

# International Students: Challenges, Social Media Use, and Adaptation

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**Abstract:** Social media are an inseparable part of our lives, offering tools for communication, information sharing, and social interaction. For international students, these platforms can help overcome challenges such as cultural adaptation, academic pressures, and social isolation. Using the 'Swiss Army knife' metaphor, this paper highlights the adaptability of social media platforms in meeting diverse user needs, such as seeking information, maintaining connections, and fostering support. Affordances like visibility, persistence, and anonymity enable international students to connect with their home cultures, explore the host country's norms, and document their personal journeys. Yet, these same platforms can reinforce boundaries that hinder their integration into the host culture. The uses and gratifications (U&G) theory helps explain motivations behind social media use, such as social interaction, information seeking, escapism, and self-expression. This study will collect public posts on X, Instagram, TikTok and Reddit with hashtags relevant to international students. I will apply thematic analysis to identify themes and patterns in these posts, exploring how key motivations and affordances shape students' online behaviours and adaptation strategies. Insights from this study will contribute to the broader understanding of social media's impact on international students' adjustment, emphasizing how affordances and user motivations intersect to shape their experiences in the host country.

**Keywords:** Social Media, International Students, Affordances, Uses and Gratifications Theory (U&G), Cross-Platform, Cultural Adaptation

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## 1. International Students

International students move abroad in pursuit of higher education to enhance their career opportunities and become more competitive than their peers (Akanwa, 2015). These students bring new ideas and ways of thinking to their host universities, which can facilitate academic growth (Babushko et al., 2020) by challenging existing views and encouraging critical thinking. They also add to the cultural diversity on campus, helping peers learn about different cultures and develop skills for intercultural interactions (Babushko et al., 2020). However, these students face various challenges when moving to a new country, including cultural adaptation, language barriers, financial strain, and social isolation (e.g., Baines et al., 2022). For these students, social media are more than tools for communication and staying connected with family; they also help students access academic resources, practice language, and learn local customs (e.g., Babushko et al., 2020). This section explores the challenges these students experience, and how they use social media to address these challenges.

### 1.1 Challenges

#### 1.1.1 Socio-cultural Challenges

International students often face challenges adjusting to new cultural norms, which can lead to culture shock (e.g., Babushko et al., 2020). Students from collectivist cultures with group support and close relationships may struggle to adapt to an individualistic society and feel isolated (Baines et al., 2022). Discrimination based on nationality or cultural background further complicates efforts to connect with others, especially with local students (e.g., Oyelana et al., 2024).

#### 1.1.2 Language Barriers

Students not fluent in the host country's language often face academic and social challenges. Limited language skills can hinder their ability to understand lectures, engage in discussions, and complete assignments, leading to poor academic performance and increased stress (Chira, 2017). In contrast, students proficient in the language are more likely to build connections with locals (Rui & Wang, 2015).

#### 1.1.3 Academic Challenges

Even fluent students face academic challenges, such as adapting to new teaching methods, unfamiliar assessment styles, and expectations (e.g., Babushko et al., 2020; Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016). For example, students from countries focused on theoretical learning may struggle with application-based learning. Heavy

workloads raise stress, especially for graduate students juggling coursework with research roles (Baines et al., 2022). As a result, some students use platforms like X and Instagram to connect to a broader community through hashtags like #PhDLife to share their experiences and struggles (Baines et al., 2022) and access academic resources, such as forming study groups.

## 1.2 Social Networks and Support

### 1.2.1 Co-nationals:

Co-nationals or home-nationals are people from the same home country, either living back home or in the host country. While these connections facilitate adjustment, over-reliance on co-nationals, especially in the host country, can hinder adaptation by limiting interactions with locals, and creating cultural silos (e.g., Hendrickson & Rosen, 2017; Lim & Pham, 2016). However, students' networks often include others from their home regions (e.g., the Middle East) or locals with similar cultural backgrounds, based on shared factors like language, religion, or interests (Gomes et al., 2014).

### 1.2.2 Other International Students

Students often form bonds with other international students over shared experiences, or challenges, such as adjusting to social norms, overcoming language barriers, or dealing with homesickness. For example, they may bond over finding foods from their home culture or dealing with academic challenges. These connections are often formed in person, in events like orientations, but maintained on social media and can create a sense of community (Gaitán-Aguilar et al., 2022). This helps them learn about each other's cultures and coping strategies, which can facilitate their adjustment in the new environment.

### 1.2.3 Local Community

Connections with host nationals help students better understand local norms, improve language skills, and have a sense of belonging. However, cultural differences, language barriers, and limited shared experiences make these connections challenging. Some students actively seek building connections with local students, while others interact because of having a direct contact, such as a roommate (Gomes et al., 2014). These interactions are often limited to academic projects, leading students to socialize more with other international students or co-nationals, as they share similar experiences, such as homesickness and cultural challenges. However, as time passes, students rely less on distant relationships and focus more on local connections, which improves their adjustment (Hendrickson & Rosen, 2017).

## 2. Social Media and International Students

### 2.1 Social Media

The term "social media," first introduced in 1994 (Aichner et al., 2021), has been used inconsistently to describe various online platforms (Nau et al., 2022). Nau et al. (2022) define social media as "web-based and mobile services that allow individuals, communities, and organizations to collaborate, connect, interact, and build community by enabling them to create, co-create, modify, share, and engage with content (user- or bot-generated)." Social media have now evolved beyond their original purposes, becoming multifunctional tools that serve diverse needs. Nau et al. (2022) introduced the 'Swiss Army knife' metaphor to describe this dynamic and multifaceted nature, emphasizing how platforms now offer multiple services that were once separate. This change enables users to fulfil different needs on a single platform without constantly switching between them (Nau et al., 2022). For example, Instagram, initially a photo-sharing app, now includes messaging, video-sharing, and in-app shopping. While platforms share similarities, each remains unique because of its distinct set of features and affordances, shaping user behavior and interactions.

### 2.2 Social Media Use by International Students

International students use social media more after moving abroad, mainly to stay connected to family and friends back home (Hendrickson & Rosen, 2017). They engage with social media at varying levels. Passive engagement includes activities like following accounts related to the host country's culture or other international students' experiences. Participation includes joining in discussions on platforms like X or Reddit to seek advice or share information such as tips on local grocery stores. Creation can include sharing content like

Reels on Instagram and TikTok to document their journey, such as “A day in my life as an international student.” Active engagement, such as posting or commenting, leads to higher perceived social support from both home and host countries (Pang, 2020).

Social media plays a complex role in international students' experiences, providing connection and support, while also posing challenges to integration. Sleeman et al. (2016) suggest that social media serve three roles of bridges, boundaries and hybrid spaces for international students. As bridges, social media connect students to their home culture, improving well-being and offering support. Platforms like Reddit can help share knowledge about the host country's culture campus life.

However, social media can create boundaries when students primarily interact with co-nationals, limiting connections with locals (Sleeman et al., 2016). Lim and Pham (2016) found that international students used different platforms to connect with various groups, using features like emojis on LINE and Facebook to foster intimacy with co-nationals. In contrast, text-based platforms like WhatsApp were seen as less engaging, reducing opportunities for deeper connections with locals. These virtual boundaries reinforce separation from the host culture, limiting cross-cultural exchange and integration (Sleeman et al., 2016). In extreme cases, students may prioritize platforms popular in their home country over those in the host culture (Sleeman et al., 2016). Hybrid spaces offer a balance, allowing students to interact with both co-nationals and locals, fostering connections to both cultures and enabling cultural exchange. Achieving this balance helps students integrate while maintaining ties to their home culture (Lim & Pham, 2016).

### 2.3 Social Media Affordances

Studying social media is more than identifying their functions and features; it also includes understanding the possibilities they offer to users. The concept of affordances highlights both the opportunities and constraints within platforms and helps explore how platform design influences users' interactions (Ronzhyn et al., 2022). For example, Instagram encourages visual storytelling through images and short videos, while X is often used for real-time updates. Affordances in technology refer to what platforms enable users to do (e.g., Bucher & Helmond, 2016). Ronzhyn et al. (2022) define social media affordances as “the perceived, actual, or imagined properties of social media, emerging through the relation of technological, social, and contextual, that enable and constrain specific uses of the platforms.” However, affordances can also constrain users, like X's 280-character limit. Several scholars have developed typologies to organize and clarify affordances; for example, Falahatpisheh and Khajeheian (2020) proposed a typology for affordances of social media platforms.

Key affordances influencing user behaviour include, but are not limited to, visibility, persistence, and anonymity (e.g., Treem & Leonardi, 2013). Visibility determines who can see content, influencing how users present themselves online (Bucher & Helmond, 2016; Hollenbaugh, 2021). International students may share personal content privately while curating public posts to maintain an ideal image (Hollenbaugh, 2021) or align with cultural expectations. For example, a student from a more religious background may avoid publicly sharing content that contradicts their faith but feel comfortable sharing it in private or closed groups.

Persistence refers to the durability of content, meaning how long it remains (e.g. Bucher & Helmond, 2016; Fox & McEwan, 2017). Platforms like Facebook and Instagram, with higher persistence, enable users to document experiences and revisit past posts, while X makes older tweets harder to retrieve. This affordance allows international students to document their journeys and experiences, revisit old posts, or delete the ones that no longer reflect their identity or opinions. For example, a student may worry that the content they shared before may align with their home country's norms but be misunderstood in their host country. Therefore, they may prefer platforms like Facebook, and Instagram over those with ephemeral content, such as Snapchat, for this purpose.

Anonymity refers to users' ability to conceal their identity (e.g. Evans et al., 2017), without directly linking it to their offline identity (Hollenbaugh, 2021). High anonymity on platforms like Reddit allows users to discuss topics freely, especially sensitive topics, but may also encourage negative behaviours like trolling or posting harmful content. In contrast, platforms with low anonymity, such as Facebook, often link online and offline identities, promoting more authentic self-presentation (Hollenbaugh, 2021). For international students, anonymity provides a safe space to share challenges like loneliness without fear of judgment, balancing the need for privacy with the opportunity for self-expression.

### 2.3.1 Affordances in Research

A significant challenge in studying affordances is the lack of a unified definition, especially in the context of social media platforms, leading to inconsistent use and confusion with platform features or outcomes (Frey, 2023; Ronzhyn et al., 2022; Treem, 2016). Affordances are "possibilities for action" (Bucher & Helmond, 2016), distinct from static features and are shaped by user-platform interactions and lead to different outcomes, depending on how users engage with them (Evans et al., 2017; Ronzhyn et al., 2022). Additionally, affordances are not fixed but exist on a continuum. For example, the affordance of visibility can range from public posts to private posts. These different levels can lead to different outcomes, such as self-expression (positive) or privacy issues (negative). Studying social media affordances helps explain why international students prefer specific platforms to deal with their challenges of adjustment. For example, persistence allows students to access resources over time, and visibility enables them to control their audience when sharing their experiences.

## 2.4 Social Media Research

A common myth about social media is that these platforms are not 'serious' and are primarily used for entertainment, overlooking their significant roles in policy, social movements, public health, and social support (Treem et al., 2016). Additionally, the changing nature of social media and features complicate research, making findings from previous studies potentially outdated or less applicable (Nau et al., 2022). Studying affordances allows researchers to understand how platform changes influence user behaviour and social interactions. This approach also helps scholars apply findings from studies on discontinued or less popular platforms to current research contexts (McEwan & Fox, 2022). Therefore, to ensure clarity, researchers should specify the type of social media and platform they study and provide information about its design and features (Nau et al., 2022).

While social media platforms share similar design elements or functionalities, like connection or content sharing, each has a distinct environment with its own set of affordances and platforms should not be treated as homogenous (e.g. Matassi & Boczkowski, 2023). Cross-platform analysis reveals how platforms influence each other and adopt features from one another. For example, Instagram introduced Stories after its popularity on Snapchat, and X (former Twitter) replaced its Favourite with a heart-shaped Like, imitating Instagram and Facebook (Bucher & Helmond, 2016).

### 2.4.1 Cross-platform Studies

Cross-platform studies focus on affordances, content flow, and interactions between platforms (Matassi & Boczkowski, 2023). For example, TikTok videos might be reshared on Instagram and spark conversation on X. While platforms share features like content sharing, they also have unique affordances that shape user behaviour. For example, TikTok is designed for short videos, Instagram focuses on visual content, LinkedIn is used for professional networking, and X for real-time updates. Additionally, cross-platform studies also highlight platform influence through imitation or adaptation (Matassi & Boczkowski, 2023), like Instagram adopting Snapchat's Stories or YouTube launching Shorts after TikTok's success. Such comparisons offer insights into user behaviour, platform design, and management changes, such as those seen in changing Twitter to X. This type of comparison helps us understand what kinds of interactions and activities are common or acceptable on one platform but not on others. These activities could include how often people post, the number of daily new posts, or how users typically react to a post. Therefore, comparative studies offer a deeper understanding of why users prefer specific platforms or a combination of them over others.

## 3. Theoretical Framework: The Uses and Gratifications (U&G) Theory

The Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory explains why and how people actively choose media to gratify specific needs. Initially developed for traditional media, U&G now includes social media, viewing users as active participants seeking to meet psychological and social needs like entertainment, information, and interaction (e.g., Whiting & Williams, 2013). This theory focuses on users rather than media, making it useful for analysing diverse media preferences across demographics (Quan-Haase & Young, 2014). Researchers have adapted U&G to study social media use (e.g., Smock et al., 2011; Whiting & Williams, 2013), organizing motivations into user-oriented and platform-oriented approaches. The user-oriented approach prioritizes users' characteristics and behaviour, while the platform-oriented approach highlights the role of platform affordances (Rathnayake & Winter, 2018).

Each platform fulfils distinct needs without replacing others (Quan-Haase & Young, 2014). For example, Instagram is often used for sharing visual content, while LinkedIn focuses on professional networking and sharing career-related content. Furthermore, even features with similar functions can lead to different motivations (Quan-Haase & Young, 2014). Studies such as Chen and Peng (2023) highlight the importance of linking users' motivations to platform affordances, users often choose platforms aligning with their motivations. The following section delves into user-based motivations and their relevance to affordances, particularly for international students:

### **3.1 User-based Motivations**

#### *3.1.1 Social Interaction*

Social interaction refers to the need to connect and engage with others. This motivation can be especially important for international students to stay connected with family and friends back home while building new relationships in the host country (e.g., Menon, 2022). Platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp support interpersonal connections, enabling users to join groups, connect to people with similar interests, and create a sense of community (e.g., Pelletier et al., 2020). Features such as messaging and private chats facilitate intimate or emotional conversations and social support (e.g., Bae, 2018).

#### *3.1.2 Entertainment and Escapism*

Motivations for entertainment and escapism involve using social media for relaxation, enjoyment, and passing the time (e.g., Bossen & Kottasz, 2020; Whiting & Williams, 2013). Entertainment includes consuming content, such as memes, videos, and music, either passively (scrolling) or actively (sharing posts) (Bossen & Kottasz, 2020). Escapism serves as a distraction from reality (e.g., Chen & Peng, 2023; Scherr & Wang, 2021), helping users avoid boredom, reduce stress, and relax (e.g. Quan-Haase & Young, 2014). Escapism may overlap with entertainment, but its primary focus is relieving stress. For example, international students might browse TikTok or Instagram for funny videos, or join TikTok challenges (e.g., Falgoust et al., 2022), to relieve stress in a new environment.

#### *3.1.3 Information Seeking and Sharing*

This motivation involves seeking and sharing information, such as news, updates, and events, often on platforms like X (e.g., Bae, 2018; Pelletier et al., 2020). International students may follow accounts related to visa regulations or campus events to stay updated. This motivation also includes keeping track of others' activities (surveillance), such as following celebrities, friends' posts, or trends (e.g., Scherr & Wang, 2021). Staying updated with trends, is often influenced by peer pressure to use specific platforms or avoid being seen as disconnected or 'old-fashioned' (e.g., Chen & Peng, 2023; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). Additionally, users with this motivation value affordances like persistence as it allows them to find, share, and revisit information over time (Chen & Peng, 2023).

#### *3.1.4 Self-presentation and Self-expression*

Social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok enable international students to express their identity and share their cultural background, and experiences (e.g., Chen & Peng, 2023). This includes posts about their achievements, hobbies, interests, and lifestyle (e.g., Whiting & Williams, 2013), often done through visual storytelling. This motivation promotes active user engagement, with students valuing persistence for storing content and privacy (Chen & Peng, 2023) which is directly linked to the affordance of visibility.

### **3.2 Studies on Specific Platforms/Features**

Scherr and Wang (2021) studied university students and found four key motivations for using TikTok: socially rewarding self-presentation, trendiness (engaging with trendy content), escapist addiction (habitual, prolonged use), and novelty (excitement of discovering new content). Motivations and usage patterns varied by time of day, suggesting, even within a single platform. This suggests that international students may turn to platforms like TikTok in the evening for relaxation after a long day of classes (entertainment or escapism) or in the morning to stay updated.

Lu and Lin (2022) identified four main motivations for using Instagram Stories: entertainment, surveillance, perceived functionality, and social sharing. Users engage with the Stories function because of its convenience,

entertainment, and for exploring trends. They interact with content by reacting with emojis, polls, or replying to stories, or question boxes. They also interact with other users to build relationships and share interesting or personal content (Lu & Lin, 2022). Users create content to connect with others, express themselves, and enjoy the ephemeral nature of Stories (Lu & Lin, 2022).

Smock et al. (2011) studied undergraduate students' general Facebook use and the use of specific features. They found that general use is driven by relaxing entertainment, expressive information sharing, and social interaction but motivations varied by feature. For example, expressive information sharing motivated engagement with status updates and groups but was negatively associated with overall time spent on Facebook. This suggests the need to examine motivations in relation to specific platform affordances rather than general use.

#### 4. Methodology

This study aims at addressing the following questions: 1) What are the frequently used social media platforms by international students in Canada, and what factors influence platform selection, 2) How do features and affordances shape students' motivations and social media use, and 3) What motivations drive platform choice and usage among international students.

The study will collect publicly available posts (textual and visual) shared by or about international students under specific hashtags (e.g., #InternationalStudentsCanada, #PhDLifeCanada, #StudyAbroadCanada, and #GraduateLifeCanada) on X, Instagram, TikTok, and Reddit. These platforms are selected because of their popularity (Instagram and TikTok are often used for visual storytelling, X for real-time updates, and Reddit for anonymous discussions) and affordances (e.g., anonymity on Reddit vs. high visibility on Instagram). Data collection will cover a three-month period, from August to November, when many international students start their studies in September. This study will adopt a qualitative approach using Thematic Analysis (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify, summarize, and interpret key themes in the dataset. TA is well-suited for open-ended, descriptive, and interpretive questions, making it effective in exploring the diverse multimedia content (e.g., text, visuals). Motivations (from U&G) and affordances will serve as analytical lenses during coding, but I will remain open for new themes to emerge inductively. For example, posts emphasizing privacy or hidden identities may reflect the affordance of anonymity.

#### 5. Conclusion

International students face challenges such as cultural adjustment, language barriers, and academic pressures, often turning to social media for support, maintaining home connections, building new relationships, and adapting to their host environment. Balanced use of social media as hybrid spaces is key to fostering adaptation and cultural exchange. U&G relies heavily on self-reported data, which often lacks validation through behavioural methods, reducing the precision of findings (Chen & Peng, 2023; Quan-Haase & Young, 2014). The rapid evolution of social media platforms, with new features and policies changes, further complicates understanding user motivations (Chen & Peng, 2023). Additionally, U&G often overlooks platform-specific factors and affordances which influence engagement (Rathnayake & Winter, 2018). Combining U&G with affordances and integrating subjective measures (e.g., surveys or interviews) with objective data (e.g., usage statistics), offers a more comprehensive understanding of social media use (e.g., Chen & Peng, 2023; Lalmas et al., 2022).

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