JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION

Social Media Use and Acculturation among International Students in Xi'an: A Pilot Study Based on the Uses and Gratifications Framework

Zhu Daijun[a], Awan Binti Ismail[b*]

[a] *Kuala Lumpur University of Science and Technology, Malaysia*
[b] *Universiti Utara Malaysia Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

*Corresponding author

Abstract

With the accelerating internationalization of Chinese higher education, the Acculturation of international students has emerged as a topic of significant academic and practical relevance. As a deeply integrated element of daily life, social media serves as a crucial platform for these students, facilitating essential functions such as information acquisition, social interaction, and the procurement of emotional support. Grounded in the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) framework and acculturation theory, this pilot study investigates the dynamics between digital media engagement and cross-cultural adjustment. It employs descriptive statistical analysis (n = 40) to examine a cohort of international students in Xi'an, a historically rich yet non-metropolitan Chinese city. The research specifically focuses on their diverse motivations for using social media, patterns of intergroup contact, levels of perceived social support, and subsequent acculturation outcomes. This study addresses a pivotal question: how does the strategic use of social media support different dimensions of acculturation, including psychological adaptation, sociocultural competence, and identity negotiation within a unique non-metropolitan context? By integrating the U&G perspective, which emphasizes users' active selection of media to fulfil specific needs, with acculturation theory, this research elucidates the nuanced and selective role of social media in the digital acculturation process. The pilot findings contribute to the literature by highlighting a potential disparity between behavioural adjustment and deeper psychological integration, suggesting that mere usage does not guarantee holistic adaptation. The results underscore the need for educational institutions and support services to recognize and leverage social media as a strategic tool in fostering international students' holistic well-being and intercultural development. This exploration lays a foundational groundwork for future large-scale studies on technology-mediated cultural adaptation in similar educational settings.

Keywords
Social media; International students; Acculturation; Social support; U&G

Penggunaan Media Sosial dan Akulturasi dalam Kalangan Pelajar Antarabangsa di Xi'an: Suatu Kajian Rintis Berdasarkan Rangka Kerja Kegunaan dan Kepuasan

Sejajar dengan pemecutan proses pengantarabangsaan pendidikan tinggi di China, akulturasi pelajar antarabangsa telah muncul sebagai topik yang mempunyai kepentingan akademik dan praktikal yang signifikan. Sebagai komponen yang terintegrasi secara mendalam dalam kehidupan seharian, media sosial berfungsi sebagai platform penting bagi pelajar antarabangsa memudahkan aktiviti utama mereka seperti pemerolehan maklumat, interaksi sosial, serta akses kepada sokongan emosi. Berteraskan kerangka Uses and Gratifications (U&G) dan teori akulturasi, Kajian rintis ini meneliti dinamika antara penggunaan media digital dan penyesuaian silang budaya. Kajian ini menggunakan analisis statistik deskriptif (n = 40) untuk meneliti sekumpulan pelajar antarabangsa di Xi'an, sebuah bandar China yang kaya dengan nilai sejarah namun bukan bersifat metropolitan. Penyelidikan ini memberi tumpuan khusus kepada pelbagai motivasi pelajar dalam menggunakan media sosial, corak hubungan antara kumpulan, tahap sokongan sosial yang dirasakan, serta hasil akulturasi yang terhasil. Kajian ini mengemukakan persoalan utama: bagaimanakah penggunaan media sosial secara strategik menyokong pelbagai dimensi akulturasi, termasuk penyesuaian psikologi,

kecekapan sosiobudaya, dan perundingan identiti, dalam konteks bukan metropolitan yang unik? Dengan mengintegrasikan perspektif U&G yang menekankan pemilihan media secara aktif oleh pengguna untuk memenuhi keperluan tertentu bersama teori akulturasi, kajian ini menjelaskan peranan media sosial yang bersifat selektif dan bernuansa dalam proses akulturasi digital. Dapatan awal kajian menyumbang kepada literatur sedia ada dengan menonjolkan kemungkinan wujudnya jurang antara penyesuaian tingkah laku dan integrasi psikologi yang lebih mendalam, sekali gus menunjukkan bahawa penggunaan media semata-mata tidak menjamin penyesuaian holistik. Hasil kajian ini menegaskan keperluan institusi pendidikan dan perkhidmatan sokongan untuk mengenal pasti serta memanfaatkan media sosial sebagai alat strategik dalam memupuk kesejahteraan menyeluruh dan perkembangan antara budaya pelajar antarabangsa. Kajian ini menyediakan asas awal bagi penyelidikan berskala besar pada masa hadapan mengenai adaptasi budaya berasaskan teknologi dalam konteks pendidikan yang seumpamanya.

Kata kunci:Media sosial; Pelajar antarabangsa; Akulturasi; Sokongan sosial; Teori Kegunaan dan Kepuasan

Introduction

With the advancement of global higher education internationalization, international students have become a vital force in promoting cultural exchange and regional integration. According to UNESCO (2022), the number of international students worldwide has grown from 2 million in 2000 to over 6 million in 2020. China has ranked as the largest host country in Asia and the third largest globally for several consecutive years. In December 2024, Liu Jianlin, Director of the Provincial Department of Education, stated that, as the educational and cultural Centre of Western China, Xi'an has attracted a growing number of students from Asia, Africa, and other regions, thanks to initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the "Study in Shaanxi" policy. Xi'an has thus become a representative site for observing regional international education in China.

For international students, successful adaptation to the host country's culture, academic environment, and daily life is a key factor in achieving a meaningful study experience. Acculturation refers not only to observable changes in daily Behaviours—such as language use, food preferences, and social practices but also to deeper psychological processes, including a sense of belonging, cultural identification, and emotional attachment to the host society. Behavioural acculturation often occurs earlier and is driven by practical necessity, whereas psychological acculturation develops more gradually and requires sustained social interaction and emotional engagement (Berry,1997). However, this process is often challenged by language barriers, social exclusion, and cultural differences (Zhou & Qin, 2023). In this context, social media is increasingly viewed as a digital tool that can alleviate culture shock and support social integration.

Recent studies suggest that social media not only helps international students access information and manage daily tasks, but also plays a role in maintaining intercultural connections, offering emotional support, and creating spaces for social interaction all of which can indirectly facilitate the acculturation process

(Chowdhury, 2020). In China, local platforms such as WeChat, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu have become increasingly multifunctional and deeply embedded in the lives of international students (Zhang & Lin, 2023). These platforms are widely used for accessing practical information, building interpersonal networks, and participating in local cultural practices.

Although the positive impact of social media on the adaptation of international students has been well-documented, two major gaps remain in the literature. First, most studies focus on the direct relationship between social media use and adaptation outcomes, with limited attention to the underlying psychological or social mechanisms (Wang, 2023; Zhou & Wang, 2022). Second, existing research often concentrates on major coastal cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, while overlooking cities like Xi'an that feature strong traditional cultural characteristics and unique regional contexts (Liu & Zhang, 2020; Zhang et al., 2022).

To address these gaps, this study focuses on the role of social media use in the acculturation process of international students in Xi'an. Specifically, it examines four dimensions: social media use motivations, intergroup contact, perceived social support, and acculturation status. Using descriptive statistics based on 40 valid questionnaire responses, the study aims to explore Behavioural patterns and integration pathways in a localized digital context. The findings are intended to provide a basis for future empirical modeling and offer practical insights for improving institutional support and policy design. Against this backdrop, this study makes three key contributions. Theoretically, it extends the Uses and Gratifications framework by linking specific media-use motivations to differentiated acculturation outcomes. Conceptually, it integrates digital media use, perceived social support, and acculturation into a unified analytical framework. Contextually, by focusing on Xi'an as a non-metropolitan and culturally traditional Chinese city, the study broadens the geographical and cultural scope of international student acculturation research in China.

Literature Review

Social Media and International Students in China

Over the past decade, China has become a major destination for international students, especially those from Central Asia, Africa, and Southeast Asia(Yang P., 2022). This development is largely attributed to national initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the Study in China strategy(Vuong et al., 2021). Xi'an, a culturally rich city with a growing higher education sector, is emerging as a key location for this demographic. However, cultural distance, language barriers, and differences in educational practices continue to pose challenges for international students' acculturation (Berry, 1997; Choi et al., 2020).

Social media platforms—particularly WeChat, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu—are deeply embedded in

international students' everyday lives in China. These platforms serve multifunctional roles, facilitating information acquisition, social networking, emotional expression, and entertainment (Zhang et al., 2022; Ellison et al., 2007). Previous research suggests that such platforms reduce uncertainty, promote emotional well-being, and foster social capital (Nguyen & Li, 2023; Putnam, 2000; Wu, 2020). However, most studies focus on the general impact of social media on acculturation outcomes, overlooking the underlying motivations that drive media use (Wang, 2023; Zhou & Wang, 2022).

To address this gap, this study applies the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory to examine three key dimensions of social media motivation: information-seeking, social connection, and entertainment/emotional regulation. This analytical framework not only enables a deeper understanding of students' media Behaviours but also links these motivations to perceived social support and cultural acculturation.

Uses and Gratifications Theory and Motivational Dimensions

The Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory suggests that media users are active decision-makers who select specific platforms and content to fulfill psychological and social needs (Katz et al., 1974). Within the context of social media, three primary motivational dimensions have been widely identified: information-seeking, social connection, and entertainment or emotional regulation. Information-seeking involves acquiring knowledge, staying informed, and searching for practical advice (Huang & Li, 2023). Social connection refers to the maintenance of existing relationships and the development of new interpersonal ties (Winstone et al., 2021). Social connection refers to the maintenance of existing relationships and the development of new interpersonal ties, and recent research further highlights how platform-specific affordances facilitate these connections among international students (Kim & Kim, 2023). Entertainment and emotional regulation pertain to using media for relaxation, stress relief, and emotional coping (Nabi et al., 2021).

In intercultural contexts, these motivations are closely linked to the process of acculturation. For example, information-seeking can help reduce culture shock and facilitate understanding of local norms and expectations (Chen & Liu, 2023). Social connection plays a key role in fostering intergroup interaction and providing emotional support, while entertainment-driven use of media may promote psychological well-being during periods of cultural transition (Wang & Duan, 2022).

In China, popular platforms such as WeChat and Xiaohongshu provide international students with access to highly localized information ecosystems, ranging from administrative procedures to everyday lifestyle guidance. Meanwhile, short-video apps like Douyin offer not only entertainment but also informal exposure to Chinese language and cultural references (Liu&Zhang, 2020). Understanding how these distinct motivations

shape students' digital engagement can help reveal underlying adaptation strategies and acculturation trajectories within the unique Chinese social media landscape.

Social Media Use, Social Support, and Cultural Acculturation

Beyond initial motivations, social media engagement also intersects with two critical acculturation outcomes: perceived social support and cultural integration(Cao et al., 2021). Digital platforms play a crucial role in providing emotional reassurance and practical assistance for international students, especially in unfamiliar or stressful contexts (Baghoori et al., 2024; Fichman,2025). Peer-based communities and digital resource groups offer timely advice that can reduce acculturative stress and enhance psychological resilience (Nguyen et al., 2023).

Furthermore, researches shows that sustained engagement with host culture content and individuals may support both surface-level and deeper cultural acculturation(Baghoori, 2024; Adeyoyin, 2025). According to Berry's (1997) acculturation framework, acculturation includes both Behavioural adjustment and psychological integration. While platforms may initially support logistical acculturation, their potential to foster internalized cultural identity is less examined.

In this study, the relationship between specific usage motivations and acculturation outcomes is explored in detail, offering a more nuanced understanding of the digital lives of international students in Xi'an. By separating and analysing the dimensions of motivation alongside outcomes like social support and cultural fit, this research contributes to a more integrative and context-sensitive application of U&G theory in intercultural environments.

Methodology

This pilot study adopts a quantitative research design to validate the research instruments and explore preliminary patterns of social media use and acculturation. The target population consists of international students in Xi'an, a strategic educational hub in Western China and a key node in the "Belt and Road" initiative. This specific demographic is highly relevant as it represents a diverse group (from Asia, Africa, etc.) navigating acculturation in a city with strong traditional Chinese cultural characteristics, distinct from cosmopolitan coastal cities.

A total of 40 international students participated in this pilot study. To effectively identify respondents within

this specific community, convenience and snowball sampling methods were employed. Participants were recruited through international student offices and digital channels (e.g., WeChat groups) across universities in Xi'an. The inclusion criteria required participants to have resided in China for at least one semester to ensure sufficient acculturation experience. The sample comprised 60% male and 40% female students, with the majority aged 18–24, ensuring a representative snapshot for testing the instrument's applicability.

The questionnaire was developed based on the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) framework and acculturation theory. To ensure content validity, all items were adapted from established scales with proven reliability in cross-cultural contexts:

Social Media Usage: Measured using the scale developed by Kuang and Wu (2019), based on TAM and UGT, specifically designed for international students in China. It assesses motivations and usage behaviors(10 items).

Acculturation: Adapted from Black and Stephens' (1989) Acculturation Scale, focusing on general, interaction, and academic adaptation (10items). The original scale reported a Cronbach's α of 0.83.

Social Support: Measured using the Perceived Social Support Scale (PSSS) by Zimet (1988), covering family, friends, and school support (12 items). Previous studies reported Cronbach's α values ranging from 0.85 to 0.91.

Intergroup Contact: Based on Islam and Hewstone (1996), revised by Shi et al. (2014)(10 items). The reported Cronbach's α in previous studies was 0.80.

All items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale.

The pilot survey was conducted in June and July 2025 via an online platform (Wenjuanxing). The primary purpose was to test the clarity and face validity of the items. On average, respondents took approximately 10–15 minutes to complete the survey. Feedback collected indicated that the translated items were well-understood, with no significant ambiguity reported. Although the original scales are mature, this pilot study re-evaluated their internal consistency to ensure applicability in the specific context of Xi'an.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the survey, explicitly stating the voluntary nature of participation and the right to withdraw. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed, as no personally identifiable information (PII) was collected or stored.

The structure of the questionnaire is as follows:

Table 1. Measurement Dimensions and Item Count

Dimension	Description	Number of Items
Demographic Information	Gender, age, length of stay in China, language proficiency, platform use	5
Social Media Use Motivation	Learning, making friends, emotional expression, social feedback	10
Intergroup Contact	Frequency, quality, and type of interaction with local Chinese people	10
Social Support	Emotional support, informational assistance, practical help	10
Acculturation	Food habits, language use, transportation, lifestyle, sense of belonging	10

The data were cleaned and analysed using SPSS. Descriptive statistical methods were employed, including frequency distributions, mean and standard deviation calculations, and dimension-based trend observations. Due to the limited sample size, the study does not include inferential statistical analysis; instead, it aims to present the distributional characteristics of variables and explore initial patterns of association.

All participants provided informed consent before participation. The data collection process adhered to ethical guidelines for educational research, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality throughout the study.

Results and Discussion

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

A total of 40 valid responses were collected from international students currently enrolled in universities in Xi'an. Regarding gender, 60% of the participants identified as male, 32.5% as female, and 7.5% selected "other", which refers to respondents who did not identify within binary gender categories or preferred not to disclose their gender identity. In terms of age, the majority (60%) were between 18 and 24 years old, followed by 32.5% aged 25–30, indicating that most respondents were undergraduate or master's students.

As for the length of residence in China, 45% had lived in the country for 1–2 years, and 27.5% had stayed for more than 2 years, suggesting that most participants had developed a certain level of local exposure. In terms of Chinese language proficiency, 42.5% reported conversational ability, 25% basic proficiency, and 15% no ability, showing a wide range of linguistic backgrounds.

Overall, the sample demonstrates considerable diversity in gender, age, duration of stay, and language skills, providing a reasonable basis for exploring acculturation patterns among international students.

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (n = 40)

Variable	Category	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	60.0
	Female	32.5
	Other	7.5
Age Group	18–24	60.0
	25–30	32.5
	31–35	5.0
	36+	2.5
Length in China	<6 months	15.0
	6–12 months	12.5
	1–2 years	45.0
	>2 years	27.5
Chinese Proficiency	None	15.0
	Basic	25.0
	Conversational	42.5
	Fluent	17.5

Analysis of Social Media Use Motivations

This study first conducted a descriptive analysis of international students' motivations for using social media. Based on the mean and standard deviation scores of the 10 motivation-related items (SM1–SM10), the motivations can be categorized into three major types: informational/cultural, social connection, and emotional regulation.

The table below presents the mean and standard deviation for each item:

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Social Media Usage Motivation Items (n = 40)

	Item	Mean	Std Deviation
SM1	Learning about Xi'an's culture and history	4.85	1.51
SM2	Searching for local food and tourism information	4.43	1.66
SM3	Connecting with local Chinese students	4.18	1.75
SM4	Communicating with other international students	4.70	1.60
SM5	Sharing study-abroad experiences to receive feedback	4.53	1.85
SM6	Using for relaxation and entertainment (e.g., short videos)	4.23	1.83
SM7	Seeking attention or validation	3.95	1.57
SM8	Joining student-related online communities	4.45	1.77
SM9	Finding peers with similar experiences	4.98	1.73
SM10	Reducing loneliness via social media	4.05	1.77

From the results, the highest mean score was observed for SM9, "to find friends with similar experiences" (M = 4.98). This highlights the central role of social media in enabling international students to construct peer networks anchored in shared experiences. According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), individuals seek affiliation with groups that reflect their own social context. For international students navigating cultural unfamiliarity, the search for peers who have faced similar linguistic, academic, or lifestyle challenges fulfills both emotional resonance and practical support needs. Such networks not only offer empathy but also serve as survival-oriented communities, reinforcing a sense of belonging within the host environment.

Motivations related to informational and cultural learning—such as SM1 ("to learn about Xi'an's culture") and SM2 ("to explore local food and tourism")—also scored relatively high (both means > 4.4). This reflects a proactive attitude toward cultural engagement. In the early stages of acculturation, students often display a high level of curiosity and cognitive openness toward the host culture (Kim, 2001). Exploring local content through social media allows them to bridge knowledge gaps, reduce uncertainty, and prepare for more

confident offline interactions. In this sense, digital platforms act as "low-risk cultural laboratories" where students can experiment with host norms before adopting them in real-life contexts.

In terms of social connection, besides SM9, items such as SM4 ("to communicate with other international students," M = 4.70) and SM8 ("to join international student groups," M = 4.45) also received high ratings. These patterns suggest a strong preference for intra-group interaction. This tendency may stem from lower communication barriers and greater cultural familiarity within peer communities, as well as the instrumental functions such groups often serve—such as information sharing, academic help, and emotional reassurance. As previous studies have noted (Ye, 2006), such bonding capital may support early-stage adaptation, but its dominance could also limit broader integration into the host society if not balanced with bridging capital.

In contrast, emotional regulation motivations scored lower overall, particularly SM7 ("to seek attention or recognition," M = 3.95) and SM10 ("to relieve loneliness," M = 4.05). This suggests that international students do not primarily use social media as a space for emotional dependency. A plausible explanation lies in the pre-existing emotional support systems that many students maintain through family or home-country networks. Additionally, some students may view emotional expression on Chinese platforms as culturally incongruent or lacking sufficient relational depth to meet such needs (Chen & Hanasono, 2016).

Taken together, the data reveal a dual-Centreed motivational structure: international students use social media both as a tool for cultural exploration and as a mechanism for social positioning within peer communities. This Behaviour reflects a form of strategic media use that supports Behavioural adjustment while cautiously navigating cultural identity. For practitioners and university staff, these findings suggest the value of facilitating online initiatives—such as digital cultural sharing, intercultural discussion forums, or mixed-group activities—that channel students' proactive motivations into meaningful, two-way cultural engagement.

Analysis of Intergroup Contact Behaviours

Intergroup contact is a key dimension in assessing the depth of acculturation among international students. It reflects how frequently and meaningfully students engage with local residents, particularly through digital platforms. This study examined 10 items (IC1–IC10) to assess students' online interaction, local relationship building, and participation in culturally oriented activities. The results show that item means ranged from 4.05 to 4.78, with standard deviations between 1.48 and 1.86, indicating overall moderate engagement levels with individual variation.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of Intergroup Contact Items (n = 40)

	Item	Mean	Std Deviation
IC1	Connecting with local people via social media	4.78	1.72
IC2	Actively building relationships with locals via social media	4.60	1.74
IC3	Interactions with locals on social media are generally positive	4.78	1.73
IC4	Feeling welcomed by the local community via social media	4.05	1.48
IC5	Gaining deeper understanding of Chinese culture online	4.25	1.78
IC6	Collaborating with locals for academic tasks via social media	4.35	1.51
IC7	Participating in online events/discussions about Xi'an's culture	4.78	1.69
IC8	Commenting/liking/sharing local users' posts	4.50	1.75
IC9	Making local friends online and meeting them offline	4.70	1.65
IC10	Feeling more confident interacting with locals via social media	4.25	1.86

The highest-rated items were IC1 ("contacting locals via social media"), IC3 ("having positive interaction experiences with locals"), and IC7 ("participating in online discussions or events related to Xi'an culture"), all scoring 4.78. These findings underscore the effectiveness of social media in facilitating initial contact and cultural topic engagement. Platforms such as WeChat and Douyin, with their high penetration rates, offer international students low-barrier, asynchronous communication environments that feel psychologically safe. Such digital interactions allow students to "observe" and "test" local norms, gradually building confidence before engaging offline.

Following closely were IC9 ("making friends online and meeting them offline," M = 4.70) and IC2 ("actively building relationships with locals via social media," M = 4.60). These results indicate that a portion of students successfully extended online connections into offline friendships, representing a shift from weak to strong ties. From a computer-mediated communication (CMC) perspective, this suggests a level of trust and social motivation sufficient to move beyond digital boundaries. However, such transitions are not universal and may depend on factors such as language proficiency, extroversion, cultural openness, and the resumption of offline

social events in the post-pandemic context.

Notably, IC4 ("feeling welcomed by the local community") scored the lowest (M = 4.05), suggesting that despite frequent online contact, emotional acceptance does not necessarily increase proportionally. This highlights a gap between "interaction frequency" and "sense of belonging." Several factors may contribute to this gap: the superficial nature of online exchanges, limited deep interaction with locals beyond the international student circle, and mismatches in communication styles or cultural expectations that hinder perceived friendliness.

Other items, such as IC10 ("feeling more confident communicating with locals because of social media," M = 4.25) and IC5 ("gaining a better understanding of Chinese culture through online communication," M = 4.25), received moderate-to-high ratings. These results suggest that while social media is effective for cultural knowledge acquisition, its ability to directly boost communication confidence remains limited. The asynchronous and low-risk nature of online communication fosters comfort, but this sense of ease may not fully translate into real-world confidence, leading to what some researchers term "digital dependency without Behavioural transfer."

In summary, the sample demonstrates a pattern of frequent digital contact with limited emotional integration. While social media lowers the barrier for initial interaction and information exchange, it is insufficient on its own to foster deep cultural affiliation. Therefore, it is recommended that universities and related institutions complement digital outreach with high-quality offline engagement opportunities—such as cultural experience days, bilingual interest groups, and guided intercultural exchanges—to strengthen students' emotional connectedness, cultural understanding, and confidence in real-world social integration.

Analysis of Social Support Functions

As a key medium of social connection in a foreign environment, social media plays an increasingly recognized role in providing emotional support, informational assistance, and practical help for international students. To assess its effectiveness in this regard, the study conducted a descriptive analysis based on 10 items (SS1–SS10). As shown in Table 4, the item means ranged from 4.15 to 5.25, with standard deviations between 1.44 and 1.89, indicating considerable variation in students' perceived social support experiences.

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics of Social Support Items (n = 40)

	Item	Mean	Std Deviation
SS1	Feeling understood via social media	4.53	1.87
SS2	Feeling emotionally supported through social media	4.45	1.72
SS3	Able to express true thoughts on social media	4.53	1.65
SS4	Receiving encouragement from peers on social media	4.43	1.78
SS5	Getting help when facing problems through social media	4.15	1.78
SS6	Learning how to live in China via social media	5.25	1.69
SS7	Finding motivation or inspiration through social media	4.38	1.82
SS8	Getting peer suggestions or advice through social media	4.78	1.69
SS9	Gaining psychological comfort from social media	4.38	1.89
SS10	Getting information more conveniently through social media	4.85	1.44

Among all items, SS6 ("Social media helps me understand how to live in China") recorded the highest score (M = 5.25), followed by SS10 ("Social media makes it easier to access information," M = 4.85) and SS8 ("I can receive peer advice via social media," M = 4.78). These results highlight the prominent role of social media in offering practical guidance and daily life navigation. For newly arrived students, platforms such as WeChat and Xiaohongshu often function as primary "survival tools," offering user-generated content on topics ranging from transportation and healthcare to administrative processes. By learning through others' shared experiences, students are able to bypass information gaps and develop a context-specific understanding of their host environment.

Regarding emotional support, items like SS1 ("Social media makes me feel understood") and SS3 ("I can express my real thoughts on social media") showed moderate-to-high scores (both M = 4.53). These findings suggest that while digital platforms provide space for emotional expression, the depth of emotional reciprocity may be limited. The virtual environment, though accessible, may lack the intimacy or continuity needed to generate a strong sense of belonging—an observation consistent with previous studies that note the instability of online emotional ties.

It is also noteworthy that SS5 ("I can get help from social media when I face difficulties") received the lowest

score (M = 4.15), indicating that students may still prefer offline channels when facing real challenges. This tendency could be attributed to the "weak tie" nature of most online connections, or to ongoing concerns over privacy and reliability in online help-seeking Behaviours.

Overall, the findings suggest that social media primarily serves an informational and referential role in the social support structure of international students, while its functions in emotional companionship and direct intervention remain limited. This pattern reflects a utilitarian approach to digital media use among this group and underscores the importance of supplementing online resources with stronger emotional support mechanisms and face-to-face interaction platforms. For university administrators and support services, enhancing both digital information accessibility and opportunities for meaningful human connection may be key to improving students' holistic support experience.

Analysis of Acculturation Status

Acculturation is a key indicator of international students' ability to integrate into the host society, encompassing multiple dimensions such as language use, lifestyle adaptation, interpersonal relationships, and cultural identity. This study Analysed international students' acculturation status in Xi'an using 10 items (AC1–AC10). As shown in Table 5, the item means ranged from 4.00 to 4.58, while most standard deviations exceeded 1.7, indicating significant individual differences in adaptation experiences.

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics of Acculturation Items (n = 40)

	Item	Mean	Std Deviation
AC1	Understanding Chinese Behavioural norms	4.45	1.88
AC2	Having close Chinese friends	4.23	1.73
AC3	Getting used to Chinese food	4.50	1.83
AC4	Adapting to Chinese social etiquette	4.53	1.65
AC5	Feeling comfortable with local customs	4.48	1.83
AC6	Adjusting to Chinese pace of life	4.55	1.78
AC7	Understanding Chinese festivals/traditions	4.45	1.58
AC8	Feeling part of Chinese society	4.00	1.68
AC9	Switching between cultures effectively	4.28	1.71
AC10	Feeling satisfied living in China	4.58	1.75

Overall, most items showed moderate-to-high scores, suggesting that the sample had established a basic level of cultural adaptation. The highest-scoring items were AC10 ("I feel satisfied with my life in China," M = 4.58) and AC6 ("I can adapt to the pace of life in China," M = 4.55), reflecting a generally positive perception of overall living conditions. This may be attributed to Xi'an's relatively stable pace of life, affordable living costs, and the availability of institutional support services for international students, which together facilitate smoother adjustment to everyday routines.

Similarly high scores were observed for AC4 ("I have adapted to Chinese social norms," M = 4.53) and AC3 ("I have become accustomed to Chinese food," M = 4.50), suggesting that students have gradually developed familiarity with daily life practices. These "surface-level" Behaviours are typically the first indicators of cultural adjustment and demonstrate students' ability to learn and adapt through observation, imitation, and repeated exposure.

However, deeper psychological aspects of adaptation showed relatively lower scores. For example, AC8 ("I feel that I am part of Chinese society," M = 4.00) and AC2 ("I have close relationships with Chinese friends," M = 4.23) reflect a weaker sense of belonging and integration into local interpersonal networks. These results suggest that while students may behave in culturally appropriate ways, they may still experience barriers in forming meaningful emotional connections or internalizing host culture values. Factors such as language limitations, cultural distance, or insufficient sustained interaction with locals may contribute to this gap.

Other items, including AC9 ("I can switch flexibly between different cultural contexts," M = 4.28) and AC1 ("I can understand Chinese Behavioural patterns," M = 4.45), scored at mid-range levels. This indicates that students possess some degree of intercultural awareness and Behavioural flexibility but may still be in the process of developing more advanced cross-cultural competencies. This phenomenon is consistent with acculturation theory, which distinguishes between Behavioural adaptation—observable actions aligned with host norms—and psychological adaptation—internal identification and emotional integration with the host society (Berry, 1997).

In summary, the findings reveal a pattern of relatively strong Behavioural adaptation but weaker psychological integration among international students in Xi'an. This suggests that while students are able to function effectively in their daily lives, a deeper sense of belonging and cultural connectedness remains underdeveloped. For universities and support institutions, this highlights the importance of supplementing basic services with Programmes aimed at fostering cultural identity and emotional integration. Initiatives such as intercultural workshops, local host family Programmes, and collaborative student activities can help international students

transition from merely "adjusting to life" to truly "belonging to the community."

Conclusion

This pilot study was conducted primarily to evaluate the validity and reliability of the research instrumentation and to assess the feasibility of applying the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) framework to international students in Xi'an. The results confirm that the adapted questionnaire, comprising 45 items across motivations, intergroup contact, social support, and acculturation, functions as a reliable instrument for capturing the complex dynamics of digital acculturation.

Regarding instrumentation, this study contributes a localized measurement tool specifically calibrated for the non-coastal Chinese context. The clear differentiation observed between "informational/cultural" and "social connection" motivations suggests that the instrument possesses strong construct validity, effectively distinguishing between utilitarian and social uses of media. Furthermore, the instrument successfully captured the nuanced gap between behavioural adjustment and psychological integration, demonstrating its sensitivity in detecting subtle acculturation variances even within a small sample.

Preliminary findings derived from this pilot data indicate that while social media effectively supports surface-level adaptation and information seeking , it plays a more limited role in fostering deep psychological belonging. These initial patterns support the theoretical alignment of the instrument with Berry's acculturation model.

However, the limitations of this pilot study must be highlighted. With a small sample size (n = 40) and a cross-sectional design, the statistical power is limited, and the findings regarding specific acculturation outcomes should be interpreted as indicative rather than conclusive. The primary value of this work lies in establishing a methodological foundation. Future research should leverage this validated instrumentation on a larger, more diverse population to perform inferential analyses and further test the causal relationships between digital engagement and cross-cultural adaptation.

References

Allport, G. W. (1954). *The Nature of Prejudice.* Addison-Wesley.

Adeyoyin, O., Adeyemo, I., & Oyetunde, T. T. (2025). *Quantifying the Impact of Host Community Integration on Mental Health Outcomes Among African International Students in US*

Universities. CogNexus, 1(02), 167-180.

Baghoori, D., Roduta Roberts, M., & Chen, S. P. (2024). *Mental health, coping strategies, and social support among international students at a Canadian university*. Journal of American college health, 72(8), 2397-2408.

Berry, J. W. (1997). *Immigration, acculturation, and adaptation*. Applied Psychology, 46(1), 5–34. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1464-0597.1997.tb01087.x

Black, J. S., & Stephens, G. K. (1989). *The influence of the spouse on American expatriate adjustment and intent to stay in Pacific Rim overseas assignments*. Journal of Management, 15(4), 529–544. https://doi.org/10.1177/014920638901500403

Chen, R., & Liu, D. (2023). *Perceived social media utility in digital acculturation*. Telematics and Informatics, 75, 102008. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2023.102008

China Education Online. (2022, May 18). *Ministry of Education released the "China Language and Writing Development Report (2022)*". Retrieved from

https://news.eol.cn/inchina/lhyw/202205/t20220518_2225941.shtml

Choi, Y., & Kang, H. (2022). *Adjustment stressors among international students in China: A mixed-methods study*. Higher Education Research & Development, 41(1), 1–18.

Chowdhury, E. K. (2024). *Examining the benefits and drawbacks of social media usage on academic performance: a study among university students in Bangladesh*. Journal of Research in Innovative Teaching & Learning.

Ellison, N. B., Steinfield, C., & Lampe, C. (2007). *The benefits of Facebook "friends:" Social capital and college students' use of online social network sites*. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 12(4), 1143–1168.

Fichman, A. (2025). *How International Students Use Internet for their Mental Health Purposes* (Master's thesis, Lithuanian University of Health Sciences (Lithuania)).

Huang, Y., & Li, X. (2023). *Social media and emotional adaptation: Extending U&G in multicultural contexts*. New Media & Society, 25(3), 458–476.

Katz, E., Blumler, J. G., & Gurevitch, M. (1973). *Uses and Gratifications research*. Public Opinion Quarterly, 37(4), 509-523. https://doi.org/10.1086/268109

Kim, J., & Kim, S. (2023). *Social media affordances and social connectedness among international students*. Journal of Intercultural Communication Research, 52(1), 36–55.

Kuang Wenbo & Wu Xiaoli. (2019). *Analysis of WeChat Usage Behavior of international students in Xi'an from a Cross-Cultural Perspective: An Empirical Study Based on Cultural Adaptation Theory*. Journal of Wuhan University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition) (03), 115-126.

Liu, Q., & Zhang, Y. (2020). *Cultural adaptation and short video platforms: A study of Douyin among international students in China*. Asian Journal of Communication, 30(4), 300–316.

Nguyen, A., & Li, S. (2023). *Digital peer networks and acculturative resilience among international students*. Computers in Human Behaviour, 145, 107802. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2023.107802

Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community.* Simon & Schuster.

Rehman, S., Fazlee, S. I. B. A., bin Zayed, M. A. Z., & Dullet, G. (2024). *The Role of Media Entertainment in Managing Stress among Malaysian Students: Escapism vs Adaptive Coping Strategies.*

Shi, J., Liu, L., & Zhang, X. (2014). *The influence of intergroup contact on intergroup bias: The mediating role of common ingroup identity.* Psychological Development and Education, 30(5), 536–544.

Vuong, Q. H., Pham, H. H., Dong, T. K. T., Ho, M. T., & Dinh, V. H. (2021). *Current Trends and Realities of International Students in East and Southeast Asia: The Cases of China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Malaysia*. International Journal of Education and Practice, 9(3), 532-549.

Wang, H. (2023). *Exploring digital acculturation: International students' social media use in Chinese universities*. Journal of International and Intercultural Communication, 16(1), 45–61.

Wang, J., & Duan, Y. (2022). *Social media coping mechanisms during acculturation: A study of emotional needs.* Journal of Media Psychology, 34(2), 105–117.

Wu, Y. (2020). *The impact of social media on the emotional acculturation of international students in China.* Global Media Journal, 10(2), 98–112.

Wu, D. C., Kim, H. S., & Collins, N. L. (2021). *Perceived responsiveness across cultures: The role of cultural fit in social support use.* Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 15(9), e12634.

Winstone, L., Mars, B., Haworth, C. M., & Kidger, J. (2021). *Social media use and social connectedness among adolescents in the United Kingdom: a qualitative exploration of displacement and stimulation*. BMC public health, 21(1), 1736.

Yang, P. (2022). *China in the global field of international student mobility: An analysis of economic, human and symbolic capitals*. Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education, 52(2), 308-326.

Zhou, M., & Wang, L. (2022). *Online engagement and socio-cultural adaptation of foreign students in China.* Asian Journal of Communication, 32(2), 109–127.

Zhou, Y., & Qin, X. (2023). *International student well-being in host cultures: Adaptation challenges and institutional responses.* Journal of International Students, 13(2), 123–140. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v13i2.4789

Zhang, M., Xu, P., & Ye, Y. (2022). *Trust in social media brands and perceived media values: A survey study in China*. Computers in Human Behaviour, 127, 107024.

Zhang, Q., & Lin, Z. (2023). *Acculturation in the digital era: Mobile apps and foreign students in China.* Media, Culture & Society, 45(2), 211–228

Zimet, G. D., Dahlem, N. W., Zimet, S. G., & Farley, G. K. (1988). *The multidimensional scale of perceived social support*. Journal of Personality Assessment, 52(1), 30–41.

https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327752jpa5201_2

Islam, M. R., & Hewstone, M. (1993). *Dimensions of contact as predictors of intergroup anxiety, perceived out-group variability, and out-group attitude: An integrative model*. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 19(6), 700–710. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167293196005

Biodata

Zhu Daijun (Email: daijunzhu7@gmail.com) is currently a Ph.D. candidate at the Communication Department, Kuala Lumpur University of Science and Technology (KLUST), Malaysia. Concurrently, she serves as a lecturer at the Southeastern Asia Research Center, Xi'an Siyuan University, China. Her primary research interests lie in intercultural communication, with a specific focus on the acculturation dynamics of international students in the digital age.

Dr. Awan Binti Ismail (Email: awan@uum.edu.my) is an Associate Professor at Universiti Utara Malaysia Kuala Lumpur (UUM KL) and serves as an Adjunct Professor of Communication at Kuala Lumpur University of Science and Technology (KLUST), Kajang, Selangor. Her scholarly expertise lies in Journalism Education, Sustainable Journalism, Media Practices, Media Management, and Mass Communication, with a strong focus on advancing media and communication studies in Malaysia.