

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN SHAPING ACCULTURATION EXPERIENCE: A STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN LAHORE

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Abstract

Higher education has grown global in an escalating manner. Now, students travel abroad as higher education has become more international. This scenario is also helping students to discover new cultures and environments. In this maneuver, they face several challenges. During these challenging times, social media allows students to remain connected to their home culture. Moreover, they simultaneously interact with their host culture. This study investigates the function of social media to seek cultural identity and milestones of acculturation for international university students in Lahore, Pakistan. The research took a mixed-methods approach using quantitative survey data from 20 students and qualitative content analysis of Facebook and Instagram posts from 15 students. Demographics, social media usage patterns, general English proficiency, sociocultural adjustment, intergroup anxiety, and acculturation-related stress are examined through a survey. The study reviewed the posted content for frequency of posts, use of language, audience targeting, and implications for cultural identity. The results of the study showed that 72% students (mean = 3.6/5) use social media to connect themselves with their home culture by sharing posts about family, traditions, and experiences. Moreover, host culture content engagement is 62% (mean = 3.0/5), and often the form of passive viewing. 62% (mean = 3.1/5) of students used convergence strategies to connect with mixed audiences and engage the host culture. However, 72% (mean = 3.6/5) of them used divergence strategies to maintain connections with their home culture. They represent a conscious negotiation of cultural identity, and are consistent with Berry's Acculturation Model and Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT). The findings indicate that social media support emotional state, alleviating acculturative stress and providing a controlled environment for gradual integration into the host culture. The findings have direct implications for universities on how to organize digital orientation programs, intercultural workshops, and peer mentoring initiatives. The limitations of this study are its small sample size and geographic bounds. Moreover, this is a geographically focused study and relies on short-term observation. This suggests that future researchers should adopt a longitudinal approach for generalized results.

Keywords: *International students, Acculturation experiences, social media, convergence, and divergent strategies*

Introduction:

Acculturation can be defined as a cultural and psychological exchange between two different cultural groups (Elhami & Roshan, 2024). The present world is more globalized than ever. Now migration and international travel are common. Moreover, cross-cultural exchanges are also increasing day by day. The acculturation process is key to understanding how individuals or groups adapt to new cultures (Ullah et al., 2024).

This transformation is more common among international students. They have to navigate unfamiliar academic systems, social norms, and values. Relocating to a host country from one's home country presents challenges, including language barriers, new customs, and different social norms (Kunst & Mesoudi, 2025). The strength to navigate these differences whilst retaining one's cultural identity is dominant when integrating and adjusting to any host culture.

Acculturation has a strong influence on emotional and psychological health (Lin et al., 2021). This is particularly noticeable among international students, overlapping their home cultural frameworks with the pressures of their host culture. Although there are multiple strategies one can take, four of them are proposed by researchers such as Berry in 1997. According to Balakrishnan et al., (2025) these include the following: integration (the acceptance and maintenance of both the home culture and host culture), assimilation (the abandonment of one form of mental identity for another, typically associated with adopting a host culture but losing own), separation (maintaining home culture whilst avoiding engagement with the host), and marginalization (losing both cultural identities).

Social media has become one of the most relevant tools to assist international students in coping with the acculturation process. For example, migrant students use social media platforms to remain connected to their home culture and engage with the local one while maintaining ties back home as a way of compensating for their geographical separation (Molder et al., 2022). In a time where communication is immediate, social media serves as an effective medium for adjusting to a different culture.

Nevertheless, there are some challenges to social media for international students. Students often tend to relate more easily with those from their home culture (Ho et al., 2022). This has theorized the extent of engagement of local students and the social norms they adopt. This, combined with home country media and social networks, often limits full integration to a host culture (Yam et al., 2023). However, social media is still an important tool to help balance both cultural identities.

Social media, in some ways, is fulfilling the purpose of staying connected with home, but this is only part of the story in today's acculturation (Manu et al., 2023). It actually guides students when it comes to their identity, building new social networks, and adjusting to the different cultural norms in a host nation. Social media exerts a significant impact on acculturation, making them the vital aspect of international students in coping with maintaining both their home and host culture (Rodriguez & Seock, 2026).

Background

An increasing number of international students are studying abroad (Yue & Lu, 2022). This makes an understanding of the acculturation process necessary (Kreienkamp et al., 2024). For these students, adjusting to foreign systems of academia, social norms and cultural practices can be challenging. Social media, and in particular Facebook, are crucial for students to deal with

cultural differences and maintain social ties as well as cope with acculturative stress (Alasmari, 2023).

International students utilize social media for connecting with home culture in the context of engaging host culture (Ke et al., 2022). Facebook, as a virtual instrument, breaks down cultural boundaries to communicate with family, friends, and peers. It also provides emotional support, alleviating feelings of isolation and homesickness by keeping ties to familiar social networks and cultures (Egitim, 2022).

Furthermore, social media also allows students to share and demonstrate parts of their cultural identity (Zhang & Ren, 2024). Through social media, as indicated by Facebook, students can discuss their personal stories, embrace the home culture, and experience the host culture (Yip et al., 2024). The tendency for students to maintain a dual engagement with both cultural environments allow better sharing of home and host culture, contributing to easier acculturation (Pang et al., 2024). This keeps students connected to themselves while adjusting to new environments.

Problem statement

There are lots of challenges faced by international students. These problems include language barriers, cultural differences, and adaptation to new academic systems (Alasmari, 2023). Such challenges can lead to acculturative stress, which hurts the emotional health of students (Wu et al., 2025). These feelings of isolation, struggling to adapt to new social norms and academic expectations, can make integrating into the host culture more difficult and ultimately slow down the process of acculturation (Ke et al., 2022).

Although social media enables individuals to stay connected with their home culture, little is known about the role of social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram in relation to the acculturation process of international students (K, 2022). While social media aids students in maintaining connections to their roots, how they impact cultural adaptation and identity negotiation through this process is still under review within the space of education abroad.

Researching the role of social media in facilitating acculturation is therefore needed. Researching how platforms such as Facebook and Instagram aid students in assimilating into the host culture but also retaining their culture is beneficial (Omori & Schwartz, 2022).

Significance of this study

This study is significant in understanding how international students are using social media for acculturation. Moreover, it aids universities in supporting international students in a better way when it comes to adjusting to a new country. In this way, universities can offer programs, workshops, and online communities that allow them flexibility around cultural and academic integration. The findings may also guide policymakers and student services in devising strategies that mitigate stress, loneliness, and isolation of students. In short, this study offers some valuable perspectives that should help enhance the experience and general success of international students.

Objectives

- To identify the content shared by international students on social media platforms and how this content reflects their process of acculturation.
- To examine the strategies adopted by international students with their peers on social media platforms.
- To investigate how these international students are negotiating their cultural identities on social media platforms.

Research questions

- **RQ 1:** What are the characteristics of posts made by international students on their Facebook and Instagram profiles during their first year at universities in Lahore?
- **RQ 2:** What communication strategies are being used by international students at universities in Lahore while communicating with their peers on Facebook and Instagram?
- **RQ 3:** How do international students at universities in Lahore negotiate and perform their cultural identities on Facebook and Instagram?

Contribution of this study

This study contributes to the understanding of how international students use social networking platforms (such as Facebook and Instagram) to negotiate between their home culture and host culture. This is done by investigating at the interplay of social media, cultural adaptation, and identity expression. It also offers practical implications for international students' adjustment within their host country.

Literature review

This delves into central theories that inform acculturation, social media use, and identity negotiation. This chapter lays the groundwork for understanding how international students use social media in their process of cultural adaptation and identity formation.

This literature review specifically targets Facebook and Instagram for their particular use as an open forum for community interaction. According to Kim & Mesquita (2025) social media may serve as sources of emotional support, facilitate cultural exchange, and provide means for students to remain relevant to their home culture at the same time as adapting to the host culture. But several other studies also identify adverse effects of these social media platforms (Rehman & Wu, 2020). For instance, excessive reliance on home country media might hinder engagement with the host culture and slow the process of adjustment (Hofhuis et al., 2023).

Existing studies of international students clearly show a tendency to consume more media from their home country (Kim & Mesquita, 2025). For this purpose, they use television, social media, and news outlets. This keeps them connected with their culture and provides familiarity while being away from home. Consuming familiar media enables students to track developments, stay aware of trends (Stuart et al., 2025). Moreover, this also helps them to maintain an emotional connection with their home culture.

On the other hand, international students also make efforts to engage with the host home media. The major reason to use the media of the host country is to understand local norms, language, and social practices (Mellado & Hermida, 2022). In this detection of how different cultures would interact if students were to return educationally so that they have a more culturally predictive element from both homes, where students are familiar, they do not experience and catch education in the host media (Zhou & Yin, 2025). This is why studies suggest that students should keep close ties with local media resources. These types of media consumption help them adapt to the new circumstances.

Furthermore, it examines Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT). This theory explains the process of adjustment in the style of communication (Fowler et al., 2025). CAT outlines that international students could choose reply strategies of either convergence (adapting to the host region) or divergence (preserving their home culture) when interacting on social media platforms (Pines et al., 2025). This theory assists in clarifying the universal utility of social media communication as an integration or home relationship reinforcement into the host culture

(Balakrishnan et al., 2025). Thus, existing literature shows that there is limited research on how social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram help or hinder international students through their long-term acculturation process to negotiate cultural identities in culturally diverse cities like Lahore, Pakistan.

Theoretical framework

This section discusses the theoretical framework that underlines this study, combined with Berry's Acculturation Model and Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT). These frameworks are important to frame an understanding the use of social media platforms by international students in order to negotiate acculturation and cultural identity in the host society.

Both these theories provide an in-depth analysis of the experience of students navigating the challenge of balancing the acceptance within a new culture. Berry's Acculturation model serves as an underlying framework to explore various types of acculturation strategies adopted by the international students, including Integration, Assimilation, Separation and Marginalization (Elhami & Roshan, 2024). On the other hand, Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) centers on communication behavior in terms of convergence and divergence and their impact on social interaction and identity negotiation (Fowler et al., 2025).

Berry's Acculturation Model offers a conceptual basis for the recognition of variability in students' strategies as they smooth their path on arrival. The four strategies that the model describes are (i) integration; (ii) assimilation; (iii) separation; and (iv) marginalization. These strategies condition the way students dance between home culture and the host culture, thus directly affecting their cultural adaptation (Billedo et al., 2020). By attempting to analyze students' social media interactions using this model, researcher is able to better visualize how students engage with other aspects of their identities through the use of Facebook and help them navigate these issues in modern day society.

Therefore, these four strategies of acculturation given by Berry, Integration, Assimilation, Separation, and Marginalization, greatly influence the process of adaptation to the new surroundings. These strategies are also helpful to understand the behavior of international students in the process of acculturation. Integration is generally associated with the positive end of the outcomes, since students who take up this strategy can better manage their cultural identities (Dong et al., 2023). There is a major difference between integration and assimilation. Integration enables students to stay connected to their cultural roots while also engaging fully within the culture of their new environment.

The Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) deals with how people adapt their communication depending on the people they interact with. The two major strategies defined in CAT is convergence, which refers to an individual changes their original pattern of behavior for a more similar one compared with the host culture, and divergence, that is, keeping one's own cultural differences and separating from the host culture (Billedo et al., 2020).

CAT is particularly important in this study as it describes how international students may utilize diverse communication strategies on social media platforms. Students could act to assimilate with the host culture by applying convergence strategies. For example, by using a global language and by taking part in the local activities. They may also preserve their identity related to their home culture with the help of divergence technique (Ho et al., 2022).

Researchers highlighted that these two strategies are evident in the online activity of international students (Yam et al., 2023). In the convergence process, students may use English

and engage actively with content relating to the host culture. They communicate in a global language so that they can easily become part of new cultures (Rodriguez & Seock, 2026). They were likely to post about festivals or events in the local area or academic life in the host country. They adjust their communication style so that it can have a parallel course with the host culture. It makes them feel more involved, and it shows their willingness to adapt to a new environment.

Research methodology

The present study uses a mixed-methods research design. This design is selected to explore the influence of social media platforms on the acculturation experience of international university students in Lahore. It blends quantitative surveys with qualitative content analysis of social media posts. This model is adopted for this study because it allows the researcher to examine not only the quantifiable patterns (Zaib et al., 2022). It also helps to better understand the social media relationship with the acculturation experience (Kreienkamp et al., 2024). In this way, one can get a fuller understanding of how students adjust in a foreign cultural environment.

The quantitative part of this study involves structured survey questionnaires administered to study participants. This survey is used to collect data on demographic information (e.g., age, gender), language proficiency measures, patterns of social media usage (both active and passive forms), and indicators of sociocultural adjustment. This technique is selected because it enables the systematic measurement and comparison of key variables across participants (Molder et al., 2022). It also facilitates the identification of overall patterns and correlations associated with acculturation experiences among international students in Lahore.

Moreover, the qualitative aspect consists of a content analysis of social media posts of participants. These social media platforms include Facebook and Instagram only. The main purpose of this is to investigate their communication styles, language choices, and the expression of identity. This content analysis method is selected since it provides behavioural data, as opposed to self-reported answers (Pulsford et al., 2023). It also gives the researcher insight into how students are portraying themselves online and how they are negotiating between home and host cultures in their day-to-day social media dealings.

Studies suggest that acculturation involves both tangibles (e.g., actions) and intangibles (subjective experience) (Molder et al., 2022). So, this mixed-methods design provides the most appropriate way for the investigation of the research questions of this study. On the other hand, using a single method would restrict the area of analysis. Thus, by using both quantitative and qualitative approaches, researchers can achieve triangulation (Taherdoost, 2022). This is done in an attempt to enhance validity and to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of how social media impacts the acculturation process among international students.

Participants

This study has 20 international university students studying at various universities in Lahore, Pakistan. These students have been in their first or second semester, and this period is significant to observe the early stages of acculturation (Titzmann & Jugert, 2024). Since this period involves students adjusting to the host culture, concentrating on these months allows the researcher to peer into their very first experiences of adaptation (Kreienkamp et al., 2024).

Sampling techniques

This research is based on a purposive sampling technique that allows to select samples according to the most relevant nature of the data (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025). Purposive sampling enables the researcher to purposefully select individuals who can provide rich, in-depth insights

on how social media impacts acculturation (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). It is particularly useful in studies where the objective is to gain detailed insight rather than generalizability (Zhou & Yin, 2025b).

The participants were selected based on the following criteria:

- (a) International university students studying in Lahore, who are part of ESL or first-year programs, and
- (b) Active users of social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram.

These criteria help to confirm not only that participants are at the initial stage of cultural adjustment but also that they actively participate in online environments where acculturation processes can be captured.

Data collection methods

This study uses two different methods for the collection of data. A questionnaire is used for a survey, and the content analysis of social media posts.

The instrument for the survey of the current study was a questionnaire adapted by the researcher. The survey is mainly comprised of questions from the work of Omori and Schwartz (2022). Moreover, some other scales are also adopted which were used by existing studies. These include the sociocultural adaptation scale adapted from Furnham and Bochner, (1982), and the Intergroup Anxiety Scale from Stephan and Stephan, (1985). The items of self-reported English language proficiency adapted by Bekteshi & van Hook (2015). The background questions such as questions regarding social media use and cultural engagement are developed by the researcher to fit the objectives of this present study.

There are a total of seven sections of survey. These seven sections include, demographic information, usage of social media, language proficiency, sociocultural adjustment, intergroup anxiety, acculturative stress, and cultural management. Moreover, this combination of two different methods allows the researcher to gather self-reported data and observable behavior in an online setting (Pulsford et al., 2023). It is also important to note that the literature on social media acculturation is rare.

The second method is content analysis of posts from Facebook and Instagram. In this method, the activities of participants are tracked over time. These platforms were selected based on their rank as the top social networking sites globally and their popularity amongst university students (K, 2022). This present study uses two different platforms, whereas previous studies were limited only to single social media platforms. This approach helps to provide a more comprehensive view of the social media landscape. Particularly, considering how important visual content has become for communication and identity expression in the present digital space (K, 2022).

The content on social media is coded according to several important characteristics. These characteristics involve the posting frequency, language use (English vs. native language vs. code-switching), post types (pictures vs. captions vs. status updates), targeted audiences (home country friends vs. host country friends), and identity expression. By including both Facebook and Instagram, this study is able to take a much deeper look into the acculturation process. Facebook comprehends text-based communication and interaction, while Instagram adds visual importance to description, details of oneself, or ties to origin (Rehman & Wu, 2020b).

Data collection procedure

Data collection was performed in a few systematic steps.

- (1) Participants were recruited through university networks and personal referrals.
- (2) They received a brief summary regarding the purpose and scope of the study, followed by an invitation to participate for those who met the inclusion criteria.
- (3) Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection.
- (4) Participants received enough information about the goals and procedures of the research, along with their rights, including that they can withdraw from the study at any stage.
- (5) Participation was voluntary, and all respondents were assured of confidentiality.

Quantitative data were obtained through structured survey questionnaires which were distributed directly to participants and via online. Simultaneously, qualitative data were gathered via observations of participants on Facebook and Instagram over a period of time. Posts were only included if they had been shared during the first months of their stay, enabling the researcher to chronicle early experiences of acculturation.

Data analysis

This study used a mixed-methods research design, and thus the data was subject to both quantitative and qualitative analysis techniques. Thus, this study is examining both numerical patterns and deeper meanings behind the behaviors of participants on social media. This combination allows for a complete interpretation of the data.

Descriptive statistics (frequencies, means and standard deviations) are used to analyze the quantitative data obtained from the surveys. The analysis considered variables like language fluency, social media use, number of local (Pakistani) friends, as well as consumption habits for both mainstream and regional media. This analysis was intended as a descriptive overview of demographics of participants and levels of sociocultural adjustment.

Postings on Facebook and Instagram contained qualitative data, which was analysed using a directed content analysis approach. This approach was chosen because it is theory-driven, which permit the researchers to explore the data in light of accessible frameworks (Manu et al., 2023). These analyses explored verbal strategies related to convergence and divergence, identity negotiation, cultural expression, etc., exhibited by participants.

Social media posts were coded during the analysis stage according to predefined variables regarding language usage, content type, and target audience (Mishra & Dey, 2022). Other themes were identified as data emerged. By telling a story about the individual experience of social relationships with both the home and host culture, this approach allows for understanding the true benefits or disturbance to cultural adjustment, thus enriching the understanding and addressing research objectives (Radwan, 2022).

Ethical considerations

The study was designed considering several ethical aspects, ensuring that the participants and their rights are protected. Participants were informed about the research before data collection, including its purpose, procedures, and their role in it. All the participants were assured that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without consequences.

The study also followed the ethical guidelines for online research by respecting the privacy of respondents and by restricting the analysis to content shared and permitted. Furthermore, extra care was also taken to ensure social media data was not misinterpreted and was not abused. In

general, the study was performed respectfully and in accordance with ethical principles, ensuring the dignity and privacy of all participants.

Results and discussion

This part of the research aims to provide the results and discussion of this study. These results are drawn from survey answers and Facebook content. The research questions related to the ways international students engage with social media are answered in this chapter. The chapter merges the quantitative (survey data) with qualitative (content analysis) in order to offer an in-depth comprehension of cultural adaptation practices and the online engagements of students.

The sample of this study consists of 20 international students from various universities in Lahore, Pakistan. A total of 20 such students filled the survey form; however, as per the target of this study, 15 students were shortlisted from these 20 participants. The target of this study is to include such participants who were enrolled in their first year of study. The particular sample of students consisted of those who hailed from Palestine, Egypt, Nepal, China, Nigeria, Sri Lanka and Japan. They were studying for their first or second semester and had stayed in Pakistan for 5 to 17 months.

Moreover, they were studying in different programs at University of Lahore (UoL), Punjab University (PU), National University of Sciences and Technology (NUST) and Lahore University of Management Sciences. In a survey, first of all, students were asked about their age and gender. As per the results, these respondents were in the age bracket of 19-26 years.

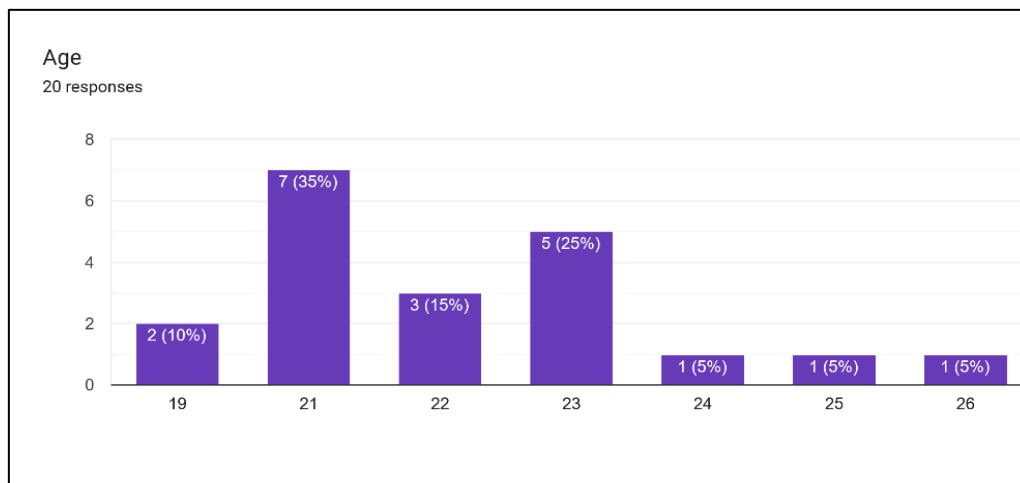


Figure 1: Age of respondents: Prepared by the researcher.

In the same section, participants were asked about their nationality. The results are as per following chart. Most of the participants are from Palestine, followed by China.

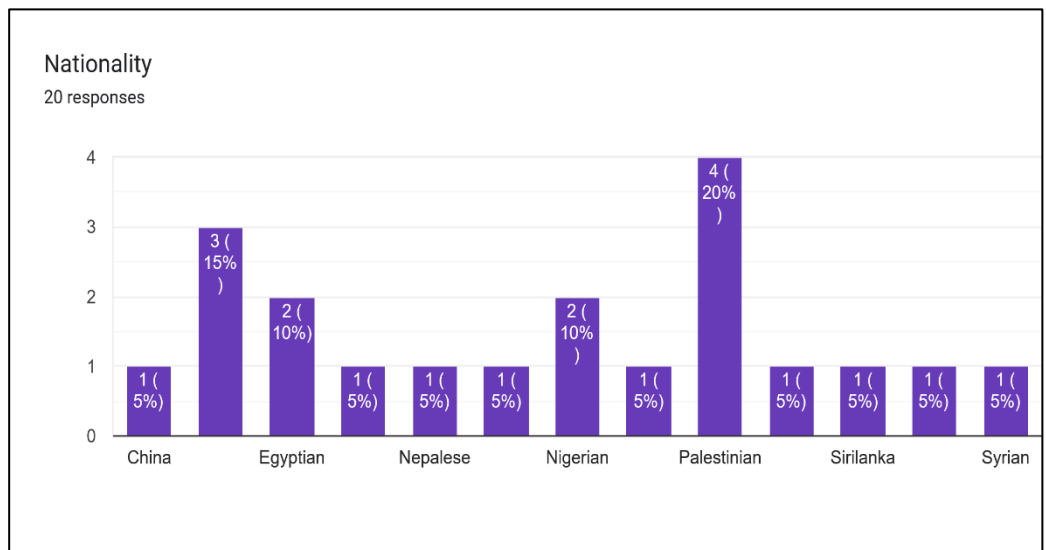


Figure 2: Nationality of participants. Prepared by the researcher.

The most important part of this study was about the stay of participants in Pakistan. The target participants of this study were those participants who were in their first year of stay in the host culture. Out of 20 participants, 5 were present in the host culture more than 12 months. For this purpose, rest of 15 participants shortlisted for further analysis.

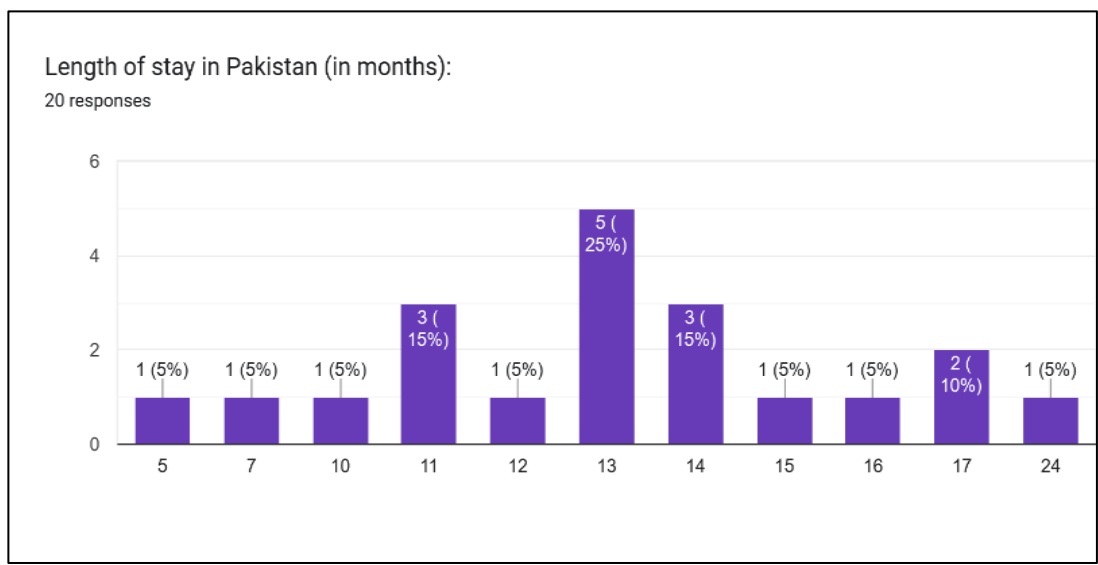


Figure 3: Length of stay in Pakistan. Prepared by the researcher.

These 15 survey participants were also included in the qualitative Facebook and Instagram content analysis. These participants were asked to add the profile of the researcher as friend on these social media platforms. All accepted the researcher-created profiles as friends, allowing their interactions via status updates and comments to be observed. This enabled the researcher to conduct a detailed investigation of social media use in relation to acculturation.

Further, this survey was used to index intergroup anxiety with single items about being comfortable and confident interacting with local students as well as feeling nervous. The items for intergroup anxiety were adopted from Stephan and Stephan, (1985). Mean scores of acculturative stress and well-being were assessed by using participants' levels of homesickness, feelings of alienation, cultural adjustment difficulty as a source of stress, and the extent to which they felt satisfied with their adaptation. Lastly, cultural engagement through social media focused on how often home and host culture is posted about, what type of audience they interact with via their posts, and code-switching behavior. Items assessing acculturative stress and well-being were adapted from Omori & Schwartz (2022).

The participants indicated that they used several of the social media platforms for communication and social engagement, including Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok. According to survey data, all participants held active accounts on Facebook and Instagram, 19 used WhatsApp, while 9 indicated that they use TikTok. The average number of hours spent on social media per day was 3.8 (SD=0.7), with most participants using social media between 3 and 4 hours a day 65% (n=01) and, the rest-use it for more than four hours. This indicates that social media platforms are properly used by students in their daily lives to meet both social and academic requirements. This is clearly depicted in the following image.

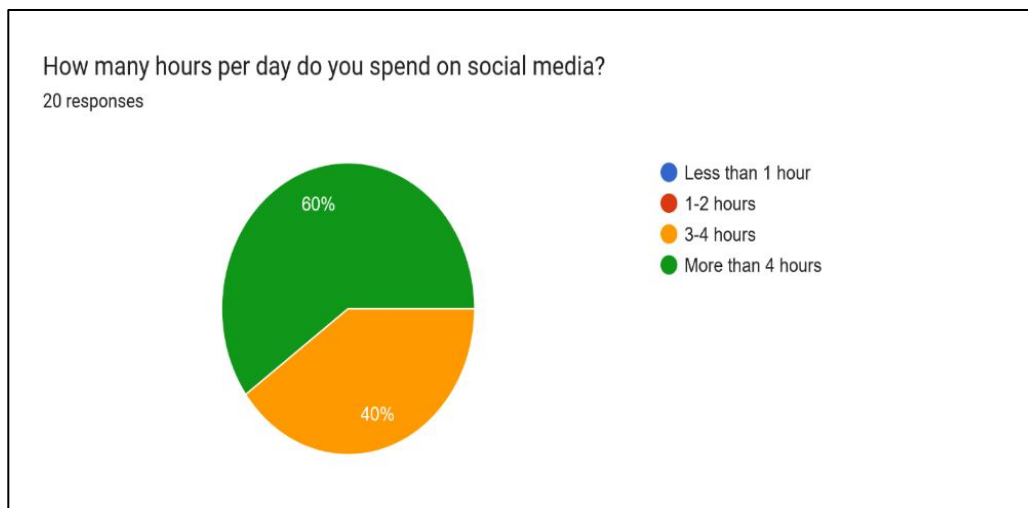


Figure 4: Hours per day spent. Prepared by the researcher.

When asked for what purpose they use social media. Most of them answered to stay in contact with family and friends from back home (M = 4.3, SD = 0.6; 1 saying never and 5 always). Moderate engagement with local students (M = 3.2, SD = 0.8) was compared, students reported a significant amount of academic/work purposes (M = 3.5, SD = 0.7). Participants also reported high usage for entertainment (M = 3.7, SD = 0.9). The mean ratings of posting about home culture content (M = 3.6, SD = 0.8) were higher than posting about host culture content (M = 3.0, SD = 0.9). Mixed audience posting and code-switching were sometimes (M = 3.1, SD = 0.7).

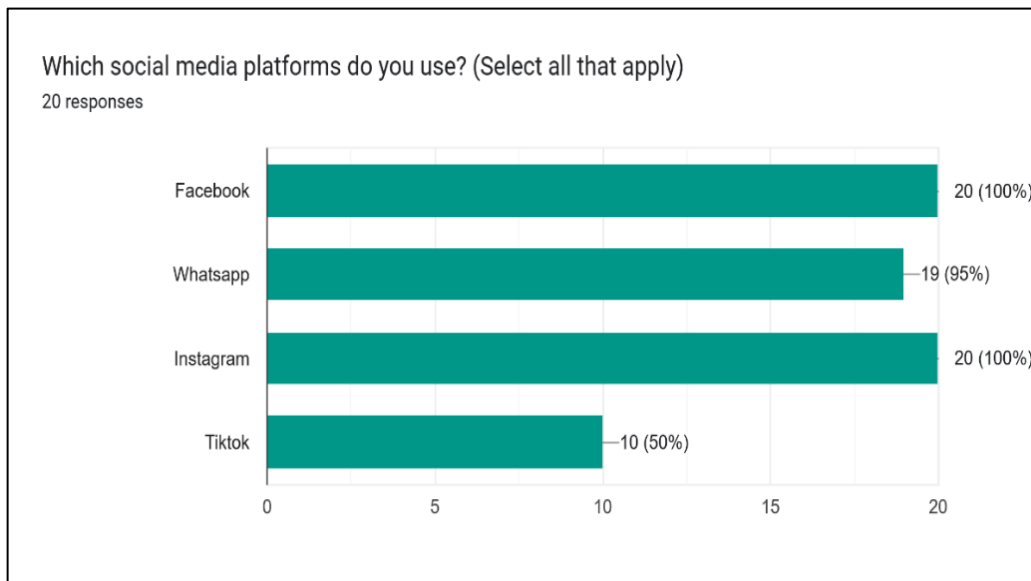


Figure 5: Purpose of using social media. Prepared by the researcher.

In the same section, participants were also asked about the platforms they used. Most of the participants selected Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram. Some of them also selected Tiktok as a platform used by them.

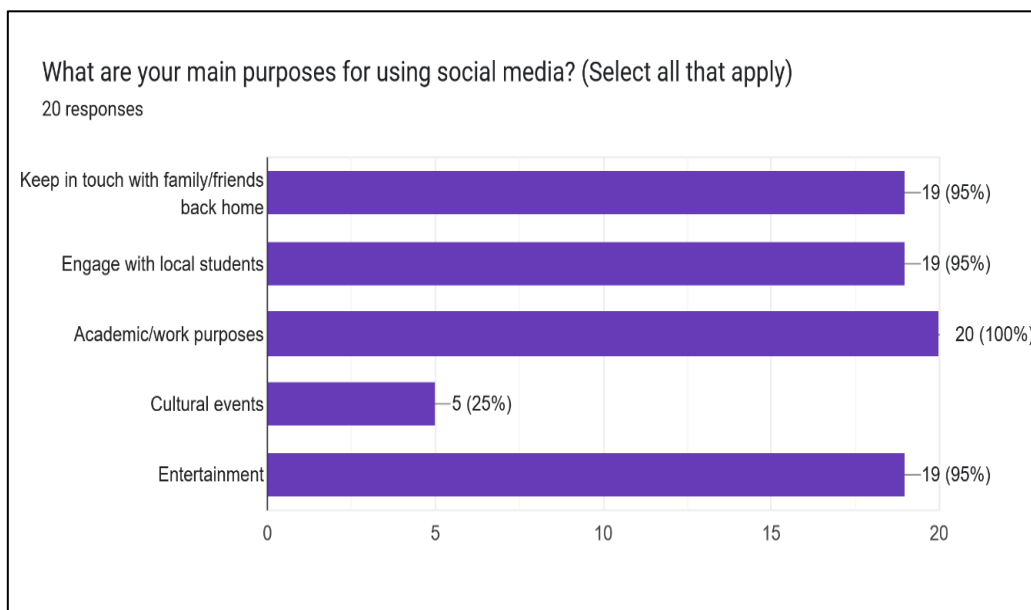


Figure 6: Social media platforms used by participants. Prepared by the researcher.

These results further imply that social media platforms operate as a haven for sustaining the home culture once an individual travels abroad. With a more frequent frequency of home-related content and having high engagement on well-known platforms. This also illustrates the divergence connection of participants as most of the participants wanted to adopt most connections back to their native culture. In a similar vein, moderate uses with local students show that social

media can access to the host culture and help newcomers ease their way into it, thus supporting the initial stages of acculturation. The table shows the mean and standard deviation of data.

Variable	Measurement / Item	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Notes / Interpretation
Daily usage	1 = <1 hr, 2 = 1–2 hr, 3 = 2–4 hr, 4 = 4+ hr	3.8	0.7	The majority is spending 3–4 hours/day; a small group >4 hr
Home Country Connections	Frequency of use (1 = Never, 5 = Always)	4.3	0.6	The main purpose is to support ties to local culture
Engaging with Local Students	Usage frequency	3.2	0.8	Moderate interaction with local groups
Academic	Usage frequency	3.5	0.7	Students are using social media for study purposes as well
Entertainment	Usage frequency	3.7	0.9	Shows that social media is also used for entertainment
Home Culture Content	Usage frequency	3.6	0.8	Mostly share home-related content
Host Culture Content	Usage frequency	3.0	0.9	There is less engagement with the content of the new culture
Audience	1 = Home only, 2 = Mixed, 3 = Local only	2.1	0.7	The majority target home or mixed
Code-Switching	1 = Never, 5 = Always	3.1	0.7	Participants sometimes use both languages

Table 1: Social media habits of participants. Prepared by the researcher.

Qualitative results

Facebook and Instagram utility analysis showed that subjects exhibited low active posting frequency in their first and second semesters. The majority of the students had a preference to read and observe other posts that other people made rather than post frequently on their own walls. The majority of participants posted at least once or twice in either a month, quarter, or annually. This trend indicates that people utilize social media to learn more about the world around them rather than feel compelled to always be vocal. Low posting frequency might indicate tentative actions, a lack of confidence with audience expectations, or perhaps valuing passive consumption in those initial phases of acculturation. Posting behavior of participants is shown in the given table.

Although they very rarely post, participants used Facebook and Instagram as a communication tool to keep in touch with friends back home. Through their interactions with home country friends, students had mostly a convergence communication strategy making majority of the captions, comments and shared content in their mother tongue. Posts usually contained more personal information related to life events, family celebrations, or culture from their home country.

This convergence strategy provided strong social links, reiterated shared identity, and familiarity in cultural interactions leading to comfort.

A clear change in communication strategy emerged when participants had a blend of friends from their home country and host country on Facebook. Students practiced code-switching by toggling back and forth between English and their mother tongue to accommodate for various audiences. Code-switching allowed for local peers to be incorporated into the discussion yet still culturally relevant to friends from their home countries. It also showcases a practical style of intercultural communication, where students can be simultaneously engaged in competing social environments.

However, while posts mostly reflected home culture as prominent in participants' online expression, some snippets suggested minimal investment in experiences relevant to the host culture. They posted occasionally about vacation trips, university stuff and what life was like in Pakistan; but they were mostly touristy photos or comparisons of different experiences between the host and home country. Such posts were also fewer, and often more observational in tone, implying participants viewed themselves as temporary incumbents rather than permanent members of the host culture.

ID	Country	Posting (1. None, 2. 1–2 times a month, 3. 1–2 times a week, 4. Everyday)	Language (1. English, 2. Other/native, 3. Code-switch)
P1	Palestine	3	1,2,3
P2	Egypt	3	1,2,3
P3	Nepal	2	1,2
P4	Palestine	4	1,2,3
P5	Nigeria	3	1,2
P6	Somalia	3	1,2,3
P7	Palestine	2	1
P8	China	3	1,2
P9	Syria	3	1,2
P10	China	3	1,2,3
P11	Palestinian	2	1,2
P12	Nigeria	2	1,3
P13	Palestine	3	1,2,3
P14	Qatar	2	1,2
P15	Sri Lanka	2	1,2

Table 2: Posting habits of participants. Prepared by the researcher.

Overall, the Facebook and Instagram content analysis sheds light on the dynamic nature of social media use and acculturation. Students lean on home culture links, leverage language as a tool to appeal to varied audiences within their current environments (friendship communities), and remain guarded about participating in the host culture. These findings support the idea of social media as a scaffolding tool to facilitate international students in adapting to their new sociocultural environment and maintaining cultural continuity.

Combining quantitative and qualitative findings

These broader survey data and corresponding Facebook and Instagram content analysis reveal the nature of experiences of international students while adjusting to local communities in Lahore, Pakistan. Survey results showed that participants were fairly comfortable with English, reporting average comfort ranging from 3.2 to 3.4 (out of five) for reading, writing, and speaking. This moderate-to-high proficiency indicates that students had the linguistic capacity necessary for forming interactions with Internet content from both home and host cultures. Yet, several Facebook and Instagram postings indicated that students conversed in their native language or code-switched purposefully despite this ease with English, suggesting minimal posting about host culture encounters. This pattern suggests that although language proficiency is an important basic condition, it does not automatically yield actual adaptation or active engagement with host culture through social media.

This interpretation is further corroborated by intergroup anxiety survey data. Feelings of awkwardness ($M = 2.9$) and confidence ($M = 3.0$) in conversation with local peers were both moderate, as reported by participants. Although they managed to communicate, there was still a sense of caution that probably affected how/if this host culture experience was posted. This results in Facebook and Instagram as an artificial context where students can control/apply the exposure to host culture contents, decide whether or not to expose themselves to mixed audiences.

The Facebook and Instagram findings also mirror well-being and acculturative stress measures. Participants experienced moderate homesickness (mean=3.0), isolation (mean=2.9), and adaptation stress (mean=3.1). Moreover, satisfaction with adaptation was also above the midpoint of the 5-point scale (mean=3.3). This dual pattern means that some stress occurs as the students adjust to new cultural contexts. Home culture is the most salient content on Facebook and Instagram, indicating that social media acts as scaffolding for students (Balakrishnan et al., 2025).

In this way, the synthesis of survey and Facebook findings provides insights leading to a more nuanced understanding of the role of social media in acculturation. Facebook and Instagram are mainly used by students to keep in touch with their home culture. They also use this social media to handle intergroup anxiety and maintain psychological well-being. At the same time, they carefully consume host culture content by code-switching and posting only occasionally, exhibiting a calculated manner of integrating. The findings reaffirm the scaffolding role of social media. Social media enables international students to strike a balance between continuity with home culture and gradual integration into the host environment.

Conclusion

This study's findings indicate international students in Lahore primarily employ social media as a means of maintaining ties to their home culture while selectively choosing host culture experiences. The quantitative survey results and qualitative content analyses of Facebook and Instagram posts show that students posted more often about home than about host culture activities, allowing social media to become a psychological scaffold supporting emotional health, stability during homesickness, and links between local adaptation phases.

The study also highlights that even those students reporting moderate to high English proficiency engage little with host culture content. This suggests that even the linguistic competence of a person alone does not necessarily mean engagement with the host culture, but rather that social, psychological, and cultural factors impact the online behavior.

When students intentionally use convergent and divergent communication strategies, they make their digital lives audience-dependent. When it comes to mixed audiences, they use code-switching and English. The same people also tend to post in their native language to reaffirm ties with home culture. They are also able to keep their connections intact with different audiences at the same time while communicating. Such patterns reflect a conscious use of social media, which combines maintaining cultural ties with gradual acculturation.

Posts of host cultures are few and far between, and only ever framed through an observational approach or “traveler” perspective, noting that they take great care to create staged authentic experiences within the local environment. In fact, the home and host culture content together demonstrate identity building through continuing culture collection of experiences concerned with both worlds, in addition to embracing some selected experiences from the host culture.

Limitations

This study has some limitations that need to be considered. The relatively small sample size of participants (20 survey respondents and 15 Facebook and Instagram content analyses) may compromise the generalizability of results to the wider population of international students in Pakistan. Second, this study is geographically limited to Lahore, which limits the findings of this study to other cities or other regions and nations with different cultures, behaviors on social media, and educational environments. Third, data collection was limited to the participants of first/second semesters and included only short-term behaviors and acculturation patterns, while longer duration adaptation processes have yet to be explored. Limitations of the analysis should be taken into account when interpreting results and planning additional studies.

Recommendations for future research

Longitudinal study designs need to be used in future research to follow the social media use and acculturation of international students over a series of semesters or whole academic programs. Tracking students over a longer period would provide information on the dynamics of online interaction, identity negotiation, and cultural adaptation. Moreover, expanding analysis to a broader spectrum of social media platforms (e.g., TikTok, Twitter, and Instagram) may provide insight into the role platform-specific affordances contribute to convergence and divergence strategies, cultural expression, and audience targeting.

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