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“It keeps me close to my family”: Social media and transnational adaptation among African graduate international students in the United States

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ABSTRACT: *This study examines the role of social media in the adaptation and acculturation experiences of African graduate students in the United States. While research on international students has focused on academic, cultural, and social challenges, limited attention has been given to how digital platforms shape everyday adjustment, particularly among African students. Drawing on social support theory, acculturation theory, and transnational perspectives, this study explores how social media functions within students’ lived experiences of migration. Using a qualitative design, in-depth interviews were conducted with 16 African graduate students from countries such as Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Cameroon, and Sierra Leone at a public U.S. university. Thematic analysis revealed that social media supports family connections, emotional coping, information seeking, and network building. The findings suggest that social media enables ongoing transnational engagement, allowing students to remain connected to home while adapting to new environments, highlighting its central role in contemporary adaptation processes.*

Keywords: social media, African graduate students, adaptation, acculturation, social support, transnationalism, international students

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INTRODUCTION

African students continue to migrate to the United States in pursuit of advanced education and expanded professional opportunities. The United States remains among the leading destinations for international students globally, hosting more than 1.1 million students in recent academic years and accounting for a significant share of globally mobile students (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2025; Migration Policy Institute, 2025). Students are drawn to U.S. institutions because of their global reputation, access to research infrastructure, and opportunities for academic and career advancement (IIE, 2025). However, international student mobility is increasingly shaped by broader structural and policy conditions, including visa restrictions and immigration controls that affect access, mobility, and transnational connections for students from several regions, including parts of Africa (Migration Policy Institute, 2025; U.S. Department of State, 2024).

For many African students, studying in the United States represents both an opportunity and a transition that requires significant cultural, social, and academic adjustment. Research on international students has consistently shown that adapting to a new environment involves navigating unfamiliar institutional systems, building new social networks, and managing the emotional and psychological challenges associated with migration and displacement (Gaitán-Aguilar et al., 2022; Hofhuis et al., 2023; Xin et al., 2025). These processes are often shaped by the availability of social support and the ability to maintain connections across both home and host contexts.

In recent years, scholars have increasingly highlighted the role of digital technologies, particularly social media, in shaping the experiences of migrants and international students. Social media platforms have been shown to facilitate communication across geographic boundaries, support the maintenance of transnational ties, and provide access to information and social networks that can aid adaptation (Shu et al., 2020; Zhao, 2020). Moreover, the ways in which individuals use social media are shaped by their social context and needs, suggesting that digital engagement plays a complex role in processes of adjustment and integration.

This study draws on three complementary theoretical perspectives to examine these dynamics. First, social support theory provides a framework for understanding how individuals access emotional, informational, and instrumental support through their social networks, including those mediated by digital platforms. Second, acculturation theory explains how individuals adapt to new cultural environments while maintaining aspects of their original identity (Berry, 1997). Third, a transnational perspective highlights how migrants sustain connections across national boundaries, allowing them to remain embedded in multiple social and cultural contexts simultaneously (Levitt & Schiller, 2004). Together, these frameworks offer a lens for understanding how social media may shape the experiences of African graduate students navigating life in the United States.

Despite growing research on international students and digital media, few studies have specifically examined how African graduate students use social media within the context of adaptation and acculturation in the United States. Much of the literature treats international students as a homogeneous group, overlooking the distinct experiences of African students shaped by race, nationality, migration history, and structural constraints. To address this gap, this study examines the role of social media in the adaptation and acculturation experiences of African graduate students in the United States. By focusing on students' lived experiences, this study seeks to understand how digital platforms shape their adjustment to academic and social life in a new cultural environment. Specifically, the study is guided by the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** How do African international graduate students use social media in their adaptation to life in the United States?
- **RQ2:** What role does social media play in shaping African international graduate students' acculturation experiences?

Challenges Faced by African International Students in the United States

African students in the United States face a cluster of academic, cultural, social, and racial challenges as they transition to American higher education. Research on African international graduate students has shown that their experiences are shaped not only by ordinary adjustment demands but also by structural conditions within U.S. institutions, including assumptions made by peers and faculty, adjustment problems embedded in campus systems, and conflicts between students' worldviews and dominant institutional norms (Mwangi et al., 2019). More recent studies likewise report that African students often encounter academic and cultural barriers simultaneously rather than as separate issues, making adaptation to U.S. higher education especially complex (Adjei, et al., 2025; Ihuoma et al., 2025).

One recurring challenge in the literature is academic adjustment. African students frequently report difficulty navigating unfamiliar instructional practices, campus communication systems, faculty expectations, and classroom participation norms in the United States (Ihuoma et al., 2025; Mwangi et al., 2019). In a study of Nigerian students in the United States, participants described language-related barriers, culture shock, the challenge of balancing school and work, the high cost of living, and inadequate support systems as key obstacles to their transition (Okpala, 2018). Similarly, research on Ghanaian international students in the American higher education system revealed that students actively negotiated academic and institutional challenges as they adjusted to U.S. campuses (Flournoy, 2018). Studies involving students from Ghana, Nigeria, and Kenya also point to cross-cultural adaptation difficulties tied to academic expectations and everyday campus life (Baffour, 2024).

The second major theme is racialization and exclusion. Several studies have shown that Black African students must adapt not only as international students but also as people who are newly racialized within the U.S. context. Awuor (2021) argued that Black African international students often encounter racism in the

United States in ways that differ from their experiences in their home countries and that these racial experiences influence how they identify with social groups on campus. Mwangi and Fries-Britt (2015) studied Black students at a predominantly White institution and reported that racism, both on and off campus, shaped students' acculturation in negative ways. Similarly, Yaro and Smith (2024) reported that race had mixed but important effects on Black African students' identification with and commitment to predominantly white institutions, even when students were drawn to those institutions for educational opportunity. These findings suggest that African students' transition in the U.S. is not only intercultural but also racialized.

The literature also highlights financial strain, isolation, and limited institutional support as persistent problems. In one earlier but still frequently cited U.S.-based study, financial pressures were identified as the greatest challenge for African international students, followed closely by cultural challenges, with both contributing to homesickness, stress, and alienation and reducing time spent studying and social life (Evivie, 2009). More recent work continues to identify financial difficulties, communication barriers, and uneven access to institutional resources as central obstacles for African students in U.S. colleges (Ihuoma et al., 2025). Country-specific and multicountry studies reinforce this pattern. For example, Nigerian students have reported insufficient support systems and negative emotions linked to transition (Okpala, 2018), whereas studies including students from Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon, and Zambia similarly describe adaptation difficulties tied to social and institutional adjustment (Ekanoye, 2023). These studies suggest that African students' experiences in the United States are shaped by overlapping pressures involving academic transition, racialized encounters, financial constraints, and weak support structures.

Social Media and the Adaptation of International Students

In response to the academic, social, and emotional challenges associated with migration, international students increasingly turn to digital technologies, particularly social media, as resources for navigating life in host countries. Social media platforms have become central to how students maintain relationships, access information, and manage the complexities of cross-cultural adaptation (Yaro & Smith, 2024; Zhao, 2025). Scholars argue that digital communication tools are no longer peripheral but are embedded in the everyday experiences of international students, shaping how they interpret and respond to their environments.

One of the most widely documented roles of social media in the literature is as a source of social support. Studies show that social networking platforms enable international students to maintain strong ties with family and friends in their home countries while also forming new connections in their host environments (Hofhuis et al., 2019; Koech et al., 2025; Zhao, 2025). This dual connectivity allows students to draw on emotional, informational, and practical support, which is critical for coping with stress, loneliness, and uncertainty during the adaptation process (Madge et al., 2019). Maintaining these transnational ties

has been linked to improved psychological well-being and smoother adjustment among international students (Gaitán-Aguilar et al., 2022).

Beyond emotional support, social media also serves as an important tool for information seeking and practical adaptation. International students use digital platforms to access information about academic expectations, housing, transportation, and everyday life in their host countries (Park et al., 2014; Shu et al., 2020). These platforms often function as informal knowledge networks where students share experiences, advice, and resources that are not always readily available through institutional channels. As a result, social media can help reduce uncertainty and facilitate students' ability to navigate unfamiliar systems.

In addition, scholars highlight the role of social media in supporting cultural adaptation and identity negotiation. Digital platforms allow international students to remain connected to their cultural backgrounds while simultaneously engaging with new cultural environments (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Hofhuis et al., 2019). This process enables students to maintain a sense of continuity and belonging across borders, often described as a form of transnational engagement. However, research also suggests that the use of social media can produce mixed outcomes, as strong attachment to home networks may sometimes limit interactions with host communities (Hofhuis et al., 2019).

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on three complementary theoretical perspectives, namely, social support theory, acculturation theory, and transnationalism, to examine how African graduate students use social media to navigate adaptation and acculturation in the U.S. Together, these frameworks provide a multidimensional understanding of how individuals access resources, adjust to new cultural environments, and maintain connections across borders.

Social Support Theory

Social support theory provides a useful framework for understanding how individuals cope with stress and life transitions through their social networks. Early work by Cobb (1976) conceptualized social support as the information that leads individuals to believe that they are cared for, valued, and part of a network of mutual obligation. This idea was further expanded by Cohen and Wills (1985), who identified different forms of support, including emotional, informational, and instrumental support, and argued that these forms of support play a critical role in buffering the effects of stress.

Subsequent research has applied social support theory to digital contexts, demonstrating that social media platforms can serve as important channels through which individuals access support (Madge et al., 2019). For international students, these platforms facilitate communication with family and friends, provide access to advice and resources, and create opportunities for the development of new social networks in host environments. In the present study, social support theory provides an analytical lens for examining how African

graduate students use social media to access emotional, informational, and instrumental support while adapting to life in the U.S. This theory guides our interpretation of how digitally mediated interactions contribute to participants' well-being, problem-solving, and adjustment during their transition to a new cultural and academic environment.

Acculturation Theory

Acculturation theory explains how individuals adapt to new cultural environments following migration. The most widely cited framework is developed by Berry (1997), who conceptualizes acculturation as a process involving changes in cultural patterns resulting from continuous contact between different cultural groups. Berry identifies four acculturation strategies, integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization, on the basis of the extent to which individuals maintain their original culture and engage with the host culture.

This framework has been widely applied to international student populations, where adaptation involves both psychological adjustment (e.g., well-being, stress) and sociocultural adjustment (e.g., navigating everyday life and social interactions) (Ward et al., 2020). In recent years, scholars have extended acculturation theory to include the role of digital communication, suggesting that online interactions can shape how individuals engage with both home and host cultures (Zhao, 2025). In this sense, social media becomes a tool through which individuals negotiate cultural identity and adaptation simultaneously.

In this study, acculturation theory is used to examine how participants negotiate engagement with both their home and host cultures through social media. Rather than assuming that adaptation requires detachment from one's culture of origin, the framework helps explain how participants simultaneously maintain cultural ties while they participate in academic and social life in the U.S.

Transnationalism

The concept of transnationalism provides a broader lens for understanding how migrants sustain connections across national boundaries. Transnationalism was developed in migration studies by scholars such as Schiller et al. (1992), who argued that migrants often live simultaneously in multiple social worlds rather than fully assimilating into a single society. Later, Levitt and Schiller (2004) further developed this concept, emphasizing that migrants maintain social, cultural, economic, and emotional ties across borders.

With the rise of digital technologies, transnational connections have become more immediate and sustained through social media platforms. These platforms allow migrants to participate in family life, cultural practices, and social networks in their home countries while they are physically residing elsewhere. For international students, this means that adaptation does not require complete detachment from home; rather, students can remain embedded in both contexts simultaneously. Social media thus plays a critical role in enabling what scholars

describe as transnational social fields, where individuals maintain overlapping identities and relationships across geographic spaces.

From a transnational perspective, this study examines how participants' everyday digital practices sustain relationships, identities, and a sense of belonging across national borders. This framework provides a basis for understanding how social media enables students to remain connected to their home countries while simultaneously adapting to life in the United States.

METHOD

Methodological Approach

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how African graduate students use social media to navigate adaptation and acculturation in the United States. A qualitative approach is appropriate for examining lived experiences and capturing participants' meanings, perspectives, and interpretations within their social context (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Given the exploratory nature of this study, qualitative inquiry enabled an in-depth understanding of how students engage with digital platforms as part of their everyday adaptation processes.

Participants and Sampling

The participants consisted of 16 African graduate students enrolled at a public university in the United States. The participants represented multiple African countries, including Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon, Congo, Sierra Leone, Senegal, and Kenya, and included both master's and doctoral students ranging in age from 23 to 36 years.

A combination of purposive and snowball sampling was used to recruit participants. Purposive sampling was initially employed to identify African graduate students who met the study's inclusion criteria. These participants were then invited to refer other eligible African graduate students, consistent with the principles of snowball (chain-referral) sampling. Snowball sampling is particularly useful for accessing specialized or hard-to-reach populations through participant referrals (Parker et al., 2019; Noy, 2008). This recruitment strategy facilitated access to participants with varied academic backgrounds, degree programs, and countries of origin while expanding the sample through trusted peer referrals. The demographic characteristics of the participants included in this study are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant (pseudonym) characteristics (N = 16)

Participant (Pseudonym)	Age	Degree	Field of Study
Anna	30	PhD	Public Health
Akan	26	Master's	Communication
Bamileke	27	PhD	English
Ben	24	Master's	Geography
Chukwuka	28	PhD	Chemical Engineering
Ebere	28	PhD	Public Health
Henry	26	Master's	Information Technology
John	27	Master's	Engineering
Kabye	30	PhD	Pharmacy
Nelson	31	PhD	Economics
Sarah	29	PhD	Communication
Stephen	35	PhD	Anthropology
Dika	32	PhD	Social Work
Patrick	36	PhD	Health Education and Behavior
Mercy	29	Master's	Music
Nelly	33	PhD	Psychology

Researcher positionality

Both authors were African graduate students at the university where the study was conducted, which facilitated participant recruitment and rapport during the interviews. To enhance the credibility of the findings, the interviews followed a semistructured guide, participation was voluntary, and member checking was used throughout the study.

Data collection

Data were collected through in depth, semistructured interviews conducted between May and November 2019. Semistructured interviews are widely used in qualitative research because they provide flexibility while allowing researchers to explore participants' experiences in detail (Kallio et al., 2016). Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was conducted on a one-on-one basis to enable participants to express their views freely.

The interview guide focused on participants' experiences adapting to life in the United States and their use of social media in navigating these experiences. Questions explored how participants used digital platforms to maintain relationships, access information, and manage challenges associated with

migration and adaptation. The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent to ensure accuracy.

To enhance credibility, the study employed member checking, in which participants reviewed their transcripts to confirm accuracy and clarify their responses (Carlson, 2010; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Analysis

The interviews were conducted via Zoom, which generated automatic transcripts of each interview. The researchers reviewed and corrected the automatically generated transcripts for accuracy before analysis. The researchers reviewed the transcripts for accuracy and prepared them for analysis in Microsoft Word. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis approach, which involved familiarizing the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report.

Both researchers independently conducted the initial coding of the interview transcripts using a manual coding process. Following the first round of coding, the researchers met to compare and discuss their codes, identify areas of agreement and disagreement, and collaboratively refine the coding framework. Through an iterative process of discussion and consensus, related codes were grouped into broader categories and subsequently organized into themes that captured recurring patterns across participants' experiences. Throughout the analysis, the researchers revisited the transcripts and supporting quotations to ensure that the themes accurately reflected participants' narratives and remained grounded in the data.

The final themes were developed collaboratively and refined through repeated discussions until consensus was reached regarding their meaning, boundaries, and supporting evidence. Representative quotations were then selected to illustrate each theme while preserving participants' anonymity through the use of pseudonyms.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the participating university prior to data collection with the number IRB201901636. All participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

RESULTS

The analysis revealed that social media played a central and multifaceted role in African graduate students' adaptation and acculturation in the United States. Rather than serving only as a communication tool, social media emerged as a critical resource through which participants navigated the emotional, social,

and practical aspects of everyday life. The findings show that participants' use of social media extended beyond basic use, shaping how they experienced distance, connection, and adjustment in a new environment. Five interrelated themes emerged from the data: (1) maintaining transnational copresence; (2) coping and emotional regulation; (3) social media as an informal infrastructure; (4) building digital communities and belonging; and (5) motivation, engagement, and identity work. Collectively, the five themes address both research questions. They illustrate how participants used social media during adaptation (RQ1) and the roles these practices played in shaping their acculturation experiences (RQ2).

Maintaining Transnational Co-Presence

The participants described social media as enabling a sense of “being present” in their home countries despite physical absence. Through constant digital interaction, they were able to sustain relationships, follow events, and participate in family life across borders. This went beyond maintaining contact; it created a form of copresence that reduced the emotional impact of distance. Ebere (28, PhD, Public Health) explained:

Social media helps me stay connected to my roots in a way that feels very real. If I don't go online, I feel completely disconnected because I don't watch the news regularly. Through WhatsApp and Instagram, I know what is happening with my friends and family, and I can talk to them almost every day.

Similarly, Stephen (35, PhD, Anthropology) emphasized how social media allowed him to participate in important family moments despite travel constraints:

There are many things happening back home that I cannot attend, especially because of visa issues and the cost of traveling. However, through social media, I can still be part of those moments. When my family has events, they send videos and pictures and sometimes even call me live. I can see everything as it is happening.

Chukwuka (28, PhD, Chemical Engineering) explained how social media enabled him to remain involved in important family milestones despite being thousands of miles away:

My wife sent me photos when our son turned two through WhatsApp. They had a photo shoot, and I posted the pictures. I was on a video call throughout the celebration, and it felt as if I was there. Without WhatsApp, honestly, I do not know what I would have done.

These findings illustrate how social media enables participants to sustain meaningful relationships with family and friends across national borders, reinforcing the concept of transnationalism. Rather than viewing adaptation as a process of detaching from home, participants described maintaining continuous engagement with their home communities while adjusting to life in the United States. Social media therefore functioned as a bridge that supported both transnational connectedness and adaptation.

Coping and Emotional Regulation

Social media also functioned as an important tool for managing the emotional stress, loneliness, and psychological strain associated with migration. The participants described using digital platforms to regulate their emotions, distract themselves from stress, and maintain a sense of familiarity in an unfamiliar environment. Anna (30, PhD, Public Health) noted the following:

There are times when I feel truly overwhelmed, especially with school and everything occurring at the same time. Sometimes I just go on Instagram and watch videos or listen to music from back home. Even something simple like that helps me calm down.

John (27, Master's, Engineering) similarly described social media as a coping mechanism:

When I feel stressed or alone, I just go online, watch videos, or chat with people. It helps me take my mind off things for a while. You may not even realize it, but those small things help you deal with the pressure. Being here alone is not easy, so having that space online makes a difference.

Dika (32, PhD, Social Work) described the emotional complexity of maintaining constant contact with family through social media:

Although social media gave me emotional support, it also made me depressed sometimes, especially Facebook. Seeing my family every day but knowing I could not be with them was frustrating because my visa had been denied three times. Sometimes, seeing them every day made separation even more difficult.

These findings demonstrate that social media played a complex role in participants' emotional well-being. While most participants described digital platforms as important sources of emotional support and stress relief, Dika's experience illustrates that constant communication with loved ones could also intensify feelings of separation and frustration. Viewed through social support

theory, these findings suggest that social media can simultaneously serve as both a coping resource and a reminder of physical distance.

Social Media as Informal Infrastructure

Participants relied heavily on social media and digital platforms as informal systems for navigating everyday life in the United States. In many cases, these platforms compensated for gaps in institutional support by providing access to practical information and guidance. Henry (26, Master's, Information Technology) explained,

When I first came, I didn't understand how many things worked—transportation, school systems, or even simple things such as where to shop or how to find affordable housing. I used Google, YouTube, and other apps to figure things out. Sometimes I would watch videos just to understand how things are done here.

Similarly, Ben (24, Master's, Geography) described how online communities functioned as resource hubs:

I use apps and social media for almost everything, buses, food, and school information. Sometimes I go to online groups where people share their experiences and explain things. That helps a lot because you are learning from people who have already gone through the same process.

Akan (26, Master's, Communication) explained how digital platforms helped him navigate everyday life in the United States:

I remember when I was looking for a Ghanaian store to buy ingredients for cooking, but I did not know where to find one. I used Groupon to locate nearby African restaurants and stores, and that truly helped me find what I needed.

These findings highlight the role of social media as an important source of informational support. Beyond maintaining relationships, participants relied on digital platforms to navigate unfamiliar academic, social, and everyday environments by accessing practical advice and shared experiences. This shows how social media complemented formal institutional resources during participants' adaptation to life in the U.S.

Building digital communities and belonging

Participants also used social media to create and sustain new social networks within their host environment. Digital communities, particularly those involving

other African and international students, served as spaces of support, interaction, and shared experience. Sarah (29, PhD, Communication) described the following:

We have WhatsApp groups for African students, and that has been very helpful. You can ask questions, find roommates, and obtain information about opportunities. It feels like a support system because people understand what you are going through in a way that others may not.

Nelson (31, PhD, Economics) added the following:

Through social media, I have been able to connect with other Africans and international students. Sometimes it is easier to relate to people who share similar experiences. These groups make you feel like you are not alone, especially when things become difficult.

Bamileke (27, PhD, English) emphasized how social media facilitated both online and offline social interaction:

When we first came here, we used social media to organize the potlucks, fishing trips, and beach outings. We added people to the group, rented a van, and traveled together. Without social media, bringing everyone together like that would not have been possible.

These findings suggest that social media facilitated the development of supportive communities that extended beyond online interaction into meaningful offline relationships. By connecting with other African and international students who shared similar experiences, participants developed a stronger sense of belonging that supported their social and cultural adjustment. This highlights the role of digital communities in fostering adaptation through shared identity and mutual support.

Motivation, Engagement, and Identity Work

Finally, participants described social media as a space for motivation, engagement, and self-reflection. Exposure to content on social media influenced how they viewed themselves, their goals, and their experiences. Anna (30, PhD, Public Health) explained the following:

There was a time I was writing my thesis, and I felt truly tired. I went on Instagram and saw videos of people working hard and achieving things. It motivated me to keep going. It may seem small, but seeing that kind of content reminds you that you can also succeed.

Ebere (28, PhD, Public Health) reflected on broader engagement:

Social media is not just for connecting with people. It also keeps me engaged with what is happening in the world and back home. I follow discussions, trends, and sometimes even advocacy issues. It helps me feel like I am still part of a bigger community.

Kabye (30, PhD, Pharmacy) highlighted the importance of online communities in reinforcing her identity and sense of belonging:

I joined a Facebook group called *PhD Moms*. Reading the posts every day gave me a sense of identity because I realized I was not alone. There were many women who had similar experiences, and I still enjoyed being part of that group.

These findings suggest that social media supported participants' motivation, identity development, and sense of belonging throughout their adaptation process. Exposure to encouraging content and participation in online communities reinforced both personal and professional identities while helping participants remain connected to broader social and cultural conversations. From an acculturation perspective, these experiences illustrate how digital platforms supported participants in navigating multiple identities across home and host contexts.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how African graduate students use social media to navigate adaptation and acculturation in the U.S. The findings show that social media is more than a communication tool; it is embedded in how participants manage their everyday lives, relationships, and sense of self within a new cultural environment. Across the data, social media functioned as a critical resource through which emotional support, practical knowledge, and social connection were negotiated. These findings reinforce growing scholarship suggesting that digital technologies have become integral to international students' adaptation rather than merely facilitating communication (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Hofhuis et al., 2023; Xin et., 2025; Zhao, 2025).

One of the key contributions of this study is that social media functioned as a critical source of social support throughout participants' adaptation to life in the U.S. Consistent with social support theory (Cobb, 1976; Cohen & Wills, 1985), participants used digital platforms to access emotional, informational, and instrumental support. Emotional support was evident in participants' continued communication with family and friends, whereas informational support emerged through the use of social media to locate housing, transportation, African grocery stores, and academic resources. Online communities also provided practical advice and shared experiences. These findings align with those of previous studies

showing that digital platforms facilitate social support and adjustment among international students (Madge et al., 2019; Shu et al., 2020) and suggest that social media extends traditional support networks across national borders, enabling participants to access support that might otherwise have been unavailable during their transition.

The findings also provide further insight into Berry's (1997) Acculturation Theory by suggesting that many participants adopted an integration orientation. Rather than abandoning their home cultures or remaining socially isolated, participants maintained close relationships with family and friends while simultaneously adapting to academic, social, and professional life in the United States. Social media enabled participants to preserve their cultural identities while building relationships and accessing resources that supported adjustment within the host society. These findings are consistent with those of previous studies showing that digital communication enables international students to negotiate home and host cultural identities simultaneously (Hofhuis et al., 2019; Ward et al., 2001; Zhao, 2025). This suggests that social media did not hinder integration but instead supported participants' ability to engage with both cultural contexts simultaneously.

The findings also strengthen transnational perspectives by illustrating how participants sustained transnational social fields through everyday digital practices. Rather than simply communicating across borders, participants participated in family celebrations through video calls, exchanged photographs and messages, followed events in their home countries, and engaged in online communities that reinforced cultural ties. These interactions enabled participants to remain socially and emotionally embedded in their home communities while building new relationships in the United States. These findings illustrate Levitt and Glick Schiller's (2004) concept of transnational social fields, in which migrants remain socially embedded across national borders rather than shifting exclusively from one society to another.

Another important finding is the role of social media as an informal infrastructure for adaptation. Participants consistently relied on digital platforms to solve practical problems and navigate everyday life through peer-generated advice and shared experiences. This reliance highlights gaps in institutional support systems, as participants often turned to digital spaces for more immediate, relevant, and context-specific guidance than was available through formal channels. Similar findings have been reported among international students who use online communities to access practical information and reduce uncertainty during adjustment (Madge et al., 2019; Park et al., 2014; Zhao, 2025). These findings suggest that adaptation is shaped not only by formal institutional support but also by informal, student-driven digital networks that respond more directly to everyday needs.

The findings also highlight the emotional role of social media in coping and regulation. Participants used digital platforms to manage stress, loneliness, and the pressures associated with migration and academic life by maintaining contact with loved ones and engaging with familiar cultural content. These practices provided emotional grounding and continuity during adaptation. Moreover, one

participant described feeling more distressed because constant exposure to family emphasized the physical distance separating them, suggesting that social media may also intensify feelings of homesickness. These findings support previous research showing that social media engagement can both enhance well-being and complicate adaptation when home country ties become emotionally overwhelming (Gaitán-Aguilar et al., 2022; Hofhuis et al., 2019; Hofhuis et al., 2023).

In addition, social media shaped participants' motivation, engagement, identity, and sense of belonging. Exposure to inspirational content encouraged persistence, while online communities connected participants with other African and international students who shared similar experiences. These interactions reinforced participants' sense of purpose, reduced feelings of isolation, and enabled them to engage with issues affecting both their home countries and the wider global community. These findings are consistent with those of previous research highlighting the role of social media in identity negotiation, community building, and social connectedness among international students (Madge et al., 2019; Hofhuis et al., 2019; Shu et al., 2020).

Overall, these findings demonstrate that social media served as more than a communication tool; it functioned as a mechanism through which African graduate students accessed social support, negotiated cultural identities, and sustained transnational relationships during their adaptation to life in the U.S. Viewed collectively through social support theory, acculturation theory, and transnationalism, the findings suggest that adaptation is best understood as a dynamic and relational process in which students simultaneously engage with both home and host contexts. Rather than replacing one cultural environment with another, participants used digital technologies to maintain continuity with their home communities while developing the knowledge, relationships, and resources needed to thrive in their new environment. This integrated theoretical perspective highlights the important role of digital media in shaping international student adaptation (Berry, 1997; Levitt & Schiller, 2004; Zhao, 2025).

An important consideration is that these interviews were conducted in 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent changes in international student mobility, digital communication, and social media use. Although these contextual shifts may have influenced students' experiences, the primary contribution of this study is not to document platform-specific behaviors but to illuminate the broader role of social media in providing social support, maintaining transnational connections, and facilitating adaptation. As such, the findings offer a valuable prepandemic perspective that provides a foundation for future research examining how these processes have evolved over time.

Implications for Research and Practice

The findings of this study have important implications for both scholarship and institutional practice. First, this study underscores the need for international student research to more explicitly account for the role of digital technologies in shaping adaptation processes. While the literature acknowledges social media use,

this study demonstrates that it functions as a central mechanism of support, connection, and navigation, particularly for students from underrepresented regions such as Africa. Future research should continue to explore how digital platforms intersect with race, nationality, and structural constraints to shape international student experiences.

Second, the findings point to the need for universities to rethink how they support international students. Institutions should consider integrating digital platforms into their support systems by creating online communities, peer networks, and accessible information hubs that reflect students' actual practices. Rather than viewing social media as external to institutional support, universities can leverage these platforms to enhance engagement, communication, and resource sharing.

Third, this study highlights the importance of providing more targeted support for African international students. Participants' experiences were shaped not only by general adaptation challenges but also by racialization, distance from family, and structural barriers such as visa restrictions. Institutions should recognize these unique experiences and develop culturally responsive support systems that address both academic and social needs.

Finally, this study suggests that adaptation should be reconceptualized as a technology-mediated and transnational process. For contemporary international students, adjustment does not require detachment from home contexts but involves navigating multiple, overlapping social worlds. Recognizing this complexity can lead to more nuanced approaches to research and practice that better reflect the realities of international student life.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. First, the interviews were conducted in 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent changes in international student experiences, immigration policies, and social media use. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as reflecting a prepandemic context rather than current patterns of adaptation. Nevertheless, because this study examines the broader social functions of digital media in supporting adaptation, transnational connections, and social support, its findings remain theoretically relevant and provide a useful baseline for future research.

Second, the study included 16 African graduate students from a single public university in the United States. While the findings provide rich insights into participants' experiences, they may not be transferable to all African international students or institutional contexts.

Finally, the study relied on self-reported interview data, which may have been influenced by participants' recollections and interpretations. However, the use of member checking and thematic analysis enhanced the credibility of the findings.

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