Mediating belonging: English-language media and international student integration in urban China — A case study of Shanghai's foreign media ecosystem

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Abstract: With the increasing number of international students in Chinese cities, English-language media plays a crucial role in facilitating access to information, fostering cultural understanding, and supporting local integration. This study examines the extent to which English-language media in Shanghai meets the specific needs of international students. Employing a mixed-methods approach that combines survey data, in-depth interviews, and content analysis, the research explores media consumption behaviors, satisfaction levels, and key barriers to engagement. Findings indicate that mobile-based platforms, particularly WeChat, are central to students' daily media use due to their accessibility, practical content, and multifunctionality. Traditional outlets such as China Daily and CGTN are widely recognized but are rarely used, primarily because of limited interactivity, language barriers, and lack of localized relevance. Students report a strong preference for service-oriented information, including guidance on food, housing, events, and student policies, rather than general news or political content. While Chinese English-language media contributes to improved perceptions of Shanghai and China, it falls short in promoting entertainment engagement and meaningful social integration. The study argues that bilingual, user-centered, and service-driven media strategies are essential for enhancing international students' media experiences and supporting their adjustment in urban China. Recommendations are proposed to improve content design, platform selection, linguistic accessibility, and user interaction. The findings offer practical insights for media practitioners, policymakers, and researchers focused on cross-cultural communication, urban inclusivity, and international education.

Keywords: *Cross-cultural communication, English-language media, International students, Media engagement, Shanghai.*

1. Introduction

Since the initiation of China's reform and opening-up policy in the late 1970s, the country has undergone extensive transformations in its economy, society, and culture. Shanghai, once a colonial treaty port, now stands as a vibrant and cosmopolitan metropolis, positioning itself as a leader in internationalization. As the second-largest provincial-level region in China in terms of foreign residents, exceeding 200,000 according to the National Bureau of Statistics, Shanghai offers a compelling setting to explore the interactions between foreign populations and local institutions. Among these, the city's dynamic and evolving media landscape plays a particularly critical role in shaping how foreigners access, interpret, and engage with Chinese society. This study focuses specifically on international students, who constitute a young, mobile, and media-literate subset of Shanghai's foreign population, to investigate their English-language media consumption behaviors and needs.

The development of English-language media in China has mirrored the broader trend of modernization and media integration. From its early forms in radio and print to the emergence of television and eventually digital platforms, English-language media has diversified and expanded

significantly. Particularly since 2014, national-level outlets such as Xinhua News Agency, People's Daily, and China Central Television have implemented reforms to foster convergence between traditional and digital media. More recent developments, such as the launch of "Voice of China," reflect this push toward integrated communication. Traditional English-language outlets, including China Daily, have extended their reach through social media platforms like WeChat and Weibo, while independent and localized digital initiatives such as SmartShanghai or ShanghaiWOW have emerged to cater to the foreign community. Despite this growth, there remains limited understanding of whether these media platforms effectively meet the specific needs of international audiences, especially those engaged in long-term, immersive experiences in China.

The urgency of this inquiry is magnified by Shanghai's aspirations to solidify its role as a leading global city. In such a context, media functions not only as an information provider but also as a cultural bridge and integration tool. English-language media is essential to facilitating foreigners' access to public services, understanding of local culture, and participation in urban life. A strong sense of belonging, both in physical environments like schools and in digital media spaces, has been shown to influence international students' adjustment and well-being [1]. Yet, many international students report difficulties in navigating the local media environment due to language barriers, limited localized content, and technological constraints such as internet restrictions. While some students find Chinese media content helpful for language learning and practical life, others rely heavily on home-country media for news, entertainment, and daily information. This reliance is often reinforced by perceived gaps in content relevance, accessibility, and credibility in Chinese platforms. These challenges raise questions about how English-language media in Shanghai can be reimagined to better serve its intended audiences.

International students are a particularly valuable demographic for this study. Typically in a transitional life stage, they depend heavily on media for both practical needs, such as housing, transportation, and food, and for broader integration into local culture and society. They are often highly proficient in digital technology and accustomed to navigating multiple media environments. Prior research confirms that foreign students' life satisfaction is strongly associated with both their media use and interpersonal communication in the host country [2]. Their experiences thus offer insight not only into individual-level adaptation processes but also into how well the existing English-language media ecosystem supports the broader goals of cross-cultural communication and urban inclusivity. Despite their significance, prior studies on media in China have tended to focus on media producers' goals or on foreign audiences outside of China. Existing literature often treats foreigners as a homogeneous group, ignoring internal variation based on digital literacy, information needs, or cultural familiarity. As a result, audience-centered research that captures the lived experiences of specific foreign demographics, such as international students, remains limited.

The current media environment in China presents a complex picture. On one hand, English-language outlets have become more professional and digitally integrated. On the other hand, structural and cultural barriers persist. Many foreigners report that their primary engagement with Chinese media platforms remains superficial or sporadic. Reasons cited include lack of user-friendly design, minimal interactivity, insufficient cultural adaptation, and restrictive internet policies that limit access to global platforms. Furthermore, while new media platforms offer interactive possibilities, it is unclear whether Chinese media have fully leveraged these tools to create content that resonates with foreign users' everyday lives. For international students, in particular, the challenge lies not only in accessing information but also in interpreting and applying it to their unique social and academic contexts. Interactivity also plays a key role in shaping audience satisfaction. As Larsson observed, even when uptake of interactive tools is initially low, users often grow to value features like comments or live responses over time [3].

The study is driven by a desire to examine not just what media platforms international students use, but why they use them, how these platforms influence their everyday behaviors, and what unmet needs persist. It aims to uncover how international students perceive their inclusion in Shanghai's public

sphere through media, the types of content they find most useful, and the structural or cultural obstacles that hinder greater participation. In doing so, the research seeks to offer both empirical insights and practical recommendations for improving Chinese English-language media services targeting foreign audiences [4].

To guide this inquiry, the study focuses on three primary research questions. First, what are the dominant media formats and platforms used by international students in Shanghai, and how do these patterns change before and after their arrival in China? This question seeks to understand behavioral shifts caused by the new cultural and technological environment. Second, how effectively do Chinese English-language media platforms satisfy international students' information needs and integration goals? This includes evaluating media accessibility, content quality, and user satisfaction from the perspective of the audience. Third, what factors influence students' media preferences and satisfaction levels, particularly in relation to language convenience, trust, content relevance, and ease of use?

To address these questions, the study sets forth several key objectives. It first aims to map international students' media consumption behaviors, differentiating between types of platforms, traditional vs. new media, domestic vs. international sources, and examining patterns across different user profiles. Second, it assesses the extent to which various English-language media platforms fulfill informational, emotional, and social functions. Third, it identifies specific pain points and areas of improvement to inform the development of more user-centric media content. Lastly, the study proposes strategic insights for both policymakers and media practitioners seeking to enhance the role of English-language media as a bridge between Shanghai and its growing international population.

Methodologically, the research employs a mixed-methods approach to ensure both breadth and depth of analysis. Quantitative data were gathered through structured questionnaires distributed to a diverse sample of international students across several major universities in Shanghai. Studies on digital news consumption indicate that interactive features, like comments, shares, and reactions, foster more engaged, loyal audiences, especially when content encourages user response [5]. These interviews explored motivations, interpretations, and user experiences that could not be fully captured through survey data alone. Additionally, a content analysis of widely used English-language media platforms was performed to evaluate their user engagement strategies and alignment with foreign students' interests. This triangulated design provides a multidimensional perspective on media usage and effectiveness.

In sum, this study contributes to both academic and practical discourse by centering the experiences of a key, yet often overlooked, segment of Shanghai's foreign population. It responds to calls for more audience-centered research in media studies and offers actionable insights into how Chinese media platforms can evolve to meet the real-world needs of their users. In doing so, it also highlights the broader implications for urban inclusivity and cultural integration in a globalized, multilingual city like Shanghai.

2. Research Methodologies

2.1. Qualitative Interviews and Questionnaires

A structured questionnaire was designed based on the research objectives, translating key research questions into quantifiable variables. A Likert scale was used for questions assessing student attitudes to ensure scientific validity. The final version was widely distributed to a sampled cohort of undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral students after a preliminary pilot with two international students to refine wordings and options. Participants were recruited from multiple Shanghai-based institutions, including Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai Theatre Academy, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, and Shanghai University of Sport, to reach a diverse student demographic.

To complement the insights derived from the survey, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subset of participants. These interviews explored the motivations and interpretations behind the quantitative findings, and uncovered complex phenomena and nuanced issues not fully captured by

questionnaires. This qualitative phase enriched the analysis by integrating detailed participant narratives.

2.2. Content Analysis

A systematic evaluation of media platforms frequently accessed by international students was conducted to evaluate their user engagement strategies and propagating efficacy. This analysis focused on identifying structural strengths, limitations, and opportunities for enhancing media usage, particularly on cross-cultural usability and information accessibility.

The integration of these methodologies ensured a multidimensional exploration of the research problem, balancing empirical data with nuanced contextual understanding.

3. Literature Review

Most existing research on foreign media use in China focuses on media impacts and strategies for international communication, often from the perspective of media producers rather than audiences. Studies tend to be either geographically focused or medium-specific. Some concentrate on regional or urban image-building strategies, while others examine particular media channels, such as print media, for international outreach.

In contrast, Western media research began focusing on audiences in the late 20th century. This study adopts an audience-centered approach to examine media consumption among Shanghai's foreign population.

3.1. Variables for Media Usage

Relevant research adopts four important dimensions for analyzing media usage:

Media Formats. The English-language media ecosystem in China includes traditional formats and new media. While traditional media is in decline, questions remain about whether English-language media will find its future primarily through digital platforms. For international students, mobile-first habits and platform interactivity shape their preferences. Studies show that users who can comment, react, or otherwise interact with media content demonstrate stronger engagement and information retention, suggesting that interactive features are particularly important in capturing young mobile-native audiences [6].

Home-Country Media vs. Chinese Media. Previous research found that after moving to cities like Guangzhou, foreigners increasingly used Chinese media to meet everyday information needs. However, the extent to which Chinese media can replace or complement home-country media depends heavily on personalization, accessibility, and platform culture. Zhou and Yin [7] integrative review highlighted that social media functions not just as an information source but as a space for social and cultural adaptation among international students [7]. Similarly, Sawyer and Chen emphasize that social media platforms serve as tools for intercultural adaptation and identity negotiation, especially for students navigating unfamiliar media environments [8].

Individual Media Motivations. Media choice is deeply influenced by users' needs. Individual motivations, driven by personal demands, strongly affect media use. Motivations include entertainment, social bonding, identity, and information acquisition, as supported by many Western media studies. Later studies on internet media use echoed similar motivations. Seo et al. found that international students use social platforms both to seek information and to build social capital during their adjustment period [9, 10]. Sin and Kim [11] also observed that social networking sites provide high informational value in day-to-day decision-making, from housing to social events [11]. However, existing classifications remain fragmented. Foreigners in China often face unique needs, such as learning the language or adapting to local culture, which existing media coverage tends to overlook. To address this gap, this study groups their media needs into five practical categories: staying updated with news, finding specific information, accessing entertainment, integrating socially, and learning the language.

Information Needs. Understanding what kind of information is most valued is a focal point of this study. Scholars have categorized media information into news, knowledge, entertainment, and service content. Prior studies suggest that foreign audiences often prioritize actionable and practical information. International students in Shanghai primarily seek local lifestyle information related to housing, food, and education. The study defines "service information" as content that directly facilitates daily life, excluding cultural or emotional support.

3.2. Media Effect Research

Media effects research has played a central role in communication theory, evolving through "strong," "limited," and now "moderate" effects models. Most research on foreign media consumption focuses on perceptions of China or reactions to major news events. However, scholars have also examined how long-term exposure to Chinese media influences day-to-day activities and routines. [12] further argue that semantic-based, service-oriented media systems can better support audience personalization and adaptive information delivery [12, 13].

3.3. Research Subjects

Media use varies widely among individuals. Selecting a representative sample is critical. Quota and accidental sampling are often combined. Samples are generally drawn proportionally to foreign populations in major cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. This study focuses on international students in Shanghai as a key, stable subpopulation with consistent media interaction. Although not reflective of all foreigners in China, their demographic characteristics make them a relevant case for testing how media can foster intercultural understanding. As Sørensen, et al. [14] argue in broader international relations contexts, audience agency plays a significant role in shaping communication outcomes, especially in cross-cultural environments [14]. Additionally, understanding how media use intersects with identity and national representation, as explored by Larsen et al. in the context of nation branding, offers relevant parallels to the media experience of foreign students in China [15].

4. Results

4.1. Quantitative Results

4.1.1. Research Question 1: Media Formats and Platform Usage

To examine shifts in media usage of the international students before and after arriving in Shanghai, participants ranked five media formats on a 1 (most frequently used) to 5 (least frequently used) scale.

Mobile phones were the most frequently used medium after arrival (Mean = 1.19), compared with a pre-arrival mean of 1.55.

Internet usage declined moderately from pre-arrival (Mean = 2.24) to post-arrival (M = 1.90).

Television, newspapers, and radio all showed decreased use after arrival, with radio remaining the least used (see Table 1).

These patterns indicate a marked shift toward mobile-based media following migration.

Table 1.
Average usage ranking of five media among international students before and after arriving in Shanghai (lower rank = more frequently used).

	Internet	Mobile phone	Newspaper	Television	Radio
In Shanghai (Avg. rank)	1.90	1.19	4.07	3.40	4.45
In home country (Avg. rank)	2.24	1.55	4.07	2.78	4.36

4.1.2. Research Question 2: Satisfaction with Chinese English-Language Media

Participants rated their satisfaction with Chinese media across five dimensions on a 1 to 5 scale (1 means strongly disagree; 3 means neutral; 5 means strongly agree).

The highest mean satisfaction was for greater convenience (Mean = 3.78), followed by improved Chinese language skills (Mean = 3.78) and better understanding of China (Mean = 3.72).

Leisure engagement received the lowest mean satisfaction (see Table 2).

Table 2.
Satisfaction of media-related needs among international students in Shanghai. (1 = Strongly disagree; 3 = Neutral; 5 = Strongly agree).

Satisfaction Measure	Better Understanding of China	Greater Convenience	Local Integration	Improved Chinese	Leisure Engagement
Mean score	3.72	3.78	3.56	3.78	3.53

In terms of fulfilling information needs, respondents rated various categories on a 1 to 5 scale (1 means not at all necessary; 5 means very necessary).

Local events (Mean = 4.12) and tourism information (Mean = 4.14) were deemed most necessary. Food and dining and student policy also ranked highly (see Table 3).

Table 3.
Information needs of international students in Shanghai.

Information Type	Food & Dining	Housing	Shopping	Tourism	Student Policy	Events	Networking Information
Mean score	4.07	3.29	3.81	4.14	3.95	4.12	3.69

Awareness-to-usage data for specific Chinese media platforms showed that WeChat was used frequently by 90% of respondents. Few respondents use these traditional outlets, such as China Daily and CGTN, on a regular basis, although they had high awareness among this group (Table 4).

Table 4.
International students' usage of some Chinese media in Shanghai.

	Frequently Use	Occasionally Use	Used Once/Twice	Aware but Never Used	Unaware
China Daily	14	38	26	24	14
CGTN(China Global Television Network)	10	12	18	38	38
Shanghai Daily	10	21	27	38	20
ICS(International Channel Shanghai)	2	12	12	24	66
smart Shanghai	26	31	11	16	32
Wechat	104	10	0	0	2
Weibo	16	30	12	52	6
douyin	12	8	6	26	64
youku	37	45	18	6	10

4.1.3. Research Question 3: Factors Influencing Preferences and Satisfaction

Participants indicated their agreement (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) with statements regarding reasons for preferring home-country versus Chinese media.

For home-country media, the strongest drivers were content relevance (Mean = 4.32) and habit (Mean = 4.32), followed by language convenience (Mean = 4.06) (Table 5).

Table 5.
Mean agreement values for reasons that international students in Shanghai use home country-media more (1 = Strongly disagree; 3 = Neutral; 5 = Strongly agree).

Statement	Language is convenient	Articles fit my way of thinking	Content meets my needs	Easy to access	I trust it more	I am used to it
Mean (1–5 scale)	4.06	3.74	4.32	3.56	3.18	4.32

For Chinese media, ease of access ranked highest (Mean = 3.61), with language practice motivation at Mean = 3.35 (Table 6).

When asked where Chinese media could better satisfy needs, practical information, such as service-oriented content, was the top priority, whereas local news and entertainment content lagged behind.

Table 6.
Mean agreement values for reasons that international students in Shanghai use Chinese media more. (1 = Strongly disagree; 3 = Neutral; 5 = Strongly agree).

Statement	To practice my Chinese	Content meets my needs	Easy to access	I trust it
Mean (1–5 scale)	3.35	3.19	3.61	3.04

Finally, measures of perceived media influence (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) revealed that the greatest impact was on gaining a better view of China (Mean = 3.74) and improving impressions of Shanghai (Mean = 3.67), with making local friends rating lower (M = 3.27) (Table 7).

Table 7.
Impact of media on international students in Shanghai. (1 = Strongly disagree; 3 = Neutral; 5 = Strongly agree).

Impact Measure	Tried More Local Foods	Learned More Local Traditions	Made More Local Friends	Gained a better View of China	Improved Impression of Shanghai
Mean score	3.45	3.35	3.27	3.74	3.67

4.2. Qualitative Results

Qualitative data from four in-depth interviews were analyzed for recurring themes related to research questions 1, 2, and 3.

Theme 1: Mobile Necessity and Convenience

Participants universally reported that smartphones were indispensable in Shanghai due to both social and practical demands:

"In my home country, a smartphone was a luxury; I only got my first phone after coming to Shanghai." (Interviewee 2, Portugal)

Theme 2: Language and Access Barriers

Several interviewees highlighted language challenges and technical barriers to accessing desired content:

"Sometimes I look up news on Baidu, but since it's all in Chinese and difficult to read, I don't do it often." (Interviewee 4, Italy)

Interviewees also noted reliance on VPNs for home-country media, which was "costly and inconvenient" (Interviewee 1, Russia).

Theme 3: Platform-Specific Observations

Participants highlighted WeChat's adaptability to diverse daily needs.

"WeChat isn't just for messaging. Its articles and services are surprisingly helpful for daily life here." (Interviewee 3, Bangladesh)

Respondents frequently contrasted this versatility with traditional media outlets. While participants acknowledged platforms like China Daily and CGTN, most admitted to rarely engaging with them.

Theme 4: Information Priorities

Interviewees prioritized practical, service-oriented content over conventional news. Topics such as event announcements, policy updates, and dining recommendations were consistently described as vital for navigating daily routines. Many stressed that news coverage alone lacked relevance to their immediate needs, failing to sustain their attention without actionable or localized insights.

5. Discussion

Findings revealed a clear shift toward mobile-based media following students' arrival in Shanghai, with smartphones becoming their primary tool for information access and daily life. This aligns with broader patterns observed during crises, such as the Shanghai Omicron lockdown, where digital platforms played a critical role in managing daily survival for foreign residents [16]. Compared to traditional formats like TV and radio, mobile platforms were preferred due to their accessibility, multifunctionality, and integration into daily routines.

While students appreciated the convenience and language-learning potential of Chinese English-language media, satisfaction was lower regarding entertainment and integration support. Convenience and language practice (Mean = 3.78) outpaced leisure engagement (Mean = 3.53), highlighting a gap between media offerings and student expectations. This reflects deeper issues of symbolic exclusion in urban communication spaces, where certain groups struggle to see their identities reflected in mainstream narratives [17].

Students favored home-country media for its cultural familiarity, despite VPN barriers, while Chinese platforms like WeChat were used for practical access. The media's strongest influence was on shaping perceptions of China and Shanghai rather than driving social integration, reinforcing that domestic media often serve image-building functions with limited intercultural reciprocity [18].

These findings support moderate-effects theories and underscore the need for service-oriented, bilingual digital content that is responsive to real user needs. Enhancing interactivity, usability, and platform support, such as through intuitive design and information clarity, can improve satisfaction, as seen in parallel research on digital learning platforms [19]. The study is limited by its localized sample and cross-sectional design, and future research should include more diverse populations and longitudinal methods. Moreover, understanding how spatial and infrastructural conditions, like information access or connectivity, influence media use in different parts of Shanghai could offer valuable insights [20].

6. Media Formats

In today's world of rapidly developing internet communications, people increasingly rely on the internet and mobile phones in their everyday lives. Mobile phones have emerged as the most frequently used news medium among international students.

This research compared media usage by international students before and after arriving in Shanghai. In both periods, the five listed media, ordered from most used to least used on average, were: mobile phones, the internet, television, newspapers, and radio. However, before coming to Shanghai, 12.1% of students reported that television or the internet was their most-used medium, whereas after arriving in Shanghai, this proportion dropped to 0%, and the ranking of mobile phone usage rose significantly.

In follow-up interviews, students indicated that their increased reliance on mobile phones was shaped by both enabling and limiting factors. In Shanghai, high smartphone penetration and the necessity of using phones to communicate with classmates and teachers made mobile devices essential. In contrast, in some students' home countries, phones were seen as luxuries; for instance, a Portuguese student mentioned only acquiring his first smartphone after arriving in Shanghai. At the same time, traditional media such as television and radio offered limited English-language content, prompting students to use them less. One student noted that CGTN was the only English-language channel in his dormitory, and its focus on news, rather than entertainment, reduced its appeal. By comparison, mobile phones and the internet allowed students to fulfill multiple needs simultaneously. They could browse news, access articles through WeChat Moments, and use apps for daily tasks like navigation and food delivery, services they found more convenient and widely available than in their home countries. Although environmental constraints initially prompted increased mobile use, students ultimately viewed it as a highly positive and practical aspect of their lives in China.

7. Use of Chinese Media

7.1. Preference for Home-Country Media

Among respondents, 59.0% reported prioritizing home-country media over Chinese media. Key reasons included habit (mean = 4.32), content relevance (mean = 4.32), and language convenience (mean = 4.06).

For example, a student from Russia, Nastya, said that the news website is linked to her online account; after checking her email each day, she habitually looks at the news there. She also noted that she generally does not go to a news website specifically to check the news. An Italian student, Laura, said that she sometimes looks up news on Baidu, but since it is all in Chinese and difficult to read, she does not do so often.

For those who pay more attention to Chinese media, the strongest agreement (mean = 3.61) is with the statement "Chinese media are relatively easy to access." Using familiar foreign media in Shanghai requires VPNs, which are costly and inconvenient. As a result, many students resort to platforms like Youku to watch videos or American TV series, though they report missing YouTube's broader content library. Several respondents expressed a desire for freer access to their home-country media in China.

Despite these constraints, students praised WeChat for both social connection and its English-language public accounts. One interviewee noted, "WeChat isn't just for messaging. Its articles and services are surprisingly helpful for daily life here".

7.2. Usage of Chinese Media

Among Chinese media platforms, WeChat demonstrated the highest recognition, with 90.0% of respondents reporting frequent use, followed by Youku. New media platforms significantly outperformed traditional media in both awareness and engagement. Traditional outlets like China Daily and CGTN still had visibility due to their presence in campus settings, such as dormitories and classrooms. However, few participants engaged with them consistently.

Many interviewees noted they rarely used traditional media, even back home. However, some traditional outlets adapting to digital spaces, like the Global Times' English official WeChat account, managed to carve out a niche audience.

7.3. From Awareness to Usage

Knowing about traditional media like CGTN or China Daily didn't translate to regular use. Although a high proportion of respondents have "heard of" traditional outlets, especially official ones such as CGTN and China Daily, they rarely use them consistently. These outlets are sometimes encountered in settings like dormitories or academic buildings, but sustained engagement is low. For example, one interviewee noted that she learned about China Daily during a school research project on China.

In contrast, WeChat is by far the most frequently used platform, illustrating that building media awareness is only the first step; to retain audiences, outlets must offer content that truly meets their needs.

8. Conclusion

This study examines whether Chinese English-language media in Shanghai meet international students' information needs. Traditional outlets like China Daily and CGTN are visible but rarely used. Instead, mobile platforms, especially WeChat public accounts, dominate consumption by offering practical content such as event listings, food tips, and policy updates. Convenience, relevance, and language accessibility matter most, with 90% of students frequently using WeChat. VPN restrictions and shifting habits reinforce reliance on local media.

Using surveys, interviews, and content analysis, the study triangulates usage patterns with qualitative insights. Surveys show trends in satisfaction and preferences; interviews highlight service content's utility and mobile media's centrality.

Three key findings: students prioritize everyday service info, signaling a gap between media output and demand; media shape perceptions of China and Shanghai more than behaviors, acting as image-builders; and access to foreign media is limited by both technical and behavioral factors, pushing students to local platforms.

The findings prompt questions about WeChat's personalization algorithms and peer influence on platform choice, suggesting future research via behavioral analytics and longitudinal studies.

Four recommendations follow: focus on user-centered, service-oriented content like healthcare or visa guides; engage students on mobile and social platforms, especially WeChat, while keeping a multi-platform presence; ensure content is linguistically and culturally accessible through bilingual formats and visuals; and foster interactivity with comments, polls, and live Q&As.

This research offers an audience-centered framework for cross-cultural media practice, emphasizing service-driven, bilingual, interactive digital media to support students' needs and promote Shanghai as a globally inclusive city.

Transparency:

The author confirms that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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