Humor as the Politeness Strategy in Rednote posts among the Digital Refugees

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how digital refugees—users who moved from TikTok to RedNote—use humor to adapt to a new platform and sociocultural environment. RedNote has its own unique communication style, including local memes, pinyin-based slang, and visual jokes. For newcomers, humor becomes a useful way to reduce pressure, show politeness, and build social connections. Based on 30 authentic posts, this research applies discourse analysis to examine various types of humor, such as "cat tax" memes, playful usernames, dark humor, and self-mockery. The findings reveal that humor helps users express their identity, integrate into online communities, and navigate cultural differences. Humor is not only a form of entertainment, but also a social tool that supports learning and a sense of belonging.

Keywords: Humor, politeness strategy, digital refugees, RedNote, online identity, platform culture, discourse analysis

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the global digital landscape has undergone dramatic shifts. One notable outcome is the emergence of so-called "digital refugees"—users who were forced to leave TikTok due to platform bans and migrated to China-based alternatives such as RedNote (also known as Xiao hong shu). This migration process provides a unique case for studying cross-cultural digital adaptation.

This study focuses on how these digital refugees adapt to the cultural norms of RedNote. It identifies a significant "digital culture gap" between TikTok and RedNote. RedNote, shaped by Chinese internet practices, has developed its own symbolic system through the use of pinyin abbreviations (such as "xswl"), online slang (like "绝绝子"), and culturally specific memes. In contrast to TikTok's globally driven algorithmic content, RedNote operates with what could be described as a "digital dialect" rooted in localized expressions and community traditions.

These cultural differences create three major tensions for newcomers:

1) Linguistic misalignment – where intentional misspellings or coded expressions hinder understanding;
2) Barriers to community participation – due to implicit social rituals and in-group dynamics;
3) Challenges in decoding non-literal humor – which often depends on shared cultural knowledge or insider references.

In response to these challenges, digital refugees have developed four creative humor strategies:

- First, the symbolic use of "cat tax" memes, where sharing pet photos becomes a playful entry ritual;
- Second, culturally blended usernames like "Hotpot With Espresso" that mix Chinese and Western elements;
- Third, the use of dark humor to explore sensitive topics in a safe way;
- And fourth, self-deprecating posts that turn cultural misunderstandings into group laughter.

These strategies reflect Norick's (2003) theory of humor as a tool for social bonding. Humor in this context serves a dual cultural function [1]: it reduces anxiety associated with migration and builds weak-tie connections through shared jokes, while also helping users learn unspoken platform norms through metaphorical interaction.

Unlike traditional models of cultural adaptation that focus on physical space, this study introduces the concept of **"platform cultural stratification."** It argues that adaptation on RedNote is not simply a process of assimilation. Instead, humor enables users to actively reshape symbolic systems, negotiate identity, and soften cultural clashes. In this digital environment, humor becomes a survival strategy—acting as both a buffer against conflict and a transitional space where users can reconstruct a sense of belonging.

This creative coping mechanism highlights the cultural resilience of non-native users and offers a new theoretical perspective on how platform-driven "digital colonialism" can be negotiated from below.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews key theories and previous studies related to politeness, humor, and digital communication. These concepts help explain how users on platforms like RedNote express politeness and manage their social identity through humor.

Scholars have shown that humor and politeness are deeply intertwined in both face-to-face and digital interactions. As digital communication becomes more integrated into everyday life, researchers have begun applying traditional theories—such as politeness theory and face theory [2], [3].—to online behaviors. On RedNote, users interact mostly through images, memes, and short texts, with little direct conversation. This shift creates new grounds to explore how politeness strategies evolve in new media spaces. In such environments, humor is not only a form of entertainment but also a practical tool for identity negotiation, emotional support, and social inclusion.

Politeness Theory

Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory explains how people protect their "face" or public image during interactions. The theory includes two main strategies [2]:

Positive politeness, which shows friendliness and aims to build closeness. Users may use humor, compliments, or shared language to create a sense of belonging.

Negative politeness, which avoids imposing and shows respect. This may include indirect speech, humility, or self-deprecation.

On RedNote, these strategies are often expressed in more creative and indirect forms rather than through formal speech. Examples include the use of memes, usernames, and comment styles. When users post humorous or playful content—such as sharing pet photos, praising others' usernames, or joining in platform-wide jokes—they signal positive politeness by aligning themselves with community norms.

For instance, a newcomer might title a post "Paying my cat tax!" while attaching a pet photo. This not only shows friendliness and cooperation but also demonstrates knowledge of the platform's cultural humor.

At the same time, negative politeness often appears as self-deprecating humor or indirect statements. Users may begin posts with lines like "I'm not sure if this is okay, but…" or "Maybe this is silly, but here's my attempt…" Such phrases reduce the feeling of imposition and signal modesty. These expressions help protect the speaker's face while showing consideration for others.

Online interaction is not a simplified version of real-world etiquette. Instead, it has developed its own system of subtle balances and contradictions. Many digital refugees on RedNote must simultaneously "like" others' posts to maintain positive face, while "lurking" to protect negative face. They strive for precise meme use while enjoying the safety provided by ambiguity. This dynamic tension supports Goffman's dramaturgical theory in

digital settings: every user acts as a skilled performer, managing impressions within the algorithmic stage to find the best way to present themselves.

Verbal Humor Theory

In today's digital social spaces, humor has become a powerful tool for overcoming cultural barriers and shaping identity. By applying the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) [4], we can better understand the unique social intelligence found on RedNote. For instance, when the serious concept of taxation is humorously combined with the act of sharing pet photos, the phrase "paying cat tax" creates a dramatic clash between formal and informal scripts. This sudden shift in cognitive framing turns rigid, institutional ideas into soft, emotional exchanges, producing a humorous effect through semantic dislocation. It is much like placing medieval court rituals into a modern convenience store—such cross-dimensional script mixing naturally carries humorous potential.

In cross-cultural contexts, language play reveals even more delicate humor mechanisms. When a newcomer asks for help creating a Chinese username, their sincere question can be interpreted in unexpected ways due to cultural differences. This mismatch between literal meaning and reader interpretation creates layered humor—a linguistic version of Rashomon or a cultural remix. Within these gaps of understanding, humor often grows organically, like a hidden fungus thriving in a humid corner of communication. As Borges's metaphor of the Library of Babel reminds us, digital communication is a constant game of encoding and decoding.

These humorous practices serve two important social functions: on the surface, they ease tension; at a deeper level, they bond users into communities. For example, when a workplace newcomer uses memes like "Survival Guide for Corporate Slaves" to deal with awkward meetings, they are not only joking—they are also creating a protective layer of humor that softens rigid power structures. Within insider groups, recurring jokes like "coffee saves lives" or "Monday syndrome" become totems of digital tribes, reinforcing community boundaries through shared laughter. Such humorous communities act like virtual brotherhoods, using specific joke codes to establish identity.

This kind of humor is more than a personal coping strategy—it becomes a cultural defense system unique to the digital age. When users laugh at memes like "the epic battle between programmers and product managers," they are not just consuming entertainment; they are participating in a miniature cultural ritual. Each like, repost, and smile reaffirms a shared value system. This is the deeper syntax of digital humor: to build connection through deconstruction, to turn daily struggle into performative comedy, and to survive reality with a smiling mask in the virtual world.

Face Theory and Self-Presentation

Goffman's (1967) theory of face highlights [3] how individuals try to manage their social image during interactions. In the context of digital communication, this process has taken on new forms. On social media platforms, users engage in what could be called "face work" through carefully crafted self-presentation strategies.

Fig. 1 Who's Li Hua

- For example, as shown in Fig. 1**,** some RedNote users describe themselves with humorous self-deprecating bios like "Li Hua can't talk," referencing the widely used fictional character from Chinese English textbooks. This approach creates a sense of authenticity while avoiding the impression of arrogance. It shows the user as humble and approachable, making them more socially acceptable within the community.

This strategy reflects Schiro's (2016) dual-function theory of humor [5]. On platforms with strong cultural norms such as Reddit, humor not only increases the appeal of content but also reduces its seriousness. This allows users to strike a balance between expressing personal traits and adhering to group expectations. Studies have found that self-deprecating humor, because of its "vulnerability," lowers the chance of social rejection. It helps maintain positive face while creating a relaxed atmosphere for interaction.

Essentially, this is a digital-age reimagining of Goffman's theory—users use humor as a flexible rhetorical tool to preserve socially acceptable "digital face." Through humorous self-expression, they maintain both approachability and social tact, leading to the effective accumulation of social capital.

Humor on Digital Platforms and Memes

In digital spaces, humor is evolving into a multi-dimensional social medium. According to Liang (2023) [6], platforms like RedNote construct localized humor systems through coded memes, pinyin abbreviations (such as "YYDS"), and visual symbols. These encrypted "digital dialects" help newcomers quickly learn community rules and form a sense of identity.

Liu (2022) explores the phenomenon of simulated impoliteness in stand-up comedy and online comment sections [7]. Here, exaggerated tone and self-mocking frames are used to turn potentially offensive content into playful interaction. This strategy reshapes online boundaries and provides a new way for users to negotiate social norms.

At a deeper level, memes also serve as a form of social commentary. Bouchelarem (2024) shows that young people use humorous political memes to express critical views [8]. For instance, policies are often reimagined as anthropomorphic animal cartoons, which both weaken the authority of official discourse and foster collective critical thinking.

Humor also plays an educational role, especially in knowledge-sharing communities. When users make jokes about confusing slang, it often sparks collective explanations in the form of "meme encyclopedias." This peer-to-peer, informal teaching style makes cultural learning more accessible and inclusive.

Taken together, digital humor is more than just a vehicle for entertainment—it is a symbolic system for constructing group identity. It lowers the entry barrier through localized expressions, adjusts social boundaries through theatrical exaggeration, and conveys political messages through metaphor. In doing so, it creates a digital public sphere that is emotionally engaging and educational. As this multimodal symbolic system continues to evolve, it is actively reshaping participation and identity formation within online communities.

THEORETICAL CLARIFICATION

This study introduces the term *platform cultural stratification* to describe the layered and localized nature of digital platforms based on cultural, linguistic, and behavioral norms. Unlike platforms such as TikTok, which rely on globalized content algorithms, RedNote is embedded in culturally specific codes, slang, and visual practices derived from Chinese internet culture. This creates symbolic barriers for newcomers, requiring not just technical onboarding but cultural translation and adaptation. The concept draws on theories of digital anthropology and cross-cultural communication to emphasize how humor enables users to negotiate entry into stratified digital spaces.

METHODOLOGY

This study investigates how digital refugees construct online community identity through multimodal humor strategies on the RedNote platform. A qualitative discourse analysis was employed, focusing on 30 humorous posts gathered using hashtags such as #TikTokRefugees, #RedNoteEnglish, and #FirstPost over a two-week

period. These posts include user-generated memes, comments, stylized usernames, profile descriptions, and help-seeking content (e.g., “How do I say this in Chinese?” or “Can someone pronounce my name in Mandarin?”).

Note on Key Terms:

Digital refugees refers to users who were displaced from TikTok due to platform bans or political restrictions and migrated to culturally distinct platforms like RedNote. The term borrows from migration discourse to describe users adapting to new digital environments.

Cat tax is an internet meme tradition, originating from Reddit, where users humorously post a picture of their cat (or other pets) as a symbolic offering or entry fee. On RedNote, it evolved into a playful social ritual for newcomers to introduce themselves.

Data Collection

The data set consists of 30 public RedNote posts collected over a two-week period via screenshots. Selection was based on three criteria:

1. The user identified themselves as a newcomer from TikTok (e.g., stating "First time here" or "Just joined RedNote").
2. The post included humor—either in language or images, often self-deprecating in tone.
3. The post received social interaction (likes, comments), indicating public engagement with the humor.

These 30 posts were selected to represent a diverse range of humor types and communicative intents. Posts were gathered during a peak migration window, allowing for the capture of authentic and spontaneous expressions of adaptation.

Examples of data include:

·"Cat tax" memes
·Humorous or self-deprecating usernames
·Pinyin-based slang (e.g., YYDS, 250)
·Dark humor or political jokes
·Emotionally light-hearted posts about daily life, language, or learning

Many of the posts were multimodal—combining text with images, emojis, stickers, or screenshots from other platforms. These multimodal features are crucial, as they add layers of meaning and expression beyond plain text. All content was publicly available, and no personal or private information was collected.

Research Limitations

This study focuses only on publicly visible posts in English or bilingual form. It does not include private messages, deleted content, or interviews, which may have provided deeper user insights. Additionally, the reliance on humorously popular posts may bias results toward more socially acceptable forms of humor. Political or highly controversial humor was excluded to ensure the focus remained on adaptation-oriented humor.

Furthermore, while RedNote users are diverse, this study primarily analyzed posts by English-speaking users or those using international hashtags. As such, findings may not generalize to fully native RedNote users or speakers of other languages.

Data Analysis

The analysis drew upon three theoretical perspectives: Brown and Levinson’s politeness strategies [2], Attardo’s humor theory [4], and Goffman’s face theory [3].

The analysis focused on questions such as:

1) What kinds of humor were used (jokes, memes, visual puns)?

2) How was humor used to express politeness (positive or negative)?
3) Were there signs of cultural learning or adaptation?
4) How did others respond to the humor (e.g., comments, emojis, likes)?

Posts were categorized into themes such as meme-based humor ("cat tax"), self-deprecation, identity-based wordplay, and dark humor. Each category was examined to understand how humor supported politeness or identity construction.

Research Approach

This study, based on the cross-perspective of digital anthropology and media culture research, adopts a qualitative research method combining descriptive and interpretive approaches. Through diachronic model analysis and in-depth case studies, it systematically reveals the humorous practice mechanism of digital immigrant groups in the cross-cultural platform ecosystem. Help us understand how digital refugees use humor in the new platform culture.

The analysis also focuses on cross-cultural interaction. This study focuses on the RedNote platform dominated by Chinese Internet culture. Users from other countries or platforms must learn a new way of communication. Humor helps them adapt.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

"Cat Tax" and Entry Rituals: Using Humor to Join the Community

When TikTok users migrated to RedNote, many felt unfamiliar and anxious about the new platform. To make friends and feel welcomed, they began introducing themselves in humorous ways—most commonly by posting photos of their cats. This trend became known as "paying the cat tax." Though seemingly lighthearted, this practice became a kind of micro-stage for negotiating identity on a new social platform.

Typical posts included captions like "This is my cat Lily, please let me in" or "Here to pay cat tax," accompanied by a cute pet photo. This style of humor is casual and welcoming. It helps newcomers express goodwill and align with the group spirit without needing to restate politeness theory.

This practice also fits into Attardo's (1994) General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) [4], particularly the concept of script opposition. The term "tax" carries a serious bureaucratic tone, while the actual content—a pet photo—is endearing and informal. The clash between these scripts creates humor and relieves the social pressure newcomers might feel. It also serves as a kind of unofficial entry ritual, allowing users to demonstrate cultural fluency and begin building symbolic capital.

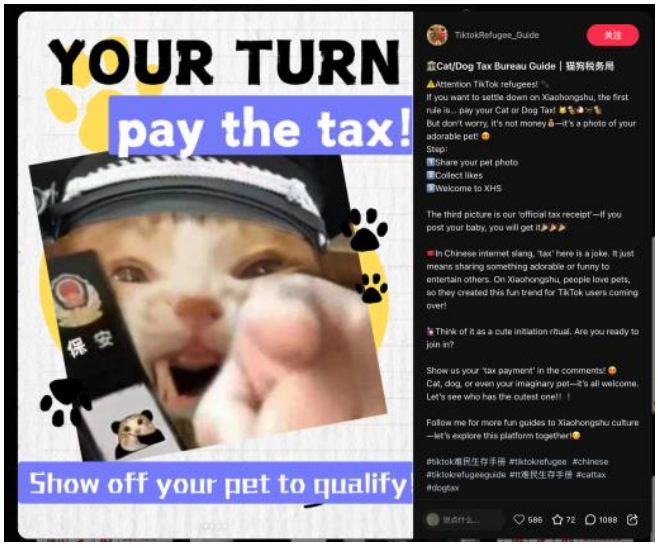

Fig. 2 Cat/dog tax bureau guide

Users often expanded on this ritual with layered creativity. Some jokingly claimed to be from the "RedNote Immigration Bureau," role-playing as border officers approving or rejecting cat tax submissions. As known in Fig. 2, Others invented departments like the "Cat Registration Office" or the "Dog License Center," playfully imagining RedNote as a nation with its own rules. These fictional institutions both parody real-life authority and strengthen group identity through shared meta-humor.

Even users without pets found creative ways to participate. One posted a photo of a teddy bear with the caption, "My cat is taking a bath—this is my emotional support bear." This sparked hundreds of replies, many accepting the substitute and playfully granting "entry." Here, Goffman's dramaturgical theory comes into play: the user cleverly presents a "flawed" self to appear more relatable, while humor helps preserve their dignity. This self-lowering tactic, especially during COVID lockdowns, offered emotional relief in a period of limited social interaction. Sharing something cute or funny became a safe way to show vulnerability.

Through this kind of light, participatory humor, RedNote migrants created a safe space for expressing identity, reducing discomfort from the platform shift, and signaling their willingness to integrate into a new digital culture.

Fig. 3 Cat tax

As shown in Fig. 3**,** one user wrote: "I'm here, bringing my cat to pay tax. This new platform makes me nervous." The post received over 300 likes and 70 comments, with replies like "Welcome!" and photos of other users' cats. This type of humor invites interaction and builds a welcoming space for newcomers.

In short, the "cat tax" ritual acts as a dynamic social contract. It demonstrates how digital migrants use humor not only to avoid direct self-disclosure, but also to earn group membership. It reduces anxiety, enables polite self-introduction, and shows that the user understands and respects the platform's unique humor culture.

Humor and Self-Naming: Identity Construction through Wordplay

Fig. 4 "Biye"

As digital refugees moved to RedNote, many of them chose creative and humorous usernames to express their identity. These usernames often mixed Chinese and English, pinyin, or numbers. As known in Fig. 4, for example, users named themselves things like “Li Hua Can’t Talk,” “Social Anxiety Trying to Socialize,” or “Biye250.” While these names are amusing, they also reflect deeper feelings such as nervousness, cultural displacement, and the desire to connect.

The “Dear Li Hua” meme can be understood as a form of collective narrative humor. Users reference “Li Hua,” a fictional character frequently used in Chinese English textbooks for decades (e.g., “Write a letter to your friend Li Hua…”). By flipping the script—foreigners now writing to Li Hua—users humorously acknowledge their outsider status while expressing a wish to belong.

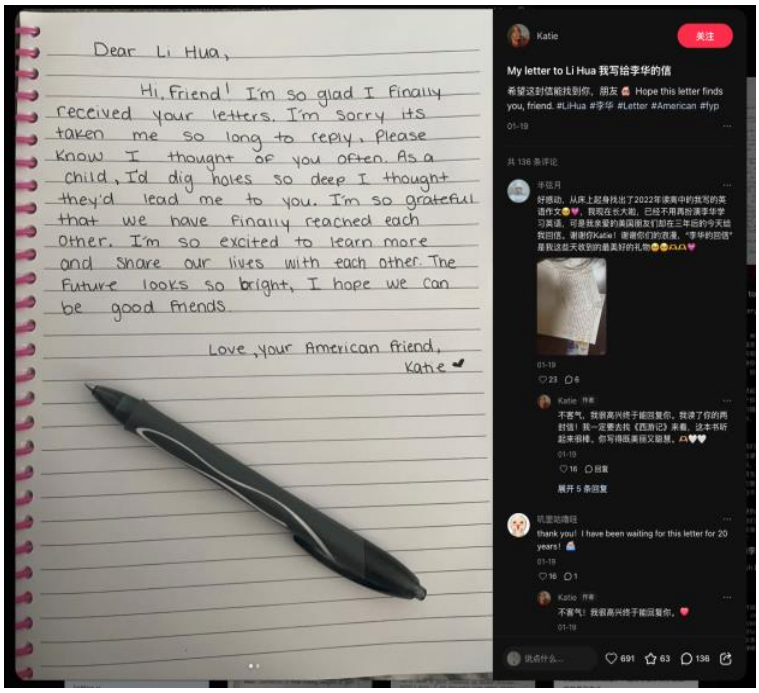

Fig. 5 Friendly comments

As known in Fig. 5, these posts are often filled with intentional Chinglish and self-mocking tones:

> “Hello Li Hua. I go RedNote. I like panda. You my friend.”

Although grammatically incorrect, the tone is playful and sincere. This lowers the social risk and makes the message come across as charming rather than awkward.

From a politeness perspective, this can be seen as a face-saving strategy. By using humor, users show vulnerability and sincerity, which often earns empathy from local users. Comments often include warm replies such as “We forgive you, foreigner Li Lei!” or “Welcome to the textbook world!”—extending the shared narrative and enhancing group bonding.

One post read:

> “Li Hua, I miss you. I don’t understand anything on this app, but I will learn.”

This blend of exaggerated longing and helplessness turns the post into an emotional performance that resonates across cultures. It functions as rapport-building humor, a tool that Haugh and Bousfield describe as useful for negotiating intercultural solidarity [9].

These usernames also reflect self-deprecating humor. Users make fun of themselves to appear humble and non-threatening. These humorous usernames display humility and reduce social risk, making it easier for users to be accepted.

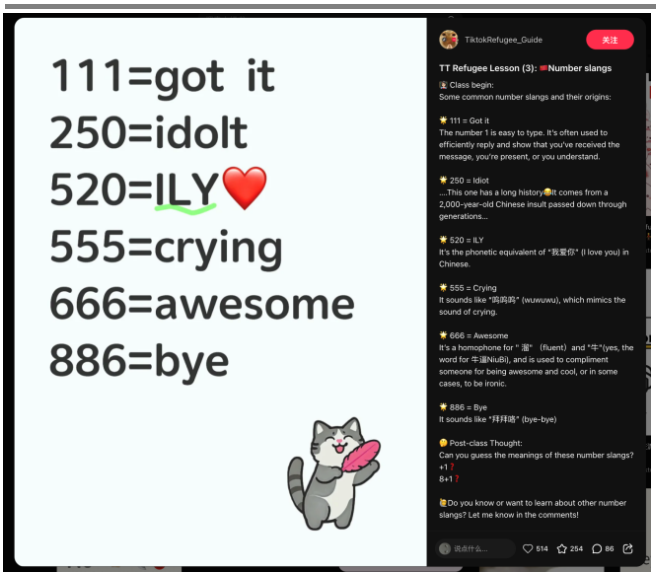

Fig. 6 Coded numbers

Moreover, as known in Fig.6 , such usernames help users build new digital identities. By using Chinese slang or coded numbers like “250” (a Chinese term meaning “fool”), users demonstrate a (sometimes imperfect) understanding of local culture. This shows effort in cultural adaptation, sending a message like, “I’m trying to speak your language and play by your rules.”

Goffman (1967) argued that people try to manage their public image, or “face.” [3] Using silly or humble usernames is a way to lower expectations and gain sympathy. It also creates a casual and friendly tone.

In one post, a user wrote:

> “First post—don’t yell at me—my Chinese is bad—I didn’t even dare use my real name.”

Their username was “lihua_biye_2023.” Comments were kind and humorous:

> “We’re all the same—welcome!”

> “This name is too real, lol.”

Here, humor created emotional closeness and invited group support.

Attardo (1994) explains that wordplay and cultural codes (like pinyin or emojis) are part of humor’s function [4]. They create shared meaning and help users feel like insiders. Using slang like “YYDS” or “biye” shows awareness of Chinese internet culture—and using it correctly earns respect. As Liu (2022) points out, playful rudeness can actually signal intimacy rather than offense [7]. Calling oneself a “loser” or “too shy” may sound negative, but in this context, it’s a form of social bonding.

In short, humorous usernames help users:

Display self-awareness and humility

Adapt politely to platform culture

Build new social identities

Ease anxiety and invite interaction

Though short in form, these names play a big role in helping digital refugees feel accepted and understood in a new online community.

Dark Humor and Social Critique

Not all humor on RedNote is cute or friendly. Some users turn to dark humor to talk about serious topics such as politics, stress, academic pressure, or identity struggles. These jokes may seem funny on the surface but often carry deeper messages about uncertainty, fear, or cultural tension.

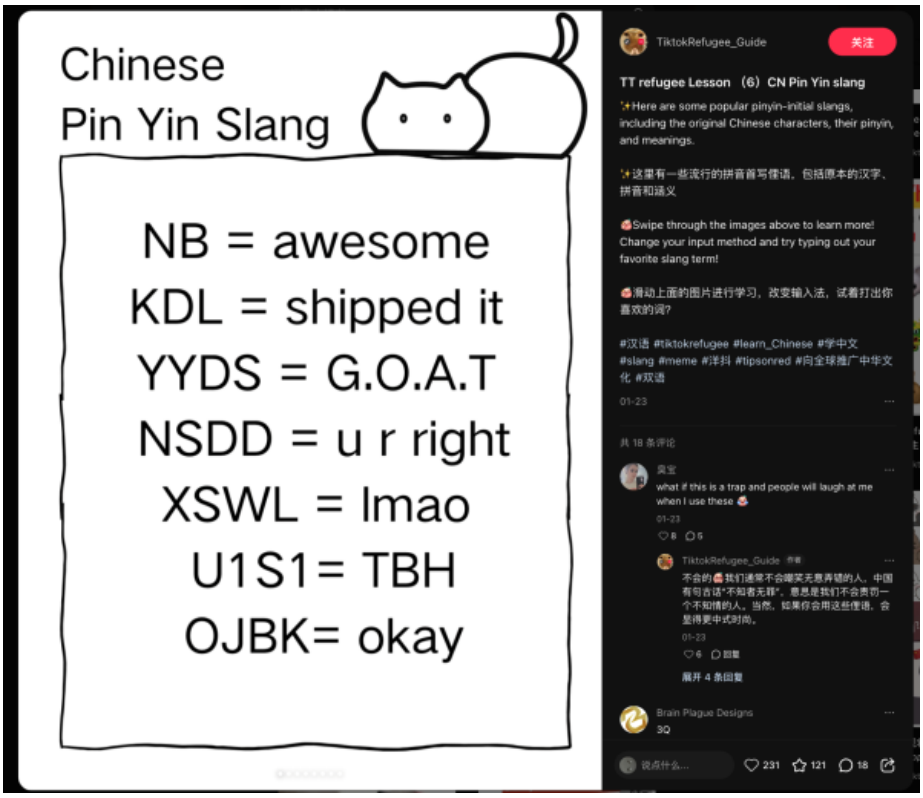

Fig. 7 Chinese slangs

As known in Fig. 7, for many TikTok refugees, learning and using RedNote's cultural codes is a process of trial and error. Common comments from new users include questions like:

"Can someone explain what 111 means?"

"I keep seeing 'YYDS'—is it like OMG?"

These innocent questions often receive humorous responses, sometimes resulting in "RedNote slang guides" written entirely with emojis or memes. This playful confusion turns into community bonding. From a politeness perspective, this aligns with positive politeness strategies—users seek approval by showing interest in shared knowledge[2]. When mistakes are wrapped in self-deprecating or sincere tones, they are often tolerated, or even warmly received.

For example, one user posted:

"Trying to stay calm while using 2333—hope I don't embarrass myself," followed by a laughing-crying emoji. Humor here protects face and invites supportive responses. Even local users sometimes reply playfully, saying things like:

"Wow, you're already fluent in the XSWL dialect!"

This kind of light encouragement shows how humor helps bridge the gap between language ability and community acceptance. In this way, abbreviated humor becomes both a learning tool and a cultural positioning strategy.

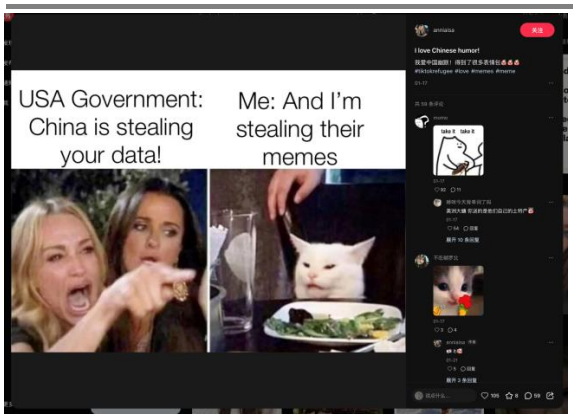

Fig. 8 Chinese humor

In some cases, dark humor delivers subtle social critique. For example, as known in Fig. 8, a user posted a set of emojis and captioned it:

"USA Government: China is stealing your data!"

Another user joked:

"Me: And l'm stealing their memes"

These posts appear playful but express satire and irony, especially regarding the political implications of switching from TikTok to a Chinese platform.

According to Attardo (1994), dark humor works by creating contrast between serious ideas and humorous language [4]. RedNote users combine cute memes and gentle wording to express complex feelings like disappointment, culture shock, or distrust. This allows them to speak without direct confrontation.

Fig. 9 Five Years Gaokao, Three Years Mock Exams

As known in Fig. 9, Five Years Gaokao, Three Years Mock Exams. is a famous Chinese exam preparation book. Some netizens suggested that TikTok refugees improve their Chinese proficiency by studying this book, so as to stop using the translation function to browse Rednote. Another popular post read:

"Here to pledge loyalty—I'm ready to recite 'Five Years Gaokao, Three Years Mock Exams.'"

This referred to a famous Chinese exam prep book. The joke implied that being accepted on RedNote required cultural sacrifice. Others replied:

"You've chosen the hard path,"

"RedNote is harder than the college entrance exam."

These responses continued the dark joke in a supportive way, showing shared pressure and insider understanding.

While some scholars view humor as trivializing serious issues, dark humor on RedNote often achieves the opposite—it deepens emotional resonance while keeping conversation socially safe. Its ambiguity allows users to express sensitive opinions, navigate risk, and connect through layered interpretations.

In summary, dark humor on RedNote is a clever form of expression. It helps users:

Talk about social and cultural pressure

Critique political realities or platform transitions

Express frustration and emotional fatigue beneath a joking tone

For digital refugees, dark humor is a way to keep their voice, even while adjusting to life in a new online "country."

Self-Deprecation and Social Anxiety: Reducing Distance through Humorous Vulnerability

Another common humor strategy among RedNote newcomers is self-deprecation. Many users joke about their poor Chinese skills, their fear of posting, or their general social anxiety. This type of humor is soft and emotional—it allows users to show weakness in a safe and acceptable way.

For example, one post read:

"My hand is shaking as I write this. Afraid of getting scolded, afraid no one will reply… but here we go!"

Another user wrote:

"First time posting on RedNote—feels like giving a public speech."

These statements may sound funny, but they also feel genuine. They reveal just how nervous some users feel when trying to enter a new digital environment.

Fig. 10 Dark - humored

Unlike memes with animals or light jokes, self-deprecating humor often reflects a more complex emotional mix—frustration, identity struggles, or cultural insecurity. As known in Fig. 10, one user posted:

"Why does an AR-15 need 20 bullets? Because that's how many kids are in a classroom."

The post referenced school shootings in the U.S. and included a combination of numb and desperate emojis. Though shocking at first glance, such humor expresses helplessness about real-world issues, as users feel powerless to change them.

This reflects McGraw and Warren's (2010) Benign Violation Theory, which states that humor occurs when something seems wrong but is presented in a way that feels safe or socially acceptable [10]. In these cases, RedNote becomes a "safe zone" for controversial discourse—where users can wrap harsh realities in jokes and maintain emotional distance while coping with trauma.

Such posts may also be seen as a form of mock impoliteness (Culpeper, 1996), where the speaker intentionally breaks politeness norms, but the audience forgives them because they understand the humorous intent [11]. On RedNote, this works largely because of shared background knowledge. For instance, when someone says,

"At least on RedNote, I can't get shot," the impact is strong because the audience understands the double meaning—both a critique of American norms and a signal of seeking refuge.

However, not all users respond positively. Some newcomers hesitate to post dark jokes, asking things like:

"I want to be funny, but I don't want to offend anyone here. Will this make people uncomfortable?"

This shows that humor always carries a social risk, especially across cultures. What is funny in one context may feel inappropriate in another.

Self-deprecating humor allows users to lower social tension and appear non-threatening. By acknowledging their own flaws first, they create room for empathy and reduce the risk of criticism.

This strategy also creates emotional closeness. In the comments, many users responded with kind and humorous encouragement. One wrote:

"This post is so real—I see myself in it."

Another said:

"Don't worry, we all started this way."

These responses show that self-deprecation resonates, especially with others who have similar fears.

Schiro (2016) found that humor helps reduce stress and increase engagement, especially in social contexts [5]. While her study focused on public advertising, the same principle applies here. Self-deprecating humor allows digital refugees to manage fear while still expressing a desire to join the community.

Sometimes, self-deprecation mixes with dark humor. Usernames like "Social Anxiety Li Hua" or "Failed International Student" sound sad, but are also funny. These names express pain in a way others can laugh with—not at. As Attardo (1994) noted, humor can turn difficult emotions into shared experiences [4]. Self-humor is low-risk and high-reward: if people like it, the user feels accepted; if not, they can say, "It was just a joke."

This lets users test social waters without full exposure. In short, self-deprecating humor helps users:

Lower their "face" to show politeness

Cope with fear of rejection or silence

Form emotional bonds with like-minded people

Enter the group as honest and open individuals, not as perfect ones

Through this strategy, humor becomes a tool for expressing vulnerability and building belonging in an unfamiliar and sometimes intimidating digital world.

Humor and Platform Culture: Adapting to RedNote's Local Style

RedNote is very different from TikTok. While TikTok focuses on fast-paced videos, dance trends, and global viral content, RedNote is more centered around text and image sharing, with strong connections to Chinese internet culture. For digital refugees, switching to RedNote is more than changing apps—it's like entering a new country with its own language, rules, and sense of humor.

In this context, identity-based humor serves as both a cooperative strategy and a soft landing in an unfamiliar cultural environment. New users often describe themselves with usernames or post titles like "TikTok Refugee #298," "Devlin's Emergency RedNote Account," or "Feelin' Cute, Might Survive the Algorithm Crash." These phrases combine sincerity and sarcasm, allowing users to present themselves as self-aware, adaptable, and emotionally honest.

By using self-irony, newcomers manage awkwardness with charm, turning vulnerability into relatability.

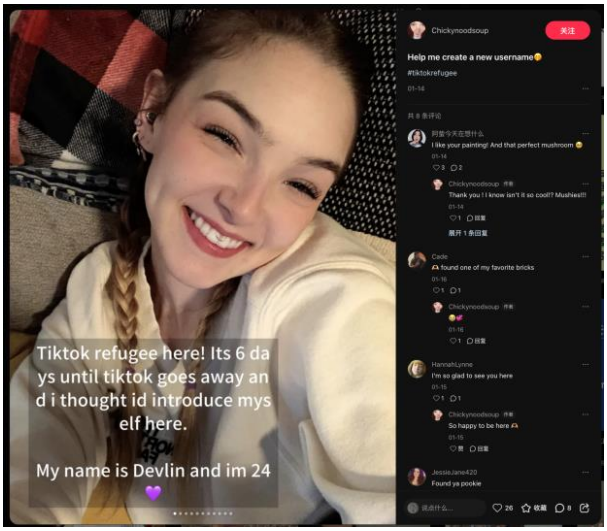

Fig. 11 A Rednote new user

As known in Fig. 11, one user wrote:

> "Hi, I'm Devlin. I'm 24. I don't know how to use this app, but I'm here now."

The comment was simple, but it received many likes and replies. Other users responded with things like "Same here!" or "Welcome to the club." Humor wasn't just in the words, but in the tone—in the honest admission of confusion, and the shared anxiety of being a digital immigrant.

This kind of humor also opens doors to help. By saying things like "I can't speak Chinese, but I'm trying," or "Please help me pronounce my name," users admit their limitations while inviting cooperation. In this way, humor is not just a roundabout form of politeness—it becomes a strategic display of digital humility that builds connections.

To adapt, users must learn the platform's local culture. Humor becomes a powerful way to do this. As known in Fig. 6 and Fig. 7, a common strategy is using pinyin slang or number codes, such as:

YYDS – "yǒng yuǎn de shén" (Forever God = always the best)

XSWL – "xiào sǐ wǒ le" (Died of laughter)

250 – A slang term for "fool" or "idiot"

520 – Sounds like "wǒ ài nǐ" (I love you)

At first, newcomers may not understand these codes. But through exposure and humorous examples, they gradually learn. Several users shared humorous "slang code charts" to help newcomers understand expressions like YYDS or 250. These playful guides made learning more accessible and turned confusion into group bonding. Humor, in this context, works as an informal language teacher.

Attardo (1994) noted that humor depends on shared background knowledge [4]. On RedNote, this includes local slang, meme histories, and cultural values. By learning how to joke "in the RedNote way," users are not just being funny—they are demonstrating cultural understanding.

Liang (2023) explained that RedNote humor is often highly visual and layered [6]. Users combine text, stickers, emojis, and even offline references (like exam books or celebrities) to create jokes. For TikTok immigrants, this means learning a new multimodal communication style.

This humor also reflects a collective sense of belonging. When users finally "get the joke," they feel like insiders. They begin remixing memes or posting their own funny content. It's like learning a new dialect—not just the words, but the tone, rhythm, and emotional feel.

In another example, a user wrote:

"I finally understand 'YYDS'—does this mean I can graduate now?"

The post was funny but also celebrated cultural integration. Comments included:

"Welcome to the fandom universe!"

"You're one of us now."

Ultimately, humor helps digital refugees actively learn and internalize RedNote's local style. Through memes and shared jokes, users transform cultural gaps into moments of connection.

Common patterns emerge across these cases. First, humor functions as a politeness strategy, replacing formal language with more creative, accessible, and culturally sensitive expressions. Users use humor to show respect, signal belonging, and avoid imposing on the host community. Second, humor relieves emotional tension—helping refugees cope with platform migration, express insecurity, or simulate confusion in a way that earns support instead of criticism.

Moreover, humor builds social ties. Most humorous posts receive warm replies, corrections, and even co-creation ("You forgot your cat tax license!"). This shows that humor invites interaction and positions users not as outsiders, but as learners and players in a shared digital space.

Finally, humor is adaptive. Users flexibly adopt local codes, experiment with new formats, and blend global internet logic with Chinese digital practices. In doing so, they construct hybrid identities—part foreigner, part netizen—communicating through jokes, memes, and self-aware irony.

These findings suggest that humor is not only a form of politeness—it is also a method of becoming: a creative way to gain recognition, build relationships, and cross cultural boundaries in a transnational digital world.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Humor in RedNote posts serves as a multifunctional strategy that blends emotional support with social positioning. Across the analysis, humor consistently functions in three key ways: it manages users' digital face (as per Goffman), it facilitates group belonging through shared norms (Brown & Levinson's positive politeness), and it enables playful identity performance in a culturally unfamiliar space. By expressing vulnerability through self-deprecation or irony, users not only avoid direct confrontation but also invite empathy and interaction. These

mechanisms converge to illustrate that humor is not incidental—it is a deliberate strategy of adaptation and relational repair.

This study explored how digital refugees—users who migrated from TikTok to RedNote—use humor as a politeness strategy to adapt to a new platform. Through examples such as cat tax memes, creative usernames, dark jokes, and culturally coded humor, it became clear that humor serves more than just entertainment purposes. It plays an important role in building relationships, reducing anxiety, and learning new cultural norms.

Using qualitative discourse analysis of posts, memes, comments, and usernames, this research examined how TikTok refugees express themselves, manage identity, and build community on RedNote. The findings show that humor plays a central role in facilitating cross-cultural adaptation. Users employed different types of humor—self-deprecation, irony, emojis, coded abbreviations, and collective storytelling—to ease their entry into unfamiliar digital communities.

For instance, the "cat tax" ritual allows newcomers to humorously announce their presence without seeming aggressive. Letters to "Li Hua" transform textbook references into emotional performances. Digital slang like "666" or "YYDS" becomes both a learning tool and a social signal. Even darker jokes, though controversial, help users express fear, build solidarity, and test the boundaries of acceptable speech.

These practices reflect key ideas from politeness theory, face theory, and humor studies. Brown and Levinson's (1987) distinction between positive and negative politeness is clearly reflected in how users try to be friendly while avoiding pressure. Goffman's concept of face appears when users create funny usernames or apologize before asking questions. Attardo's GTVH theory helps explain how script opposition and shared context create humor, especially in culturally blended posts [2]–[4].

From a broader perspective, humor is not just a way to have fun—it is a social strategy. It helps users avoid awkwardness, create empathy, and gain legitimacy in new environments. For many TikTok refugees unfamiliar with RedNote's language, culture, and algorithms, humor becomes a bridge—a way to be seen, accepted, and understood.

Limitations

This study has some limitations. The data only came from publicly visible posts and did not include interviews or long-term observations. It also focused mainly on English-speaking users, which may not represent the full range of multilingual or local user responses. Additionally, certain humor types, especially political or dark humor, require deeper cultural sensitivity and more audience analysis.

Future Research

Future studies could explore how humor evolves over time—for example, whether users' humor styles change as they become more experienced. Comparative studies between platforms such as RedNote, Threads, Instagram, or Weibo could also reveal how platform norms shape humor and politeness. Another promising direction is to explore how humor interacts with algorithmic visibility—do humorous posts spread more widely, and if so, why?

Recommendations

1. For new users:

Approach the platform with a light heart. Use humor to show your willingness to learn. It's okay to make mistakes—as long as you joke about them in a kind and respectful way. This makes it easier to connect and opens the door for conversation.

2. For RedNote platform moderators:

Consider creating spaces or tags that support newcomers, such as #FirstPost or #NewUserTips. Encourage the use of friendly humor to break the ice. Highlight top comments that show warmth or humor—not just popularity.

3. For researchers:

This study focused on a small sample of humorous posts. Future research could explore video content, voice posts, or emojis in more detail. Researchers could also compare different platforms (e.g., RedNote vs. Threads) or different language communities (e.g., Chinese vs. English humor).

Interviews with users would also help reveal the feelings, strategies, and experiences behind each post. This would make future research richer and more personal.

Conclusion

In an age of digital transformation, users often feel lost or afraid. But humor gives them a voice. It provides a way to smile, learn, and belong. On RedNote, humor helps turn digital refugees into digital citizens—people who don't just use the platform, but help shape its culture.Sometimes, small jokes tell big stories: about fear, friendship, learning, and change.

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