

The Social Construction of Transnational Marriage on Rednote: Insights from Influencer–Follower Interactions

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Abstract

This study adopts a social constructivist perspective to explore how transnational marriages are constructed through social media interactions on Rednote. On the Rednote platform, researchers collected 50 posts by Chinese influencers showcasing transnational marriages and 150 highly liked comments as samples for content analysis. The results indicate that sharing cross-cultural lifestyles is the main content of these posts, with *life sharing*, *love stories*, *emotional sharing*, and *scripted videos* as the core themes displayed. Through self-disclosure, influencers build trust and emotional connections with followers and construct a positive image of transnational marriages through impression-management-based self-presentation strategies. Selective showcasing of positive life aspects and scripted content are the primary forms of self-presentation. In these interactions, influencers and followers establish parasocial relationships that shape followers' cognition and practices regarding transnational marriages. In the future, the construction of transnational marriages on social media and its impact on users' internalization and practices will become a new direction for research.

Keywords: Social Constructionism, Rednote, China, Transnational Marriage, Social Media

Introduction

Transnational marriage can be broadly understood as a transnational activity between citizens of different countries within a pre-existing and active transnational network (Charsley, 2013). With globalization, transnational marriages have become common in many countries. For example, according to data from the European Union's statistics office covering 27 countries in 2023, about one in every 13 families is a mixed family. However, this trend is not evident in China. According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2023), the registration rate of transnational marriages in China in 2022 was only 0.23%. The marginalized status of transnational marriages in China has led to a scarcity of official data,

and media reports often link transnational marriages to criminal activities, suggesting that Chinese individuals who date or marry foreigners are opportunists, unpatriotic, or morally corrupt (Chan & Ngai, 2021).

On the other hand, some media overly romanticize celebrities' transnational marriages, leading some Chinese people to overestimate the appearance, personality, and wealth of foreign partners while overlooking the practical difficulties associated with transnational marriages (Pan, 2014; Wang & Sun, 2020). Unlike mainstream media, social media offers a new window to information about transnational marriages. There is still a lack of research on the media image of transnational marriages, especially the construction of social media images. Relevant academic research focuses on specific areas such as migration, illegal transnational marriages, crime, or foreign spouses' cultural adaptation (Pan, 2014; Woon & Pang, 2017).

In the absence of comprehensive, detailed mainstream narratives, social media has become a crucial platform for people to learn about transnational marriages (Zhou & Zhang, 2019). However, the content on social media about transnational marriages is fragmented and lacks an overall summary and synthesis (Chen & Liu, 2020). Scant research has been done on Rednote, one of China's most important social media platforms. This platform has over 200 million monthly active users, 70% of whom are young women, and more than half live in China's most developed first- and second-tier cities (Qiangua Data, 2022). The platform's young, female, and fashionable user base makes it a focal point for narratives and discussions on transnational marriages, underscoring the need for research on this platform. On highly dispersed social media, a core issue is understanding how Chinese influencers with experiences of transnational marriages and their followers construct transnational marriages through interactions. Based on this, the study examined posts by Chinese influencers on Rednote about transnational marriages, along with followers' comments. Additionally, this study analyzed these interactions from the perspective of social constructionism.

Research on transnational marriage remains scarce in China, particularly studies that explore the lived experiences and everyday realities of such relationships. Consequently, the public image of transnational marriages often appears stereotyped and distant from real life. Social media, however, provides a more personal and detailed lens through which these relationships are displayed and discussed. Despite this, little research has systematically analyzed how transnational marriages are represented and constructed on social media platforms. This study addresses this gap.

By viewing social media content as a form of social construction, this study investigates how transnational marriages are constructed on Rednote through influencers' impression management strategies and the formation of parasocial relationships with followers. It reveals how these interactive processes jointly shape the public understanding of transnational marriages in China. The findings have practical implications for improving public awareness, supporting social media content governance, and informing government decision-making in marriage and immigration management. Furthermore, this research contributes to reducing social bias and promoting multicultural community integration. Theoretically, it extends the application of social constructionism in digital sociology by integrating impression management and parasocial relationship theories into the social construction process.

Research Questions

1. What themes of transnational marriage posts do Chinese influencers publish on Rednote?
2. What methods do Chinese influencers use to construct transnational marriages on Rednote?
3. In what ways do Chinese influencers and their followers construct transnational marriages through interactions?

Research Objectives

1. To explore the themes of transnational marriage posts published by Chinese influencers on Rednote.
2. To analyze the methods Chinese influencers use on Rednote to construct transnational marriages.
3. To examine the relationship between social media interactions on Rednote and the construction of transnational marriages.

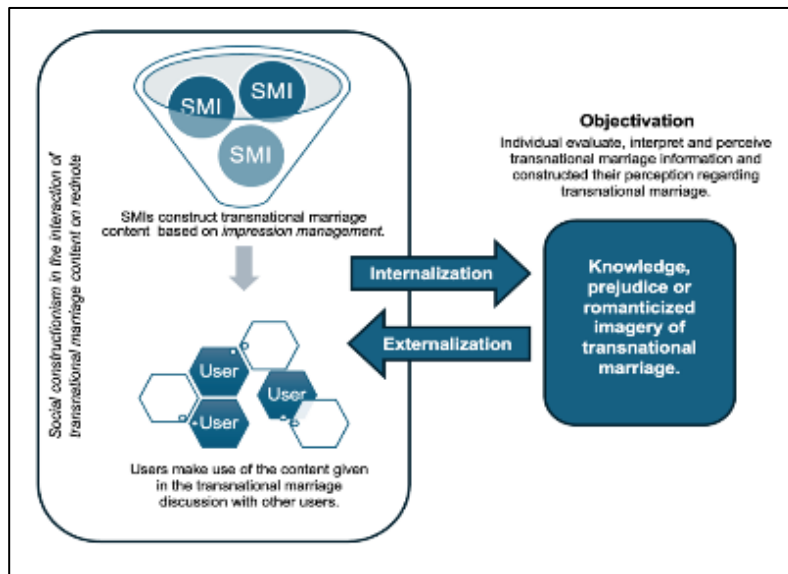
Theoretical Framework

Figure 1: The social construction of transnational marriages on Rednote

The theoretical framework of this study is based on social constructionism and incorporates the concept of impression management. According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), an individual's knowledge comes from interactions with others. In this sense, transnational marriage can be seen as a socially constructed concept, the result of collective meaning-making. This construction consists of three processes: externalization, objectification, and internalization of social reality. SMIs may engage in impression management by posting content on social media, thereby participating in the social construction of transnational marriages through social interactions (Picone, 2015; Goffman, 1956).

Specifically, social media influencers (SMIs) are viewed as reliable sources on transnational marriages, yet they often craft images that align with public expectations, which may not be entirely accurate (Picone, 2015; Goffman, 1956). According to Zhao (2020), SMIs

might alter information to suit their perspectives, creating varied social realities through their narratives. As outlined by constructionism theory, understandings of reality are shaped within social structures and are reinterpreted and reconstructed through social media interactions (Rodkin, 1993). These constructed realities of transnational marriages become part of the public discourse after being externalized, reflecting ongoing discussions on platforms like Rednote (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Transnational marriages on Rednote repeatedly undergo this construction process.

Methodology

This section explains the study's nature and objectives. It also clearly defines the specific sample size and criteria, as well as the data collection and analysis methods.

Research Design

This study is a phenomenological type of qualitative research that employs an empiricist-based inductive research strategy. The research objectives are to explore the content and form of transnational marriage posts on Rednote, analyze how SMIs construct transnational marriage, and examine the relationship between social media interactions and the construction of transnational marriage. The research method used is content analysis, and the data analysis method is thematic analysis. Regarding sample selection, five Chinese influencers with foreign spouses were selected from Rednote, all with follower counts exceeding 50,000 and thus meeting Rednote's criteria for medium influencers (Huitun Data, 2024). The study collected the top 10 most-liked posts from each of the five SMIs, along with the top 3 most-liked comments under each post, totaling 50 posts and 150 comments. To protect the privacy of SMIs and their followers, only publicly available data is collected, and account names are anonymized. All posts and comments about transnational marriages were filtered to exclude irrelevant content.

Data Collection and Analysis

After determining the SMIs based on the sample criteria, researchers will collect the 10 most popular posts from each influencer, for a total of 50 posts. Given that posts on Rednote are predominantly visual, including text, images, and videos, researchers will systematically identify and tag key elements such as weddings, cultural conflicts, and family interactions, and convert all content into text. Additionally, the three most popular comments under each post will be collected, totaling 150 comments. During this process, information unrelated to the transnational theme will be filtered out, including, but not limited to, advertisements, duplicate content, and emojis. All data will be categorized and coded using NVivo and Excel to identify specific themes and, through relevance analysis, extract core themes and concepts related to the construction of transnational marriages.

Research Method

Content analysis is an empirical method for analyzing text within communication contexts, following methodologically controlled rules and a gradual model without immediate quantification (Mayring, 2000). This method involves analyzing both the surface content and deeper aspects of materials, including their form, text themes, main viewpoints, and underlying contextual information (Becker & Lissmann, 1973). In this study, we focus on the construction process of the meaning of transnational marriages. The primary objects of content analysis are posts and comments, which are all converted to textual form for analysis.

The analysis is conducted from three perspectives. To begin with, a thematic analysis of the data identifies the main types and themes of posts related to transnational marriages while also exploring the relationships between sub-themes and core themes. In addition, existing themes are categorized to identify consistency in content strategies to clarify how SMIs construct narratives of transnational marriages in social media content. Finally, the study examines the role of social media interactions in constructing transnational marriages and investigates the dynamics between SMIs and their followers throughout this process.

Results

This section presents the results of the thematic and content analyses conducted on the data. It explores the content of transnational marriage posts published by SMIs and analyzes the methods used to construct transnational marriages. Additionally, the study examines the relationship between the construction of transnational marriages and social media interactions.

Thematic Analysis

Table 1

Information on SMIs and their foreign spouses

SMIs	Gender	Followers No.	Nationality of spouse	Average No. of likes per post
Lan	Female	125k	Benin	13.3k
Bao	Female	188k	Russia	51.2k
Cao	Female	88k	Mexico	30.3k
Dou	Female	152k	Saudi Arabia	15.1k
Lei	Male	210k	United States	42k

The influencers selected for this study, along with information about their spouses, are shown in the table. The average follower count for the influencers is 152 thousand, and the average number of likes for the collected comments is 2.2 thousand. According to a word frequency analysis, the most frequently occurring words in the titles are foreign, family, sister, girlfriend, and husband. The tags #InterracialLove, #Mixed-raceBaby, #TransnationalMarriage, #RecorderofRomanticLife, and #DailyLifeofYoungCouples appear most frequently. This indicates that sharing about cross-cultural lifestyles is a primary content theme in the posts. Specifically, the researchers divided the 50 posts into 12 themes based on the content of the posts:

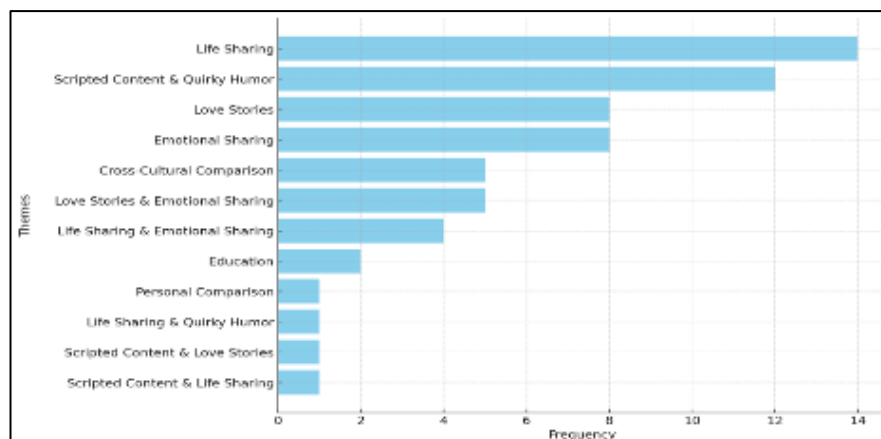


Figure 2: Frequency of post themes

The figure shows the frequency of post themes, with *life sharing* occurring most frequently, with 14 occurrences. This is followed by 12 occurrences of *scripted content* and *quirky humor*. *Love stories* and *emotional sharing* are presented 8 times each. These results are consistent with the previous analysis of title and hashtag frequencies. Among all themes, these four themes are central, with their correlations displayed as follows:

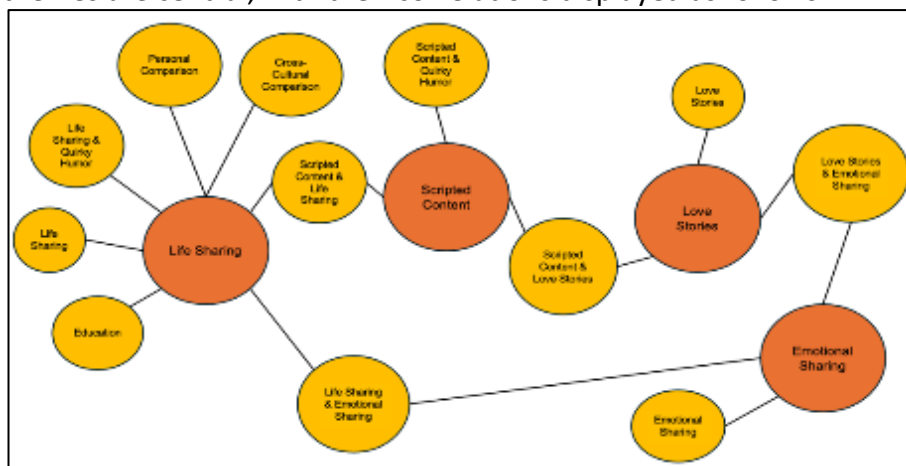


Figure 3: Correlation between different themes in posts

This figure shows the correlation between different themes. *Life Sharing* has the most sub-themes at seven, while the other three core themes each have three. Four sub-themes are shared among these core themes, highlighting the main content in posts about transnational marriages. SMIs share their daily routines, emotional stories, and feelings, providing insights into transnational marital life and facilitating an understanding of cross-cultural lifestyles. They also produce scripted content featuring clear narratives, dialogues, and plot structures, enhanced with professional editing to emphasize scenarios. Humor is a predominant style in these posts, which, although widespread and engaging, may not fully or accurately depict the real-life experiences of transnational marriages. In summary, the content posted by SMIs primarily revolves around sharing cross-cultural life experiences, which detail everyday life and the transmission of emotions and thoughts. Scripted content to attract followers is also an important theme of the posts.

Construction of Transnational Marriage

Self-Disclosure

Self-disclosure is a foundation for establishing the authenticity of emotional connections when sharing transnational marriages on social media. SMIs self-disclose by consciously sharing personal information with others, including thoughts, emotions, experiences, and beliefs (Derlega et al., 1993). This information is usually private and not publicly known. As Ueno and Adams (2006) pointed out, appropriate self-disclosure helps build intimate relationships, fostering mutual understanding and trust.

In the self-disclosure of SMIs, the most common is sharing details about daily life. This includes sharing about emotions and relationships and revealing significant moments. For example, Bao and Lei shared moments of a marriage proposal and family reunions:

Bao	第一次见婆婆，她没有丝毫距离感，看她比视频显瘦了。我心疼得一直哭。她帮我擦眼泪，轻轻地：“我的孩子。”终于等来了这一天，太多不易，好在结果是甜的。	<i>It was the first time I met my mother-in-law, but I did not feel the slightest sense of distance. Seeing that she had lost weight compared to the video, I was so distressed that I cried the whole time. She wiped away my tears and said gently, 'My child.' I have finally waited for this day, and it has been so hard, but fortunately, the result is sweet.</i>
Lei	从今天开始，我会化身成你心里的那条鲸鱼。无论在什么时间和空间的组合里，我都会守护你。你会嫁给我吗？	<i>Starting today, I will transform into the whale in your heart, and no matter the combination of time and space, I will always be there to protect you. Will you marry me?</i>

Figure 4: SMIs share the touching moments in life

These posts are presented in video format, capturing unforgettable moments in the SMIs' transnational marriages. As displayed on social media, these details of life can be seen as a collection of life's moments (Sinn & Syn, 2014). Followers experience these moments together with the SMIs and establish emotional connections. Many followers express that they are moved when they see such sharing:

 2022-12-27 117 4	<i>It moved me to tears.</i>
 2023-03-18 1088 111	<i>This is the first marriage proposal video that made me cry. We always try to satisfy each other's needs, but Lei's marriage proposal plan is based on his wife, and he loves her forever.</i>

Figure 5: Followers express their emotions about the posts

These comments display the sincere emotions of followers who were moved. Part of the reason might be that these life scenes are close to people's real lives, allowing them to feel a similar emotional resonance. As Slaby et al. (2019) pointed out, the elements of emotional resonance are generated through the shared production of meaning within relationships. This resonance demonstrates how people witness the intimate relationships of SMIs and helps to foster the building of close relationships with SMIs.

In addition to showcasing daily life, SMIs also share their vulnerabilities and challenges. This includes, but is not limited to, family relationship issues, cultural adaptation, and cyberattacks. For example, Cao and Dou have self-disclosed some complex and controversial issues:

Cao	当一个中国姐姐和一个混血妹妹走在一起，总有点显眼。我也被路人问过：这姐妹怎么一点都不像呀。	<i>When a Chinese and mixed-race sister walks together, it always catches the eye. Passersby have also asked me, 'How come these sisters don't look alike?'</i>
Dou	沙特有什么好呀？语言不通，没有亲人，没有闺蜜，吃不到猪肉，喝不到酒……远嫁不是一件好事。	<i>What is good about Saudi Arabia? There is a language barrier, no relatives, no close friends, no pork to eat, no alcohol to drink... Marrying far from home is not a good thing.</i>

Figure 6: SMIs share the challenges in life

These comments reveal the real dilemmas faced by SMIs. Cao has shown the awkward situation of having two children with different fathers post-divorce. Meanwhile, Dou has expressed the disadvantages of marrying far away in Saudi Arabia. As part of private topics, this content allows SMIs to interact more intimately and warmly with their followers. Nevertheless, self-disclosure on social media can also face risks such as sexual harassment, negative feedback from others, or cyberbullying (Aharony, 2016). This risk becomes more evident, especially when the content of the posts conflicts with people's beliefs. For instance, some people have accused Cao of not caring for her elder daughter, while Dou faces much less controversy. The differences in people's attitudes can be seen in the comments:

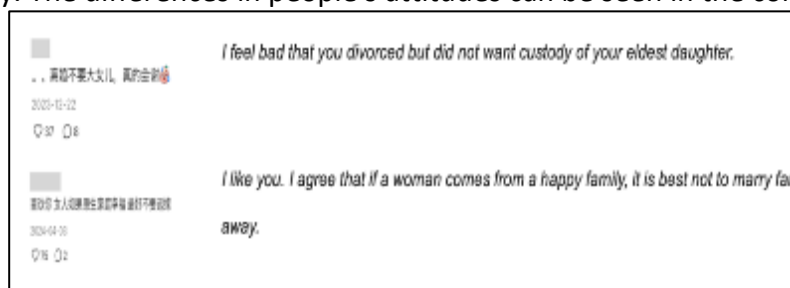


Figure 7: Followers' diverse reactions to different self-disclosures

These comments highlight the diverse reactions to self-disclosure. Although Robinson et al. (1995) suggest that likability and perceived authenticity are positively correlated, genuine self-disclosure does not always lead to positive feedback. Self-disclosure aligned with societal norms is typically deemed appropriate. Balanced self-disclosure is likely authentic and favorable. Self-disclosure is crucial for SMIs to establish authenticity in narratives about transnational marriages. By sharing personal emotions and challenges, SMIs quickly earn trust. However, if self-disclosure clashes with public values, it may result in negative feedback.

Self-Presentation

As public figures on social media platforms, impression management-based self-presentation is one of the most important content creation strategies for SMIs. As Goffman (1959) emphasized, self-presentation is the act of controlling, shaping, and altering others' perceptions in specific contexts. This strategy helps SMIs establish a positive image after building authenticity in transnational marriages through self-disclosure. Specifically, self-presentation in posts manifests in two forms: selective showcasing positive aspects of life and scripted content. Selective presentation often includes ideal spouses, family relationships, and lifestyles commonly seen in SMI displays. For example, Bao and Lan have portrayed their ideal family images:

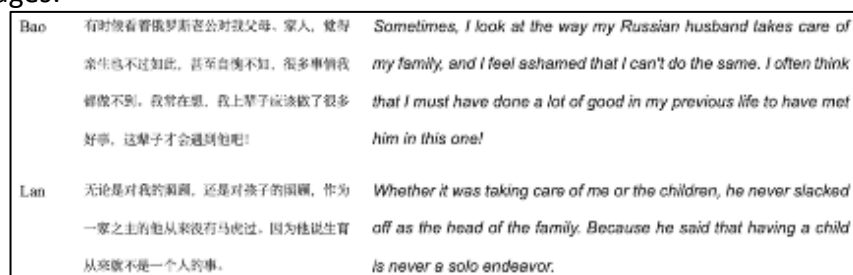


Figure 8: SMIs share harmonious family relationships

These contents showcase the admirable traits of SMIs' foreign spouses. They are often elegant, considerate, and family-oriented, and they get along well with other family

members. Many similar displays, such as Dou, frequently showcased her lavish gatherings in Saudi Arabia. Cao shares how her children's rapid development is unfolding in a multilingual environment. These contents highlight the positive aspects of transnational marriages, which help influence followers' perceptions and evaluations, thereby establishing a long-term identity akin to an ideal self (Picone, 2015; Goffman, 1956). Feedback indicates that favorable evaluations are often the mainstream content in the comments on these posts:

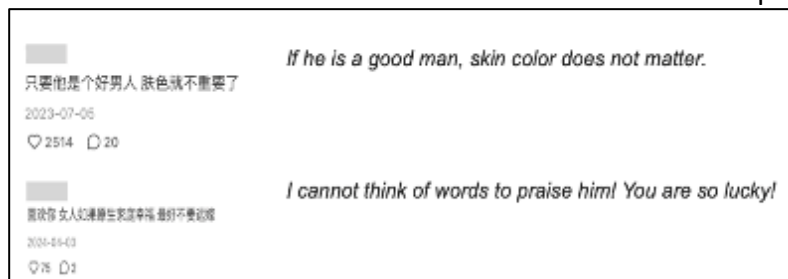


Figure 9: Positive comments about posts by followers

These comments show people's approval and envy towards the transnational marriages displayed by SMIs. The content presented by SMIs meets people's life expectations and prompts followers to make comparisons. This social comparison with idealized figures can evoke aspirations and feelings of pressure, leading to decreased satisfaction with one's life (Salovey, 1991; Lim & Yang, 2015). Some followers also express dissatisfaction with their marriages and spouses. However, this disparity is inaccurate, it results from SMIs' selective content presentation.

On the other hand, scripted content is an important form of self-presentation for SMIs. These posts are planned around specific themes, camera language, dialogues, and characters, making the content more like a performance than everyday life. The pursuit of entertainment is a key characteristic of scripted content. Thus, due to their entertaining nature, pranks, life challenges, and surprise displays are common choices for SMIs. Here are some examples of posts by SMIs:

Table 2

Examples of scripted content

SMIs	Translated post titles	Content description
Lan	Eat the lipstick in front of my husband and see his reaction.	<i>A Chinese wife used sugar to pretend it was lipstick and tricked her husband.</i>
Bao	When I lied to my Russian husband that I was pregnant.	<i>A Chinese wife plays a trick on her husband by pretending to be pregnant.</i>
Lei	I spoke Chinese-style English to my American wife all day.	<i>A Chinese husband jokes with his American girlfriend, speaking Chinese-style English that she does not understand.</i>
	While my fiancée is asleep, I spread flower petals all over her, so much that she thinks she is hallucinating.	<i>A Chinese husband planned to surprise his sleeping wife by covering the bedroom with flower petals.</i>

These posts are fun but deviate from real-life experiences. In the videos, SMIs perform pre-planned scenarios in front of preset camera positions. Such content is highly entertaining

and often attracts a lot of attention. When people focus on entertainment, the authenticity and originality of posts are not particularly emphasized, even amid the prevalence of homogeneous content. Lasswell (1948) noted that people use media consumption of entertainment to release emotions and escape the pressures and challenges of real life. These scripted contents, like social media products, create a positive emotional value that endears people to transnational marriages and keeps them engaged with SMIs.

In short, SMIs employ various strategies to achieve their self-presentation goals. Selective displays of positive life aspects magnify the ideal spouse, good family relationships, and refined lifestyles, while negative content is avoided. Followers endorse and admire these portrayals. Scripted content, carefully planned, helps SMIs maintain consistent quality and achieve sound entertainment effects.

Interactions and Parasocial Relationships

In social media interactions, SMIs and their followers form a type of parasocial relationship. This is a one-sided virtual social relationship where followers see SMIs as part of their real social relationships over time. In this parasocial relationship, the audience develops a bond, intimacy, or familiarity with media figures they do not know, like relationships with family or friends. These fictional social media connections create a simulated interactive environment (Horton & Richard, 1956; Su et al., 2021). These interactions can alleviate loneliness and provide emotional support. For example, many followers share their emotional connections with SMIs:

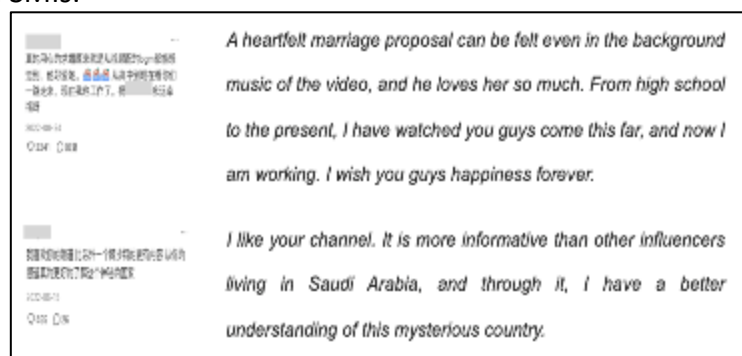


Figure 10: Followers express a long-term emotional connection with SMIs

These comments demonstrate followers' emotional support for SMI, which is stable, reciprocal, and long-lasting. Berger and Calabrese (1975) argue that developing interpersonal relationships is a process of increasing certainty about information. Stable interactions enhance understanding and trust between SMIs and their followers, thereby expanding SMIs' influence. In the construction of transnational marriages, this influence is reflected in both cognitive and practical aspects. Cognitively, how SMIs construct transnational marriages can enhance people's acceptance of such marriages. If people are already dissatisfied with their marriages, this comparison can exacerbate dissatisfaction with their reality:

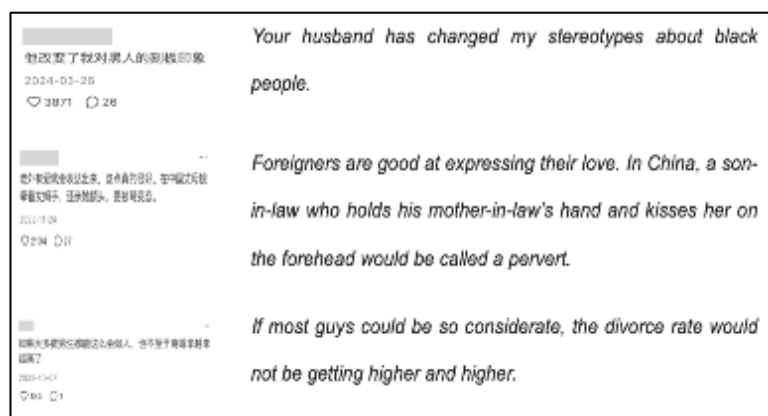


Figure 11: Followers express a high level of acceptance of transnational marriages

In the comments, people express strong approval and acceptance of transnational marriages, as evidenced by their aspirations for healthy marital values and ideal partners. These comments encourage SMIs to post more content that meets people's expectations, creating an inclusive environment for transnational marriages. New followers' positive perceptions of transnational marriages are reinforced in this field. This is like an interpersonal performance conducted by two or more actors before a third party (Kaplan, 2021). This network of strong and weak ties constitutes a bounded, semi-public social space where followers and SMIs construct the narrative of transnational marriages, thereby strengthening its positive image.

Furthermore, followers' practical behaviors also transform within these parasocial relationships. This is reflected in their consumer practices and the enactment of transnational marriages. People are not only more willing to try transnational marriages but also purchase foreign products promoted by SMIs:

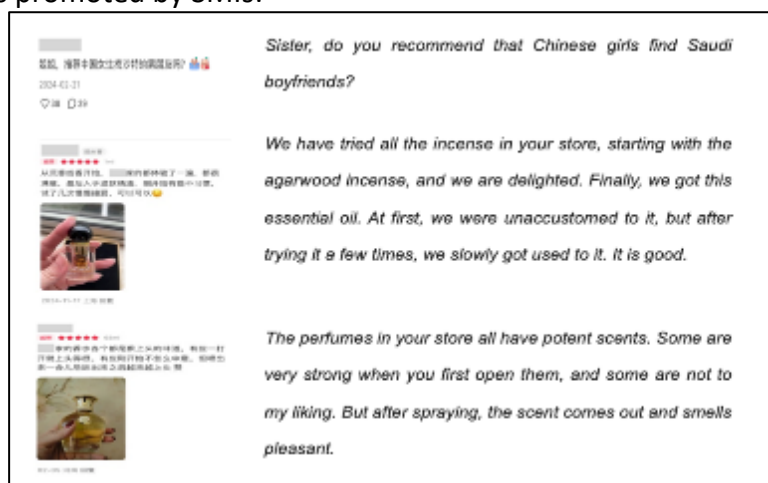


Figure 12: Examples of followers' practical actions

Comments showcase people's practical trials in interactions, including attempts at transnational marriages and exploration of cross-cultural products. Some SMIs use live broadcasts to communicate about transnational marriages and market products. In some posts, embedded advertisements for skincare products, baby formula, clothing, diapers, and more can be seen. Through the continuous mediation of advertising attitudes and brand attitudes, social media enhances the indirect influence of SMI endorsements on people's purchase intentions (Uribe et al., 2022). Mentioning SMIs in shopping reviews and expressing

gratitude are common practices. This indicates that this form of consumption can be seen as part of the influence exerted by parasocial relationships. SMIs, concerned with maintaining their credibility, also provide more cautious advice.

Overall, long-term interactions between SMIs and followers have formed stable parasocial relationships. On the one hand, these relationships increase acceptance of transnational marriages and intensify negative emotions toward already unsatisfactory marriages. On the other hand, cognitive changes promote practical changes, including practices related to transnational marriages and cross-cultural products. These changes in cognition and practice are placed in the public discussion realm, becoming part of the construction of transnational marriages on Rednote and influencing a new cycle of transnational marriage construction.

Conclusion

This study explores how transnational marriages are constructed on Rednote from a social constructivist perspective. Sharing cross-cultural lifestyles is the main content and theme of posts published by SMIs. Through self-disclosure strategies, SMIs build trust and emotional connections with followers and enhance the positive image of transnational marriages through impression-management-based self-presentation. Selective showcasing of positive aspects of life and scripted content are the primary means of self-presentation. Over the long term, followers and SMIs form parasocial relationships. These relationships support followers emotionally and influence their cognition and practices regarding transnational marriages, including increased acceptance and intensified negative emotions toward unsatisfactory marital relationships. The inclination towards cross-cultural products and practices of transnational marriages also becomes part of the online construction of transnational marriages. This research helps to understand how transnational marriages are presented on social media. It also demonstrates the potential of social media as a new research subject for private topics such as marriage. However, since Rednote is primarily used by female users, the small sample size may lead to data bias. Future research could explore more representative and diverse samples across broader social media platforms. Additionally, the impact of transnational marriages on social media and their influence on users' internalization and practices represent new research directions.

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