

110 The 'RED': A Liminal Space for New Chinese Academics

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Research Domains

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Abstract

The paper explores how 'RED', a social media platform in China, serves as a liminal space for Chinese students undertaking doctoral degrees in the UK. As a liminal space, RED is used to search for and disseminate information, provide support, and foster and maintain relationships in a way that is far removed from campus-based sites and formal processes of doctoral study. The early phase data reported consists of 'dialogic-reflective' interviews with RED users alongside logs of their interactions and posts. This study explores how RED serves as a resource for Chinese international students, helping them navigate their academic migration and build a sense of community. The study underscores the significance of social media platforms in supporting the needs of international students and highlights the importance of developing more tailored support structures for such student groups whose motivations, goals and preferred strategies are sometimes not fully appreciated by their institutions.

Full paper

Background to the study

Social media platforms serve as multifunctional digital tools to assist people's lives and to build or maintain relationships. They prove particularly indispensable for Chinese academic migrants who, while studying abroad, may experience feelings of isolation or disconnection from their native country and culture. This study delves into the role of 'RED', a prominent social media platform in China, functioning as a liminal space for Chinese students pursuing doctoral degrees in the UK. As a liminal space, RED provides a unique forum for information discovery and sharing, peer support, and academic relationship cultivation and maintenance.

UK higher education welcomes huge numbers of international students every year, among which the number of international students from mainland China is the largest (HESA, 2023; Project Atlas®, 2023). The presence of international student groups fosters cultural exchange and contributes their distinct research interests and viewpoints to academia. As Chinese students face the transition personally, culturally, and academically, they engaged in intricate social and academic practices, which deserve research attention. Moreover, they actively engage with one another through social media platforms, utilizing these platforms to connect, assist, and exchange their experiences related to pursuing HE and living in the UK.

This study investigates how and why international doctoral students use social media as a liminal space during their doctoral studies. The research aims to explore their experience during liminality from multiple perspectives, including cultural, social, and academic transition through their discourse practices on social media. In this study, discourse is beyond its purely linguistic origins. It also serves as a mediation of practice, which means individuals do things by discourse. Discourse is a means of practice and also embodied the knowledge of people's thoughts, considerations, behaviours and identity negotiations, offering researchers a valuable lens through which to investigate human practices. The study thus adopts a qualitative approach with dialogic-reflective interviews as the primary data collection instrument, alongside the collection of posts and interactions discussed during research encounters.

Context: The RED

The social media platform used in this study is RED, which is mainly used in Mandarin-speaking areas, especially mainland China. As a platform that aims to accompany a generation to find a lifestyle that suits them and grow together with them (People.cn, 2020). In RED every post must include an image or short video, which is similar to Instagram, while it also pays attention to users' textual discourse practice. Hashtags are used to create communities and also the Big Data technology will help users find more posts related to their interests.

Chinese international doctoral students, technically, can find the content posted by those who have experience living and studying abroad in the UK HE settings simply find the virtual community by searching the keywords or key hashtags in Mandarin.

Theoretical framework

The study draws on theories of liminality. Liminal spaces can be understood as spaces where liminality is manifest, which is one of the tripartite processual schemes in the concept of transition, together with separation and reintegration (Turner, 1983; van Gennep, 1969). It refers to a state of being "in-between" or on the threshold of something (ibid). Van Gennep (1969) saw liminality as a stage of temporal transitions within a larger process of rites of passage, within which an individual moves from a child to an adult. Later, Turner (1983) added spatial considerations to liminality, specifically the physical and social space between two clearly defined boundaries. Another related iteration comes from Madison (2011), who focuses more on identity transition.

Implications

Drawing upon early phase findings of this study, I posit that social media platforms act as unique digital meeting grounds, creating an unprecedented type of transitional space or 'liminal space.' This space serves to unify individuals with common traits, facilitating the exchange of information and communication of emotions. Liminality, a key phase in any transition, often involves subtle elements that are difficult to discern. Yet, the interactive capabilities of social media allow these minute aspects to be expressed, archived, and retrievable as digital discourse. This makes digital discourse, as highlighted in studies by Herwig (2009), Haimson (2018), and Mitra & Evansluong (2019), a significant research window into understanding liminality. The dynamics of discourse on RED provide researchers with a critical perspective on Chinese doctoral students' transition experiences, beyond the conventional boundaries of campus-centric locations and formal procedures inherent to doctoral studies. Moreover, it opens opportunities to thwart homogenization, as discussed by Gu (2009) and Huang (2012), and to understand individuals' experiences of liminality from an emic perspective.

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