



The Impact of Users-Generated Contents' (UGC) Perception and Key Opinion Leaders' Persuasion on Chinese Students' Motivation and Decision to Study Abroad in Thailand: A case study of Red Platform in China

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Abstract

Despite Thailand's increasing appeal as a study-abroad destination for Chinese students, research on the influence of user-generated content (UGC) and key opinion leaders (KOLs) on the RED platform remains limited. This study investigates how the perceived credibility and usefulness of educational content, combined with the persuasive impact of KOLs, affect Chinese students' motivation and decision to study in Thailand. The sample comprised 171 Chinese international students aged 18 to 37, selected through purposive and convenience sampling. Data were analyzed using means, standard deviations, and Stepwise Regression Analysis at a 0.05 significance level. Findings reveal that (1) perceived credibility and usefulness of RED content significantly influenced KOL persuasion, impacting study-abroad decisions at a medium level (34.5%); (2) KOL persuasion had a positive effect on students' motivation, accounting for 47.5% at a medium level; (3) motivation significantly affected students' final decision to study in Thailand (45.2% at a medium level). Personal growth and career development were key predictors. This study highlights the role of UGC quality and KOL influence in study-abroad decisions, offering insights for educational institutions on leveraging social media to attract international students.

Keywords: Users-Generated Content (UGC), Persuasion of Key Opinion Leader (KOL), Motivation for Study Abroad, Decision to Study Abroad in Thailand, RED Platform

Introduction

As China's cooperation with countries along the Silk Road grows closer and closer, and the trend of economic globalization becomes increasingly apparent, internationalization of education has become a trend. Since 2013, President Xi Jinping has proposed the "Belt and Road" initiative, which aims to form a community of interests,



destiny and responsibility with mutual political trust, economic integration, and cultural inclusiveness. Under the promotion of the "Belt and Road" initiative, various humanities exchange programs between China and Thailand, particularly in areas such as university exchanges, international student education, think tank cooperation, youth exchange, cultural dialogue, and language and cultural exchange and learning have become increasingly frequent. Compared with Europe, America, and Australia, Thailand has a lower cost of living, low application requirements, high graduation rates, strong cultural adaptability, high tolerance, and more geopolitical advantages. Currently, the number of Chinese students studying in Thailand is increasing, and according to data released by the Chinese Ministry of Education, there are currently 40,000 Chinese students studying in the country (He, 2020).

As the national Internet+ strategy deepens, more people are searching for information online and sharing their experiences. Most users favor user-generated content (UGC) platforms. Self-media bloggers' information content has subjective, authentic, and focused characteristics, and the interaction and communication with users are stronger, which enhances user stickiness, trust, and perceived value. More Chinese students tend to learn information about studying abroad through user-generated content on self-media platforms.

However, limited research about how social media platforms like RED—where students actively seek and share study abroad information—shape their motivation and decision-making. This research fills this gap by examining how users perceive the credibility and usefulness of online content, as well as the influence of key opinion leaders (KOLs) on RED, in their journey to decide on studying in Thailand."

Objectives

1. To examine the influence of perceived credibility, perceived usefulness, and key opinion leaders promoted in RED platform on the Chinese students' motivation to study abroad in Thailand.
2. To examine the influence of perceived credibility, perceived usefulness, and key opinion leaders promoted in RED platform on the Chinese students' decision to study abroad in Thailand.
3. To examine the influence of motivation to study abroad on the Chinese students' decision to study abroad in Thailand.



Literature Reviews

UGC definition

Since the emergence of blogs, YouTube, and Wikipedia in 2005, User-Generated Content (UGC) has become a focus of attention and has received a lot of attention. So far, there is no scientific definition to define it. User-generated content refers to information resources created and published on the Internet by ordinary Internet users (Akar & Topcu, 2011). This term first appeared in the 2005 China Internet Annual Report. Research on user-generated content is still in its infancy, especially in China. Regarding the concept of user-generated content, Goodrich (2011) believes that content published by users that can be considered UGC must have the following characteristics: on the one hand, the audience of the information can access it through online media (such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs and YouTube); on the other hand, it can be animated, graphic, image, photo, text, and other self-created content; finally, the information is created by individuals rather than professional organizations.

Motivation for creating UGC

Discussing the motivation for creating user-generated content can further help us understand the essence of UGC and distinguish the differences between diverse types of UGC to some extent. There are many studies on UGC motivation, and most scholars focus on blog creation motivation. For example, Brabham (2010) believes that users' motivation for creating blogs is influenced by factors such as material rewards, opportunities, and personal reputation, while Nardi (2004) believes that users create information to express their views and opinions, record daily life, and express emotions.

Study abroad information provided by the UGC platform.

As a popular emerging social media platform in recent years, RED platform has attracted more attention due to its advantages in attracting and retaining users. Based on the analysis of the "Uses and Gratifications theory", Wan (2022) found that people tend to approach media for some psychological need, and the main reason for using RED is to obtain and understand information and meet personal needs for specific community content, including learning and consultation. At the same time, under single factor variance analysis, the overall significance test value of education level is greater than 0.05, indicating that the different levels of educational backgrounds of RED users also have a small effect on their motivation to use. However, the significance measure between educational level and "understanding information" is less than 0.05, implying that the information needs of RED audience are influenced by the difference in educational level, and the higher the educational level is, the stronger the psychological motivation to use RED App to obtain information. Liu (2022) found in her survey study that UGC provides different perspectives on studying abroad. In addition to students sharing their own experiences and advice on

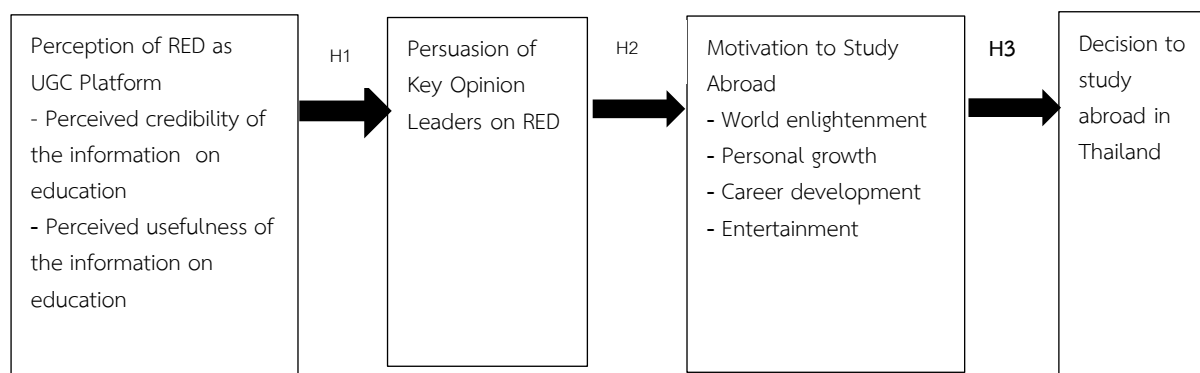


studying abroad, UGC also provides multiple channels, such as educational media, study abroad consulting agencies, and expert advisors, which provide systematic and in-depth analysis of study abroad from multiple perspectives and help international students get comprehensive information on studying abroad.

Key Opinion Leaders (KOL)

Influential individuals who produced user-generated content on the Internet are considered by many online users to be Key Opinion Leaders (KOL) (MacKinnon, 2012). Key Opinion Leaders were first defined in The People's Choice. Opinion leaders refer to people who can influence the attitudes or behavior of others (Lazarsfeld & Berelson, 1944). The development of the Internet and the rise of self-media platforms have provided a broader platform for the study of Key Opinion Leaders. Key Opinion Leaders on the Internet are usually those who publish information, disseminate information, and provide reference for others' opinions through the Internet to influence the user public to make decisions.

Research Framework



Research Hypothesis

1. Hypothesis 1: Perceived credibility and usefulness of the UGC in education on RED platform significantly influence the persuasion of key opinion leaders.
2. Hypothesis 2: Persuasion of key opinion leaders on RED platform has a significant effect on Chinese students' motivation to study abroad in Thailand.
3. Hypothesis 3: The motivation for study abroad of Chinese student has a significant effect on the decision to study abroad in Thailand for Chinese students.

Research Methodology

Research design

The researcher used the survey method to examine the factors affecting the Chinese students' decision to study abroad in Thailand. The questionnaire was collected in September-October 2023.



Population and Sample Selection

The subjects targeted in this study were Chinese international students aged under 18 years old to over 37 years old who are currently studying in Thailand. The study primarily focused on Chinese international students currently studying in Thailand who were active users of social media, especially have experiences using RED platform during year 2022-2023. The sampling method used in this study is purposive sampling and convenience sampling. This approach was chosen due to the specific nature of the research questions and the need for participants with certain capabilities.

Variables and Research Instrument

The independent variable was perception of credibility and usefulness of UGC on education, and the mediating variables was persuasion of key opinion leaders and motivation to study abroad in Thailand, and dependent variable was Chinese students' decision to study abroad in Thailand.

The questionnaire consisted of 5 sections and 38 questions, and 171 questionnaires were finally collected for this study. The first section has 5 nominal-and-ordinal questions asking about the demographic factors of respondents, including gender, age, level of education, and duration and frequency of RED platform use. The second section has 6-likert questions asking about the perception of the credibility of the usefulness of UGC in RED platform, adopted from Yuksel (2016). The third section has 4-likert questions inquiring the perceptions on the persuasion of key opinion on RED platform. The fourth section consists of 20-likert questions inquiring the motivations for studying abroad in Thailand. Adopted from American Institute of Foreign Study (cited in Anderson & Lawton, 2015), the motivation for study abroad (MSA) has four dimensions, including world enlightenment, personal growth, career development, and entertainment. The fifth section has 3-likert questions inquiring the decision to study in Thailand. Finally, Section 2-Section 4 used the same 5-likert scale, arranging from 1- Completely disagree, 2-somewhat disagree, 3-neither agree nor disagree, 4-somewhat agree," or 5 "Completely agree."

Instrument Pretest

The English questionnaire was translated into Chinese language and did back translation to ensure content validity. To ensure the reliability of the questionnaire, the questionnaires were pretested with 30 respondents and found that all parties had Cronbach coefficient higher 0.70, which was considered acceptable reliability. The Cronbach coefficient of the overall perceived credibility and perceived usefulness of UGC in education was 0.938, composing of 0.898 Cronbach alpha for perceived credibility and 0.884 Cronbach alpha for perceived usefulness. The Cronbach coefficient of



persuasion of key opinion leader in RED platform was 0.886. The Cronbach coefficient of motivation for study abroad was 0.962, composing of World Enlighten with Cronbach alpha of 0.934, personal growth with Cronbach alpha of 0.925, and career development with Cronbach alpha of 0.950, and entertainment with Cronbach alpha of 0.892, respectively.

The questionnaire underwent three steps to ensure content validity for the scales for UGC credibility and KOL persuasion were adapted from past studies, a team of experts reviewed the instrument for clarity and relevance, and back-translation (from English into Chinese language) resolved language discrepancies. A pretest confirmed reliability.

Results

Summary of descriptive findings

Among 171 respondents, majority of the respondents aged 23-27 years old (33.3%, $n = 57$), followed by 28-32 years old (24.6%, $n = 42$), 18-22 years old (19.9%, $n = 34$), completed bachelor's degree (55%, $n = 94$), and college degree (28.7%, $n = 49$). They have been using the RED platform for over 1 year (s) (58.5%, $n = 100$), followed by between 6 months to 1 year (26.9%, $n = 46$) and less than 6 months (14.6%, $n = 25$), respectively. They used RED platform between 30 minutes to 1 hour (36.3%, $n = 62$) a day, followed by those using RED platform less than 30 minutes (28.7%, $n = 49$), between 1 hour to 2 hours (22.2%, $n = 38$) and over 2 hours (12.9%, $n = 22$), respectively.

Respondents' perceived credibility ($\bar{X} = 3.886$, S.D. = 0.937) and perceived usefulness ($\bar{X} = 3.736$, S.D. = 1.042) of the UGC in education were ranked at the high level. They also had a positive perception ($\bar{X} = 3.606$, S.D. = 1.026) on the persuasion of key opinion leader of the RED platform. When examining motivation for study abroad, the results found that the respondents had high motivation for study abroad ($\bar{X} = 3.722$, S.D. = 0.754), ranking personal growth ($\bar{X} = 3.780$, S.D. = 0.977), career development ($\bar{X} = 3.763$, S.D. = 0.956), world enlightenment ($\bar{X} = 3.680$, S.D. = 1.008), and entertainment ($\bar{X} = 3.666$, S.D. = 1.045), respectively. Finally, their decision to study abroad in Thailand was ranked high ($\bar{X} = 3.699$, S.D. = 1.029).

Summary of inferential findings

Hypothesis 1: Perceived credibility and usefulness of the UGC in education on RED platform significantly influence the persuasion of key opinion leaders.

Stepwise Regression analysis revealed that the respondents' perceived credibility and perceived usefulness of the UGC in education on RED platform are significant positive predictors of the persuasion of key opinion leaders ($R^2 = 0.345^*$, $p < 0.05$). When examining their impact on the persuasion of key opinion leaders, the findings revealed that



respondents' perceived credibility ($\beta = 0.416^*$, $p < 0.05$) and perceived usefulness ($\beta = 0.246^*$, $p < 0.05$) are the significant positive predictors of the persuasion of key opinion leaders. These findings suggested that credibility and usefulness of UGC in education significantly influenced the persuasion of key opinion leaders, showing that credibility factor of educational information has a positive effect than the usefulness of educational information.

Table 1: Summary of Regression Analysis for Hypothesis 1

Predictors: Perception of RED as UGC Platform	B	S. E	Beta	Sig.t
Credibility of educational Information	0.455	0.082	0.416	0.000
Usefulness of educational Information	0.242	0.073	0.246	0.001

Remark:

Predictor: Perceived credibility and usefulness

Dependent variable: Key opinion leaders, $R^2 = .345^*$, $p < 0.00$

Hypothesis 2: Persuasion of key opinion leaders on RED platform has a significant effect on Chinese students' motivation to study abroad in Thailand.

The Regression analysis revealed that the persuasion of key opinion leaders on RED was a significant positive predictor of Chinese students' motivation for study abroad ($R^2 = 0.475^*$, $p < 0.05$). In general, persuasion of key opinion leaders on RED was accountable for Chinese students' motivation for study abroad at the rate of 47.5%, which is considered in the medium level. This regression result found that hypothesis is significantly supported ($\beta = 0.691^*$, $p < 0.05$).

Table 2: Summary of Stepwise Regression of Hypothesis 2

Predictors: Persuasion of Key opinion leaders on RED	B	S.E	Beta	Sig.t
Persuasion of Key opinion leader	0.508	0.041	0.691	0.000

Remark:

Predictor: Key opinion leaders on RED

Dependent variable: Motivation to study abroad, $R^2 = 0.475^*$, $p < 0.05$



Hypothesis 3: Chinese students' motivation to study abroad has a positive effect on their decision to study abroad in Thailand.

The Stepwise Regression analysis revealed that the motivation for study abroad (including world enlightenment and personal growth, career development, entertainment) are significant positive predictors of the decision to study abroad in Thailand for Chinese students ($R^2 = 0.452^*$, $p < 0.05$). Overall, the motivation for study abroad is accountable for the decision to study abroad in Thailand for Chinese students at the rate of 45.2%, which is considered in the medium level. This test result found that hypothesis is significantly supported.

When examining the impact of each dimension of the motivation for study abroad on the decision to study abroad in Thailand for Chinese students, the findings revealed that the personal growth ($\beta = 0.427^*$, $p < 0.05$) and career development ($\beta = 0.248^*$, $p < 0.05$) are significant predictors of the decision to study abroad in Thailand for Chinese students. However, world enlighten ($\beta = 0.051$, $p > 0.05$) and entertainment ($\beta = 0.116$, $p > 0.05$) are not significant predictors of the decision to study abroad in Thailand among Chinese students.

Table 3: Summary of Stepwise Regression of Hypothesis 3

Predictors: Motivation to Study Abroad	B	S.E	Beta	Sig.t
World enlighten	0.052	0.071	0.051	0.460
Personal growth	0.450	0.073	0.427*	0.000
Career development	0.267	0.080	0.248*	0.001
Entertainment	0.114	0.064	0.116	0.075

Remarks:

Predictor: Motivation study abroad

Dependent variable: Decision study, $R^2 = 0.452^*$, $p < 0.05$

Discussions and Conclusion

Firstly, the usefulness and credibility of the information on the RED platform significantly affects the persuasion of KOLs. Zhou's (2023) study pointed out that information is a key factor for users to evaluate KOLs. And KOLs often convey information through real and effective reviews that fit the life scenarios to attract users. Thus, the usefulness and credibility of information were revealed as the communication strategy for KOLs to attract users' attention. The theory of persuasive communication also pointed out that users make judgments based on the credibility of the information and their trust in



the KOL. And the truthfulness and credibility of the information was obviously the basis of users' trust in KOL.

Secondly, the study found that the persuasion of KOLs had a significant positive impact on users' motivation to study abroad. Through KOL's persuasion, users analyze their own situation, which makes their motivation stronger. Yu (2021) pointed out that users' psychological motivation is often divided into rational motivation, emotional motivation, and trust motivation. Users tend to have trust motives for the KOLs they follow, and after being convinced by KOLs, they will think and judge according to their own characteristics and then decide.

And finally, it is the motivation to study abroad that influences Chinese students to make the final decision to study abroad in Thailand. Weng (2019) argued that users tend to have their own psychological motivations before deciding, and they tend to make choices that best fit their psychological motivations. And, these results coincided with the assumption of the Theory of Rational Behavior, which assumed that consumers evaluate the perceived benefits and sacrifices of rational behavior and then make choices (Li, 2012).

Moreover, these results were also consistent with the Expectancy theory. The Expectancy theory assumed that individuals act in a certain way because they believe that their behavior will lead to desired outcomes, and they place a high value on those outcomes (Vroom, 1964). As for the four dimensions of study abroad, this paper finds that world enlightenment and entertainment are not significant factors for study abroad motivation, and only personal growth and career development are significant factors. The non-significance of world enlightenment may stem from Thailand's cultural proximity to China, reducing perceived novelty compared to Western destinations. Additionally, 55% of respondents held bachelor's degrees, suggesting a focus on career advancement over cultural exploration and entertainment.

In addition, it may also be related to the small sample, the sample of this study is 171, although it has reached the qualification standard, but it is still relatively small, which may produce errors.

In conclusion, the purpose of this study was to examine the impact of the persuasive content posted by KOLs on the UCG platform on the motivation to study abroad, and their decision-making to study abroad among Chinese international students. The results confirmed that the persuasion of KOLs was significantly predicted by the usefulness and credibility of the information on the RED platform, and the persuasion of KOLs ultimately has a significant positive impact on the motivation and decision to study abroad. The process of this research is also in line with the assumption of Action Theory that consumers will make the final decision by evaluating various information (Zhang, 2011).



This study helps relevant study abroad organizations to make more reasonable publicity of information about studying in Thailand on the UCG platform, attracting more Chinese students who intend to study in Thailand, understand the information about studying abroad, and make the decision to study abroad, which to a certain extent can promote the development of the study abroad industry in Thailand. Also, this study is not only limited to the concept of study abroad but also has a certain reference value for the consumer's purchasing behavior.

Recommendations for Future Application

1. KOLs must ensure the accuracy of their information in a number of ways. Currently, most of the KOLs that provide information about studying in Thailand were students who are currently studying in Thailand. They delivered their information through their own practical experience. In the process of delivering information, KOLs should avoid false propaganda, which may affect themselves and users who have not yet made the decision to study in Thailand.
2. KOLs should also pay attention to the needs of users. According to the survey, users who study in Thailand pay more attention to personal growth. The content produced by KOLs should also be based on this perspective, showing the study facilities and atmosphere in Thailand, and telling users about the impact of studying in Thailand on their personal growth, to attract a wider audience.
3. Before making the decision to study in Thailand, Chinese students themselves should also make their own deliberations and actively search for information while seeking help from traditional study abroad agents.
4. The findings show that motivation to study abroad has a significant positive effect on the final decision to study abroad. Chinese international students, it is important for them to be clear about their motivation to study in Thailand so that they can choose to study in a school that suits them.

Recommendations for Future Research

1. This research studied only Chinese international students studying in Thailand, the scope of the study is narrow, and in the process of future research, international students of different nationalities studying in different countries can be studied. In addition, the UGC platforms can be expanded by choosing platforms such as Douyin, Weibo, etc. to broaden the scope of the study.
2. The researcher chose only the quantitative research method. Whereas quantitative research is often conducted through one side, qualitative research



is equally important to obtain more students' insight and expectation based on the learner's perspective. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the qualitative aspect in the next study, and study from the international students themselves, and analyze the influence of KOLs on UGC platforms on international students' decision to study abroad through in-depth interviews, case studies and other methods

Limitations of the Study

This study analyzes the influence of KOLs on UGC platforms on Chinese international students' final decision to study in Thailand, which provides a new way of thinking to study the persuasion of KOLs on UGC platforms, but there are still the following limitations:

First, this research only examined Chinese students studying in Thailand. Compared to Europe and the United States, Thailand is clearly not the most important destination for Chinese students (Xu, 2015). The study should continue to expand the scope of research on Chinese students going to other countries such as Europe and the United States, to make the research conclusions more adequate.

Second, this research only studied RED, a UGC platform, and it is necessary to study more platforms, such as Weibo, Douyin, etc., which are preferred by Chinese students to collect information, to increase the reliability of the research conclusions.

Third, there are few KOLs who provide information about studying in Thailand on RED, which makes Chinese students tend to collect consistent information, and to some extent affects the validity of the study.

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