

The Influence of Social Platforms on Chinese Students' Decision to Study Abroad in the UK

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, studying abroad has become an increasingly important educational pathway for Chinese students, with the UK emerging as a favored destination for its prestigious universities, international environment, and long-standing academic reputation. This study investigates how Chinese students and their parents perceive and make decisions about studying in the UK, particularly focusing on how these perceptions are formed and reflected through Xiaohongshu, a famous Chinese social media platform. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research combines a quantitative survey of 75 university students in China with qualitative analysis of over 16,000 tokens of user-generated text from Xiaohongshu, using Python tools for sentiment analysis, keyword extraction, and topic modeling. The results reveal that while students are largely motivated by educational quality, global rankings, and career advancement, concerns about tuition costs, language barriers, and safety remain prominent; based on these insights, the study recommends that UK institutions enhance their presence on Chinese digital platforms and offer more personalized cultural and emotional support to better address the needs of prospective international students.

KEYWORDS

Study abroad; Chinese students; Social media influence; Xiaohongshu

1. INTRODUCTION

As one of the most attractive countries for students to study abroad around the world, the UK attracts a large number of Chinese students each year due to its high-quality education system [1], academic resources, globalized social environment. According to recent statistical data, Chinese students have become the largest component of the international student population in the UK. With the deepening of Sino British education cooperation, more and more Chinese families see the UK as an important choice for their children to receive international education [2].

Even so, the decision-making process for Chinese students studying in the UK is not solely determined by the quality of education. Economic costs, cultural differences, language adaptation, and other factors also influence the choices of students and parents [3]. Meanwhile, different family backgrounds, educational philosophies, and personal expectations also make study abroad decisions more diverse and personalized [4]. Therefore, studying the views of Chinese students and parents on studying abroad in the UK can not only help us understand the changing trends in studying abroad, but also provide valuable references for UK universities and relevant policy makers [5].

The decision of Chinese students to study abroad is influenced by various social and cultural factors, including traditional educational concepts, family expectations, social class, and economic conditions [6]. Especially in Chinese society, education is regarded as an important way to enhance social status

and career prospects, so parents often have a strong leading role in their children's educational choices [7]. At the same time, with the acceleration of globalization and the improvement of family economic levels, more and more Chinese families are paying attention to opportunities for international education, hoping to provide their children with broader development space through studying abroad.

However, cultural differences also bring many challenges. For example, language barriers, academic pressure, cultural adaptation, and other issues may cause students to experience anxiety and unease during the study abroad process [8]. Therefore, studying these cultural background factors is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the decision-making process of Chinese students and parents in studying abroad [9].

With the popularity of social media, there have been significant changes in the way information is obtained. In the past, students and parents usually obtained study abroad information through traditional channels such as study abroad agencies, educational exhibitions, and school promotional materials. However, in the context of the rapid development of the Internet and social media, Chinese social platforms such as Xiaohongshu, Weibo and Zhihu have gradually become an important source of information about studying abroad.

As a well-known content sharing platform in China, Xiaohongshu focuses on sharing real user experiences, covering various aspects of studying abroad from application preparation, visa application, school selection to daily life [10]. Users can obtain first-hand study abroad experience through Xiaohongshu, and also communicate with publishers through interactive comments. Therefore, Xiaohongshu is not only a platform for information acquisition, but also an important medium for students and parents to form their study abroad decisions [11].

This study centers on Chinese students' perceptions on studying abroad in the UK, with particular attention to how their motivations, concerns, and decision-making processes are formed and shaped through interactions on the social media platform Xiaohongshu. By analyzing user-generated content, this research explores how online narratives and emotional expressions influence individual choices in international education.

The research addresses two key questions:

- (1) What are the main motivations for Chinese students to choose the UK as their study destination?
- (2) What are the concerns of Chinese students about studying abroad in the UK?

These two questions aim to find the socio-cultural and informational dynamics behind study-abroad decisions in the digital age. The findings will help educators, policy-makers, and universities better understand the expectations and anxieties of prospective Chinese students, and enhance the responsiveness of institutional outreach, support services, and communication strategies on platforms like Xiaohongshu.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To better understand how social platforms influence the study-abroad decision-making of Chinese students, this research is rooted in relevant theoretical perspectives that account for both media influence and individual decision behavior. These frameworks offer analytical tools to understand the mechanisms through which digital content shapes perceptions, emotions, and ultimately choices. This study is based on the following theoretical frameworks, which help clarify how Chinese students and their families interact with digital content, process information under uncertainty, and make educational decisions within a complex sociocultural environment.

2.1. Social Media Influence

Social platforms play an increasingly important role in modern decision-making processes [12]. As a commonly used social platform among young people in China, Xiaohongshu gathers a large amount of information about studying abroad, life, and learning. Therefore, analyzing the discussions on Xiaohongshu can help understand how this information affects students' study abroad decisions.

2.2. Decision Theory

This theory focuses on how individuals make decisions in situations of information asymmetry [13]. In the decision-making process of studying abroad in the UK, students and parents often evaluate the pros and cons of their choices based on discussions, experience sharing, and relevant information on the platform.

This study adopts a mixed research method, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative content analysis, to comprehensively understand the views of Chinese students and parents on studying abroad in the UK.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study implements a mixed-methods approach to fully examine the motivations, concerns, and decision-making processes of Chinese students regarding studying abroad in the UK. The combination of quantitative and qualitative data allows for both breadth and depth in capturing student perspectives and platform-based discourse.

Survey data were collected through interviews with Chinese university students, aiming to gather insights into their motivations, expectations, and concerns about studying abroad. The questionnaire covered multiple dimensions, including reasons for choosing the UK, anticipated challenges, and perceptions of overseas education. Participants were 75 sophomore students from three classes at a mid-tier university in Chongqing, China. Despite the limited scope, the data provide a representative snapshot of students' attitudes within a specific institutional and regional context.

At the same time, content from Xiaohongshu was analyzed to investigate how Chinese social media users discuss studying in the UK. Python web crawling tools were used to collect user-generated contents and comments related to studying in UK experiences. Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques, including sentiment analysis and keyword extraction, were used to uncover emotional patterns, frequently discussed themes, and interaction dynamics. This qualitative data shows how social media serves not only as an information channel but also as an emotional and decision-making space.

Data analysis was conducted using Python-based tools to process and interpret the collected data. For the Xiaohongshu corpus, a range of libraries was employed, including jieba for Chinese word segmentation, playwright for simulating browser environments and extracting original textual content, and matplotlib, pillow, and wordcloud for visualizing term frequency and discourse patterns. Sentiment analysis and topic modeling techniques were applied to find emotional tendencies embedded in user posts and comments.

These analytical procedures enabled the identification of prevalent keywords and emotional categories (e.g., positive, negative, neutral), offering insight on how students and parents express their views, concerns, and expectations regarding studying in the UK. Through this approach, the study captures not only the cognitive but also the affective dimensions of digital discourse surrounding international education decisions.

4. DISCUSSION

By using the python media crawler tools, 16,928 tokens of Xiaohongshu users' content and comment related to study abroad in the UK has been gathered for analysis.

4.1. Overall Views of Students on Studying Abroad in the UK

Chinese students generally believe that studying in the UK is an effective way to enhance their educational background and broaden their international perspective. Students are more concerned about the global rankings, academic resources, and future career development opportunities of British universities. In surveys and interviews, many students expressed that the curriculum in the UK is more flexible and the duration is shorter (such as one-year master's programs), which makes them believe that studying abroad in the UK has the advantages of low time cost and fast returns.

Parents' concerns are more focused on safety, cultural adaptation, economic costs, and children's mental health. Parents generally hope that their children can enhance their social competitiveness and obtain better career prospects through studying abroad [14], but at the same time, they also show concerns about whether their children can adapt to life abroad. Especially after the COVID-19 epidemic, parents are more sensitive to children's health and safety issues.

4.2. Results Reflected on the Xiaohongshu Platform

As Figure 1 shows, Xiaohongshu posts related to “studying abroad in the UK” exhibit the following characteristics:

Diversified sources of information: The content shared by users covers various aspects of daily life, from application preparation and visa processing.

Strong emotional inclination: The post contains both positive sharing of study abroad experiences and negative stories of cultural conflicts and adaptation difficulties.

Academic related: school selection guide, popular majors, application process, etc.

Life related: accommodation choices, daily expenses, social circles, etc.

Psychological health: loneliness, cultural adaptation, psychological stress, etc.



Figure 1. Word cloud from data gathered from Xiaohongshu

The Xiaohongshu platform has played an important role in information dissemination and emotional resonance. The main purpose of students and parents searching for information on Xiaohongshu is to gain real experience and emotional support, rather than just official information.

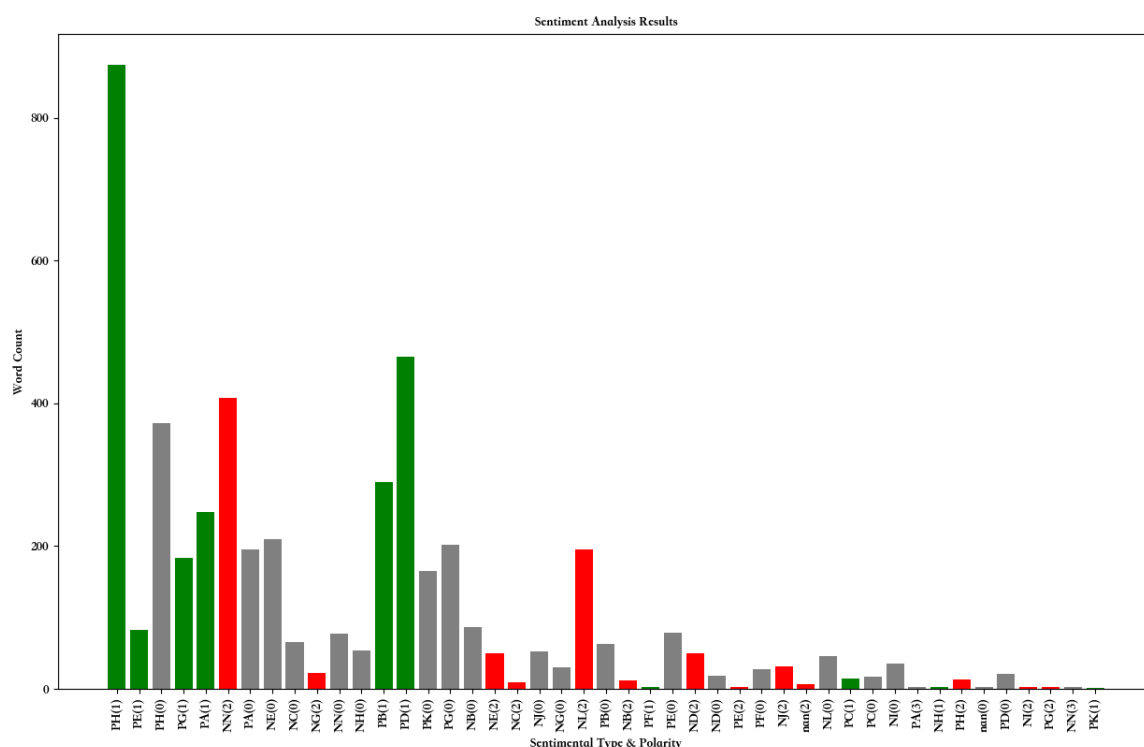


Figure 2. Sentimental analysis from data gathered from Xiaohongshu

As Figure 2 shows, the green bar represents the majority of positive emotions, with “Praise (PH)”, “Reassurance (PE)”, and “Belief (PG)” being the most prominent emotional categories. This indicates that Chinese students generally have a high level of recognition and expectations for studying in the UK. The emotional vocabulary in the “Praise (PH)” category is most frequently used, indicating that students often use positive words such as “excellent”, “pragmatic”, and “reasonable” to describe the quality of education, university rankings, teaching methods, and humanistic environment in the UK. The frequent occurrence of such vocabulary reflects recognition of the teaching level and reputation of British universities, indicating that the international student community holds a positive view of the education system in the UK. In addition, the high-frequency vocabulary of the “Peace of mind (PE)” category also indicates that many students can gain a sense of security and trust when planning to study in the UK, believing that the learning environment and living conditions in the UK are trustworthy and reliable.

In addition, emotional vocabulary in the “Believe (PG)” category also frequently appears, such as “trust”, “believe”, “reliability”, etc., indicating that Chinese students hold a relatively optimistic attitude towards the future development prospects of studying abroad in the UK. They believe that education and study abroad experience in the UK can provide assistance for future career development, and this belief is repeatedly emphasized in their sharing and discussions.

Although the overall sentiment tends to be positive, the analysis results also show a certain proportion of negative emotions. Among them, “Anger (NA)” and “Disappointment (NJ)” are the main negative emotional categories, indicating that students also mention some experiences of dissatisfaction and setbacks when discussing studying abroad in the UK.

Emotional words in the “Anger (NA)” category, such as “angry”, “annoyed”, and “furious”, may reflect unpleasant experiences experienced by some students during their study abroad process, including institutional issues, visa barriers, rising tuition fees, and cultural conflicts. This indicates that although most students have positive expectations for studying abroad in the UK, there are also some practical challenges and dissatisfaction in the actual process.

4.3. The Main Motivation for Chinese Students to Choose The UK As Their Study Destination

According to the interview results of 75 sophomore students from a university in Chongqing, China (Figure 3; Table 1), the main motivations for students to choose to study in the UK include the following aspects.



Figure 3. Interview and group discussion for studying abroad in the UK

Table 1. Key motivations for Chinese students choosing the UK as a study destination

Motivation	Percent	Description
Education quality and Global rankings	76%	British universities are ranked high globally, especially among the top G5 universities such as Oxford, Cambridge, UCL, etc.
Career development prospects	64%	British education has a high degree of recognition in both domestic and international job markets, which helps to enhance career competitiveness.
Language environment	60%	As English is a globally recognized language, students hope to enhance their language proficiency through studying abroad.
Short educational system	54.67%	The master's program in the UK is relatively short, which can reduce time costs and quickly obtain qualifications.
Cultural experience	40%	Students hope to broaden their international horizons and experience different cultures and lifestyles through studying abroad.

5. RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE AND APPLICATION VALUE EXPANSION

5.1. Fully Reveal the Cognitive, Attitudinal, and Motivational Background of Chinese Families Towards Studying Abroad in the UK

Through the analysis of discussions between Chinese students and parents on Xiaohongshu and the combination of questionnaire survey data, this study aims to comprehensively present the cognition, attitude, motivation, and cultural background of Chinese families towards studying abroad in the UK.

Cognitive level: The study will reveal the core cognition of Chinese families towards studying abroad in the UK [15], including their understanding of the quality of education, academic resources, cultural environment, and career development opportunities in the UK.

Attitude level: The study will analyze the differences in attitudes between Chinese students and parents in the decision-making process of studying abroad [16]. For example, students tend to focus more on personal growth and cross-cultural experiences, while parents are more concerned about academic returns and career prospects.

Motivation background: The study will also delve into the influence of social and cultural backgrounds on Chinese families' decision to study abroad [17]. Many Chinese families view international education as an important way to enhance their social status, and this motivation reflects the influence of cultural capital theory.

5.2. Provide Important Insights for Future Education Policies and Marketing

The results of this study can provide policy recommendations and marketing strategies for UK universities, educational institutions, and government departments to better attract and serve Chinese students.

By understanding the core concerns of Chinese students and parents, such as education quality, employment opportunities, and living costs, UK universities can adjust their enrollment policies and curriculum accordingly.

The analysis results of social media platforms such as Xiaohongshu indicate that Chinese students rely more on real user experience and peer sharing in the process of studying abroad. Therefore, British universities should make more use of digital platforms in their promotion, adopt content marketing and word-of-mouth communication strategies [18], such as invite Chinese students studying in the UK to share their stories of studying abroad; Publish authentic and grounded propaganda content on platforms such as Xiaohongshu and Tiktok (douyin).

Research has found that cultural adaptation is one of the main challenges faced by Chinese students studying in the UK [19]. Therefore, UK universities and educational service providers can strengthen cultural adaptation support services based on the results of this study.

6. CONCLUSION

This study tries to provide profound insights into the cognition and attitudes of Chinese students towards studying abroad in the UK and reveal the importance of social media in modern decision-making processes. By analyzing the content of digital platforms such as Xiaohongshu, this study will help relevant institutions develop more targeted enrollment policies, marketing strategies, and digital service plans, to better attract and serve international students.

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