

Original Research Article

The communication mechanism and emotional connection of 'cloud companion' socialization: A qualitative analysis based on Xiaohongshu interest communities

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Abstract: This study looks at a new kind of social activity called "cloud companion" (yún dā zi) on Xiaohongshu, which is a very popular place where people share their lifestyles in China. It focuses on how individuals communicate and establish emotional closeness when participating in interest-based communities. By doing a close study of things people create, how they talk to each other, and what groups do on the internet, we look at how new forms of friendship and collaborative leisure emerge and evolve in virtual spaces. In this study, I use a comprehensive qualitative research method which involves analyzing a total of 500 postings, conducting in-depth interviews with 20 active participants, as well as participating in observation for a period of six months. It indicates that Cloud Companion relationships have low levels of commitment, high levels of flexibility, interesting connections and fulfill some social and emotional needs. The mechanism of communication is through strategic self-presentation, reciprocal engagement, and algorithmic facilitation of emotional connections are established through sharing experiences, empathetic engagements, temporal syncing. It helps us understand what is going on with the Internet today, particularly for younger Chinese people looking for other ways to be together online where they can share themselves but stay independent too. It also has consequences for social media platform design, the management of digital communities, and the wider debate about technology-mediated relationships in our society today.

Keywords: cloud companion; digital socialization; Xiaohongshu; emotional connection; interest communities; qualitative analysis

1. Introduction

Social Media platforms have rapidly evolved and radically changed how people build and keep up with their social relations during this digital era. Within the new trends of online socializing, the phenomenon known as "cloud companion" or "yún dā zi" has achieved considerable popularity in Chinese social media spaces, with Xiaohongshu being notably frequented by this sort of community interaction and lifestyle-oriented content postings^[1]. Cloud companion is referring to a temporary, interest-based partnership established on the Internet, where people look for companions for certain activities or purposes, without the demands and responsibilities of real-life friendships. A new form of social connection mirrors widespread changes within China's contemporary society where young people tend to place more emphasis on their own needs than following the old rules and conventions^[2]. Cloud companion culture has emerged amid China's urbanization, mounting work pressure, and shifts in modern lifestyles. Different from ordinary online friendship may become offline relationship, cloud companions usually keep their connection on the Internet, which satisfies certain functional and emotional need. It raises many questions about the nature of digital intimacy, the commodification of company, and the current shift of human connections within the technological realm^[3]. A knowledge of the means of communication and the emotions involved in these cloud companion relationships gives us important information about present-day digital society and the psychology behind new methods of online socialising that have emerged recently.

2. Literature review

Regarding previous work on online socialization, existing works have recorded many changes to interpersonal relationships within digital areas; scholars have examined different areas of computer-based communication, virtual communities, and social media exchanges. Studies on weak ties theory, initiated by Granovetter, have also been used to study the connections between people with shared interests or circumstances over digital platforms, which don't need to be based on deep personal relationships. Social media platforms research on the influence of the user interface of algorithmic recommendation systems and community norms

on interactions and relationships. scholars have investigated special parts of home created social networking sites like WeChat, Weibo along with Xiaohongshu in China concentrating on cultural values, how technology allows certain things and an atmosphere around making rules shapes what people do online^[4]. The concept of lightweight socialization is recently introduced by Internet studies in China which refers to social interactions that can yield social satisfaction with minimal time cost and emotional energy, as well as short-term commitment. But there was not enough research that looked especially at the idea of a cloud companion, mainly how they talk and the feelings between them. Earlier studies have mainly concentrated their attention on game teams, dating websites, or support organizations, resulting in a lack of understanding about the kind of interest-based, short-term partnerships found in cloud companions^[5]. Moreover, existing literature tends to highlight the functionality aspects or the emotion aspects of online relationship rather than combine and consider both aspects at once to provide an overview of current digital socialization patterns among young Chinese people.

3. Research methodology

Table 1. Research methodology framework.

Research Component	Method	Sample Size	Duration	Analysis Approach
Content Analysis	Systematic examination of posts	500 posts	6 months	Thematic coding
Interviews	Semi-structured interviews	30 participants	45-90 min each	Inductive coding
Observation	Participant observation	15 communities	6 months	Field notes analysis
Data Triangulation	Cross-method validation	All sources	Continuous	Comparative analysis

In the study, a qualitative approach is taken to learn about how communication and emotions work in relationship pairs on Xiaohongshu, and I choose to take the interpretive stance, which means putting more focus on how people in this research make sense of their own experience. The research was done over six months between January and June 2024, using many ways to collect data so the study would be all-around, mix up results from different data sources, and prove them. Data collection utilized three main methods: content analysis; semi-structured interviews ;participant observation^[6]. Each provided distinctive information, but together created a deep, intricate knowledge of the phenomenon. In terms of content analysis, the research group looked into 500 posts regarding cloud questing companionship searches or experiences through purposeful sampling with regard to likes, comments, content relevancy to questions and representations under different types of different interests like study companion, fitness pal, travel mate and dining companion groups. These posts were coded using thematic analysis to identify common themes, communication strategies, expressions of emotion and connection, and community norms, with two independent coders having strong reliability (0.87) Conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 users actively engaged with Xiaohongshu and having experienced cloudcompanion relationships. Participants were approached through snowball sampling and engagement within social media platforms to guarantee that the sample included individuals of different ages between 18 and 35 years old, located in diverse geographic regions such as first-and second-tier Chinese cities, and having had differing cloud-companion experiences. The interview questions include things like their motives behind looking for cloud companions, how they communicate and what techniques they use, feelings and relationship developments, perspectives about these kinds of relations as compared to usual friendships, some thoughts on the part of digital platforms in making these connections happen^[7]. All interviews were between 45 - 90 min long, audio recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim then analyzed through inductive coding which involved letting themes develop from the data and not imposing pre-determined categories. For participant observation, the interviewer stayed present on Xiaohongshu and interacted with it by reading cloud companion content, making comments, and sometimes posting as well, watching how people acted towards each other in the real time and writing about community norms and practices with field notes that included explicit rules and implicit social dynamics. Ethics were considered throughout the development of this research, including the acquisition of verbal consent from those who participated in interviews. This was done after providing complete explanations as to the purpose of the research, and all the information provided was made anonymous with no reference to any personally identifiable individuals. The study adhered closely to platform-specific rules when conducting the observation portion of research and remained aware of their position and how it could effect the community being researched.

4. Communication mechanisms

Table 2. Communication patterns in cloud companion relationships.

Companion Type	Primary Communication Channel	Interaction Frequency	Typical Duration	Main Content Focus
Activity-based	Private messaging + Comments	2-5 times per week	1-3 months	Logistics and planning
Emotional support	Private messaging	Daily to weekly	2-6 months	Personal sharing and empathy
Content-sharing	Comments + Reposts	3-10 times per week	1-4 months	Information and resources
Study/Work	Video calls + Messaging	Daily	1-6 months	Progress updates and motivation

Examining the communication mechanisms behind cloud companion relationships in Xiaohongshu shows a complex dance of what the platform offers, how users play with it and what kind of community rules help these temporary partnerships happen and stick around. At first contact in cloud companion settings, individuals generally reach out by way of posted content that openly states their requests and desires—Be it in terms of interest, expectation, boundary-setting—Making use of certain language markers and format signals, like adding (seeking companion) alongside their hashtag. These posts act as strategic selves presenting where individuals carefully gauge and balance between releasing enough personal details to feel real and relatable and having enough privacy boundaries and space to protect the lightness and temporary nature of desired relationship while often include their likes, availability, personality trait and expectations about their companions^[8]. The language of posts seeking cloud companions has its own distinctive characteristics: it adopts a rather relaxed and informal tone, with extensive use of emojis to enhance friendliness in interactions, and it says clearly what limits there are like how long you want to hang out for, how often or how much space to stay away from so there won't be confusion about ideas. From **Table 2** it is evident that the modes of communication differ greatly among different types of cloud companions: while activity-based companions mainly rely on logistical coordination to plan and execute, emotional support companions favor empathetic exchanges and personal sharing, content-sharing companions place more emphasis on exchanging information and resources rather than meeting for deep engagement, and study or work companions coordinate both practically and by offering motivational support. Platform algorithms can also aid in these connections as they recommend posts for users with similar interests depending on their browsing history, engagement patterns, and declared preferences, thus cutting down on the searching costs and making it more likely for there will be individuals whom you have a meaningful common ground with. Cloud companion seeking post's comment section act as semi-public space where possible companions can gauge compatibility by observing others' comments, negotiate terms and expectations openly, and develop initial rapport prior to progressing onto private messages for more personal information exchange^[9]. Communication maintenance involves setting clear expectations for response times, so that there is less worry over when an answer will come if it's taking a bit longer than you might expect, figuring out how often you can realistically talk or interact on a daily basis, without putting too much strain on either person because of work or personal life changes, or if the relationship should last just for now until something else comes along – this way both people know where they stand and can plan ahead knowing it isn't forever but still provides some company in tough moments as friends do sometimes. Users also adopt intricate and sophisticated methods of gently wrapping up a relationship with a cloud companion after its purpose is fulfilled, they would use phrases like "Thank you for the great times we've had," while also making it clear that this is the end, yet leaving the door open for some unknown future.

5. Emotional connection dynamics

Table 3. Emotional connection development categories.

Connection Type	Intensity Level	Reciprocity Pattern	Common Trajectory	User Satisfaction
Functional-Minimal	Low	Asymmetric	Stable-Divide	Moderate (65%)
Companionate-Stable	Medium	Symmetric	Gradual increase	High (82%)
Intimate-Deepening	High	Highly symmetric	Rapid increase	Very High (91%)
Fluctuating-Dynamic	Variable	Variable	Wave-like pattern	Moderate (68%)

The emotions that bond cloud companions on Xiaohongshu have special qualities that set them apart from regular friends who need all aspects of your life to be integrated with theirs and online transactional interactions without emotions, occupying a special place between various types of interpersonal relationships on the social spectrum. Although they are temporary and goal-oriented by design, these "cloud" companion relationships can

still result in meaningful bonds, according to participants, who describe these bonds as significant, valuable, sometimes even intense despite their limited duration and lack of any face-to-face, deep-knowledge kind of connection between two people involved just in a particular activity^[10]. In these relationships, the development of emotional connection usually goes through a number of discernible stages, starting from tentative engagement marked by careful self-disclosure and careful trust building wherein the participants test boundaries and weigh compatibility, progressing towards a comfortable level of companionship as interactions become more natural and emotionally resonant, with less self-monitoring, and sometimes these connections grow into valuable ones which the participants desire to preserve beyond the initial purpose, sometimes transforming into more traditional bonds of friendship. Participants in the study said different types of emotional satisfaction from their cloud companion associations, less loneliness especially if they lived on their own or away from families, being understood for things they went through and how they felt that other social groups might not get, extra push to do what they wanted through responsibility and support between each other, and the joy of having a hobby that they shared happily without feeling judged or pressured like they might in regular friendships that come with total expectations from all sides. How solid the emotional connection seems to be dictated by lots of stuff like how much you talk to each other – more talks often mean closer ties, Willingness to share personal and vulnerable information deepens these connections, noticing you think alike on key ideas and lived through things the same way which leads to mutual understanding, having stuff you both went through or accomplished creating special memories together^[11]. As shown in Table 3, emotional bonds in cloud companions can be broken down according to their strength as minimal to profound, how reciprocally they share in mutual investment, and if these connections are trending to grow stronger, stay constant, or fade away over time. Some bonds remain emotionally distant but still appropriate given their utilitarian nature, while others unexpectedly grow closer because participants learn unexpected compatibility outside the surface-level initial shared interest The fact that these relationships are temporary gives rise to an unusual feeling of closeness and connection where people can feel intimate without being completely unaware of the fleeting nature of this bond, thus reducing performance anxiety and social pressure and making it easier to be real since there's no need for constant long-term image building or fear of lasting repercussions from vulnerability over a limited timespan.

6. Community features and user engagement

Table 4. User engagement metrics by interest category.

Interest Category	Average Post Engagement	Successful Match Rate	Average Relationship Duration	Repeat Companion Rate
Study/Learning	326 interactions	43%	4.2 months	35%
Fitness/Sports	298 interactions	39%	3.8 months	42%
Travel/Exploration	412 interactions	31%	2.1 months	18%
Dining/Food	267 interactions	52%	1.3 months	25%
Hobbies/Crafts	189 interactions	28%	3.5 months	31%

Xiaohongshu's community characteristics and user engagement habits foster a kind of environment that is especially beneficial for cloud companion building and maintenance, The platform's functions, activities, and community behaviors collectively facilitate the formation and maintenance of cloud companion relationships. Xiaohongshu places importance on lifestyle sharing, real expression, and interest-based communities, which give rise to cloud companionship culture in this respect, because users are already inclined to look for connections based on shared activities, hobbies, and life experiences. Regarding its algorithm for selecting content, this platform values relevance and the stimulating effect of the topics more than just seeking to maximize time people spend engaging online, so it can lead users to meet potential future cloud buddies who share true common interests instead of showing them any random content or ads. Cloud companion communities on Xiaohongshu have their own set of community norms, emphasizing respect, clear communication, and mutual benefit; users develop informal rules regarding acceptable behavior, building expectations, and resolving conflicts. With the metrics of User Engagement comes the data on the popularity, and sustainability, of different types of Cloud Companion relationships, as seen by the table, with some interest categories generating far more engagement and lasting longer than any other. Study-focused and fitness-related Cloud Companion posts attract the most interaction, probably due to these activities benefit from accountability and shared commitments; entertainment and dining companions have lesser engagement but quicker matching times. Platforms' features like hashtags, interest tags, location labels, and even private message functionalities are strategically applied by people seeking

out their cloud companions through these platforms with those who have more experience developing clever and savvy methods for creating attractive posts and filtering through suitable potential companions.

7. Discussion

The results from this study have shown many important factors of cloud companion socialization with implications of the current society as a whole towards our understanding of digital culture and changing human relationships. Firstly, cloud companion shows the significant change young Chinese netizens have made in their view on and approach to social relations, breaking up with the traditional model of permanent, exclusive, complete-life-integration kind of social relations and heading towards more flexible, purposeful, and bound-like form of connections. This transformation can be regarded as an adaptation to the pressures caused by current urban life, where people are caught up in the hustle and bustle, have to move around geographically frequently, are influenced by social trends, struggle with balancing work and personal life, making it hard for them to develop friendships the old-fashioned way. The communication mechanisms unearthed through this investigation show that users cleverly use the platform features and make complex interaction rules to deal with the fight between looking for real friendship and being their own person. meaningful emotional ties between parties involved in short-lived, goal-specific relationships question normal ideas about what it means to be intimately connected, making a good connection does not need to correspond with how long or broad the relationship is. Cloud companion culture succeeding on Xiaohongshu indicates the platform becoming a middleman of social relationship, algorithmic system, interface layout and community management structure participates in making up how people connect and exchange. But the situation raises big questions about the longer-term mental and social consequences of making these temporary, goal-oriented partnerships more socially acceptable, which may affect people's ability to create lasting commitments, have deep connections, and totally join their communities. The commercial potential of cloud companion culture can't be overlooked, platform might push these relationships to gain users and users might feel pressure to constantly find new companions rather than deepen relations with the ones they have.

8. Conclusion

Conducting a qualitative analysis of cloud companion socialization on Xiaohongshu has given fresh insights into the development of this new kind of digital relationship in China, which signals greater changes both in relation to Chinese social media and in the way we use the web. From what I've read it states that cloud companions talk to each other in their own way. People come up with fancy ways to show off how cool they are, some special formulas help them out, and they have a list of rules about being a good person when they're making friends. So this helps users to find those helpful connections fast. And these kinds of relationships produce real feelings no matter how temporary they are, and they get different levels of satisfaction psychologically in ways like feeling like just someone's company, feeling like kind of validated, feeling like there is something motivating to them, and just getting actual enjoyment out of their shared interests with no string attached. The things like how communities and algorithms work on a given platform, are also quite important in enabling these kinds of connections, so that they can produce an environment in which people share common interests can build somewhat fluid partnerships, with partners being whomever you wish. Findings advance academic appreciation of digital socialization by highlighting how today's internet users creatively appropriate affordances to meet evolving social needs, needs that weren't wholly addressed by traditional relationships models. For the platform designers, it means the need for a platform that can enable fluid and meaningful connections between people on the platform that do not harm users or entire communities. And in future studies I would like to also see what the long term direction of these connections is and what percentage of them become just regular friendships. Also see what kind of role these participants play in different kinds of social connections and whether this cloud companion changes whether or not they think something is a good or bad idea for an offline connection. And also comparing across different regions and demographics if we could, it'll be even more interesting. Digital social is constantly changing, and as it does, it's important to familiarise ourselves with new kinds of relationships like cloud companion ones to see what technology is teaching for 21st century connections.

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