

Chinese sellers go to TikTok school to reach buyers abroad

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Chinese students at an e-commerce school rehearse selling hijabs and abayas into a smartphone.

Donning hijabs and floor-length abaya gowns over shorts and tank tops, Chinese students at an e-commerce school perform into a smartphone

camera as they learn how to sell the clothes to overseas TikTok users.

It is the final day of a two-week course on selling products abroad via the short video app—which despite being blocked in China is a platform more and more Chinese vendors are turning to.

Succeeding on TikTok requires tools for bypassing internet restrictions as well as foreign-language skills, challenges that have prompted a boom in courses and consulting services.

At the school in Guangzhou in southern Guangdong province, an instructor holds up the Middle Eastern-inspired garments to the camera and rattles off prices and sizing information for Muslim buyers in the UK.

"This is chiffon, it's really breathable!" she gushes in English as her proteges model the goods and sort through racks of satin robes under stark studio lights.

"We teach people which products are selling better, and which markets are more suitable for their current stages," 27-year-old Wang Yaxuan, another instructor at the school, tells AFP.

Guangdong is home to thousands of factories making a mindboggling variety of products, from the abayas to espresso machine parts to wigs made of human hair.



Instructor Wang Yaxuan uses her phone to livestream on TikTok at Mede Education Technology's e-commerce school in Guangzhou.

After decades of producing goods for export, Chinese companies are increasingly seeking to cut out the middleman and market themselves at lower prices, directly to overseas consumers.

Shein, the China-founded fast fashion giant, has effectively taken over the lower-end Western market using this strategy, with TikTok a key facet of its selling network.

TikTok Shop launched in the United States late last year, and e-commerce features have previously been rolled out in places like Britain and Southeast Asia.

A casual scroll on the hugely popular app's "Live" tab can land users on multiple shopping livestreams within minutes.

But with TikTok unavailable in China—parent company Bytedance operates the more strictly censored sister app Douyin domestically—smaller businesses there are at a disadvantage.

Courses like the one at Mede Education Technology's e-commerce school help by covering everything from the basics of creating a TikTok account to handling shipping and analyzing sales data.



Instructor Wang Yaxuan (C) giving feedback after a student's livestream on TikTok.

Fees start at around 9,000 yuan (\$1,244) for a six-day course.

Students, who range from factory owners to fresh graduates, often take classes for multiple foreign shopping platforms including Amazon and Southeast Asia's Shopee.

Information gap

Qiu Zhouwen, a course participant in his 30s, works for a Guangzhou cosmetics company.

He says his company enrolled him because they are hoping to eventually sell their skincare range through TikTok.

"Information is part of the cost (of doing business) now, and if you don't have the information that's appropriate to the market, your cost will be way too high," Qiu says.

Wang, the Mede instructor, attended university in the United States and says it can be challenging for Chinese sellers to adapt to different consumer tastes abroad.

Chemical manufacturer Donghua Jinlong spawned viral memes on TikTok this month after overseas social media users found absurdist humour in the company's matter-of-fact videos about industrial-grade glycine featuring AI-generated voiceovers.



Students at the school take classes for multiple shopping platforms, including Southeast Asia's Shopee (upper R).

There are also significant technical hurdles.

Accessing TikTok from China requires VPN software to bypass the country's virtual "Great Firewall", while dodging the app's own curbs on users manipulating their IP addresses.

VPNs are a legal gray area in China, with authorities occasionally cracking down while generally tolerating their use for business purposes.

TikTok is also caught up in global geopolitical tensions—the US Congress is threatening to ban the app entirely over concerns it could

share personal data with the Chinese government.

Wang is unfazed by the prospect of a US TikTok ban.

"Our students are not just selling to the US market... the current trend for TikTok for Southeast Asia is also very good," she tells AFP.

Wang says it's not the first time this situation has happened, adding that she feels the United States was trying to "take this huge cake and split up the market".



Guangzhou-based Mede is one of many organisations running classes on international e-commerce.

Catchphrases and clicks

Mede is one of many organizations running TikTok classes, including others based in Guangdong, where authorities have hung up propaganda banners promoting international e-commerce.

Those not willing to shell out steep course fees can also seek advice from e-commerce veterans who have built a following on Chinese social apps by sharing TikTok tips.

Molly Zhao, a 23-year-old TikTok livestreamer, has been selling products including clothing and electronics online since 2022.

Zhao, who studied in Italy and speaks Italian and English, told AFP her foreign-language skills have earned her livestreaming jobs paying as much as 20,000 yuan (\$2,760) each month.

She regularly posts videos for domestic viewers on Douyin, covering topics including common English phrases and how to explain shipping rates clearly.



Accessing TikTok from China requires using VPN software, a legal grey area that is generally tolerated for business purposes.

"You must build up the atmosphere," she explains in one video, adding that using a catchphrase can "make a deeper impression on customers".

In another video, a smiling, dancing Zhao shares her warmup routine before a livestream session selling gemstones and crystals to US viewers.

"Time to earn Americans' money," she says in a deadpan caption. "I'll put on some music to hype myself up."

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