this App. Bye.	EN with CN subtitles	video	US	67k	13k	17-01-2025
迫不及待等着我的付款 在美国, 现在是“报税季”, 这意味着是时候收退税款了。不过, 我觉得也该是中国人把我们的“猫税”退还给我们的时候了! 我们一直在通过发送猫咪照片来缴纳猫税, 现在该是退税的时候了! (RedNote emoji)	#报税季 #猫税 #猫税退款 #tiktokrefugee #cattax #american #english #sharcyournotes #globalvillage #猫咪照片	在美国, 现在正值“报税季”, 我们通常会收到退税款。所以, 这也意味着中国人应该把“猫税”退还给我们美国人了! with a cat meme (付钱)	CN	pic*1 (cat meme)	US	18k	11k	09-02-2025
You have to know about here	#Tiktok #tiktokrefugee #chinese #cattax #TisonRED	hello any tiktok refugees let me tell you be careful when using emojis on Chinese social media for example this one you never use it This one is fake smile it can mean you are so annoying or I hate you, I'm speechless or F word anything but an actual smile follow me, know more about China.	EN	video	CN	12.3k	7160	18-01-2025
TikTok refugee cat heard there was a cat tax!	#tiktokrefugee #cat #cattax	cat pics	CN	pic*4	US	2.3k	654	15-01-2025
Hello please let us stay!!!	#cattax #hello #tiktokrefugee #cats	Paying cat tax so I can stay on Rednote 缴纳猫税, 这样我就可以继续使用小红书	EN with CN subtitles	video	Canada	27k	4743	16-01-2025
Cat tax Hi all. Here is me paying my cat tax, please enjoy it! 这是我的猫税, 请享受! 爱来自美国	#tiktokrefugee #cattax #foreigner #rednote	pictures of cats	EN/CN	pic*2	US	35k	4548	15-01-2025
CAT TAX FROM CALI 来自加州的猫税 Thanks for letting us crash on your couch. Here's my offerings. The shorthair is a boy named Bob and the cakuci us a girl named Marley. 谢谢你让我们在你们的沙发上休息, 这是我的礼物, 短毛猫是一只名叫鲍勃的男孩, 三色猫是一只名叫马利的女孩。	#tiktokrefugee #tiktok #TikTokban #cat/cats	CAT TAX FROM CALIFORNIA 来自加州的猫税 with pics of cats	EN/CN	pic*7	US	30k	6848	13-01-2025

Post	Hashtags	Content	language	Type	IP	likes	comments	Time of Post
<p>Hello! 新朋友们好,我是来交猫税的。作为一名来自美国的协会会员,我听说我们应该缴纳猫税才能考虑被接纳为会员。我非常乐意支付。请向我的猫咪 Lili 问好,并给我发一张你的猫(或狗)的照片。</p> <p>As a new member from the US, I've heard that we should pay cat tax in order to be considered for acceptance as a member. I am more than happy to pay. Please say hello to my cat Lili and send me a picture of your cat (or dog).</p>	#猫好 #tiktokrefugee #cats #americas #cattax #猫税	cat pics	CN/EN	pic*9	US	75k	29k	21-01-2025
<p>Hello 这是我的兔子🐰</p> <p>我的兔子叫nana,是我生日的时候我的男朋友送给我的礼物。我们都爱它,虽然她有点调皮还贪吃。因为我没带猫,没办法交猫税。对不起,所以我用兔子代替可以吗?我很喜欢中国,这些是翻译,如果有冒犯真的对不起。</p>	#兔子日常 #tiktok #tiktokrefugee #cattax #猫税	rabbit pic	CN	pic*1	US	35k	6424	14-01-2025
<p>关于猫猫税</p> <p>最近看到好多外国友人在交猫税</p> <p>我发现好多外国的猫猫看起来像是一个三角形△(图上只画了美国国旗 但是不仅仅在美国)</p> <p>但是大多数中国猫猫是圆形的o</p> <p>why?</p>	#猫税 #cat #cattax #tiktok #tiktokrefugees #地球村	为什么美国猫是△而中国猫是o的呢? Why are American cats triangular and Chinese cats round? But cats are cute no matter what!	CN/EN	pic	CN	13k	6095	18-01-2025
<p>WHY TT refugees' cat looks more FIT?为啥老外的猫都那么瘦?</p> <p>刷了一堆评论区的猫税我发现老外的猫都好瘦啊不像国内的猫都圆滚滚的</p> <p>标题TRANSLATE: After browsing a bunch of comments about the "cat tax", I noticed that cats owned by foreigners seem to be quite skinny. They are not like the chubby cats we often see in China.</p>	#cattax #tiktokrefugee	WHY TT refugees' cat looks more FIT?为啥老外的猫都那么瘦?	CN/EN	pic	CN	1888	3439	14-01-2025
<p>你好呀外国友人!小咪在 Rednote欢迎你!</p> <p>TikTok refugees</p> <p>Welcome to Readnote</p> <p>I'm mimi guoguo</p> <p>(灵感来源:前百万 Baiwan)</p>	#tiktok #tiktokrefugee #cattax #rednote #抖音 #tiktok难民 #cat #pet #欢迎	Hello! US user! I'm Chinese Mini Guoguo. Welcome to RedNote. Could you show me your cat photo or be my English teacher? I'm Chinese girl. I can share my canned food with you. I guess we are besties now.	EN/CN	video	CN	11k	3064	14-01-2025
<p>李华的信终于寄出去了</p> <p>Hi, Tiktok Refugees. Most Chinese people have written letters to an imaginary foreign friend in the name of Li Hua during their English final exams. Unfortunately, these letters were never sent.</p> <p>But now you've suddenly appeared here. I just want you to know that perhaps this time, Li Hua can really receive a reply. Welcome to stay and contribute more "cat tax" btw.</p> <p>嗨,抖音视频版(TikTok)的朋友们。大多数中国人都曾在英语期末考试时,以“李华”的名义给一位虚构的外国朋友写过信。遗憾的是,这些信从未寄出。但如今,你们突然出现在这里。只想让你们知道或许这次,“李华”真的可以收到回信了。欢迎留下来,顺便多贡献点“猫税”。</p>	#记录吧就现在 #tiktokrefugee #tiktokrefugee #tiktok难民 #文化输出 #cat #猫 #cattax		CN/EN	pic	CN	47k	2368	21-01-2025
<p>TikTok Refugee Cat Tax(交猫税)</p> <p>最近,像我这样的“TikTok难民”正在大量涌入小红书,在我看来,这不仅仅是一次简单的迁移,而是我们共同见证历史的一部分。TikTok的改变让我们这些创作者和用户不得不寻找新的家园,而小红书正是这个家。或许现在还很难完全理解,但我们需要这个平台,我们需要一个能够延续创作、表达自我、分享生活的地方。</p> <p>在这个特别的时刻,我对这里的社区充满感激。无论是新的朋友还是老用户,你们的包容和支持都让我们感到温暖。希望我们的加入不仅能带来多样化的内容,也能让这个社区更加丰富多彩。为了表示感谢,我特意带来“猫税”!这次的“猫税”是一段关于我新加入家庭的小女孩的视频,她是一只可爱的“中式混血小猫”,正在和我一起用猫咪的角色扮演为大家带来欢乐。希望你们喜欢!</p> <p>Recently, "TikTok refugees" like me have been flooding to Little Red Book. In my opinion, this isn't just a simple migration-it's a part of history we're making together. The changes on TikTok have pushed creators and users like us to seek a new home, and Little Red Book is exactly that place.</p> <p>In this special moment, I'm deeply grateful for the warmth of this community. I hope our arrival not only brings diverse content but also makes this community even more vibrant and fun! To show my gratitude, I've come to pay the "cat tax".</p>	#TikTokRefugee #TikTok #TikTokBan #CatTax #交猫税	I heard there is a cat tax on here, let me show you my cat. 这是我的猫	CN/EN	video	Canada	9965	2365	18-01-2025
<p>为什么中国的猫好圆好可爱?</p> <p>Why are cats in china so round?</p> <p>Chinese cats are famous for their round faces!</p> <p>I even want to move to China.</p> <p>中国的猫以圆脸而闻名,我甚至考虑会搬到中国很想看看圆滚滚的猫咪大人。</p>	#cattax #tiktok #tiktokrefugee #猫税 #tiktok #xiaogongshu #中国朋友 #我心依旧日是中国心 #外国人在中国 #tiktokrefugee	Why are cats in china round?为什么中国的猫这么圆?	CN/EN	pic	Canada	2439	1993	21-01-2025
<p>Hi I'm Chinese cat, nice to meet u- welcome- and give me ur data, and cat tax lpay methhhhh (lol) :vivo x200pro</p>	#我家宠物好可爱 #cattax #猫咪 #小猫咪 #cats #refugee #tiktok难民 #交出你的cat tax #手机摄影 #ipsonRED		EN	video	CN	27k	1785	25-01-2025
<p>来听最新洗脑单曲《猫税之歌》</p> <p>专正在循环播放(猫税之歌)</p>	#tiktokrefugee #tiktok #cattax #cats #奇怪的文化输出 #动画 #猫	a song of cat tax	CN	video	CN	18k	1568	20-01-2025

Post	Hashtags	Content	language	Type	IP	likes	comments	Time of Post
<p>When Chinese People Say“吸猫”(XimiMiao)...</p> <p>Recently, TikTok refugees have been super active in paying their "cat tax".</p> <p>But here's the thing: many of you might have noticed Chinese friends saying "吸猫" in the comments. And guess what? Google Translate turned it into su*k puy**.</p> <p>oh. My God</p> <p>I let me clear this up real quick-what we actually mean is something like snuggling up to your adorable kitty , showering it with love andkisses, just like the meme in Pic 3.</p> <p>So, everyone, fo me to learn some authentic Chinese internet culture. Let's avoid more L.O misundersandings like this one. FYI, Pic 4 has already gone viral across Chinese social media-it's too funny to miss!</p> <p>最近tt难民们都积极在缴纳猫税!大家注意到评论区有很多中国朋友在说“吸猫”,谷歌翻译把它翻译成了su*k pu**y的意思...</p> <p>我的个老天爷啊...</p> <p>我们真正想表达的意思是 亲亲你的小猫咪 ,就像图2的表情包一样的意思...</p> <p>赶紧学习中国文化吧,别再生这样笑得满地找牙的事情了...图4已经在中文网络传疯了..</p>	#吸猫 #cattax #tiktokban2025 #tiktokrefugee #文化差异 #全世界都说中国话 #mandarin #learn Chinese #tiktokrefugee #xmaso	<p>让我吸猫?</p> <p>Clarification</p> <p>Let me suck the pussy???</p> <p>What? What? You think!</p>	EN/CN	pic*3	CN	8009	1571	17-01-2025

Comments Sample Example:

Below are the comments and replies from Post #1 and Post #2 as references. Each post was saved in a single EXCEL sheet for keeping the post and the selected comments and replies.

ID	Post	Hashtags	Content	language	Type	IP	likes	comments	Time of Post								
Eidaniel	这是我的猫, 以及更多 This is my cat too. And more	#tiktokrefugee #野耳 #萌宠 #宠物日常 orah	Selfie with cat cat anime raccoon	CN/EN	pic+9	US	16k	2752	16:01-2025								
																	
No.	ID	Comments	Language	IP	Likes	reply 1	ID	IP	Likes	reply 2	ID	IP	Likes	reply 3	ID	Likes	
1	明眼明	我勒个天,你连牌子小图都!!!	CN	CN	2.8k	它们真美,但我们是朋友!	Eidaniel (author)	US	3.2k	小猫咪不用养,是野生的,在美国有人养小猫的会像吃他们家养的院子里的东西	陈龙波输出	CN	0.26k	朋友,你当然没有确定你在发手机? (liken by author)	明眼明	0.22k	
2	阿雨鸭	我盲看你的颜色头像! 蓝色是颜色头发没有那么多(只解释),不是这个干净的蓝色。好的颜色最可爱,我也来发我的猫! 猫皮那买一张的猫皮!	CN	CN	1.1k	谢谢! Omg! 我想分享你的照片?	Eidaniel (author)	US	0.24k	是在发的图,它一只眼睛坏了,我带它做了手术,现在没事。正在Work		阿雨鸭 (commenter)	CN	0.27k	这是模仿艺术家的样子,我想它照片修改了眼睛颜色,让它看起来像猫,因为非黑非白我家猫眼睛是蓝色的	阿雨鸭 (commenter)	0.24k
3	德德	You know, when paying cat tax, there is a probability that your cat will be loved, which is normal. 你知不知道,当你付猫税时,有概率你的猫会被爱,这是正常现象。(with a meme)	EN/CN	CN	0.95k		Eidaniel (author)	US	0.77k	稀有IP	Tanqunfly	CN	0.02k				
4	丹尼莱土豆	恭喜你成为我的今日猫友,明天记得保持愉快,化个妆,保持好心情。 Congratulations on paying your taxes today, and keep up the good work tomorrow. Have a good time in Little Red Book.	CN/EN	CN	0.37k	这会从我的朋友圈消失 (doge)		Eidaniel (author)	US	0.25k		丹尼莱土豆	CN	4			
5	木村与森		meme	CN	0.34k		Eidaniel (author)	US	0.18k	You already know how to use emojis	木村与森	CN	20	I usually watch and never interact haha.I wish western apps had emojis like this	Eidaniel (author)	17	
6	这三位是最好看的女士			CN	4		Eidaniel (author)	US	1								
7	memo	天啊这包有毛的猫都好可爱呀! 我好爱	CN	CN	2	好可爱	R.	CN			猫肉肉 回家要走走水渠	CN					
8	888	Your cat is very cool like you. (liken by author)	EN	CN	2												
9	鱼鱼鱼鱼	喵喵喵喵喵喵 小可爱	CN	CN		喵喵喵喵喵喵之前刷到这个帖子了,因为太好看了	鱼鱼鱼	CN		干斯面	梦晴音	CN					
10	Elena Day	These trah pandas are hilarious man (liken by author)	EN	CN	1												

No.	ID	Post	Hashtags	Content	language	Type	IP	likes	comments	Time of Post								
2	超级小乖	Hi China! 这是我缴纳的赋税, 请欣赏 小红书的网友们大家好! 我最喜欢中国的中国原住民 。这是我的小红书主页, 非常 可爱哦, please enjoy!	#我心依然是 中国心 #kokok #kokokrefugee #交出你的cat tax #赋税 #自拍 #我和我的猫 咪	Selfie with cat alone	CN/EN	pic*4	CN	142k	13k	16-01-2025								
No.	ID	Comments	Language	IP	Likes	reply 1	ID	IP	Likes	reply 2	ID	IP	Likes	reply 3	ID	Likes		
1	兜兜转转	*我是喜欢中国的中国原住民*笑死 我了哈哈哈哈哈哈哈哈哈	CN	CN	35k	我在美国住了0年, 我喜欢 中国文化, 我自己学习了 中文, 中文真的学的非常 好, 但是我已经不需要 翻译器 0	超级小乖 (author)	CN	33k	很有实力	泪眼一直下 吗	CN	5.4k	笑死在美国住了0年哈哈 哈哈哈哈哈	奥伯利算小 土豆 (weight fever版)	9.8k		
2	巴黎申创火腿 抽渣狂想家	老哥在小红书交朋友的 话都是把猫都丢一边 然后戴上蓝牙耳机走到 镜头前喵一声的 doge	CN	CN	26k	Really?	超级小乖 (author)	CN	8.3k	Yes, please 帮 信me	巴黎申创火腿 抽渣狂想家 (commenter)	CN	4.8k	我可以作证她说的 是真的	夫人请吃的 (YAO)	2.6k		
3	扭扭闪闪(p_s)	本地西洋菜	CN	CN	25k	快速快哉 笑的小女 子一命呜呼	哦	CN	0.8k	故秀之	一个嘛 哇哇 哇哇	CN	76	老菜蹄子	海棠花不准	20		
4	Ravenightingale	是以俄国真的一集	CN	CN	5.1k	来自广阔东方	超级小乖 (author)	CN	2.7k	你吃橙子皮	摆烂小鱼	CN	1	广东, 广阔的东方	白南翔	0.24k		
5		 在一堆难民里刷到了老熟人	CN	CN	5.1k	你的图片怎么有声音	超级小乖 (author)	CN	0.9k	哈哈哈哈哈 巴巴格	触触大魔王	CN	72					
6	赫赫城	耐心, 也许交上来称自己就 够了	CN	CN	20		赫赫城	CN	1	嘿嘿	画画 so easy	CN						
7	椰一登	它会抓老鼠! 它会抓小 鸟! 它还听话! 让它不 要再抓了, 它就再也 不抓了	CN	CN	6													
8	Kity不基唯	中国人对帅哥都很包容, 不交税也是可以玩小 红书的	CN	CN	5	这家伙就是中国的	momo	CN	3									
9	墨西哥的芭 朵	 很大觉得这雨的小华很 像艾尔南森	CN	CN	4	这个黑衣服和发型, 甚 至气质都很像	墨西哥的芭 朵	CN	2									
10	语文猪	@momo 冬日暖阳 看这个美男子, 深深 放心	CN	CN	4													

# APPENDIX 2. OPEN-CODING

I coded the content of Post #1 - #10 and all the comments one by one and came up with the first version of the codebook (See Appendix 3).

Key words - Post 1	Key words - Post 2	Key words - Post 3	Key words - Post 4	Key words - Post 5
Social norm - #metas as a community sharing rule Migration between platforms - the laughing #tiktokrefugee Cross-cultural communication - bilingual content Humor - post raccoons can be seen as a humorous parody of the "cat tax" culture self-presentation - selfie with cat	cultural identity recognition - "中国心" "中国人在此" cross-cultural communication - bilingual content positive/praise - 喜欢中国 self-presentation - selfie friendly interaction and engagement - 朋友们大家好 Playful/self-irony - he is not a real cat refuge but performs to be one	Pet Anthropomorphism - The post introduces itself from the first-person perspective of a cat, calling itself an "egregious cat" and humorously talking about its fat brothers and sisters, showing an anthropomorphic expression that makes the post more interesting and approachable. Cross-Cultural Communication - The post was published in English and introduced Chinese RedNote to American users. community engagement - ask for cat pics	Online Social Norms & Community Engagement: The user humorously accepts the community-driven rule of "cat tax". Shows a self-awareness and willingness to integrate into RedNote culture. Cross-Platform Migration (#tiktokrefugee): The use of #tiktokrefugee suggests the migration of TikTok users to RedNote, potentially due to platform restrictions. Humor & Pet Anthropomorphism: "Mr. Boogie is lazy and only likes wet food." Personalizing the cat enhances the emotional appeal and humor of the post. Platform adaptation: she mentioned that she paid this cat tax and therefore, she wanted to stay on this platform.	Humor & Meme Play: The user subverts the "cat tax" meme by posting a fox instead of a cat. The phrase "alternative tax payment" makes the post sound official or transactional, enhancing the comedic effect. Cross-Cultural Meme Adoption (#tiktokrefugee): The #tiktokrefugee tag implies that the user is a TikTok migrant, highlighting platform transitions. Pet Substitution & Community Engagement: By using a fox instead of a cat, the user engages playfully with pet tax culture while also challenging its cat-centric nature. Cross-cultural resonance - they all know the same song
suprise/block - "我那个字" (miss OMO) pet anthropomorphism - "他们好野, 但他们是朋友" Cross-cultural comparison - compare raccoons in America and China teasing - "居然没有睡觉" "还在玩手机吗?"	humor/self-teasing - "我在美国住了6年" Emotional Resonance and Engagement - "笑死了" Supportive and Positive Interaction - "厉害厉害"	Social Media Norms - mention cat tax and post cat pic Exaggeration & Humor - "I'll gladly give you all of my dum" Praise & Affectionate Language - "so cute" "太可爱了" "kiss kisses" Bilingual Communication & Cross-Cultural Interaction Pet Anthropomorphism - "宝宝" "亲亲"	Cat Longevity & Experience Sharing: The conversation shifts to the age of cats, sharing experiences about older pets. Community Engagement & Recognition: Users praise longevity as a sign of good care and healthy cats. Adoption & Parahel Debate: The mention of "土猫 (street-bred cats)" being healthier suggests a cultural perspective on pet ownership in China.	Viral Song Reference: "What does the fox say?" references the viral song "The Fox" (2013) by Ylvis. Cross-cultural resonance and others humorously respond with lyrics, continuing the meme culture. Playful Nostalgia & Pop Culture Engagement: Users play along with the joke, reinforcing a shared internet culture. Cross-cultural resonance - they all know the same song
positive humor/teasing - "猫眼眯眯", "猫眼眯眯" looks like he winks all the time praise/support - "喜欢" "羡慕" "可爱" concern/care - requesting cat photos and stories teasing and initiation - also want to buy a pirate costume for her cat	humor/teasing	Cross-Cultural Comparison - 感觉他的眼睛都好使 我们的眼睛都好使 Self-Depressing Humor - 吃上上面那碗过 Cultural Differences & Teasing - "猫" "狗" 会都不咋滴 👉👉👉 (The cat owner's food quality is bad extends the joke, suggesting that the owners are underfed while the cats are well-fed, a common internet meme. Community Engagement: The @ mention ("@浑身真的咕咕咕") indicates a shared inside joke, enhancing group cohesion.	Traditional Cat Behavior: This question reflects a classic association: "Do cats still hunt mice?" Playful Praise & Humor: "Good child lol" humorously praises the cat, reinforcing affection for pets. Highlighting Cat's Energy: The phrase "You have an active cat" contrasts with the "lazy" personality described in the post.	Playful Policing of Meme Rules: The comment pretends to enforce "cat tax" rules, rejecting the fox substitution. Community Interaction & Playful Acceptance: The author plays along by apologizing, reinforcing meme engagement. Humor - the cat looks like fox, the use of meme
humor/joke - "your cat will be leaved" "meme of a sack" Cross-cultural communication - bilingual content Online social norms - The reference to "cat tax" is a well-known internet meme, which participants likely recognize and find humorous.	Sarcasm/teasing - "本地西作菜" "老婆孩子" Specific language style - 文言文 praise - "秀"	Praise & Admiration: The replies emphasize admiration ("elegant," "love that name," "best emoji), reinforcing positive engagement. Cross-Cultural Engagement: English and Chinese speakers interact seamlessly, indicating international reach. Minimalist Emotional Expression: Meme's reply ("👉👉👉") represents emotion through emojis, which transcends language barriers.	Cross-Cultural Pet Comparisons: This discussion reflects globalization in pet ownership, recognizing that certain breeds exist in multiple countries. Humor/teasing - "中国也有英短猫"	Challenging the cat tax rules: Pay taxes with photos of raccoons Humor: using memes and fake certificates Friendly engagement: "thank you friend"
Positive emotion Humor/joke - fake certificate Online social norms - sharing a common understanding of the "cat tax" meme Friendly and Supportive Interaction - "I will continue to pay taxes to the best of my ability"	Sarcasm/teasing - "以假乱真" "广东, 广西的东方" identity recognition - "来自东方" online interact - 晒好友	Personal Sharing & Community Engagement: The comment and replies contribute to personalized interactions, connecting users through shared pet ownership. Curiosity & Fascination: Users express amusement and questions, fostering continued discussion. Affirmation & Relatability: "Your cat looks like my cat" fosters a sense of connection. Friendly & Supportive Tone: The questions and compliments encourage engaging conversation.	Shock & Admiration for Cat Longevity: Commenters express amazement at an 18-year-old cat. Lighthearted Joke: "老太多" "能活60多" exaggerates longevity for comedic effect. Tough Cat Personalities: "我被他揍了" humorously attributes human-like aggression to the cat.	self-presentation: post cat pic humor: using funny meme factual resonance: "glad to see this emoji"
Humor - meme Playful and Light-Hearted Tone - meme Praise/supportive - "You already know how to use emojis" Platform Differences/teget - "I wish western apps had emojis like this"	Humor and Sarcasm - "老熟人" teasing cat name Cultural Symbols and Humor Friendly Interaction	Cross-Species Inclusion: Despite the cat-focused theme, a rescued hummingbird gains attention, broadening engagement. Curiosity & Fascination: Users express amusement and questions, fostering continued discussion. Bilingual Follow-Up: Kymie responds in both languages, showing cultural adaptation.	Meme Evolution & Linguistic Play: Users playfully dissect the origin of "cat tax", mistaking it as "no tax". Language Confusion & Online Culture: "Our English didn't even sound like Chinese" humorously reflects language misunderstandings in meme adoption.	humor: swim to US teasing: "政治幽默" humor: using meme
Humor - meme of showing love (A cartoon bear is using his mobile phone to click "赞") Online social norms - posting cat photo without saying anything	kindness/praise/friendly - "开心" humor/teasing - "交上来帮自己"	self-presentation - post cat pics without saying anything	Cross-cultural communication - use English to express self-presentation - posting cat pic online social norm - common rules	Community Recognition: 我也有 (晒图) praise: 好秀秀 humor: using meme
Praise - "好可爱" "好漂亮" Resonance and recognition Humor - interesting meme	Exaggeration - the use of ! Pet Anthropomorphism - "我让它不要再抓了" Self-Presentation 分享自己跟猫的照片和有趣的描述 Friendly Social Atmosphere - 晒好友	humor - sharing owl shaped cat pic to amuse audiences self-presentation - to attract views	cultural different - Chinese people think there are no 梅花猪 in US	Community-Driven Playfulness: Commenters continue the tax theme by joking about putting cats in sacks, a common internet meme about mischievous cats. Meme Integration: "喜欢橘色的" plays into the "orange cat stereotype", reinforcing pet-related humor.
Praise/supportive - "very cool" friendly attitude - liked by author positive interaction	Humor and Teasing Identity and Community Acceptance - "这状况就是中国的"	community engagement - post cat pic self-presentation	self-presentation - posting cat pic	Legal & Cultural Pet Ownership Discussion: Comments discuss focus on pets, mixing humor with real-world pet-keeping culture. humor: vocal ping xit
Special cultural identity and symbolic meaning - 小浣熊 = 干饭团 positive emotion - 咕咕咕咕咕 praise/supportive - 晒好漂亮 Common interest - "毛孩晒过" community interaction - 晒好友	External references - refers to other things Cultural Resonance - refers to another characteristic in other cultural background	praise - aww	suprise/block	Internet Lore & Meme Origin Story: Explains the backstory of "cat tax" in Chinese forums. Language Evolution in Memes: Highlights how translation mistakes create viral internet culture.
Humor/Slang Usage - "Trash panda" is a playful, informal term for raccoon Emotional Resonance and Shared Humor: The use of "hilarious" along with the laughing emoji 😂 expresses the commenter's enjoyment of the content positive/viral social environment friendly/supportive - liked by author	appreciation/praise - "美男子" "深得我心" social internet norm - 晒好友	Cross-Species Participation: The commenter engages with a cat-themed post despite having a dog, showing that pet lovers across different categories still want to participate. Bilingual Communication: The English-Chinese mix shows an awareness of cross-cultural audiences and a possible attempt to connect with both English and Chinese speakers. Community Engagement: This response subtly challenges the "cat tax" meme, implying that even dog owners can take part in the trend.	self-presentation - posting cat pic	Humor & Metaphor: The comment humorously compares the cat to "striped eye bread", referencing its striped fur pattern and loaf-like sleeping posture. Meme Format ("...jpg"): The ".jpg" at the end mimics meme naming conventions, making the comment more internet-friendly and playful. More Food-Based Comparisons: The author continues the joke by comparing the cat to a rice cucumber, further emphasizing its sleeping posture and shape. Playful & Interactive Tone: The use of emojis 🍌 keeps the conversation lighthearted.

Key words - Post 6	Key words - Post 7	Key words - Post 8	Key words - Post 9	Key words - Post 10
<p><b>Movie Adaptation &amp; Online Social Niche:</b> The phrase “流行不起来” (didn't take off) humorously modifies the “cat tax” meme by attributing music to an alternative “payment”. This demonstrates meme remixing, where internet humor is used to present non-related content (music) in this case.</p> <p><b>Cross-Platform &amp; Cross-Cultural Engagement:</b> The Weibo/Kuaishou linking suggests that Rock/Pop and others migrated from TikTok to Weibo/Douyin.</p> <p><b>Bilingual Content (CN/EN):</b> Shows an intentional appeal to a global audience, engaging both Western and Chinese users. English for cross-promotion / Chinese for meme engagement / a strategic way to maximize reach.</p> <p><b>Meme &amp; Digital Performance:</b> Turning the cat tax meme into a performative adaptation, linking internet culture with digital self-promotion. Hashtags (#music, #viral) indicate an attempt to make this post go viral, leveraging both meme, culture and music content trends.</p>	<p>The user humorously engages with the “cat tax” meme, explicitly mentioning American cat tax and acknowledging the translation attempt (看到这个词翻译是上猫税!).</p> <p><b>Bilingual language choice (CN/EN):</b> Suggests an attempt to reach both Chinese and English-speaking users.</p> <p><b>Hashtag inclusion:</b> Shows platform migration (Weibo/Kuaishou) → Suggests the TikTok-RedNote migration trend is still active.</p>	<p>The dramatic storytelling (“valued above the sun, fought three bears, climbed two mountains”) is an exaggerated heroic journey narrative, commonly used for humorous effect.</p> <p><b>“CAT TAX”</b> → The post continues with the internet “cat tax” meme, where users “pay” for participation by sharing a picture.</p> <p>The over-the-top, expressive form of humor (cat + digital + media) creates more trends, making the post highly shareable. The TikTok/Kuaishou linking suggests the meme’s migration from TikTok to RedNote, reinforcing the TikTok-RedNote migration trend.</p> <p>The phrase “republic” (“共和国”) humorously reflects the struggle of translating to a new platform, mirroring real-life experiences of content migration.</p> <p>The mixing of the cat’s and person’s expressions makes the image visually eye-catching and shareable, increasing engagement potential.</p> <p><b>Hyper-expressive, exaggerated emotions</b> are common in viral reaction memes, which could make the post more aversive/catchy for high engagement.</p>	<p>Calling it a “T!T refugee cat tax” humorously acknowledges platform migration struggles while engaging with internet cat culture.</p> <p>The description “narcissistically throws up next to my plate” adds a self-deprecating, humorous touch, making the cat seem relatable and flawed yet lovable.</p> <p>Remarking the cat from China to Chevy reflects a familiar, affectionate internet trend where pet names become cultural and more personal over time.</p> <p>The bilingual addition “这是美国猫税” (这是为美国猫!) directly promotes the user’s music career, blending content pet content with marketing strategy.</p> <p>The surreal, humorous storytelling approach makes the promotion feel less forced, increasing the likelihood of audience engagement.</p> <p>The high-quality image with a cozy, aesthetically pleasing background (drapery, holiday lights) makes the post visually engaging, fitting within RedNote’s preference for warm, lifestyle-oriented content.</p> <p>Stylized with pet-relevant personal branding, where followers feel closer to the creator through personal glimpses into their life.</p> <p><b>Cross-cultural communication - bilingual content</b></p>	<p>The “normal cat” concept aligns with the growing trend of pet-driven culture where users share intimate details post through Instagram. The post taps into viral aesthetics, blending wholesome humor with cute pet content, making it highly shareable.</p> <p>Weibo/Kuaishou linking signals that this user migrated from TikTok to Weibo, emphasizing how content trends spill across platforms.</p> <p>The “cat tax” phrase further reinforces internet participation norms, where users “pay” for engagement by posting cat photos.</p> <p>A cat dressed as a normal cat is both endearing and humorous, making it an ideal candidate for meme creation and playful audience response.</p>
<p><b>Cross-Platform Expansion:</b> Users discovering the song on QQ Music (a Chinese platform) show how the meme is traveling across digital ecosystems.</p> <p><b>Cross-Cultural Engagement:</b> Western artists engaging with Chinese platforms reflects cultural adaptation and localized digital presence.</p> <p><b>Personalized Effortlessness:</b> Mentions of QQ Music &amp; responses by the author reinforce engagement, boosting the song’s visibility.</p>	<p><b>Meme Expansion</b> → Users create a humorous “cat tax” narrative, turning the post into a playful interactive space.</p> <p><b>Community Engagement</b> → The author actively participates in the joke, reinforcing community bonding.</p> <p><b>Cross-Cultural Social Media &amp; Subculture Development</b> → “Only Five Meme Cat” becomes a niche meme within the meme, showing how digital communication co-creates trends.</p>	<p><b>Playful Cat Ownership Meme</b> → The phrase “meow meow” plays into a common internet joke where users humorously “claim” ownership of cats.</p> <p><b>Cat Personalization &amp; Internet Creativity</b> → Other replies expand the joke, adding different “reasons” (e.g., pet, cat, catlover).</p> <p><b>Humorous “love” meme</b></p>	<p>The “cat being loved” joke is a trending internet gag, humorously suggesting that cats can be “loved” as pet or cat tax payments.</p> <p>The call-and-response format (“Oh no!” → “Now your cat is loved!”) shows community engagement and playful meme construction.</p>	<p>The caption hints at different cat overlays by normalizing content, creating a common thread joke.</p> <p>Calling the cat “Red Note” humorously integrates the pet’s localized experience, reinforcing how pet fashion often leads to the internationally funny content.</p>
<p><b>The “My eye will sleep” comment:</b> Highlights late-night engagement trends on platforms like RedNote.</p> <p><b>“Cat tax” humor</b> is expanded to a subculture, showing how users playfully remix the meme to new contexts.</p>	<p><b>Humor Through Fair “Cat Taxation” Threat</b> → The idea that cats can be “taxed” reinforces the meme’s role as a common social rule.</p> <p><b>Community engagement</b> from the author knows the meme is a joke, she still very vociferously is trying to get the cat.</p> <p><b>Viral Spread:</b> The “无猫了” comment humorously implies that this joke has already become a meme.</p>	<p>Humor with interesting cat meme good cat shows a praise of cat’s cut but the reply to author using her cat’s name with an angry face is also humorous (no longer).</p> <p>which trigger more praise and attraction in this comment section.</p>	<p>Users respond to the “cat tax” concept like a dystopian joke about a future where everyone’s cat is “taxed” or “taken.”</p> <p>The English-Chinese mix shows how memes transcend language barriers in global internet culture.</p>	<p>The “My eye will sleep” comment plays into the late-night engagement meme, where users “pay” for attention by staying up late.</p> <p>The clarifying response (explaining the meme) shows how internet humor spreads across cultural contexts.</p>
<p><b>Praise:</b> “颜色太好了” (“I like to wear this purple on my head”) → cross-cultural communication - bilingual content.</p> <p><b>Contextual reference:</b> Shows users try to play her color, to personal life sharing.</p> <p><b>Praise:</b> “what an interesting combination!” → ask for help “where I can listen the complete song?”</p>	<p><b>Humor/ Joke:</b> pretending using pants to pay cat tax → cross-cultural communication - bilingual content.</p> <p><b>Contextual reference:</b> Shows users try to play her color, to personal life sharing.</p> <p><b>Praise:</b> “what an interesting combination!” → ask for help “where I can listen the complete song?”</p>	<p>The self-deprecating humor of “nobody even my fat cat” prompts humorous responses from the community, reinforcing pet appreciation culture.</p> <p><b>Contextual reference:</b> Shows users try to play her color, to personal life sharing.</p> <p><b>Praise:</b> “what an interesting combination!” → ask for help “where I can listen the complete song?”</p>	<p>The “nobody even my fat cat” prompts humorous responses from the community, reinforcing pet appreciation culture.</p> <p><b>Contextual reference:</b> Shows users try to play her color, to personal life sharing.</p> <p><b>Praise:</b> “what an interesting combination!” → ask for help “where I can listen the complete song?”</p>	<p>pet anthropomorphism: “你总是‘上’”</p>
<p><b>Cross-Platform Streaming Behavior:</b> Users are actively searching for the song across platforms, indicating strong audience interest.</p> <p><b>Bilingual Engagement:</b> Fans interact in both English &amp; Chinese, making it clear that RedNote is fostering a multilingual music community.</p> <p><b>Praise:</b> “what an interesting combination!” → ask for help “where I can listen the complete song?”</p>	<p><b>Marital Art, Tropes &amp; Cultural Symbolism</b> → “Kang Fu Cat” references Chinese marital arts &amp; pop culture stereotypes.</p> <p><b>Global Cultural Exchange Through Memes</b> → English speakers engage with Chinese internet humor, reinforcing RedNote’s cross-cultural reach.</p>	<p><b>“So Goodies to Mommy” Playful Cat &amp; Fake Narrative</b> → Asking implies the cat is being “taken away”, adding to the meme-to-meme storytelling.</p> <p><b>Visual Elements Drive Meme Resonance</b> → The comment about the “blinky cat” suggests the image itself is an additional joke.</p>	<p>Using cat job to self-praise and engage in fan community.</p> <p><b>Praise:</b> “你可真厉害得厉害!”</p> <p>This cat meme is showing how pet pictures are repurposed in digital expression, the meme of cat being a baby is consistent and fun.</p>	<p>The midnight joke combines time difference with the “trending pet” meme, further reinforcing playful internet engagement.</p> <p>The “nobody” reply adds another layer to the joke, showing how the post author engages in meme-building with their audience.</p> <p>pet anthropomorphism: 法国社会学家 (Humor using cat to show “nobody”)</p>
<p><b>Praise:</b> “一个人一月只睡最多三次” → Fan Generated Content: The creation of a post art as a fan tribute.</p>	<p><b>Meme Humor &amp; Digital Communication:</b> The “sneaking and excusing” joke is a common internet trope, often applied to online digital life or work-related situations.</p> <p><b>The dramatic framing</b> makes the post engaging, turning further storytelling.</p> <p><b>Community engagement</b> of the joke: The “nobody” response extends the joke, making the comment section an interactive storytelling space.</p> <p><b>Anthropomorphism &amp; Digital Play:</b> The cat is treated like a human character, reflecting how pet owners apply human-like behaviors to their pets in internet culture.</p>	<p><b>“偷猫” (stealing cat) comment</b> assigns a personality trait to the cat, reinforcing pet anthropomorphism.</p> <p><b>Meme Adaptation &amp; Internet Creativity</b> → Internet users build upon the cat’s expression to create new meanings.</p>	<p>Exaggerated cat emotions highlight the humorous atmosphere (she can show a praise of cat’s cut meme even as a meme joke).</p>	<p>The midnight joke combines time difference with the “trending pet” meme, further reinforcing playful internet engagement.</p> <p>The “nobody” reply adds another layer to the joke, showing how the post author engages in meme-building with their audience.</p> <p>pet anthropomorphism: 法国社会学家 (Humor using cat to show “nobody”)</p>
<p><b>Praise:</b> “music tax is enough” (“This tax music” is the meme humor - meme of cat with emphasis listening to music)</p> <p><b>Community engagement:</b> acceptance of “music tax”</p>	<p><b>Emotional Resonance:</b> The phrase “音乐税” (music tax) reflects an affectionate tone, emphasizing bonding through shared activities for pets.</p> <p><b>Cross-Cultural &amp; CN/EN Discussion:</b> Monitoring the electric shocker introduces a secondary topic of pet care, shifting the conversation from visual appeal to warmth and cuteness.</p> <p><b>Praise:</b> “老师把小猫咪养的好好”</p>	<p>The “音乐税” (music tax) (dog-tax shilling from different parents) is a playful way to show about similar-looking pets.</p> <p>Users from different cultural background (CN vs CN) engage by finding commonalities between their cats.</p>	<p>Users leverage comment sections to request engagement and follow-up books.</p> <p>Suggestions about having less cat content paving reflect platform-specific social media trends.</p>	<p>The comment references a meme that humorously exaggerates affection for cats animals, particularly in cross-cultural internet spaces.</p> <p>No reply indicates that the humor is self-contained and meant to be an independent contribution to engagement.</p> <p>The align with how internet users “wear” pet images, using playful language and exaggerated expressions of affection.</p>
<p><b>Internet humor &amp; anthropomorphism:</b> Suggests that the artist is part of the “cat tax” meme himself.</p>	<p><b>Anthropomorphism &amp; Cultural Symbolism:</b> Naming the cat “The Godfather” assigns a powerful and authoritative persona, treatment of the meme as a meme.</p> <p><b>Humor &amp; Religion/Morality:</b> The “cat tax” reply humorously extends the cat’s majestic presence, shifting from cultural authority to religious leadership.</p> <p><b>Internet Personality Projection:</b> The common reference to common internet trends where users give dramatic, high-tone identities (e.g., kanye, john, hollywood).</p>	<p>The cat’s posture and expression clearly resemble popular internet reaction images, where animals appear unexpectedly human-like. This type of funny or anthropomorphic pet photos has a high potential for meme adaptation.</p> <p>The simple “my cat” text shows how users interpret humor in their own way, which aligns with meme culture’s preference for user-driven narrative expansion.</p> <p><b>“Buddy”</b> - Positive reinforcement. Simple appreciation of the cat’s appearance and personality.</p>	<p>This image is an example of a “Judge Cat” meme, where a cat is humorously depicted as a stern, authoritative figure making decisions.</p> <p><b>Playful:</b> Adding a judge’s wig and gavel transforms the cat into an internet archetype, reinforcing participatory meme culture.</p> <p>The primary expression combined with legal symbolism plays into anthropomorphic humor, where pet acts as exaggerated human roles.</p> <p>Assigning the role of a judge to a cat makes it both humorous and authoritative, reinforcing the perception of cats as independent, no-nonsense creatures.</p> <p>The English caption “Approved, next step” suggests cross-cultural meme sharing, as similar judicial meme formats exist in Western and Chinese online communities.</p> <p>The Chinese caption (“批准下一步”), meaning “Oh, ok, the dog’s next step”, suggests a playful twist, reinforcing the user’s creative intent.</p>	<p>The phrase “法官” (judge) refers to a popular term describing cats looking their nose under their hats, a well-known cat behavior in pet meme culture.</p> <p>The phrase functions as a form of endorsement, reinforcing pet-specific language and its role in anthropomorphism and attributing whimsical to certain cat poses.</p>
<p><b>Engagement observation:</b> Notes that linking animations resemble fireworks, enhancing platform interaction.</p> <p><b>Humor timing:</b> “烟花绽放的瞬间” (“烟花绽放”) → make fun of it</p>	<p><b>Community engagement</b> praise</p>	<p>The use of a liability term (“liability holder” &amp; “liability”) suggests that the user perceives the cat as a family member rather than just a pet. This reflects the global trend of humanizing pets, treating them as siblings or children rather than animals.</p> <p><b>Pet as a good cat:</b> Humors the use of a meme with a liability cat → internet highlights the deep emotional bond and serves as a common way pet owners express affection online.</p>	<p>The “follow me cat” phrase suggests a meme format where users misinterpret objects as pet-related items.</p> <p>The colorful, colorful, sparkling bag is visually striking and unusual, prompting the reply “这颜色也太鲜艳了” (This sack actually looks pretty nice).</p> <p>This response shifts the focus from the meme’s original intent to an aesthetic appreciation of the bag itself.</p>	<p>This comment expresses genuine curiosity about purchasing pet outfits, reinforcing the trend of pet fashion in digital spaces.</p> <p>The clipping emoji 📄 suggests excitement and enthusiasm.</p>
<p><b>Algorithmic influence:</b> Highlights how reactions and engagement shape content feeds.</p> <p><b>Community engagement:</b> if trend to meme</p>	<p><b>Community engagement</b> praise</p>	<p>The use of liability terms (“liability holder”) suggests that the user perceives the cat as a family member rather than just a pet. This reflects the global trend of humanizing pets, treating them as siblings or children rather than animals.</p> <p><b>Pet as a good cat:</b> Humors the use of a meme with a liability cat → internet highlights the deep emotional bond and serves as a common way pet owners express affection online.</p>	<p>This comment extends the “cat tax” meme format to humans, demanding a “narcissist” meme.</p> <p>The image collage reinforces the joke by providing “music tax payment examples”, showing the user knows internet culture.</p> <p>The use of both English and Chinese suggests an intentional engagement with a wider audience, making the joke accessible to RedNote’s multilingual user base.</p>	<p>This comment humorously blends “Red Note” (meme) with “Red Note” (card) to create “Red Note” (beautiful details), forming a humorous hybrid term.</p> <p>The joke plays on the ambiguity of a card being drawn as a meme, further reinforcing internet meme culture’s love for surreal humor.</p>
<p>no language, only meme.</p> <p>uses praise and like of adverb: music: show humor attitude.</p>	<p><b>Community engagement</b> praise</p>	<p>community engagement by sharing cat pic</p> <p>praise from other user</p>	<p>The original comment takes the “cat tax” meme literally, questioning whether owning cats in the U.S. requires a real tax.</p> <p>The reply humorously engages misleading new users into believing that RedNote has an official cat tax requirement, reinforcing the in-joke culture of online communities.</p>	<p>A simple laughter-based response suggests that the user found the image genuinely amusing.</p> <p>The smiley emoji 😊 reinforces lightheartedness, fitting into casual, positive internet interactions.</p>

## APPENDIX 3. CODEBOOK\_V1

### 1. Cats as Emotional and Humorous Connectors

**Description:** Cats serve as a medium for emotional connection and humour, fostering positive interactions among users.

**Theoretical Framework:** Emotional Resonance Theory, Humor Theory

#### 1.1 Emotional Resonance

**Description:** Cats trigger positive emotional responses, fostering empathy and connection.

*Subcategories:*

**Praise:** Users express admiration for cats.

Example: “天呐姐姐你和你的猫都好漂亮 🥰 附上我的猫 (translate) Oh my god, you and your cat are so beautiful 🥰 Attached is my cat” (from Post 1)

**Friendliness:** Warm, welcoming interactions that build a positive environment.

Example 1: “Welcome to RedNote!” (Post 3)

Example 2: “Have a good time in Little Red Book.” (comment from Post 1)

**Support:** Users provide encouragement or validation to others.

Example: “你们的歌曲太迷人了 😊。我忍不住把你们乐队画成了像素小动画，希望能喜欢 🥰，请随意使用。并致以最多的爱 ❤️。(translate) Your songs are so amazing 😊. I couldn't help but draw a little pixel animation of your band, hope you like it 🥰, please feel free to use it. And send you the most love ❤️” (comment from Post 6)



**Care/Concern:** Users express worry or compassion for pets.

Example: when someone comments “我喜欢你的橘色头发！！我也是橘色头发但没有那么闪耀鲜艳，好羡慕这个干净的橘色 🥰p4的海盗猫猫可爱捏，我也要给我的独

眼龙猫猫买一套海盗装！(translate) I like your orange hair!! I also have orange hair but not as bright and shiny as this one. I envy this clean orange hair. The pirate cat in p4 is so cute. I also want to buy a pirate costume for my one-eyed chinchilla!” (poster replied) “Omg! 你能分享你的猫吗? (translate) Omg! Can you share your cat?” (comment and reply from Post 1)

## 1.2 Humor

**Description:** Users create or engage in humorous content related to cats.

### *Subcategories:*

**Joke:** Users make humorous remarks, often exaggerating or making absurd statements.

Example 1: “You know, when paying cat tax, there is a probability that your cat will be levied, which is normal. 你知道的，缴纳猫税时，有概率你的猫会被征收，这是正常现象。” (comment from Post 1, 7, 9)

Example 2: “Say goodbye to your mom~” (comment from Post 8, 10)

**Visual Humor:** Users share funny images or videos of cats.

Example: “Paying cat tax payment 正在交猫税猫人鱼 Cat mermaid” (Post 10)



**Slang and Memes:** Users use internet slang or cultural references to create humour.

Example: “trash pandas” = raccoon (comment from Post 1)

**Playful Tone:** Friendly and amusing phrasing is used to create a fun and engaging atmosphere.

Example: “哈哈哈哈哈，你家猫像钻进垃圾袋一脸懵 (translate) Hahahaha, your cat looks like it has crawled into a garbage bag.” (comment from Post 10)

## 2. Self-Presentation

**Description:** Users use cats as a tool for self-expression and self-promotion.

**Theoretical Framework:** Goffman's Self-Presentation Theory

### 2.1 Selfie with Cat

**Description:** Users post selfies with their cats, often highlighting themselves rather than the cat. The comments will also be more about the posters rather than their cats.



(Post 2)



(Post 1)

Example:

Comment from Post 2: “这个美男子深得我心 (translate) This handsome man has won my heart.”

Comment from Post 1: “我喜欢你的橘色头发!! (translate) I like your orange hair!!”

### 2.2 Pet Anthropomorphism

**Description:** Users project human identities onto their pets, often using first-person perspectives in videos.

Example 1: (video content) “Hello US user, I'm Chinese mini burger. Welcome to RedNote. I like all kinds of cardboard boxes and garbage bags as well. Everyone says my mother is good at raising pigs. So my brothers and sisters are all chubby. Could u show me your cat photos. I can teach you how to turn into a rabbit, an eggplant, an elephant, a dragon, a peach, a pineapple and a pair. If you don't have a cat, it doesn't matter. Chinese lucky cat will bring you good luck.”

Example 2: “我家有个和他很像的，刚刚因为不睡觉捣乱被判有罪立刻执行。(translate) I have a kid who looks like him at home. He was just convicted and executed for not sleeping and making trouble.” (comment) “这是他的同伙。(translate) This is his accomplice.” (comment from Post 7)



(pic of comment)



(pic of reply)

(then, the poster replied: 噢，释放他😭 Oh, release him 😭)

### 2.3 Digital Self-Promotion

**Description:** Users leverage viral trends (e.g., “TikTok refugees” and cat memes) to promote their own content.

Example: “我付不起猫税 但我可以付音乐税。这首歌由 rudywade、@LeGrand 和 ethan gander 演唱，名为 too close，你可以在 AppleMusic 上收听🙏 “I can't afford the cat tax but I can pay the music tax. The song is by rudywade, @LeGrand and ethan gander and is called too close and you can listen to it on AppleMusic 🙏” (posted by RudyWade)” (Post 6)

## 3. Community Engagement

**Description:** Users adapt to the new platform (RedNote) by using cats as a way to engage with the community and build a shared identity.

**Theoretical Framework:** Community Building Theory

### 3.1 Icebreaker

**Description:** Posting cats as a way to initiate conversations and build connections.

Example: “这是一种破冰游戏，我们很欢迎你们，但是我们互相不太了解，可能都害怕说了什么让对方不开心的事情，但是可爱的猫应该是大家都会喜欢的，所以这是个让我们能打开话题的切入点 ~ 互相了解多了之后，就可以分享更多的东西了。 This is an icebreaker game. We welcome you, but we don't know each other very well. But everyone should like cute cats, so this is a starting point for us to open up the topic.” (comment from Post 8)

### 3.2 In-Group Humor

**Description:** Users create inside jokes and share cultural references.

Example: “朋友，请加入我们圣火喵喵教!请跟我读圣火昭昭，圣光耀耀!凡我弟子!喵喵喵喵! (translate) Friends, please join our Holy Fire Meow Meow Church! Please read with me: The Holy Fire is Bright, the Holy Light is Shining! All my disciples! Meow meow meow!” (a Chinese user’ comment) “圣火闪耀，圣光闪耀!各位弟子们!喵喵喵! (translate) Holy fire shines, holy light shines! Dear disciples! Meow meow meow!” (replied by the original poster who is from US)

### 3.3 CatTax as an Online Social Norm

**Description:** Users humorously refer to posting cats as a way to “pay tax” to stay on the platform.

Example: “I hope that this cat tax is good enough to let me stay.” (Post 4)

## 4. Cross-Cultural Interaction

**Description:** Users from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds interact through cat-related content.

**Theoretical Framework:** Intercultural Communication Theory

### 4.1 Intercultural Communication

**Description:** Users communicate across cultural and linguistic boundaries.

*Subcategories:*

**Bilingual Content:** Users communicate using both English and Chinese in a single post or conversation.

Example: “我也来交猫税了! 🐱

This is my TT refugee cat tax. Her name is Clove (although we call her Clovey). She likes to sit next to me while I’m writing music and occasionally throws up next to my piano.

这是我的美国猫税。她叫 Clove(不过我们都叫她 Clovey)。她喜欢在我写歌的时候坐在我旁边，偶尔还会在我的钢琴旁边吐毛。

对了，我是一名美国歌手 🎤 下周五发新歌 🎵 记得关注我哦!” (Post 9)

**Cross-Cultural Comparison:** Users compare cultural differences in pet care, memes, or humour.

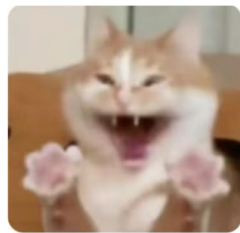
Example 1: “刷了一宿洋猫 感觉他们的猫猫都好瘦我们的猫猫都好圆 (translate) Western cats are so skinny, but our Chinese cats are always rounder!” (comment from Post 3)

Example 2: “美国有狸花猫? (translate) Are there tabby cats in the United States?” (comment from Post 4)

Example 3: “I usually watch and never interact haha. I wish western apps had emojis like this 🙄” (comment from Post 1)

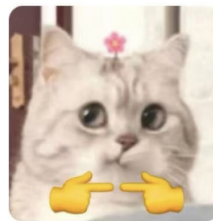
#### 4.2 Nonverbal Communication

**Description:** Users communicate through memes or cat pictures without using words.



Example 1:

(comment)



(reply)

Explanation: The orange cat is shown with its mouth wide open and front paws raised, expressing excitement, joy, or overwhelming enthusiasm. On RedNote, such exaggerated cat reactions are often used to express delight or dramatic appreciation toward a post—akin to saying "I love this!" or "This is amazing!" in visual form. The gray cat, looking down with a small blush and paired with the emoji gesture “👉👈,” conveys a shy, hesitant, or bashful response. This visual setup typically signals “cute embarrassment” or “reluctant acceptance,” functioning as a soft, indirect way of acknowledging praise or affection. This image exchange demonstrates a form of *visual dialogue* and *emotional call-and-response*. Without using text, the two users co-construct a lightweight interaction using expressive, culturally legible cat imagery. The first image performs an exaggerated emotional reaction; the second one answers it with a softened, emotionally reciprocal gesture. This exchange functions as a form of phatic communication—not focused on transmitting information, but on maintaining social presence and emotional alignment. It exemplifies soft symbolic participation through visual humor and affective mirroring.

good cat !



Example 2: (comment)



(reply by the author)

Explanation: The commenter post a funny cat meme with the sentence “good cat!” In the cat meme, a laughing cat with a pair of human hands looks like the kitten is about to catch the poster's cat, and the exaggerated and weird facial expression adds to the humour. The poster responded with a photo of her cat without any text. In the photo, the cat's expression looked a little angry and contemptuous, expressing a kind of rejection of the commenter's photo, but full of fun. (both from Post 8)

#### 4.3 External Reference

**Description:** Users reference external content, such as games or personal life, in their interactions.

Example 1: 交猫税?? 🦊 alternative tax payment (posted 6 pics of the fox)



(Post 5)

what does the fox say? (comment) wa pa pa pa pa pow!!!! (replied by the poster)  
ps: “What does the fox say?” references the viral song “The Fox” (2013) by Ylvis.

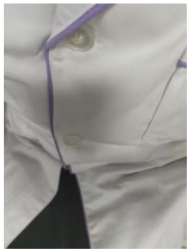
Example 2: “没人觉得这里的小华很像艾尔海森吗”(comment) “这个黑衣服和发型，甚至气质都很像哎”(reply)“Does anyone think that Xiaohua here looks like Alhaitham?” (comment) “The black clothes, hairstyle, and even temperament are very similar” (reply)



*PS: Alhaitham is a character in the game*

*Genshin Impact.*

Example 3: “我也喜欢紫色，特意在网上买的工作服，上班穿，很好看。I also like purple. I bought my work clothes online and wear them to work. They look great.”



*Personal life sharing (Nothing to do with cats or pets)*

## **5. Platform-Specific Behaviours**

**Description:** Users engage in interactions that are specific to the platform's affordances.

**Theoretical Framework:** Affordance Theory

### *5.1 Platform Humor*

**Description:** Users make jokes about platform-specific behaviours, such as "paying cat tax."

Example: “老师 在小红书交猫税的话 都是把猫猫丢一边 然后戴上猫耳朵走到镜头前喵一声的 😊” “Sir, if you want to pay the cat tax on RedNote, you just put the cat aside, put on cat ears, walk in front of the camera and meow 😊” (It is actually a joke) (comment from Post 2)

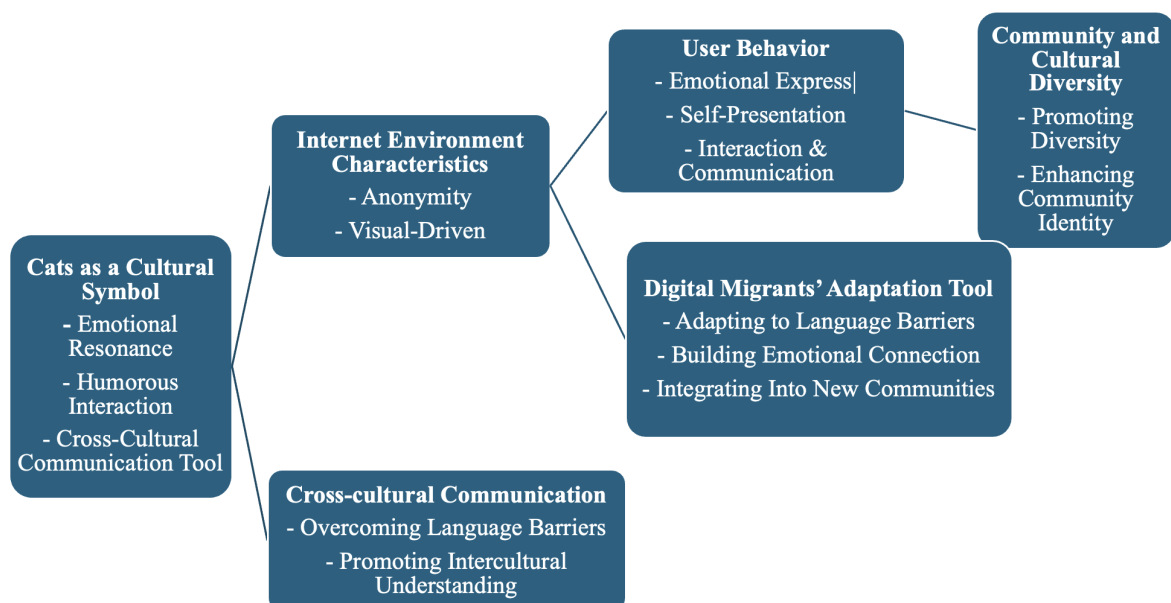
### *5.2 Hashtag Usage*

**Description:** Users use hashtags to categorize content and form communities.

Example: #tiktokrefugee #cattax (every posts)

### Some findings from the open-coding phase:

This study found that cats have become a universal cultural symbol on the Internet, mainly because they can trigger users' emotional resonance and foster humorous interactions. As a result, cat-related content has transcended linguistic and cultural boundaries, functioning as a cross-cultural communication tool that overcomes language barriers. In the anonymous and visually driven environment of the internet, users express emotions, engage in self-presentation, and interact with others through cat-related content, ultimately fostering a sense of emotional connection and community identity centered around cats. For TikTok refugees (digital migrants), cat content also serves as an adaptive tool on their new platform, RedNote, enabling them to navigate language barriers, establish emotional connections, and integrate into new digital communities more seamlessly. At the same time, as a medium for cross-cultural interaction, cats facilitate diverse user engagements, contributing to cross-cultural understanding and the promotion of cultural diversity in online spaces.



## APPENDIX 4. ORIGINAL SAMPLES OF VISUAL ANALYSIS

Non-verbal Conversation Example 1.



Non-verbal Conversation Example 2.



Using Panofsky's three levels of meaning to interpret the conversation.

Exp.	Primary level	Secondary level	Third level
1	a cat a wide-open mouth lifted paws	Exaggerated laughter mock excitement overreaction	Playful provocation humorous overstatement attention-seeking cue
	a cat a flower emoji on the head two pointing fingers	shyness retreat "me?" reaction	faux-innocence self-deprecation online flirting soft rebuttal
2	orange cat two open hands open mouth	exaggerated praise humorous distortion	meme-based affection playful compliment a friendly exaggerated "ritual" of praise
	brown cat	calmness humility slight angry	gentle acceptance modesty soft social bonding through real pet image

## APPENDIX 5. FINAL CODEBOOK

Theme	Cats as Emotional Trigger		Cats as Humor Mediators				
Category	Icebreaker	Emotional Resonance		Humor			In-group Humor
Sub-Category		Praise/Support	Care/Concern	Blending Humor	Scripted Roleplay Humor	Phonetic Misreading	
<b>Example</b>	<p>“这是一种破冰游戏，我们很欢迎你们，但是我们互相不太了解，可能都害怕说了什么让对方不开心的事情，但是可爱的猫应该是大家都会喜欢的，所以这是个让我们能打开话题的切入点~互相了解多了之后，就可以分享更多的东西了。This is an icebreaker game. We welcome you, but we don't know each other very well. But everyone should like cute cats, so this is a starting point for us to open up the topic.” (comment from Post #8)</p>	<p>“天呐姐姐你和你的猫都好漂亮” 附上我的猫 (translate) Oh my god, you and your cat are so beautiful 🐱 Attached is my cat” (from Post #1)</p>	<p>when someone comments “我喜欢你的橘色头发!! 我也是橘色头发但没有那么闪耀鲜艳，好羡慕这个干净的橘色🐱p4的海盗猫猫可爱捏，我也要给我的独眼龙猫猫买一套海盗装! (translate) I like your orange hair!! I also have orange hair but not as bright and shiny as this one. I envy this clean orange hair. The pirate cat in p4 is so cute. I also want to buy a pirate costume for my one-eyed chinchilla!” (poster replied) “Omg! 你能分享你的猫吗? (translate) Omg! Can you share your cat?” (comment and reply from Post #1)</p>	<p>Post #5, the author submits a fox instead of a cat and labels it an “alternative tax payment,” triggering a cascade of playful replies: “What does the fox say?” “wa pa pa pa pow!” These responses reference the viral novelty song “The Fox” by Ylvis (2013).</p>	<p>Post #11, a Chinese user posted a video of her cat’s perspective. In the video, the cat, self-introduced as a “Yoga Cat” who loves doing parkour, offers to trade data for cat photos.</p>	<p>Post #25, a U.S. user writes: “Please accept our car tax!”, along with pictures of his cats, which brings a likely result of autocorrect, phonetic similarity, or meme remixing.</p>	<p>朋友，请加入我们圣火喵喵教！请跟我读圣火昭昭，圣光灿烂！凡我弟子，喵喵喵！ [Friends, please join our Holy Fire Meow Church! Please read with me: Holy Fire Shines, Holy Light Shines! All my disciples, meow meow meow!] (Post #7)</p>
<b>Explanation</b>	Posting cats as a way to initiate conversations and build connections.	Users provide encouragement or validation to others.	Users express worry or compassion for pets.	Humor created based on some misunderstandings or misinterpretation.	Anthropomorphic cats introduce themselves and express themselves.	Misreading due to similar pronunciation.	Humor is not constructed by the author alone, but emerges through collaborative exchanges among commenters.

Cats as tools to self-presentation			Cats as Adaptive	Cats trigger intercultural interaction		
Selfie	Anthropomorphism	Digital Self-Promotion	Self-adaptation	Code-meshing	Questioning	Nonverbal Communication
 (Post 2)	<p>我家有个和他很像的，刚刚因为不睡觉捣乱被判有罪立刻执行。(translate) I have a kid who looks like him at home. He was just convicted and executed for not sleeping and making trouble.” (comment) “这是他的同伙。(translate) This is his accomplice.” (comment from Post #7)</p>	<p>我付不起猫税但我可以付音乐税。这首歌由rudywade、@LeGrand and ethan gander演唱，名为 too close，你可以在AppleMusic上收听。“I can't afford the cat tax but I can pay the music tax. The song is by rudywade, @LeGrand and ethan gander and is called too close and you can listen to it on AppleMusic.” (posted by RudyWade)” (Post 6)</p>	<p>please let me stay!!!</p>	<p>Here's me paying my cat tax [🐱] (❤️) 爱来自美国 [Love from the U.S.] (Post #18)</p>	<p>刷了一宿洋猫，感觉他们的猫猫都好瘦，我们的猫猫都好圆。 [I scrolled through the Western cats all night. They're all so skinny, but ours are always so round!] (a comment from Post #3)</p>	 (comment) (reply)
Users post selfies with their cats, often highlighting themselves rather than the cat. The comments will also be more about the posters rather than their cats.	Users project human identities onto their pets, often using first-person perspectives in videos.	Users leverage viral trends (e.g., “TikTok refugees” and cat memes) to promote their own content.	By using the direct expression of “paying cat tax”, the desire to be accepted by the platform is expressed.	Users blend Chinese, English, emojis, and symbolic references in a single utterance.	interactions reveal a form of asking questions. These questions posed out of genuine curiosity or	People use only visual symbols to communicate rather than language.

APPENDIX 6. WORD CLOUD OF KEY THEMES

