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Diaspora micro-influencers and COVID-19 communication on social media: The case of Chinese-speaking YouTube vloggers

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Abstract: Diaspora vloggers—migrants who produce video blogs in the language of their home countries for a transnational diaspora community—have been a largely overlooked group in the studies of social media. This paper focuses on the unique role of Chinese diaspora vloggers during an unprecedented global event—the COVID-19 pandemic. Using manual keyword search (e.g., *zhaijia riji*, *faguo yiqing*) and chance sampling (i.e., following platform recommendation), we collected 26 videos (07:44:30) from six Chinese YouTube micro-influencers (1–100k followers) located in Germany, the US, Australia, France, Italy, and Korea. Drawing on theories of narrative and stance-taking, we analyzed how these diaspora vloggers relate their experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. Results show that vloggers display both universal (e.g., fears) and culturally specific (e.g., mask-wearing) feelings, and invite their viewers to co-construe the emotional experience (e.g., the pronoun *ni* and address term *dajia*). Moreover, through different ways of "being Chinese", vloggers orient their discourse to a unique audience—transnational Chinese-speaking diaspora. Our findings point to the emergence of a new form of migrant identity in the age of social media and highlight the importance of understanding such identities in delivering public health information in global emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Chinese diaspora, migrant identities, narrative analysis, YouTube vloggers, social media discourse, COVID-19

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1 Introduction

Social media has become one of the cutting-edge topics in socio- and applied linguistic research. Much has been written about how new identities, communities, multimodal genres, and sociolinguistic practices are formed on major international social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram (e.g., Tagg, Sergeant and Brown 2017; Zappavigna 2012; Zappavigna and Zhao 2017). While the first wave of social media studies has predominately focused on English language practices on social media, increasing attentions have been paid to multilingual practices (Dovchin 2017) especially those of migrant populations (e.g., Androutsopoulos 2015; Lyons and Tagg 2019; Zhao and Flewitt 2020). More recently, there has been a call for a better understanding of Chinese-speaking social media, such as WeChat or Bilibili (Zhang and Cassany 2020).

The present study has emerged out of this ongoing and collective effort to understand the changing global sociolinguistic landscapes brought upon by the ubiquitous presence of social media in everyday life. Furthermore, it is set against the background of an unprecedented global event—the COVID-19 pandemic. The interaction of the two offers a unique opportunity to explore the role social media play in shaping both immediate communicative practices in a global emergency and long-term sociolinguistic change. Our focus in this paper is a social media space largely overlooked in the literature—diaspora vloggers, migrants who produce videos in the language of their home countries for a transnational diaspora community. The diaspora in focus is one of the biggest in the world—the Chinese diaspora. The Chinese community—both inside and outside mainland China where the virus originated—was also the first in the world to deal with the consequences of the pandemic.

We zoom in on six Chinese-speaking migrant vloggers living across four continents, Europe, Asia, Oceania, and North America. Drawing on theories of narrative and stance-taking, we will demonstrate how these diaspora vloggers relate their intimate and personal experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic to their transnational Chinese-speaking audience and various "local" communities, with a particular focus on the sharing of emotional responses. We argue that these COVID-19 stories on social media point to the emergence of a new form of migrant identity in the age of social media and understanding the formation of these kinds of identities is essential to the delivery of public health information in global emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

2 Methodology

This study examines six Chinese female YouTube micro-influencers (1–100K followers) located in six countries, namely Australia, France, Germany, Italy, South Korea, and the United States. To identify these vloggers, we combined manual keyword search e.g., *zhaijia riji* (宅家日记; 'staying-in diary'), *faguo yiqing* (法国疫情; 'French epidemic') with chance sampling (i.e., platform recommendations). We selected the vloggers based on their 1) experience in vlogging prior to COVID-19 and 2) vlogging themes (i.e., lifestyle, beauty, travel, foreign culture). The vloggers include both Chinese migrants (AUS, GER, USA) and international students (KOR, ITA).

We registered a total of 83 videos uploaded by the six vloggers between February 2 and April 20, 2020. Sixty five of these were COVID-19-related. To reflect each vlogger's characteristics within the scope of this study, we followed the principles of quota sampling. Based on the productivity of each vlogger, we included proportionally the most commented videos (until April 30, 2020), which indicated greater interest from the audience. The final dataset consists of 26 videos (07:44:30), with an average of 280 comments per video. We have obtained consent from the vloggers to use their video data for our project. The YouTube account names have been anonymised apart from the vlogger in Italy (老橙子) and France (芊芊的法國生活 StephanieStory), who have requested their channels to be referenced in the paper (Table 1). Each vlogger will be referred to by the country they lived in throughout the paper.

To facilitate the analysis, we transcribed three vlogs (10,065 characters), in which the vloggers recounted their personal experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, six vlogs were partially transcribed (8948 characters). In four videos, the vloggers filmed their trips to local supermarkets in Germany, Italy and France, and in the other two, they explained their reasons for not returning to

Table 1: Dataset of the study.

Vlogger	Subscribers	Vlogging history	COVID-19-related vlogs	Length	Comments
GER	16K	3 years	10	03:08:05	3,740
ITA	4.47K	3 years	6	00:34:52	1,543
USA	3.6K	1 year	2	00:49:46	142
AUS	47.8K	4 years	2	00:20:55	1,262
FRA	7.07K	2 years	3	00:15:59	161
KOR	16.1K	2 years	3	01:26:39	420
Total			26	07:44:30	7,268

China. These videos were selected due to topical relevance and the number of comments received, taking into consideration the scope of the paper.

Our analysis of the data was informed by discourse approaches to (social media) narratives and theories of stance-taking in spoken interaction. These lenses allowed us to examine how the vloggers constructed and framed their COVID-19 experience. Specifically, we looked at the notion of Shared Stories in the social media context (Page 2018). We also used Du Bois's theory of stance (Du Bois 2007) to investigate how the vloggers evaluated the COVID-19 situation in relation to other social subjects, including their viewers and local people (in the place where they dwell). We interpreted our analysis drawing on theories of language and identities. One key theory we have referred to is the interactionally-oriented approach to narrative and identities (De Fina 2015), which helped us to examine how the vloggers negotiate their migrant identities through positioning themselves and others (Bamberg 1997) and aligning with or distancing from figures of personhood or cultural identities (Agha 2007; Koven 2015). Another key concept is chronotopes (Bakhtin 1981; Lyons and Tagg 2019), through which we have looked at how migrant vloggers made sense of and negotiated new temporal and spatial realities (Karimzad 2016; Sinatora 2019) in the context of the global pandemic.

3 Findings & discussion

3.1 Telling Chinese stories

The primary function of the COVID-19 videos we analyzed was to construe "authentic" personal COVID-19 experience from the vlogger's perspective and *in relation to* their transnational Chinese-speaking audience. The stories told by the vloggers in these videos were typically of high "tellability" (Ochs and Capps 2001), such as the discovery of close relatives testing positive for COVID-19 (GER) and experiences of family and friends in Wuhan (AUS). Videos containing such personal stories received the most comments on YouTube.

One striking feature of these vlogs is the homogeneity in their language choice. Despite being on a social media platform dominated by the English language, the vloggers choose to use Mandarin Chinese with rare instances of codeswitching. Languages other than Chinese were mainly used by the vloggers in two contexts: 1) communicating with the locals, e.g., the ITA vlogger included a conversation in Italian at a local market (subtitled in Chinese) in one of her 'follow-me' videos; and 2) reporting the speech of the locals, e.g., AUS reported an insult she received at a shopping center: "他说 ('He said')… *taking your fxxking mask off* (English subtitles by AUS)." The utterance began with the subject (他, he) and the reporting verb (说,

said) in Chinese and shifted to English in the reported speech. The construction suggests an attempt to distance "us" (the Chinese speakers, the vlogger and the viewers) from "them" (the English-speaking attacker).

The COVID-19 narratives in these videos contain several key features of Shared Stories, a narrative form prevalent on social media, in particular, "an assumption of commonly held beliefs" and "intertextual references which connect shared text" (Page 2018: 18). The commonly held beliefs in these vlogs involve knowledge of Chinese culture and cultural practices. For instance, GER referred to her sister-in-law as a *fuerdai* (富二代; 'second-generation rich' or 'children of the Chinese nouveau riche') and the virologist Christian Drosten as the 'German Zhong Nanshan (a leading Chinese epidemiologist and the face of China's fight against COVID-19)'. The vloggers also made extensive intertextual references to social media cultures and incorporated Chinese netspeak originating in Chinese-speaking social media such as Weibo or WeChat. For example, ITA called her boyfriend who also appeared in the videos 'little assistant (小助理)', the term used by the most influential Chinese male beauty vlogger Li Jiaqi to refer to his co-vlogger. Encountering constant problems on the way to the police station, ITA complained of being 'totally drunk (真是醉了)' which means 'speechless' in netspeak. At the supermarket cashier, FRA joked that the person filling his trolley with bottles of water was going to save the 'bottled water princess (矿泉水公主)', referring to a viral story on Weibo of a Chinese returnee who threatened to break quarantine if not provided bottled spring water.

These YouTube videos are striking as the vloggers are telling stories, making sense of their experience as an immigrant during the pandemic in their host countries. Yet, their stories are not intended for either the communities in their new country (linguistic and cultural inaccessibility) or in their home country (platform inaccessibility). Instead, they seem to be sharing stories with a transnational diaspora audience, who can understand the two interwoven perspectives in the stories, being Chinese (from mainland China) and being a migrant. This point will be further illustrated in the following section.

3.2 COVID-19 as personal and localised experience

Narratives are characterised by prosodic evaluation (Labov 1972; Martin and Rose 2008). In the COVID-19 videos in our dataset, the evaluation focuses predominantly on the subject's evaluation (Du Bois 2007) of the COVID-19 pandemic in their local contexts. This, in the first instance, concerns how the vloggers reacted to and felt about the situation. Negative emotions such as fear and anxiety are highlighted and often amplified. For example, GER felt 'unprecedented panic

(无比的恐慌)' knowing her relatives contracted the virus. Meanwhile, she 'suffered deeply (煎熬)' and 'almost exploded (快爆炸了)' from the burden of keeping her child occupied in quarantine. There are also instances of more nuanced expressions of emotion where the vloggers discovered everyday joy in the chaos. For instance, vloggers generally felt apprehensive about going out and only did so when they 'had no alternative (迫不得已, ITA)', whereas staying at home felt 'the safest and most relieved (最安全 最安心, ITA)' and even 'enjoyable (享受, FRA)'. KOR was 'torn (纠结)' between her life in Korea and going home, and found stockpiling 'comforting (心理安慰)'. While these universal emotional experiences of COVID-19 are often highlighted in the reporting of COVID-19 stories in mainstream media, the voices of migrants are rarely heard. These videos thus become a platform in which migrants can participate in social emotional sharing and bonding, as reflected in the numbers of responses to these videos.

Vloggers also evaluated the severity of their local situation as well as various government measures. The evaluation is a mixture of negative and positive appraisals. For instance, ITA found the Italian statistics 'pretty scary (很吓人)', whereas GER thought 'all numbers are deceiving (数据都是骗人的)' due to the lack of tests. The negative evaluation is often followed by advice to the viewers. The advice can be a direct a call for action, e.g., 'the number is scary … I feel we should note down the German emergency number (它这个数字可怕 […] 德国的紧急医疗电话我觉得大家需要记一下, GER)', or emotional reassurance, e.g., 'there is no need to panic or be anxious (我觉得现在也不必太过恐慌, ITA) (但是大家也不要焦虑, GER)'; 'if we all obey the rules, we will be able to overcome this (只要我们大家都遵守这些规定的话 一定能一起共渡难关, ITA)'. Nevertheless, vloggers appreciated certain local measures, e.g., the well-equipped German health system, Italy's drastic lockdown policies, and Korea's transparent information release of confirmed cases. The evaluation of the local situation is often located in a transnational frame, with extensive comparisons to the situation in other countries. For instance, in GER's videos, 'Amazon supply shortage in France and Italy (法国和意大利的亚马逊有严重的配送问题)' was used to predict developments in Germany (觉得德国马上也会是这种情况), whilst German lockdown measures were compared unfavourably with the Chinese efforts: 'I feel if you followed the Chinese method earlier, it would have improved sooner (觉得你要是早就按照中国那方式做 不就早就好了)'.

These instances of evaluation indicate an agentive process in which the diaspora influencers reinterpret the local official health information and practices with references to experience of other transnational (Chinese) communities. This has profound implications for health communication, as it suggests that migrant social media influencers who are proficient in their local languages can function as the mediators of information for other migrants, both in the local and global

contexts (see also Li, Xie, Ai, and Li, this issue). Any discussion of information and language provisions for migrants in the social media age need to consider these multi-layered means of access.

3.3 From personal experience to shared experience

One of the most controversial issues for the Chinese diaspora during COVID-19 has been mask-wearing. In the videos we have analyzed, the vloggers were uniform in their attitudes towards the issue. In the videos posted at the earlier stage of the pandemic, they were 'puzzled (迷惑)', 'irritated (生气)' and 'terrified (可怕)' by locals' refusal to wear masks. Locals were construed as an ignorant and unreasonable group, in contrast to the well informed and sensible Chinese community: 'Germans are very stubborn. A very obstinate people (德国人不是非常犟嘛 很执拗的一个人群, GER)'; 'Seriously … can't they see the daily updated news on Korean Internet (我真的 韩网的新闻 每天更新的 他们是都看不见吗, KOR)'. The second personal singular pronoun 你 (*ni*, 'you') was adopted to invite members of "us" (the Chinese-speaking viewers) to evaluate "them" (the French policy makers):

(1) 最后一条 [reading a government-issued pamphlet in French] 生病以后再戴口罩 你看看 他们到现在 到这个节骨眼上了 还不知道悬崖勒马 (FRA)
'Lastly, wearing a mask after feeling sick. **(You)** look at this, until now, at this critical juncture, they still wouldn't rein in at the brink of the precipice (counteract imminent danger).'

The polarization intensified as vloggers anticipated 'being judged (被指指点点, AUS)' and 'getting beaten (被打, GER)' for wearing masks (see AUS's example in 3.1). Nevertheless, vloggers insisted on wearing masks and encouraged the viewers to do so if they feel 'uncomfortable (不舒服)' or 'in danger (危险)' 'regardless of others' opinions (不用去在意他人的眼光)' (AUS). In (2), AUS further distinguished "us" (the socially responsible mask-wearers in Australia) from "them" (those who were afraid to wear masks and the deplorable attackers). The second personal singular pronoun 'you' was adopted multiple times as a substitute for an indefinite pronoun (similar to "one" in English), referring to whoever located in Australia:

(2) 有些人说 在澳洲这个地方 如果你戴口罩的话 可能会有些人 对你恶语相向 但是我觉得你为自己的生命负责其实也同时是为其他人的生命负责 (AUS)
'Some people say that here in Australia, if **you** wear a mask, some people might speak rudely to **you**, but I think that as **you** are responsible for your own life and for other people's lives.'

While the issue of mask-wearing indicates a classic "us" and "them" discourse in the videos, in many other instances, there is a less clear-cut boundary between the self (the vlogger) and the other (the viewer), the Chinese-speaking viewers and the local people where the vlogger resides. This more inclusive discourse is achieved through use of 1) the second personal singular pronoun *ni* (as deictic in example [1] and indefinite pronoun in [2]); and 2) a distinct Chinese address term, *dajia* (大家; lit. 'big family'). Depending on the context, *dajia* in the videos can refer to 'everyone' within a certain group, e.g., the viewers, as in (3) where KOR explained to her followers that she decided to stay in Korea:

(3) 也希望大家能给我们这些留学生更多的理解吧 (KOR)
'I also wish ***dajia*** could give us international students more understanding.'

This term also extends the involvement beyond the vloggers and their viewers to include the local people. In (4), *dajia* indicates approval of local Chinese population, while in (5), *dajia* refers to the Germans and suggests the transition of "them" (the local population) to "us" (the mask-wearers):

(4) 我觉得这次我也要给在意大利的所有华人点个赞吧 因为大家都比较自觉 严格遵守各项规则 (ITA)
'I think this time I should give a thumb up to all Chinese in Italy, because ***dajia*** are quite self-disciplined and strictly observe the rules.'

(5) 我明显的感觉到 我前两天戴口罩出去跟现在戴口罩出去 大家对于我的反应是不一样了 现在大家都等于就是非常接受这个东西 (GER)
'I definitely felt that when I went out today and the other day, ***dajia*** reacted differently to me wearing a mask. Now ***dajia*** accept it very well.'

4 Conclusion

So far, we have examined the features of evaluation and narration in the COVID-19 videos produced by six Mandarin Chinese-speaking vloggers around the world. Our analysis illustrates the intimate and affective nature of social genres and practices. The COVID-19 pandemic reports in these YouTube videos foreground the private feelings of the vloggers as a migrant or international student in a 'new' country, coping with a new situation. The affect construed is both universal (e.g., fears) and culturally specific (e.g., mask-wearing). Through narrative devices (e.g., shared stories) and linguistic choices (e.g., pronoun *ni* and address term *dajia*), the vloggers then invite their viewers to co-construct an emotional experience that is shared not just between the vloggers and their viewers, but also with kin in China and in their host countries, and local Chinese and non-Chinese population.

Our analysis also highlights the unique audience and identity of these YouTube vlogs. The platform choice of YouTube combined with the linguistic choice of Mandarin Chinese suggest that they are designed neither specifically for the social media users in China or a local audience (in the country where a vlogger lived), but a transnational Chinese-speaking diaspora. The vloggers seem to be keenly aware of this audience. GER, for instance, started each COVID-19 'news report' vlog announcing the time in three time zones (Germany, Beijing, and Canada). In the videos, the vloggers constantly move between different ways of "being Chinese". They align themselves, at the same time, with 1) the Chinese community in China with updated references to its (social media) culture, 2) a transnational Chinese migrant community bonding around their shared experience of immigration (e.g., whether to return to China), and 3) a Chinese migrant community at a specific geographic location (e.g., *dajia* used by ITA).

The study we reported in this paper opens up a new space for researching migrant identities and multilingual practices in the age of social media. While it is widely recognised in the sociolinguistic literature that identities are hybrid and complex, studies of migrant identities have predominantly focused on the negotiation between old (home) and new migrant identities (e.g., Lyons and Tagg 2019). Our study suggests that social media give rise to a "third space" between the old and the new homes (cf. Chang and Chang 2019). Is this space exclusive to the Chinese diaspora due to its size and the unique social media landscape in China (Zhao and Xie 2020; see also Zhu, this issue)? This is a question yet to be addressed. Our study also invites a rethinking of the benefits of multilingualism from a migrant's perspective. Much of the existing research has lauded the creative mixing of two or more languages by migrants both offline and online (e.g., Androutsopoulos 2015; Li 2018), yet the language use by the migrant vloggers in our study are decidedly monolingual (but nevertheless creative). What are the roles of these monolingual spaces in a migrant's life and in the formation of their migrant identities?

Addressing the key theme of this special issue, we would like to suggest that understanding this new social media transnational space is essential in handling global issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic. For a diaspora with a sizeable speaker population and an increasingly valued language such as the transnational Chinese-speaking community, the challenges facing immigrants are not a lack of information but an overflow of information from different corners of the globe (see also Choi and Jang, this issue). The central task is thus not to deliver information but to monitor misinformation. How this can be achieved is one of the biggest challenges for public health authorities and government bodies. Our analysis also shows that governmental provision of health information will inevitably be re-interpreted, re-contextualised and even compared through the lens of a particular

diaspora not just at the local but also the global level. We argue that another urgent task for public health communication in global emergencies is to explore how these diaspora resources can be mobilised. Our analysis, for instance, shows these videos have helped create a space where communities can support each other emotionally. This support can be essential to the maintenance of mental health during lengthy lockdowns and self-isolation for often marginalised and socially excluded migrant populations.

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