Transcultural Empathic Communication in the "Post-truth" Era
Taking the Social Media Usage of Chinese International Students in Australia as an Example

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ABSTRACT
As an old saying goes," Far distance cannot separate us, and we all live in a united world. Empathic communication is a natural ability of human beings. In the " post-truth" era, transcultural empathic communication is beneficial to eliminating communication barriers and establishing trust between individuals of different cultures. Therefore, the realization of transcultural empathic communication is conducive to the development of multiculturalism and the Community of a Shared Future for Mankind. As a kind of emotion, empathy would be affected by the object and the situation. For Chinese students studying abroad in a different cultural space, social media platforms provide them with an open public sphere for transcultural communication. The understanding and trust established during the communication process create a foundation for further exploration in transcultural empathic communication. From the perspective of transcultural empathic communication, this paper takes a group of Chinese international students studying for their master's and doctoral degrees in Australia as the research object. Considering the social media platform as a social and cultural space for the group to build and maintain a virtual community, this paper observes, and interviews 20 Chinese international students born after the 90s from the University of Melbourne on their social media use of global social media (Twitter, TikTok) and Chinese social media (WeChat, Weibo, Doyin). It follows four aspects: difference, equality, communication, and cohesiveness, to discuss how Chinese international students form and maintain their virtual community on social media. On this basis, it will further explore the impact of social media use on the self-identity and multicultural identification of Chinese international students, as well as their integration into the local learning and living environment, within the complex context of the " post-truth" era and the COVID-19 pandemic. It is evident that the social media platform not only plays an essential role in forming and maintaining the community of Chinese international students in Australia but also increases the possibility of multicultural communication. This paper also finds that "environmental coexistence" enabled by social media platforms and digital technologies expands the media's availability and effectiveness of communication. Therefore, every Chinese international student who participates in transcultural communication actively would contribute to expanding transcultural communication methods and realizing multicultural identification. The study further explores the process of doubt and reflection on self-cultural identity experienced by Chinese international students living in a foreign cultural space. Specifically, they use global and Chinese social media platforms to interact online and offline with their relatives and friends in China, as well as teachers, friends, and classmates in Australia. Moreover, it discusses the new possibility and further development space of transcultural communication and the significance of overcoming and surpassing the trust crisis of transcultural communication in the "post-truth" era.

Keywords: *Post-truth, Chinese international students in Australia, Social media, Trust crisis, Empathic communication, Information overload, Digital labor, Algorithmic opacity, WeChat, Weibo, Twitter, TikTok.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The post-truth era, marked by the strategic use of emotion and identity over shared facts, poses acute challenges to cross-cultural understanding. Misinformation, polarization, and algorithmically curated echo chambers complicate efforts to build trust across differences. Yet even under these conditions, empathic communication remains both possible and necessary. Empathy, as a social and moral capacity to perspective-take and feel-with others, can be nurtured through contact, narrative, and dialogical practices. Social media platforms, for all the risks, afford new forms of contact at scale: weak ties that bridge communities, direct messaging that fosters intimacy, and multimodal storytelling that conveys affect and context.

Chinese international students in Australia continually navigate between their home and host culture, participating in both Chinese and global platform ecosystems. They traverse WeChat and Weibo to maintain community continuity, while engaging Twitter and Instagram to follow global trends, access information in Australia, and participate in public discourse. Their everyday navigation of difference, equality, communication, and cohesiveness offers a case study on how empathy can be enacted and undermined in a post-truth context. This paper investigates how a group of Chinese international master's students in Melbourne use social media to build and sustain virtual communities, negotiate identity, and engage in transcultural communication, information overload, and trust crises. Based on participant observation and semi-structured interviews with 20 students born after the 1990s, this paper explores four guiding aspects:

- Difference: How do students encounter and express cultural differences online?
- Equality: How do they perceive voice, representation, and fairness across platforms?
- Communication: What communicative practices and norms enable empathy?
- Cohesiveness: How virtual communities form and maintain connections?

This paper connects these practices to challenges, information overload, digital labor dynamics and discuss governance approaches for resilient, empathically oriented platform environments. This study makes three primary contributions. Empirically, it examines the transcultural communication practices of Chinese students on both Chinese and global digital platforms during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Conceptually, it advances the notion of empathic communication as a relational and context-sensitive practice, particularly in the post-truth era. Practically, the study outlines key governance levers for mitigating associated risks and fostering supportive environments for such empathetic exchanges.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Post-truth Challenge: Rising Emotion and Fading Consensus

The contemporary communication landscape is widely characterized as a "post-truth" era, a condition defined not by the absence of facts, but by their subordination to personal belief, emotional appeal, and identity politics. In this environment, information is often valued for its capacity to affirm group identity rather than its empirical veracity. Essien (2025) argues that this dynamic critically undermines "epistemic welfare," as social media platforms become vectors for disinformation that polarizes public opinion on crucial issues like climate change. This logic extends beyond scientific topics to permeate social and political discourse, creating deep-seated distrust. The spread of conspiracy theories and misinformation, particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrates how social media can become a "burgeoning of post-truth," where emotionally charged but factually baseless narratives gain significant traction (Oji, 2022).

This shift has profound implications for communication. Language itself enters a state of crisis, as its function as a tool for shared meaning is compromised by strategic ambiguity and emotive manipulation (Lin, 2022). Communication becomes less about deliberation and more about affective alignment. Galpin and Vernon (2024) extend this analysis by framing post-truth politics as a form of "discursive violence," where online abuse and the delegitimization of experts are used to silence dissenting voices and enforce ideological conformity. This creates a public sphere were expressing vulnerability or attempting perspective-taking, foundational acts of empathy, can be met with aggression. The work of Morris (2021), drawing on Baudrillard, further posits that social media generates "simulacra," or copies without originals, where the distinction between authentic

expression and performative "fake news" collapses, making genuine connection fraught with uncertainty.

Within this context, empathy becomes both a critical necessity and a highly contested practice. If communication is increasingly driven by in-group solidarity, attempts at transcultural empathy reaching across lines of national, ethnic, or ideological difference face formidable barriers. The emotional architecture of post-truth discourse, which rewards outrage and tribalism, actively discourages the cognitive and affective labor required for understanding an "other." As Zhao and Dou (2022) demonstrate through their analysis of public emotion on overseas social media, narratives are socially constructed to frame issues in ways that provoke specific emotional responses, often hardening divisions between groups.

2.2 The Digital Diaspora: Chinese International Students' Poly-Platform Media Practices

Chinese international students represent a quintessential "digital diaspora," a community that navigates life across multiple national and cultural contexts through a sophisticated repertoire of social media platforms (Chen & Ke, 2021). Their media usage is not monolithic but is best understood as a "re-media environment" or a poly-platform ecology, where different platforms are allocated distinct social and cultural functions (Dong, Ding, & Duan, 2020). Platforms like For Chinese international students in Australia, WeChat functions as an essential utility—a foundational platform that is integral to managing their overseas experience, from organizing academic collaborations and finding housing to maintaining their cultural identity and providing transnational family care. It is a space of "re-embedding" where cultural identity is reinforced . In contrast, Western platforms such as Instagram or X are used for engaging with the host society, managing a more public-facing identity, and accessing different information streams (Yang & Cheng, 2021).

This poly-platform practice is central to their identity negotiation. Dong et al. (2020) argue that students constantly engage in "platform allocation," a strategic process of curating different selves for different audiences. This is not a form of duplicity but a necessary skill for cultural adaptation, allowing them to balance expectations from their home country and their host society. However, this balancing act creates significant pressures. Yang and Cheng's (2021) research shows a complex relationship between overseas social media use and national identity; while it can foster a more cosmopolitan outlook, it can also trigger a defensive reinforcement of national identity in response to perceived hostility or misunderstanding. This is particularly acute in moments of geopolitical tension, where students may feel compelled to act as unofficial cultural ambassadors or defenders of their home country.

The COVID-19 pandemic amplified WeChat's dual role as both an indispensable tool and a source of complexity for Chinese international students. For students stranded abroad, social media became an indispensable tool for mutual aid, mental health support, and navigating rapidly changing health and travel policies (Wang et al., 2022). The pandemic narrative within these diasporic groups became a powerful site for community imagination and solidarity (Chen & Ke, 2021). However, it also exposed them to a crossfire of misinformation from both Chinese and Western sources, forcing them to constantly evaluate conflicting narratives and manage the anxieties of loved ones across different information spheres (Li, Fu, & Wang, 2021). This experience highlights the immense digital and emotional labor required of these students as they act as information brokers, cultural translators, and emotional anchors for their trans local communities.

2.3 Transcultural Empathy in the Digital Sphere: Challenges of Trust, Labor, and Algorithmic Governance

The intersection of the post-truth environment and the digital diaspora experience creates a unique set of challenges and opportunities for transcultural empathy. The primary challenge is the crisis of trust. In an environment saturated with disinformation (Gerbina, 2022), the fundamental assumption of good faith in an interlocutor is weakened. For Chinese international students, this is a dual problem: they must navigate misinformation within their own linguistic communities while also contending with stereotypes and politically charged narratives in the broader host society. The dynamic nature of false information, as analyzed by Hu (2023) through an actor-network theory lens, reveals that its spread is not a simple linear process but a complex assemblage of human actors, technological affordances, and emotional currents, making it difficult to counteract with simple fact-checking.

The other challenge is the burden of unpaid digital and emotional labor. The work of mediating between cultures—explaining cultural nuances, correcting stereotypes, and managing group conversations to maintain a positive tone which is a form of empathic labor that is often invisible and unrewarded (Chen & Ma, 2023). This labor is crucial for building "micro-bridges" of understanding, but it can also lead to burnout, especially when students feel the weight of representing an entire culture or nation (Zheng & Xia, 2022). This pressure is compounded by the psychological stressors inherent in the international student experience, including acculturation challenges and loneliness, which were exacerbated during the pandemic (Wang et al., 2022). Sustaining the energy for empathy becomes difficult when one's own emotional and psychological resources are depleted.

Finally, the rise of AI-powered content generation and moderation introduces new complexities. While AI can help detect and debunk multilingual fake news (Kotiyal, Pathak, & Singh, 2023), it also raises questions about authenticity and the future of human-to-human connection (Pu & Xiong, 2021). Despite these obstacles, opportunities for empathy persist. The very act of community maintenance, information sharing, and mutual support within student-led WeChat groups is a powerful expression of situated empathy (Dong et al., 2020). These semi-private spaces can function as a safe area where students can candidly discuss their experiences and collaboratively develop strategies for navigating cross-cultural challenges. Moreover, by consciously choosing to engage in "vernacular translation", not just translating language, but also cultural context, students can perform critical acts of mediation that foster deeper understanding.

2.4 Gap and Research Questions

Few studies simultaneously integrate: the practices by which Chinese international students negotiate difference, equality, communication, and cohesiveness across Chinese and global platforms. Existing work often treats empathy as a psychological trait rather than a set of situated practices, or it examines digital diaspora life without connecting it to platform governance and AI-mediated risks in 2024–2025. This study addresses these gaps through qualitative observation and interviews with 20 Chinese international students in Melbourne, examining how their social media practices foster transcultural empathy under post-truth conditions.

RQ1: How do Chinese international students in Australia use Chinese and global social media to negotiate difference, equality, communication, and cohesiveness?

RQ2: How do information overload, digital labor, and algorithmic opacity/trust shape empathic or non-empathic interactions and identity work?

RQ3: What governance measures, technical and participatory, can support transcultural empathic communication?

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative design centered on participatory observation and semi-structured interviews to capture the situated practices of transcultural empathic communication among Chinese international students in Australia. Participatory observation combines on-platform interactions and offline encounters. Online sites included consented WeChat groups, Weibo threads on study-abroad topics, Doujin/TikTok short videos tagged with #StudyInAustralia and related hashtags, and X/Twitter lists curated for Australian higher education, immigration policy, and local community events. Offline sites comprised campus-based activities in Melbourne—orientation sessions, cultural festivals, student-initiated workshops, and informal gatherings where online ties translated into co-presence. The researcher observes as a participant, contributing minimally to routine exchanges to maintain ecological validity while reducing intervention effects. Fieldnotes foregrounded four analytic dimensions articulated in the project design—difference, equality, communication, and cohesiveness, alongside cross-cutting sensitizing concepts from the post-truth literature and diaspora studies.

Semi-structured interviews complemented observation by eliciting participants' reflexive accounts of platform repertoires, empathic episodes, conflict management, and identity work. It employed purposive sampling to recruit 20 Chinese international students (20 master students) born after the 1990s, ensuring diversity in major, gender, length of residence, and platform usage intensity. Recruitment proceeded via snowballing through student associations and WeChat group admins. Interviews lasted 60–90 minutes and were conducted in Mandarin and/or English, depending on preference, over Zoom or in person. The

interview guide included prompts on everyday platform practices across WeChat/Weibo/Douyin and TikTok/X; recent instances of empathic communication and non-empathic breakdowns; experiences of information overload, verification strategies, and trust heuristics; perceptions of platform governance.

Participation was voluntary, and all participant identities were protected. Given the risks associated with discussing platform governance and politically sensitive topics, the study deliberately avoided collecting sensitive metadata. Methodological limitations include the focus on a single university and the self-selection of participants willing to discuss social media use, which may limit the generalizability of findings. Additionally, the observer-as-participant approach, while preserving ecological validity, could overlook more private or ephemeral digital interactions that occur outside observable platforms. These constraints suggest caution in transferring insights to other contexts.

4. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

4.1 From Information Overload to Empathic Understanding: Filters, Timing, and Context

Chinese international students in Australia live in a highly connected digital world. The information they encounter comes from many sources: social media algorithms, news from back home and Australia, content shared by friends, and increasingly, AI-generated material. This creates a fast and constant flow of information. Students often described their daily routine as that of a "personal information hub", perpetually processing inputs from a multitude of apps and platforms. A typical morning might include checking university emails, scrolling WeChat for updates from friends and family, keeping up with trends on TikTok, and looking at X for Australian news or policy changes. This information arrives at different times, in different languages, and from different time zones, requiring constant mental energy to process. This situation matches the classic definition of information overload: there is simply more information than a person can process, which leads to stress and poorer decisions. However, our interviews revealed that students rarely respond by simply giving up. Instead, they actively develop a set of practical coping strategies—mental shortcuts and daily routines that help them stay functional and connected. These strategies are not just about saving time; they are shaped by social and emotional needs. They represent a conscious effort to create space for slower, more thoughtful reflection, turning a chaotic flood of data into meaningful and empathetic understanding. This process is evident in three key practices: layered filtering, temporal pacing, and context-minimalism.

Firstly, it is to create a multi-layered filtering system that assesses information based on two key criteria: the credibility of the source and its social proof. When faced with information concerning visa, health regulation, or academic policy, students demonstrated a clear and consistent filtering hierarchy. The primary layer of trust was granted to institutionally anchored sources: official university websites, government portals, and authenticated news outlets. However, the process did not end there. The second layer involved social validation within trusted peer micro-publics, predominantly on WeChat. During fieldwork, it illustrates two-step process. For instance, when a university sent out a dense, multi-page email about new academic integrity policies, a screenshot of the key paragraphs would appear within minutes in their WeChat group. The initial post would be followed by questions like, "Can a law student here help us understand what this clause really means?" or "Has anyone heard about this from their supervisor?" A period of collective interpretation would ensue, with senior students or those with relevant expertise offering explanations. Finally, a highly trusted member of the group, often an informal community leader would post a clear, bilingual summary with numbered points, which would then be widely disseminated. This practice of peer verification and collaborative sense-making is a powerful mechanism for mitigating the risks of misinterpretation.

As Li, a postgraduate engineering student, articulated during an interview:

"The university's email is the fact, but the WeChat group is the truth. The email tells you the rule. The group tells you what the rule means for us, what the hidden traps are, how it has been applied to students before. I trust the summary from a senior student who has been through it more than any AI translation or even my own first reading."

This quote powerfully illustrates the distinction students make between raw information and socially validated meaning. This practical approach aligns with academic suggestions to use AI for filtering and summarizing information, while emphasizing that human judgment and critical

literacy must remain central (Brownsword, 2020). In practice, students reported using AI summarizers to quickly grasp the main points of lengthy policy documents. However, they consistently highlighted the importance of subsequently rereading the original text themselves to detect subtle implications and tonal nuances. As one student cautioned, automated summaries can "sound confident but be wrong." In this sense, artificial intelligence functions as a supportive tool that speeds up information processing, but never replaces human discernment. Ultimately, the interpretation of empathetic meaning continues to depend on caring, person-to-person communication.

Secondly, students consciously designed personal rhythms and temporal routines to better manage their attention. The design of platforms to maximize engagement through a continuous stream of novel and emotionally intense. By consciously controlling the pace of their information consumption, students create the temporal conditions needed for deep reading and reflective perspective-taking, which scholars like Lewandowsky (2017) identify as foundational to empathy.

The students themselves often drew a clear connection between controlling their informational pace and their capacity for empathy.

"If I see a friend's post about feeling homesick or angry about something on the news, I save it. I can't reply properly between classes. My brain is in a different mode. I have a time set aside after dinner, with a cup of tea, and I call it my 'serious reading time.' I read their post, I think about it, and then I write a real reply. If I read it in a rush, my reply will be shallow, just a thumbs-up emoji or a 'hang in there.' That's not empathy. Empathy needs time."

This disciplined approach extends beyond individual practice into a community norm. I observed numerous instances where students would pause a heated online debate in a WeChat group with a suggestion like, "This is getting intense. Let's all take a break and meet for coffee tomorrow to talk about this properly." This reflects a sophisticated understanding of the limitations of text-based communication for resolving complex, emotionally charged issues. It demonstrates the use of online and offline strategies to repair trust and foster understanding when digital cues fail, creating a more resilient and empathic communicative ecosystem.

Thirdly, in large student WeChat groups, posts that followed a clear, fact-based format were generally seen as more trustworthy. By focusing on key facts rather than personal opinions, these posts helped establish a common ground for discussion and showed openness to different viewpoints. For example, instead of a vague warning like "Be careful of this landlord!", a typical post would be structured as: "what happened, location, time, this structured way of sharing information turns emotional reactions into constructive problem-solving. This practice also encouraged what can be called "charitable reading", a form of cognitive empathy in action. Before disagreeing with a post, members would often restate it in their own words to confirm understanding (e.g., "So, if I get it right, you mean…"). David, who administers a large student group, explained the reasoning behind this norm:

"We used to see a lot of panic caused by incomplete information. Someone would post 'Be careful near Central Station!' and everyone would jump to conclusions. When you provide clear information, you're saying to the group: 'I trust you to think for yourselves—here are the facts to help you do that.'"

Through these three interconnected practices, Chinese international students actively transform the challenge of information overload. They move beyond mere survival, developing a set of communicative ethics and practices that foreground clarity, deliberation, and mutual respect. They build a communal sense-making apparatus that allows them to navigate the complexities of the post-truth era not as isolated individuals, but as a supportive, networked community.

4.2 Digital Labor: The Invisible Work of Transcultural Cohesion

Beyond their roles as students and consumers of information, Chinese international students are also productive workers within the platform ecology they inhabit. This work is sometimes paid (e.g., content creation, social media management), but it is far more often the unpaid, invisible labor that sustains the social fabric of their community. The literature on digital labor has extensively documented how platformed capitalism blurs the boundaries between labor and leisure, production and consumption, and extends forms of algorithmic management into individuals' personal lives.

Firstly, the constant and complex translational labor is performed by community leaders and engaged students. This goes far beyond simple linguistic conversion. Students routinely translated institutional communications from university policies to public health orders into digestible, accessible social media posts. This labor is fundamentally empathic. It requires a deep sensitivity to the audience's anxieties and cognitive load. According to the most effective "translators," they did not just change words from English to Chinese; they unpacked bureaucratic phrasing, added concrete examples relevant to student life, and strategically used language to manage the emotional tone. For instance, instead of directly translating a harsh warning about academic misconduct, a student translator might add a preamble like, "The university has updated its policy, let's all be extra careful with our citations," using inclusive "we" language to foster collective responsibility rather than individual fear. This is a form of "affective curation." Information was sometimes staged to manage community emotion, which is a minimal alert posted quickly to ensure awareness, and a more detailed explanation, once all the facts were confirmed, could be adopted. These are sophisticated empathic design choices, mirroring the principles of "editorial transparency" and "explainability" championed in AI accountability literature, but repurposed as community-driven norms (Doshi-Velez & Kim, 2017). However, this labor carries asymmetric risks. When rumors hardened or information was contested, they were pressured to "take a side," risking backlash from different factions within the community or even from external audiences. Chen, the admin of a WeChat group with over 500 members, described the pressure during our interview:

"I am always on-call. A new policy was announced at 2 am Melbourne time because it's midday in China, and parents start asking questions in their family groups, then the students bring the panic to my group. I feel a responsibility to have the right answer, to calm people down. It's not a job, but it feels like one. I don't get paid, I just get the stress. My phone is a portable community switchboard that never turns off."

This sentiment perfectly captures how the mobility of digital work becomes a form of moral mobilization, where the personal device is transformed into an instrument of communal responsibility. One interviewee, Mary, who often translated health advisories during the pandemic, spoke of the immense pressure to get the tone exactly right:

"It wasn't just about the words. The government's English text was too official. If I translated it directly, people would panic. So, I had to add things, like 'Don't worry, we're all in this together,' or 'Here are three things you can do right now to stay safe.' I had to be a translator, a community manager, and a therapist all at once. One time, I made a small mistake in the numbers, and the amount of anger I got... it was terrifying. I didn't sleep that night."

Secondly, the emotionally taxing labor of moderation and conflict mediation. The student who runs WeChat groups and other online forums are the primary sites where community norms are negotiated and enforced. Group administrators, who are students themselves, perform the crucial but thankless task of governance. They are responsible for upholding community standards by removing hateful content and mediating clashes. While this foundational work is constant, it is crucial to hold the community together when cross-cultural or geopolitical conflicts arise, preventing the dialogue from breaking down.

During a period of complexified bilateral relations between China and Australia， a fierce debate erupted in a student group. The conversation quickly devolved from policy discussion to nationalist slogans and personal insults. Instead of shutting down the conversation, the group administrator paused new comments and pinned a message at the top of the chat: "Let's try to understand why this matters to each other, not to win an argument. “She moved the most aggressive members to a private chat to cool down. This moderated the discussion with empathy, transforming it from a battle to be won into an opportunity for mutual understanding. This kind of work acts as a bridge, transforming division into dialogue and connection.

She said, “The most challenging task is moderating debates about our home country. The discussions often get very personal. The rule in these situations is to move the conversation to a private chat. I'll pull the two or three people into a small group and say, 'Okay, let's talk this through without an audience.' Sometimes it works. It's exhausting, and I often feel like I'm a therapist, not a student. "It's a necessary step to protect the entire online community from breaking down."

It is precisely this invisible labor that enables these online groups to function constructively, fostering mutual support instead of descending into chaos and division. Yet platforms offer precious few tools to support these moderators, who are essentially unpaid co-governors of their digital environments. The role requires constant vigilance, as one moderator explained: "I feel like I'm always on call. Now, even glancing at my phone fills me with dread about what issue I'll have to solve. It's hard to focus on just being a student when you're constantly waiting for the next drama. "

Thirdly, students face the complex task of managing their identity across different public and private spaces. As research shows, they often present different versions of themselves on different platforms, a family-oriented persona on WeChat, a professional image on LinkedIn, and sometimes a more politically vocal self on X/Twitter. For example, a joke that makes sense within a group might be misunderstood or seen as offensive in a multicultural English-language space. Similarly, a critical opinion shared in an open forum could be screenshotted and shared within family or community chats, leading to tension or conflict.

One student, Jing, shared a particularly vivid example of this boundary work failing. She had posted a photo on Instagram of herself and friends at a pub, a normal social activity in Australia.

"My aunt in China somehow saw it. She screenshotted it and sent it to my mum on WeChat. My mum called me, asking why I was in a 'bar' instead of the library. I had to spend an hour explaining pub culture and that it is safe. Now I have two Instagram accounts: a 'safe' one for the world and family, and a private one for my friends here. It's exhausting."

This example shows the “translational exhaustion” many students experience, which is the mental and emotional strain of constantly anticipating how different audiences might misunderstand their words and actions. Australian classmates who follow a student on Instagram may encounter nuanced posts about cultural festivals that challenge stereotypes. Family members on WeChat may develop greater trust in Australian institutions through the student’s careful explanations. In the process, the student’s own identity grows more complex and fluid.

The high value and heavy costs of this care-focused digital work point to clear policy and design priorities. Universities and student unions should formally recognize and redistribute this labor. For example, by creating volunteer or paid roles for “community translators” and “peer moderators,” by offering course credit, or official certificates to legitimize the work that sustains community well-being. Platforms should provide better tools and analytics for group admins, including well-being features and co-moderation options to share the workload. Algorithmic management also needs adjustment to reduce punitive opacity, avoiding unexplained content removals that disproportionately harm moderators, and to establish fast-track appeals for the trusted community. Finally, institutions can build capacity for empathic governance through training in conflict de-escalation, cross-cultural listening, and context-rich communication. While this digital care labor is here to stay, its ethical burden demands collective effort and shared responsibility.

4.3 Algorithmic Opacity, Trust, and Empathic Governance

A consistent sentiment that emerged from the interviews was uncertainty toward the digital platforms currently in use. Participants frequently expressed confusion regarding their ability to manage or influence their digital environments, raising concerns such as: “Why did the algorithm suppress my carefully written informational post?” “How was a baseless rumor able to spread to thousands of users overnight?” and “Is the platform intentionally limiting the visibility of my views on sensitive topics?” This phenomenon, referred to “black-box problem” (Burrell, 2016), extends beyond technical considerations. It has profound social and emotional implications. In digitally mediated environments where visibility is often interpreted as a sign of credibility or validation, the inability to understand platform mechanisms gradually undermines user trust.

A focus group session revealed this erosion of trust unfolding in real-time. A student mentioned that a helpful post she had written summarizing visa application tips had been removed from a large social media group without explanation. Immediately, other students began to speculate.

"Maybe someone reported you because they are a migration agent and you were giving free advice," one suggested. Another wondered, "Was it because you used a word that the algorithm flagged as

spam?" The inability to know the real reason created a vacuum that was instantly filled with suspicion, not just of the platform, but of fellow users and unseen geopolitical forces. When a student spends hours crafting a thoughtful post aimed at fostering understanding, only to see it receive minimal reach, they infer that "the machine prefers drama and conflict." This incentive structure undermines students' motivation to dedicate time and emotional effort to tasks such as careful translation, contextualization, and conflict mediation, as they learn through visibility, insufficient feedback, or punitive moderation that thoughtful and empathetic contributions are less valued and more vulnerable than other kind of posts.

Conversely, when sensationalist, low-quality, or demonstrably false content gains widespread attention, observers may perceive evidence of manipulation or systemic bias, thereby reinforcing critical perspectives on platform-driven content curation, particularly the concern that engagement-based metrics tend to prioritize emotional outrage over substantive insight (Noble, 2018). In the context of the post-truth era, such perceptions can spread rapidly: distrust in opaque algorithmic systems often extends to skepticism toward other users and to broader societal institutions, ultimately undermining the open and empathetic dialogue essential for mutual understanding.

However, the coping strategies and expressed aspirations of students point to a constructive prospect for what can be termed empathic governance—a framework of platform and institutional practices aimed at transparenting decision-making and guaranteeing the reversibility of harms. At its core, empathic governance is about designing for trust. Student experiences indicate that this can be realized through three interconnected design principles: prioritizing provenance and context, implementing credibility-sensitive content distribution, and ensuring transparent and reversible moderation.

Firstly, embedding provenance and minimal context as default features of the user interface. Participants expressed strong support for platform functionalities that include visible source labels, clear edit histories, and concise, non-intrusive contextual panels attached to posts. They regarded this information as essential for their ability to "read charitably" and to correct misinformation without undermining the original poster. During a focus group, a student named Jia drew a sharp contrast:

On TikTok, you see a video and have no idea whether it is real. But in our WeChat groups, when someone posts a summary and includes the link to the official source, I feel I can trust it. It shows the person respects my intelligence and acknowledges their responsibility to the group. I wish every platform had a “show your source” button.

This aspiration aligns closely with recent governance proposals advocating for audience-appropriate explainability rather than technically exhaustive transparency (Doshi-Velez & Kim, 2017). In my field sites, posts that voluntarily adopted this format — “Policy source here, last updated then, here's what it means for students” — were shared more widely and generated more constructive engagement. Integrating such contextual panels as native, user-friendly features within the platform’s UI would reduce the effort required to provide context and help establish them as a normative standard of responsible communication.

Secondly, moving toward credibility-aware distribution and greater content variety. Participants understood that platforms optimize for engagement, but they stressed that “not all clicks are equal.” They called for ranking and recommendation systems that give a small boost to posts with clear sources and basic context. In practice, this means tuning recommendation systems to pursue more than one goal at a time, balancing engagement with measures of information diversity and source credibility, as growing research and policy guidance suggest.

In a focus group, one student articulated the dispiriting logic of the current system:

"I spent an hour writing a post explaining a cultural misunderstanding I saw on campus. It got five likes. The next day, someone posts an angry, one-sentence rant about the same topic, and it gets a hundred reactions. The algorithm teaches you that anger works better than empathy. So why bother trying? It feels like your thoughtful voice is invisible."

This sense of algorithmic invisibility can lead to epistemic injustice, as the platform’s operating logic systematically sidelines the valuable knowledge and perspectives of community builders.

Thirdly, ensuring moderation is transparent, timely, and reversible. Nothing undermines trust faster than opaque, seemingly arbitrary decisions. When posts are taken down or accounts suspended with a vague automated notice citing “community

standards," student moderators feel delegitimized and powerless. When their appeals vanish into a corporate void, whole communities disengage. This underscores the importance of procedural justice: people judge the fairness of the process as seriously as the outcome itself.

One interviewee, Leo, had his account on a major platform suspended after he organized an online information session to help new students avoid housing scams. He received no specific reason.

"That account was tied to everything. All my group chats, my support network. I was completely cut off for 48 hours. I sent five appeals. I got nothing back but a robot reply. When my account came back, there was no explanation, no apology. How can you trust a system like that? It felt like a machine making a mistake, and no human cared enough to fix it."

Leo's story underscores the need for moderation that is not only transparent but also reversible and communicative. Even brief, templated explanations would preserve user dignity and enable repair. Setting up a fast-track appeals process for verified community stewards' admins who have earned trust through sustained work would put this idea of fairness into practice. These steps align with a risk-based approach in regulation and with a human-centered view of AI ethics that emphasizes dignity, accountability, and the right to appeal.

5. CONCLUSION

This study indicates that the trust crisis in AI-mediated communication cannot be resolved through a single intervention. Neither calls for ever-greater "transparency" in the abstract nor exhortations for users to "be kinder" are sufficient. Trust is rebuilt when infrastructures, institutions, and everyday practices align around concrete, testable commitments: default provenance, credibility-aware ranking, and transparent, timely, and reversible moderation which coupled with institutional support that recognizes and resources the human labor of empathy: listening, translating, contextualizing, and de-escalating conflict.

Situated in the case of Chinese international students in Australia, the findings underscore how transcultural empathic communication is both a principle to aim for and a skill to practice. These students operate across WeChat/Weibo/Douyin oriented to kinship and diaspora ties, and TikTok/X/Twitter arenas aligned with host-society discourse. In this context, they serve as everyday mediators: translating policies and cultural cues, curating tone and context, and repairing misunderstandings before they harden into grievance. Yet the very platforms that make such bridgework possible also ration attention through opaque ranking, penalize ambiguity through blunt moderation, and reward high-arousal novelty over slow, contextual care. The result is a persistent friction: empathic labor remains indispensable, but it is poorly recognized, weakly incentivized, and unevenly protected.

Institutional partnerships are the necessary complement. Universities and student unions should recognize the social value of "community translators" and "peer moderators" through paid roles, micro-credentials, or course credit, and offer training in conflict de-escalation, cross-cultural listening, and trauma-aware communication. Platforms should furnish co-moderation tools, wellbeing analytics to flag burnout risk, and clear pathways for redress when automated systems err. Regulators can reinforce these shifts through risk-based obligations for high-impact recommendation and moderation systems, ensuring that dignity, accountability, and the right to appeal are not aspirational slogans but enforceable standards. For Chinese international students, such commitments deliver immediate and downstream benefits. In the short term, they reduce the social and emotional costs of correction, sustain group cohesion, and expand opportunities for "micro-bridging" across cultural lines. More broadly, they demonstrate that in the post-truth era, empathic communication is better understood as an active practice than a passive reaction; it represents an institutional commitment to making meaning legible, harms reversible, and care work valued. That choice is made every day by users, admins, platforms, and universities—whether they are fully aware of it.

Looking to the future, the following three paths may improve the above-mentioned issues. First, future research could develop clear, culturally sensitive metrics for assessing the quality of empathic communication, integrating dimensions such as source credibility and cross-group reach to evaluate whether design interventions genuinely reduce misunderstanding and conflict. Mixed methods approach combining platform log data with qualitative diaries from Chinese international students may shed light on how their behaviors unfold in real time across platforms such as WeChat, Douyin, TikTok, and X. Then,

experimental co-governance models could be explored. Universities, student associations, and digital platforms might collaborate to pilot joint stewardship mechanisms, for instance, through verified student moderator programs that incorporate expedited appeal channels, burnout prevention safeguards, and public transparency reports at the campus level. What's more, systematic capacity-building would benefit from greater attention. As generative AI becomes further embedded in everyday content creation, technical safeguards such as default provenance tracing and explainable recommendation systems will grow increasingly essential. When implemented alongside participatory moderation and trustworthy redress mechanisms, such tools hold the potential to expand trust without constraining freedom of expression. In this way, transcultural empathy may evolve from a communicative ideal into an institutional capacity, one sustained by intentional design, shared responsibility, and ongoing reflective evaluation.

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