

STUDENTS AS
CO-CREATORS

A Learning & Teaching Research Collaboration

XHSxGMB: Social Media for supporting the Transnational Student Experience

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A STUDENTS AS CO-CREATORS PROJECT
UNIVERSITY OF WESTMINSTER

Executive Summary

This project explored the potential of a social media platform to support transnational student community-building at course-level – bridging the transition from China to the UK, which experience and existing research sees as both challenge and opportunity. Building on a survey and workshop with current students, we developed a student-driven channel, ‘native’ to existing media practices and embedded in a distinct institutional context. We used xiaohongshu – sometimes referred to as “RedNote” or “Little Red Book” in English – a platform commonly used by Chinese students, to set up a new account focused on the MA Global Media Business: a 1+1 partnership programme between the School of Media and Communications and Communication University of China. We explored forms of content, ways of working and engagement with this channel, underpinned by Participatory Action Research (PAR) principles, structured to support an iterative cycle of action/reflection.

Our research affirmed that the platform is a primary resource for the Chinese students we engaged, throughout the full student journey:

- discovering and ‘humanising’ the institution, helping gain overseas familiarity
- addressing underlying uncertainties and anxieties around travel/accommodation plans, access to services and academic skills
- supporting immersion and navigation in an unfamiliar city, both before and after arrival in the UK

Further, we identified:

- a lack of content connecting Chinese students to Westminster’s SU activities, health, wellbeing fitness and sports, and other elements of student experience.
- a danger that, without an official institutional presence on the platform, irrelevant, misleading or even harmful materials fill the gap – although this is not the role of a student-led account.
- a need to learn much more about how the platform supports employment opportunities, life after graduation and alumni networks.

Through our new account development, we sought to distinguish between institutional ‘promotion’ and course-level ‘community-building’, focusing on the latter – both as a way to focus content-creation on student engagement and to avoid falling foul of platform and institutional policies. We defined our own ‘community’ as current UK-based students, prospective/current students in China, and alumni looking back.

A second learning concerns project management, team structure and incentives. Our collaborative workflow was necessarily experimental and emergent. A clearer sense of leadership/accountability was needed and we now aim to produce an instructional brief and style guide for future iterations.

Finally, we came to view the channel as a longer-term project: a means of (a) asserting the course’s identity as constitutively transnational and media-engaged but evolving; and (b) maintaining cross-generational bonds from pre-arrival anticipation to post-graduation nostalgia. Management of this course page can be passed on to students in subsequent years, leading to a long-term archive and, potentially, mentorship opportunities from one cohort-generation to the next.

Background and Aims

This project explored the potential of a social media platform to support transnational student community-building at course-level – bridging the transition from China to the UK. Chinese nationals constitute the second largest ethnic group within the University of Westminster (22%) and the largest group (25%) within the UK's international students, yet often poorly supported (Ebel 2024). Chinese students often attempt to manage acclimatization challenges using social media, becoming “digital transnationals” – developing awareness of local routines and practices, travel, accommodation and advice; bridging academic and social divides (Guo 2024); and feeding the “hidden curriculum” (Machado et al. 2024, 5; cf. Wei 2024) – yet face additional barriers of transitioning across distinct media ecosystems (Sun and Xu 2023; Zhao and Fang 2022).

We therefore developed a student-driven channel, ‘native’ to students’ existing media practices and embedded in their distinct institutional context, using Xiaohongshu – a widely-used platform used by Chinese students to integrate into UK HE. MA Global Media Business (GMB) – a 1+1 transnational education (TNE) partnership – is unique within the university, forming a useful case study. GMB students complete one year at the Communication University of China (CUC), transferring to the University of Westminster for their second year – taught in Beijing during semester one; in London for semesters two and three. GMB's unique characteristics support the purposes of this study: a long period of preparation and anticipation, a transnational teaching context and a compressed London experience.

We deployed Xiaohongshu to bridge the divide in the ‘digital transnational’ (Sun and Xu 2023) university experience. Our objectives were to explore forms of content, ways of working and students’ engagement with this channel. We anticipate the learnings from the project being relevant to academic and professional services staff with responsibility for Chinese students and student experience more broadly. In addition, the project will benefit the GMB course directly, through continuation of the XHS channel.

Methods

We had two research questions:

- RQ1. How do Chinese students use xiaohongshu to familiarise themselves with the Westminster student experience?
- RQ2. How can MA GMB students use xiaohongshu to take ownership of their student experience?

RQ1 explores existing habits. RQ2 reflected on developing a new xiaohongshu channel. Both RQs were underpinned by Participatory Action Research (PAR) principles, structured to support an iterative cycle of action/reflection.

Primary methods:

- A short questionnaire-based survey received 23 responses (53% of the 2024/25 cohort). This was administered with Microsoft Forms, targeting students currently in the UK (GMB year 2), recruited in-class. Survey questions, co-designed by all partners, prioritised RQ1: how students use the platform to search/apply for a programme, prepare for travel, familiarise themselves with learning expectations and orient themselves in London. An information/consent page was embedded in the survey. Responses, anonymous by default, were securely stored in a university repository.
- A knowledge-sharing workshop with fifteen GMB students and two Chinese PhDs (the latter recruited by invitation, for a longer-term perspective on Westminster student life). Designed, facilitated and recorded by student participants, this generated more in-depth (quasi-focus group) discussion around both RQs. Participants self-selected through an opt-in on completion of the questionnaire.
- Supporting RQ2, student partners noted analytics and user comments through the platform, attended regular (minuted) project meetings with the academic partner, and completed individual reflective reports documenting their working patterns.

Analysis, led by the academic partner with input from student partners, highlighted notable quantitative trends from survey results (summarised in Excel) and user interactions (platform analytics). We did not aim for a representative sample (e.g. of all Chinese students or xiaohongshu users), so made no *general* inferences about students’ social media use. Rather, we highlighted the prevalence of particular habits and some cross-tabulation between student-motivation and platform-use questions. Qualitatively, we undertook an inductive thematic reading of all documented activities (workshop feedback, team meeting notes, reflective accounts, user comments) to record emergent areas of inquiry. Again, our approach is interpretive, not systematic, drawing connections between existing research, and practice on this MA programme. We emphasise process and reflection, above outcomes.

Results

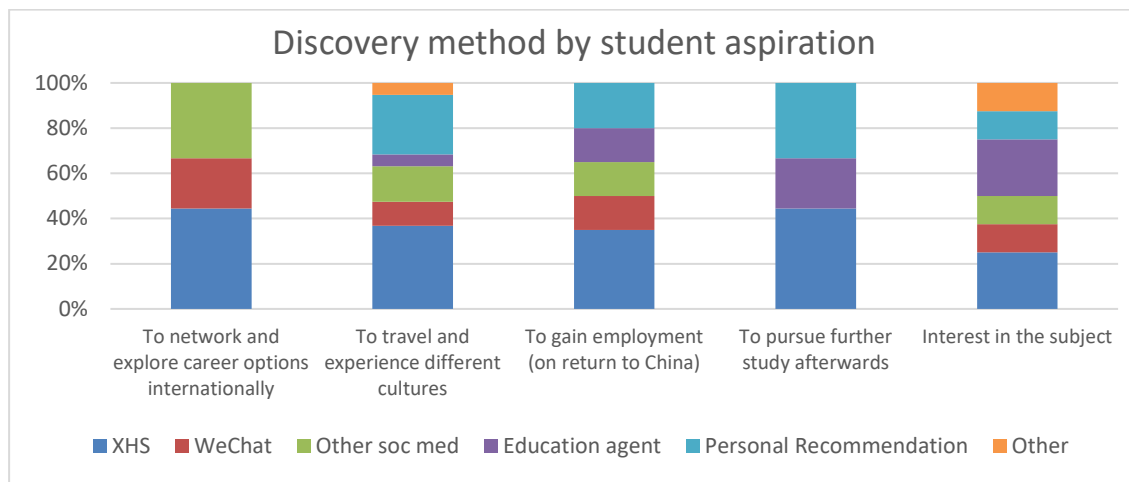
RQ1: Existing usage of the xiaohongshu platform.

Survey

Our questionnaire generated 23 distinct responses. The sample is self-selecting, likely by most active xiaohongshu users. Nonetheless, it is worth describing some features of the sample, which may be usefully indicative of this particular cohort, giving a sense of context and proportion, and suggesting areas for further investigation.

We first wanted to know how and why students pursued this particular MA programme:

- Just under half of respondents (11/23) reported being unaware of the University of Westminster prior to application, or uncertain (8/23). Only a minority (4/23) were certain they had prior knowledge of the university on application.
- Asked about the primary means of discovery for their MA, a majority of respondents selected xiaohongshu (13/23), while a small but nonetheless significant proportion (6/23) did not select any social media at all, instead using more traditional routes such as education agents or recommendations from friends or family.
- Unsurprisingly perhaps, by far the most popular reasons given for pursuing their degree were to boost employment (on return to China) (13/23) and to take advantage of international travel (13/23) – or both. Much smaller numbers reported interest in overseas careers opportunities (5/23), subject matter interest (5/23) and gaining a route to further study (7/23) as primary motivations.



Stacked bar chart to show proportion of programme discovery methods against stated primary study goals

In terms of xiaohongshu use itself, we focused on discerning the functions that students used the platform for when in China and when in the UK:

- Significantly, almost all students (including 100% of those already aware of the university on application) reported having sought information about their MA programme (21/23). Similar proportions researched the city they were coming to (20/23), as well as helping with their travel plans (19/23). More than half said they had used the platform for academic advice (such as essay-writing tips) (15/23) and to assist with their accommodation search (14/23).
- Once in London, this shifted to basics such as shopping/eating (22/23) and general navigation of the city and its attractions (21). Less urgent, but still significant, were navigating unfamiliar essential services (such as health) (12/23), and the continued need for academic support (14/23). A smaller number told us they found the platform useful for social purposes such as integrating with student life (8/23) or keeping in touch with friends/family overseas (7/23).

Use of XHS after arrival in London	Use of XHS before arrival in London						total
	Researching MA GMB	Researching London	Travel advice	Academic advice	Accommodation search	Other	
Shopping / eating	20	20	19	15	14	1	89
Navigating London	19	19	17	15	12	1	83
Academic advice	14	13	11	11	10	1	60
Navigating UK services	11	10	12	10	8	0	51
Socialising / student life	8	8	8	8	8	1	41
Keeping in touch with friends / family	7	6	7	7	6	1	34
total	79	76	74	66	58	5	

Heatmap of total reported xiaohongshu uses in China (horizontal) cross-tabulated against those in London (vertical). Cells show number of respondents that checked *both* options.
[NB. N=23. Multiple options were selected: totals do not sum to number of respondents]

Workshop

Our workshop reinforced and elaborated on many of the findings from the survey.

- As a preliminary comment, it is worth highlighting that the workshop was well attended (15/23 survey respondents), plus two doctoral students with no existing connection to the programme, suggesting a genuine sense of attachment and willingness to contribute to an initiative such as this.
- Many students focused on food in London, particularly shopping and cooking tips – giving examples of how to make authentic Chinese cuisine using more widely-available substitute ingredients in major supermarkets or smaller markets serving middle eastern communities.
- Public transport – and the student Oyster card – also emerged as a major barrier, for which Xiaohongshu was deemed useful.
- While several students had sought accommodation on the platform, they also stressed that they found this particular search overrun by advertising and potential scams, and therefore less useful.
- Some students were surprised at how little information about the university – its buildings or its heritage – was currently present on the platform, compared with some comparators that they mentioned.
- In general, while students do use the platform for very functional purposes, they also expressed strong feelings that it is not an information service and that the reason they used it was because it felt fun and entertaining.
- Accordingly, some students made clear their opinion that the platform – and particularly the GMB account – should not be used for recruitment purposes, both because such content commonly fails to cut through and also that it may undermine a sense of authenticity.



Student-run workshop held in Harrow campus in late April 2025

RQ2: Establishing a student-run xiaohongshu account for MA Global Media Business

Students set up the account in early March, which can be accessed here:

<https://www.xiaohongshu.com/user/profile/6469dc330000000010024649>

As the 'experts' in this particular platform, creative control for this side of the project was driven predominantly by student partners. The academic lead had a role as interlocutor, helping with logistics, project monitoring and direction. We initiated regular Friday morning meetings to discuss progress and future plans. Early discussions involved the account's name (中传威敏) and logo design, ideas for content, style and tone, the primary intended audience, the question of 'promotional' and 'community-building' aims, and the use of specialist technical equipment (such as microphones, lighting, etc). Later they moved to research aims and team collaboration and leadership.

Students launched the account with a six-second video, using a popular meme to introduce the team, the university's various campuses and familiar London sites. Over subsequent weeks they experimented with different styles of post: short amusing videos (e.g. of pigeons riding public transport without a ticket) or a photograph of a sunset of the London skyline; alongside more labour-intensive productions in which, for example, the student team tested Professor Gerda Wielander (Contemporary China Centre) with a Chinese admissions exam, creating a slickly-produced (edited and subtitled) ninety-second video. As this period coincided with the opening of recruitment for the programme within China, it felt appropriate to include some simple text-based posts, pointing potential applicants towards the website.

After an initial period of experimentation, in April momentum stalled. In team meetings, students reported some disappointment that, given the time and effort expended, posts were not circulating widely, follower counts were not growing beyond the teens, and particularly that classmates outside the team were not actively engaged. One post had attracted a single comment from an unknown user, disparaging the programme as low-ranking and poor value-for-money. We discussed how to deal with such comments – considering different approaches from ignoring to combative engagement – ultimately agreeing that a friendly tone, providing an alternative perspective was appropriate.

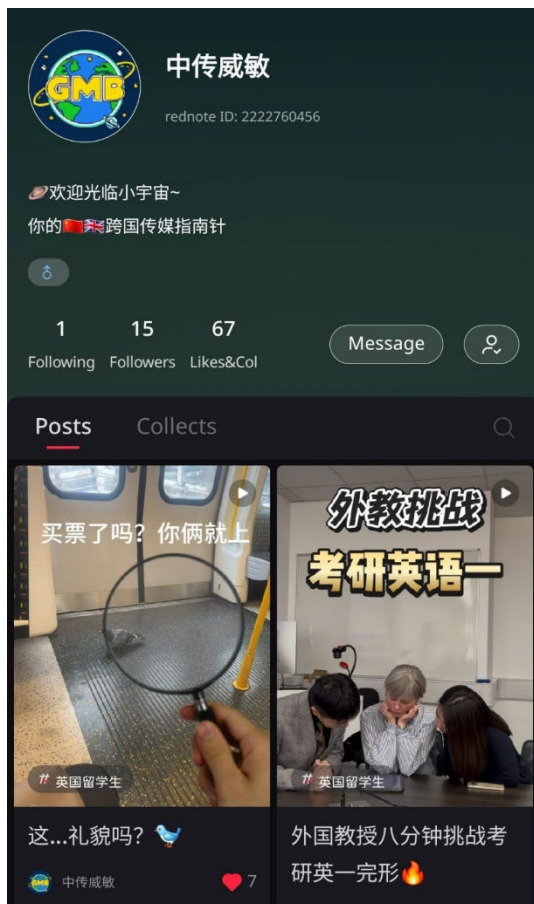
Also at this time, team members reported the expectation of regular meetings and producing content around course deadlines to be a real challenge and they experienced uncertainties over their own roles or towards the project's overall purpose. In their reflective statements, individuals expressed some frustration towards, on one hand, a sense of uneven participation or communication within the group and, on the other, a degree of perfectionism. They reported feeling a clash between values of bottom-up democratic collaboration, *ad hoc* individual creative flexibility, and a stated desire for clearer top-down leadership. We discussed different ways of organising the production flow, so that not all posts required participation or agreement from the full team, reminding ourselves that a slow-and-steady experimental approach was legitimate, and that individuals did not need to seek 'permission to post'. Nonetheless, the account fell rather silent for several weeks.

During this time, the academic lead also took the decision to set up his own account – making irregular simple posts about life as a lecturer, inspired by the students. This was not an initial objective. It helped build his own familiarity with the platform and led to some interactions with GMB alumni – however, largely, the rationale was to maintain a staff presence that would relieve students from feeling responsible for answering institutional or application related questions; these could then be redirected to a more 'official' figure to triage.

Our survey (administered mid-April) and workshop (late April) brought some welcome feedback from peers, galvanising the team and renewing energy. A post about late-night student cooking followed, as well as an end-of-teaching class photoshoot. One post in mid-May, however, generated an unexpected response: a video from the final class of the semester, in which the lecturer bid all students goodbye (and feigning disappointment with their response), accompanied by a popular song about nostalgia and overlaid text lamenting the end of youth. This ironic and deliberately sentimental post struck a chord with a wider community of xiaohongshu users who had studied in the UK and immediately circulated widely: within 24 hours the video had been liked or shared over 10,000 times and viewed over 100,000 times. By project end, primarily as a result of this video, the account had amassed around 740 followers, just under 49,000 likes, shares, or favourites, and over 100 comments – most of the latter from former students sharing their own memories, including some from former GMB or Westminster alumni who fondly recollected their time at the university and even this lecturer specifically. (The lecturer in question subsequently also set up their own account).

While plans for further content continued, this event marked a suitable end-point to the experiment, moving into a

more reflective phase. However, an interesting coda is worth mentioning. Unknown to the project team, but prompted by this experiment, staff at CUC in Beijing had established their own MA GMB account, explicitly for course promotion. This was a welcome development – it is useful to have an ‘official’ presence in order to field inquiries. However an unintended consequence was that the students’ own GMB account was suspended by Xiaohongshu’s platform moderation in early July, citing its inappropriate posting of promotional or recruitment materials without official institutional affiliation. This was a short ban, and the students were able to explain the difference, remove posts and make remedial changes to the account description for clarity. However, this episode starkly illustrated our initial conversation several months’ earlier, of the importance of marking a clear differentiation between ‘community building’ and ‘marketing’. This negative experience therefore helped sharpen the sense of identity and purpose.



MA GMB xiaohongshu account, late April 2025: small number of followers and two videos: one brief with low production values (left); one longer with more intensive production (right)



MA GMB Xiaohongshu account, July 2025: larger number of followers, as a result of high circulation of one video - and temporary account name suspension due to violation of platform rules

Discussion

With regard to **RQ1**, it is clear that xiaohongshu is a primary resource for students. While our sample does not allow for generalisation (by design), the survey and workshop supported the view that students use it throughout the full student journey.

- While unlikely to replace traditional recruitment pathways, the platform is (and likely will continue to be) an important means of **helping students gain familiarity** with the university. Visual storytelling may help **'humanise'** institutions with lower name recognition or ranking of some competitors – though that question lies beyond our study.
- After acceptance, students use xiaohongshu to prepare for travel (for example, in visa applications and accommodation searches) and support academic skills (essay-writing, technology use, misconduct claims). Without an official presence, there is **a danger that irrelevant, misleading or even harmful materials** fill the gap. Some students stressed that xiaohongshu is not a search engine and indicated a sceptical approach; others may not. A student-run account cannot give formal advice – but may assuage the **underlying sense of uncertainty and anxiety**, and reticence to ask for official help, which such uses suggest.
- Xiaohongshu supports immersion and navigation in an unfamiliar city, language, culture and food, and access to support services. Such generic content is widely available, if variable. We identified a lack of **content connecting Chinese students to SU activities, health, wellbeing fitness and sports**, and other elements of student experience.
- One limitation is the study's lack of attention to how students navigate **employment opportunities, life after graduation and alumni networks**, representing an area for further research and practical experimentation.

Regarding **RQ2**, the PAR side of the project provided both a case study of how content creators engage with xiaohongshu 'behind the scenes' and a proof of concept for our intuition that an account may resonate with GMB students. It reaffirmed an early distinction between 'promotion' and 'community-building'. At first, students felt a need to 'do it all' and focused on growth. However, promotion is not appropriate for a student-run account: it is not their responsibility, undermines authenticity and violates platform rules. The emergence first of Westminster lecturers, then official institutional accounts, helped sharpen this distinction.

The recurring question was then to define 'community': not primarily current UK-based students, but prospective/current students in China, and alumni looking back. The account's emotional pull lies in its ability to speak across space and time: providing a means of (a) asserting the course's identity as constitutively transnational, media-engaged and evolving; and (b) maintaining cross-generational bonds from pre-arrival anticipation to post-graduation nostalgia. While the account launched in semester two, future use in semester one should support those transitioning between countries. Over time the account should come to constitute an archive of experience, helping students to imagine themselves into the course. Some content may appeal to international students more generally, which is to be welcomed – but this is not the primary audience for this account.

Finally, students experienced challenges in team management. While students had complementary skills (ideation, filming, editing or on-screen presence), they also experienced conflicting creative visions and diaries, leading to stagnation. This may become less of an issue now that the account is established. If decision-making is to remain devolved to students as de facto 'experts', a clear brief (or 'instruction manual') could help provide structure and accountability.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Xiaohongshu has become an important entrant into the global media landscape. It is not a recruitment or integration solution and does not replace existing communication channels. Instead, it offers a promising space for community-building, rooted in the experiences of a transnational UK-China cohort. These learnings may be transferable to other international partnerships – 2+2 models or similar – and social media platforms. Any initiative must speak directly to the practices, needs and identity of a specific student community.

1. Support connection and orientation – not information or promotion

Xiaohongshu should not be considered an official information source or recruitment tool. Students do use the platform for discovery and advice – but primarily as part of emotional preparation for a major life transition: finding relatable stories and interpreting the unfamiliar through the lens of peer experience. A student-run course account can be understood as a space for social learning. Lecturers' accounts and institutional pages provide a more authoritative complementary presence, to which a student-run account can link and redirect queries.

2. Creativity requires structure

A student-led model should foster ownership and creativity but progress typically falters if roles became unclear or workloads uneven. Students may struggle to balance production with academic responsibilities and often seek reassurances from an authority figure (initially, at least). A small team of 1-2 students may work best, with an academic lead providing an initial framework – assigning roles, setting guidelines, briefing students on institutional and platform policies – and offering regular check-ins. A short 'starter kit' (past examples, tone guidance, content tips) will help onboard new contributors.

3. Build long-term community

The most meaningful engagement came from a post that brought together the international student experience across years, campuses, and continents. Xiaohongshu can be an evolving archive of what it feels like to be part of this community. Students can use it to imagine joining the course and to remember being part of it. The account can be positioned as a long-term cultural memory project, to which each cohort can leave behind their version of the story.

Dissemination

This report is of primary relevance to course leaders and teams of courses with high representation of international – and especially Chinese – students, who may be considering ways to bridge different communities (and spatial divides) and to embed social media in teaching.

It will also be useful for professional services staff with responsibility for student experience.

Secondarily – although with the caveats provided above – there may be learnings for social media managers, content leads and others in the marketing and communications teams, as well as those with responsibility for recruitment.

Reflection

Reflections on the project highlighted the importance of collaborative working and learning from (and about) one another in practice. They appreciated the hands-on experience of learning-by-doing and the creative freedom to try things out – as well as the satisfaction of seeing ideas evolve into reality. We were prompted into several problem-solving exercises, with students and academic staff genuinely working together to think critically about how content might resonate (or not), or dealing with difficult comments. The team worked together as equals on survey construction and the students relished the opportunity to lead the workshop, setting the tone for an engaging conversation and productive feedback.

The primary problem faced was a loss of momentum and lack of direction after the initial enthusiasm. What constituted an appropriate workflow was also part of the research question and this proved the most difficult to generate through experimentation, while competing with other time pressures. A compounding problem was more cultural: students were not accustomed to leading their peers in specific tasks without formal responsibility to do so, or acting autonomously without validation from the academic lead.

These problems derived from the constitutively emergent nature of the project. A degree of structure was implemented, with the academic lead seeking to act as a guiding hand, but greater direction from the outset may have reduced uncertainty. That said, the ability to create a viable social media presence of this kind from scratch is not simple and there were no obvious precedents – given this, the progress and achievements were remarkable.

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