Article

Check for updates OPEN ACCESS

*Journal of International Students*
Volume 16, Issue 20 (2026), pp. 1-18
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)
jistudents.org
DOI: https://doi.org/10.32674/3af5et66

# Assembling Support: A Practice-Based Study of Korean Exchange Students in a Non-Urban U.S. University

**Jungsuk Woo [1]*, Hyokju Maeng [2], Hyunjin Kwon [2], Jihyun Woo [2]**

[1] Newcastle University; jungsuk.woo@newcastle.ac.uk
[2] Eastern New Mexico University; hyokju.maeng@enmu.edu,
Eastern New Mexico University; hyunjin.kwon@enmu.edu,
Eastern New Mexico University; jihyun.woo@enmu.edu
* Correspondence: jungsuk.woo@newcastle.ac.uk

## ABSTRACT

*This study examines how international students organize social support in a non-urban campus environment shaped by spatial constraints and limited institutional resources. Focusing on Korean exchange students at a U.S. university, it reframes social support as a process that emerges through everyday practices rather than as a static resource or outcome. Drawing on Social Practice Theory, the study analyzes how support is produced through the interaction of materials (e.g., transportation infrastructure and digital platforms), competencies (e.g., coordination and information-seeking), and meanings (e.g., independence and relational responsibility). The findings show that support is not readily available within the institutional environment but is actively constructed through ongoing practices involving information-seeking, mobility coordination, relationship-building, and digitally mediated communication. These practices are shaped by spatial conditions and require continuous adjustment and interaction with others. The study contributes to international student research by conceptualizing support as an emergent, practice-based process shaped by spatial constraints and digital mediation, and by highlighting how non-urban contexts actively structure the organization of support in everyday life.*

**Keywords:** international students, social support, non-urban higher education, social practice, digital communication, student mobility

© Author(s), 2026. Published by Star Scholars Press.
This article is distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

## INTRODUCTION

International student mobility has increasingly expanded beyond major metropolitan universities to regional and non-urban institutions, where students may encounter limited transportation, dispersed services, and fewer opportunities for routine social interaction (Aguiar et al., 2024; Brooks & Waters, 2011; Holloway & Jöns, 2012; Olt & Tao, 2020). These conditions make everyday life more dependent on planning, coordination, and relational work than in resource-dense urban settings (Kenyon, 2011; Lertora et al., 2017; Olt & Tao, 2020). Yet much of the literature on international students still emphasizes adjustment, integration, and institutional support in ways that do not fully explain how support is assembled in daily life under spatial constraints.

Research on international student adjustment has traditionally focused on psychological adaptation, academic performance, intercultural competence, experiences of discrimination, and access to institutional resources (Andrade, 2006; Lee & Rice, 2007**;** Sawir et al., 2008; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Wu et al., 2015; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Within this body of work, social support is commonly understood as informational, emotional, and practical assistance that facilitates well-being and adjustment (Brisset et al., 2010; Cohen & Wills, 1985; House, 1981; Ye, 2006). Recent studies similarly show that social support, academic support, structured interaction, belonging, and institutional services matter for international students' well-being and adjustment (Anani & Apambila, 2026; Beri et al., 2025; Caligiuri et al., 2020; Marangell & Baik, 2022). However, this literature often treats support as something students receive, perceive, or access, offering less insight into how support is produced through everyday interaction, coordination, and negotiation (Collins, 2010).

This gap is especially important in non-urban contexts, where support is not simply available or unavailable but must often be assembled through information seeking, mobility coordination, relationship maintenance, and digitally mediated communication. In such settings, students may rely on messaging platforms, online search tools, and peer networks to manage transportation, shopping, services, and social connection (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Hofhuis et al., 2023; Pang, 2020). Digital tools therefore function not only as communication channels but also as part of the practical infrastructure through which support becomes possible (Komito, 2011; Madianou, 2016).

To address this gap, the present study examines how Korean exchange students at a non-urban U.S. university construct social support as an emergent practice rather than a fixed resource. Exchange students represent a specific form of international student mobility because their stay is temporary and their institutional integration may differ from that of degree-seeking international students. These conditions make everyday coordination particularly visible. Drawing on Social Practice Theory, the study conceptualizes support as produced through the interaction of materials, competencies, and meanings in everyday life (Reckwitz, 2002; Shove et al., 2012; Warde, 2005). From this perspective, international student adjustment is explained not only by access to institutional services but also by how students assemble support across spatial and digital conditions. The study addresses the following research questions:

The following research questions were proposed:

1. How do international students describe the forms of support they rely on in everyday life?
2. How are these forms of support shaped by spatial constraints?
3. How does digital mediation shape the organization of these practices?

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### Social Support in International Student Research

Research on international student adjustment consistently identifies social support as a central factor in facilitating adaptation and well-being (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Ye, 2006; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Social support is commonly categorized into informational, emotional, and practical forms, with

some studies also distinguishing institutional support (Brisset et al., 2010; Cohen & Wills, 1985; House, 1981). These forms are associated with academic success, psychological adjustment, and social integration.

Recent studies further reinforce the importance of support for international students while also showing the need to examine how support is experienced in specific institutional and cultural contexts. Beri et al. (2025) found that social and academic support were positively associated with students' well-being and emphasized the importance of culturally sensitive support systems. Caligiuri et al. (2020) showed that structured interaction can foster international students' sense of belonging and perceived social support. Marangell and Baik (2022) highlighted international students' own suggestions for improving university support, particularly through better learning experiences and a stronger sense of belonging. Anani and Apambila (2026) similarly showed that students' perceptions of university support services shape their academic and social adjustment.

Much of the existing research conceptualizes support as a resource available to students or provided by institutions, emphasizing availability and access and often operationalizing support in terms of perceived availability or frequency of use (Zhang & Goodson, 2011). This perspective treats support as something that can be possessed, accessed, or delivered. Although this approach has been valuable for identifying the importance of support, it offers less insight into how support is produced through everyday interaction, coordination, and negotiation. Processes of coordination, dependency, and mutual adjustment therefore remain underdeveloped, and support often appears as a stable input into adjustment rather than as an outcome of ongoing activity (Thoits, 2011).

**Everyday Life and Practice**

Recent research has examined everyday and place-based dimensions of student mobility, including university location, mobility, and routine activities (Aguiar et al., 2024; Holdsworth, 2009; Holton & Riley, 2013). These studies show that adjustment unfolds through repeated engagement with practical challenges, where activities such as transportation, food access, communication, and service navigation require ongoing coordination and adaptation.

Social Practice Theory provides a framework for analyzing these processes. Social life is constituted through routinized activities that integrate materials, competencies, and meanings (Reckwitz, 2002; Shove et al., 2012; Warde, 2005). Materials refer to physical and technological resources, competencies in skills and know-how, and meanings to shared understandings that guide action. From this perspective, everyday activities are not simply individual responses to difficulty; they are structured practices reproduced over time through which individuals coordinate resources, relationships, and knowledge.

Applying this perspective to international student support shifts attention from support as something students receive to support as something that becomes available through practice. In this view, asking for information, arranging transportation, maintaining relationships, and using digital tools are not separate background activities. They are everyday practices through which support is generated, negotiated, and sustained. Social support is therefore produced within practice rather than existing outside it, shifting attention from individual attributes or institutional provision to the organization of action.

**Spatial Context and Non-Urban Environments**

Research on international students has focused primarily on urban institutions, where access to transportation, services, and social networks is relatively dense (Holloway & Jöns, 2012; Holton & Riley, 2013). In contrast, non-urban contexts involve limited transportation, restricted services, and dispersed infrastructures (Kenyon, 2011; Lertora et al., 2017; Olt & Tao, 2020). Geographic location plays a key role in shaping access to resources and everyday experience (Holdsworth, 2009), affecting how students move, access services, and participate in social life (Kenyon, 2011). These spatial conditions actively structure possibilities for interaction and support and are associated with challenges such as isolation, mobility constraints, and limited institutional provision (Lertora et al., 2017; Olt & Tao, 2020).

Spatial constraints shape what actions are possible and how they must be coordinated. Activities such as transportation, shopping, and service access require planning, negotiation, and reliance on others, increasing dependence on informal networks. For exchange students, these spatial conditions may be especially consequential because their stay is temporary and their time to develop local knowledge, institutional familiarity, and stable support networks are limited. Spatial conditions therefore function as structuring conditions of practice, shaping the timing, sequencing, and coordination of everyday activities and influencing how and when support emerges.

**Digital Communication and Mediated Support**

Digital communication has been widely recognized as an important resource for maintaining social connections and accessing information, particularly among mobile populations and international students (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Hofhuis et al., 2023; Pang, 2020). While often treated as supplementary, digital technologies can become embedded in everyday practices of coordination and support, especially where physical access to services and networks is limited.

Digital communication plays a central role in international student experience by supporting relationship maintenance, information access, perceived social support, and everyday coordination (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Hofhuis et al., 2023; Pang, 2020). Students use digital tools to maintain relationships, access information, and coordinate activities across distance. Messaging platforms, search tools, and online networks support everyday organization. Rather than functioning only as communication channels, these tools operate as material components of practice, enabling coordination, facilitating information sharing, and extending access to networks beyond immediate physical environments.

Digital mediation shapes how practices are organized by influencing who can be reached, how quickly coordination can occur, and how information circulates (Komito, 2011). It reduces barriers to requesting assistance while also depending on participation in shared communication spaces. In non-urban environments, digital mediation may partially compensate for spatial constraints, but it does not remove them. Instead, digital tools become part of the practical infrastructure through which students organize information, mobility, and relationships. Digital mediation thus operates within practice, reshaping the organization of everyday activities and the conditions under which support is produced (Madianou, 2016).

**Research Gap**

Existing research addresses social support, everyday experience, spatial context, and digital communication, but these strands are often developed separately (Collins, 2010). Social support is frequently treated as a resource, everyday life is examined without fully theorizing support, and digital communication is analyzed independently from spatial conditions. This separation limits understanding of how support is constructed in practice and how spatial constraints and digital mediation interact in shaping everyday activities.

For international student research, this gap matters because support does not become meaningful only through its formal availability. It becomes meaningful through the everyday practices by which students locate information, coordinate mobility, build relationships, and respond to institutional limitations. Existing studies have shown that support, belonging, and institutional services matter for international students' well-being and adjustment (Anani & Apambila, 2026; Beri et al., 2025; Caligiuri et al., 2020; Marangell & Baik, 2022). However, less attention has been given to how students organize support in daily life when spatial and institutional resources are limited.

This study addresses this gap by examining how social support is produced through everyday practices shaped by spatial constraints and digital mediation. Rather than treating support as a pre-existing resource, the study conceptualizes support as an outcome of practice that emerges through repeated acts of information-seeking, mobility coordination, relationship-building, and digitally mediated communication.

**Conceptual Framework of the Study**

This study draws on Social Practice Theory to conceptualize social support as a process produced through everyday practices. Social Practice Theory understands social phenomena as constituted through routinized activities that integrate materials, competencies, and meanings (Reckwitz, 2002; Shove et al., 2012; Warde, 2005). This perspective shifts attention from individual attributes or institutional provision to the organization of practices through which social life is performed, with practices understood as structured configurations reproduced over time.

From this perspective, social support is not a static resource but is produced through repeated activities in which individuals coordinate people, tools, and knowledge. Everyday activities such as arranging transportation, accessing services, shopping, and communication are treated as practices through which support is generated and sustained.

Practice is constituted through the interaction of materials, competencies, and meanings. Materials include physical infrastructure and digital tools; competencies refer to skills such as coordination and information seeking; and meanings refer to shared understandings such as reciprocity and norms of help-seeking.

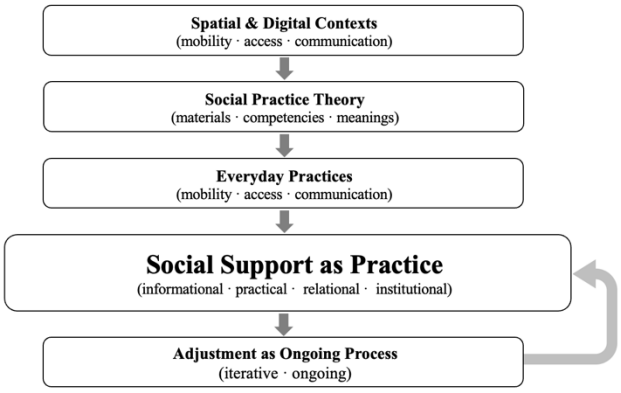
Within this framework, spatial conditions and digital mediation shape how practices are organized. Non-urban environments involve limited mobility and dispersed infrastructures (Hillman, 2016), while digital tools function as material elements that enable coordination, information seeking, and relationship maintenance (Hofhuis et al., 2023; Pang, 2020). These conditions influence the timing, sequencing, and coordination of everyday activities.

Social support is conceptualized as a layered outcome of these practices, including informational, practical, relational, and institutional forms (Cohen & Wills, 1985; House, 1981). These are analytic distinctions that emerge through practice, and a single practice may generate multiple forms of support. International student adjustment is understood as emerging from how students assemble and sustain these practices. Adjustment is an ongoing process unfolding through participation in practices shaped by spatial constraints and digital mediation. In this sense, social support is not an external input but the medium through which adjustment is enacted.

Applications of Social Practice Theory highlight how practices are shaped by interactions among materials, competencies, and meanings across domains (Blue et al., 2016). This study applies this approach to examine how support is produced through engagement with everyday conditions, with practices understood as routinized, socially shared configurations rather than isolated responses. Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework, showing how social support is produced through everyday practices shaped by spatial conditions and digital mediation and how these practices contribute to adjustment as an ongoing process.

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual Framework: A Practice-Based Model of Social Support in Non-Urban Contexts*



## RESEARCH METHOD

### Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to examine how international students construct social support through everyday practices in a geographically isolated campus environment, with particular attention to digitally mediated communication. The case is bounded by a single public university in a non-urban area of the United States, where limited transportation and restricted access to services shape students' daily experiences.

A qualitative approach was appropriate for capturing how participants described their everyday activities, including how they accessed information, coordinated with others, and managed practical constraints. Digital communication is treated as part of the practices through which students navigated everyday life rather than as a separate variable. The study is interpretive in purpose and does not aim to produce generalizable claims, but rather to offer a contextually grounded account of how support is enacted and sustained through everyday practices within a specific institutional and spatial setting. This design is consistent with qualitative case study approaches that seek to understand context-specific processes in depth (Creswell, 2013) and follows principles of bounded case study research (Yin, 2018).

### Participants and Data Collection

The study included eight Korean exchange students who had completed a semester at the host university. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling via email invitations sent to students who had recently completed their exchange program (Patton, 2015). All participants had prior experience studying at urban universities in South Korea and identified as female, providing a consistent point of comparison between urban and non-urban study environments. While all participants identified as female, gender was not treated as an analytic category; participants were selected based on their shared exchange status and exposure to a common institutional environment. Participant characteristics, including exchange terms, academic standing, and fields of study, are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Participant Characteristics and Exchange Terms*

| Exchange Term | Academic Standing | Field of Study | Participant ID |
|---|---|---|---|
| Fall 2022 | Senior | English Literature and Culture / Spanish | P2 |
| Spring 2023 | Junior | International Trade / Advertising, PR, and Branding | P5 |
| Fall 2023 | Junior | English Literature and Translation | P1 |
| Spring 2024 | Senior | Central Asian Studies / English0Korean Interpretation and Translation | P6 |
| Fall 2024 | Junior | English Interpretation and Translation / International Trade | P7 |
| Fall 2024 | Junior | English Language and Culture / National Leadership Studies | P8 |
| Spring 2025 | Senior | English Literature and Translation / Political Science and Diplomacy | P4 |
| Fall 2025 | Senior | Public Administration / BRICs Studies | P3 |

Data was collected through written responses to open-ended questions administered online. Participants were invited to reflect on their everyday experiences, including how they accessed information, managed daily activities, and relied on different forms of support. This format enabled extended, self-paced accounts and was particularly suited to capturing retrospective reflections on routine practices, as well as accommodating the geographic dispersion of participants following program completion. Because the study focused on recurring patterns of everyday coordination rather than real-time interaction, written responses

were appropriate for eliciting participants' reflective accounts of repeated practices across their exchange experiences.

Brief one-on-one follow-up communication was conducted via virtual meetings, when needed, to clarify ambiguous responses and confirm participants' intended meanings. These interactions were limited in scope and focused on supporting accurate interpretation rather than expanding the dataset. To minimize potential bias and reduce social desirability effects, follow-up interactions were conducted by research team members who had no prior interaction with participants.

**Translation and Data Preparation**

Responses were provided in Korean or English. Korean responses were initially translated using AI-assisted tools and subsequently reviewed and refined by the research team to ensure accuracy and preserve contextual meaning. Translation was treated as part of the interpretive process rather than a purely technical procedure (Temple & Young, 2004).

Each translated segment was checked against the original text to maintain contextual meaning and nuance, and interpretations were discussed within the research team when meaning depended on context or phrasing. Finalized English transcripts were compiled into a single dataset for analysis, with attention to preserving context-dependent meaning rather than literal equivalence.

**Data Analysis**

Data was analyzed using an inductive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019), focusing on how participants described everyday activities and associated forms of support. The analysis proceeded in several stages. First, all responses were read multiple times to develop familiarity with the data. Initial codes were generated inductively to capture key aspects of participants' accounts, including transportation, access to information, communication practices, and coordination with others (Saldaña, 2016). Second, codes were compared across participants and grouped into broader categories through iterative analysis. These categories were organized in relation to different forms of support (informational, practical, relational, and institutional) as they appeared in participants' descriptions of everyday life.

The analysis was interpretive rather than statistical, aiming to understand how participants organized their experiences rather than measure frequency or test hypotheses. Analytic memos were maintained to document coding decisions and theme development, providing an audit trail for transparency (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interpretations were discussed within the research team to enhance analytic consistency and reflexivity (Tracy, 2010). Follow-up communication with participants also provided a limited form of member validation by allowing clarification of intended meanings.

Although the analysis was inductive, interpretation was informed by a social practice perspective, particularly in examining how materials, competencies, and meanings were configured in participants' accounts. This theoretical lens was applied after initial coding to interpret how everyday activities became organized as support practices, rather than impose predetermined categories on the data**.** Examples of coding and thematic development are presented in Table 2, illustrating the analytic process linking initial codes to broader themes.

**Table 2**
*Example of Coding and Theme Development*

| Participant Excerpt | Initial Code | Support Type | Theme |
|---|---|---|---|
| "I didn't know how to get from the airport to the school." | Information uncertainty | Informational | Informational support under spatial constraint |
| "There was no public transportation, so I had to rely on friends." | Transportation limitation | Practical | Practical support and mobility constraints |
| "I had to ask others for help even for simple things." | Reliance on others | Relational | Relational support and interdependence |
| "Group chats helped me arrange things quickly." | Digital coordination | Informational / Practical | Digitally mediated support practices |
| "The school didn't provide enough information." | Institutional gap | Institutional | Institutional support limitations |

**Ethical Considerations**

All procedures followed ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. The research protocol was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the authors' institution (IRB Protocol #2526035). Participants were informed of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Information consent was obtained prior to data collection. All responses were anonymized before analysis, and participant codes (P1–P8) are used in reporting. The research team had no direct evaluation relationship with participants.

**Methodological Considerations**

This study has several limitations. The sample was limited to eight participants from a single institution, and all participants identified as female. While gender was not treated as an analytic category, future research could examine how gender intersects with spatial constraints and the organization of support.

Data was collected through retrospective written responses, which limited opportunities for real-time probing. Although written responses did not capture practices as they unfolded in real time, they provided reflective accounts of recurring patterns of coordination, dependence, and adaptation across participants' exchange experiences.

Follow-up communication was used to clarify responses but was not intended to generate additional in-depth narratives. The focus on a single non-urban university also constrains the transferability of the findings. Despite these limitations, the study provides a contextually grounded account of how support is enacted through everyday practices under conditions of spatial constraint and digital mediation.

## FINDINGS

The findings show that support in the non-urban campus environment was not simply accessed as a pre-existing resource. Rather, it was assembled through repeated practices in which participants located information, coordinated mobility, relied on relationships, and used digital tools to manage everyday life. Across the four themes, support emerged through interactions among material conditions, practical competencies, and meanings attached to independence, dependence, and belonging.

**Informational Constraints and Support Practices**

Participants consistently described limited access to information as one of the most immediate challenges in their everyday lives at the host institution. Rather than encountering clearly structured or easily navigable systems, they faced situations in which even basic tasks required active effort to locate, interpret, and verify information. This pattern can be understood as informational constraints shaping how

support is accessed and organized in everyday practice. Several participants emphasized that uncertainty began before arrival. P1 explained that "I didn't know how to get from the airport to the school, and it made me anxious," highlighting the absence of basic logistical guidance at a critical transition point. P2 similarly noted that "I didn't realize how important it would be to have a driver's license until I arrived," indicating a lack of context-specific information about transportation systems in a non-urban environment.

These constraints continued after arrival and extended into routine activities. P3 described that "I had to ask others even for things that seemed basic," suggesting that everyday tasks required interaction rather than independent action. P4 likewise explained that "I often had to double-check things by asking people around me," reflecting the need to verify information across multiple sources before acting. In these accounts, informational constraints were not only cognitive but also practical. They shaped when students had to pause, ask, and reorganize their activities before they could proceed. Information was not something that could be simply retrieved; it had to be negotiated through interaction.

Participants responded by developing practices centered on seeking, confirming, and coordinating information. These practices often involved asking peers, comparing responses, and using informal channels to verify details. Informational support, in this sense, did not exist as a predefined resource but was assembled through ongoing interaction within a non-urban setting where distance and limited services made place-specific knowledge particularly consequential. From a practice perspective, informational support emerged through the interaction of limited institutional materials, information-seeking competencies, and shared meanings around asking and verification.

**Mobility and Practical Support**

Participants described mobility as a central condition shaping how they managed everyday activities at the host institution. The absence of public transportation and limited access to alternative options meant that routine tasks required coordination with others rather than independent movement. This pattern can be understood as mobility constraints shaping practical support through coordinated action.

Several participants emphasized that mobility limitations structured their daily routines. P4 noted that "There was no way to go anywhere without a car," indicating that movement beyond campus depended on access to others' resources. P5 explained that "I had to arrange everything beforehand if I wanted to go somewhere," showing how even simple activities required advance planning and coordination. Participants responded by developing practices centered on scheduling and coordination. P6 described that "we had to ask each other and adjust our schedules to make it work," illustrating how transportation was collectively organized rather than individually accessed. These arrangements required ongoing communication, negotiation, and flexibility across participants.

Mobility itself became something that had to be produced through shared planning and access to resources rather than functioning as an individual capacity. Access to cars, time, and willing participants formed the conditions under which movement became possible. Although limited institutional transportation was available, participants described it as insufficient for meeting everyday needs. As a result, informal coordination remained central to how mobility was managed. Practical support, therefore, was not accessed as a stable service but was organized through shared efforts shaped by mobility constraints. Mobility support was therefore produced through the alignment of material access, coordination competencies, and the relational meanings attached to requesting and sharing rides.

**Relational Interdependence**

Participants' accounts reflected a shift in how they understood and enacted independence in the context of limited mobility and access to resources. Rather than maintaining independence as an individual condition, participants described increasing reliance on others as part of managing everyday life. This pattern can be understood as the emergence of relational interdependence. Several participants noted that they initially attempted to handle tasks independently. P1 explained that "I tried to solve things on my own at first, but it was difficult to do everything alone here," indicating a mismatch between prior expectations

and the conditions of the host environment. This shift was also described in relation to social relationships. P2 noted that "I became more comfortable asking others, and it helped me connect with people," suggesting that reliance on others contributed to relationship-building rather than representing a limitation. These changes were not described as abstract shifts in attitude but as changes in everyday practices of asking, responding, and spending time together.

Participants also described specific sources of support that extended beyond individual tasks. P3 explained that "having someone who understood our situation made things much easier," referring to relationships that provided both practical guidance and emotional reassurance. These interactions contributed to a sense of stability in an unfamiliar environment. Across these accounts, reliance on others did not appear as a temporary adjustment but as a recurring feature of everyday life. Independence, in this context, was not abandoned but reconfigured as something enacted through relationships and coordination with others. These accounts show how the meaning of independence was reconfigured through repeated practices of asking, responding, and coordinating with others.

**Digital Mediation and Institutional Gaps**

Digital communication was consistently described as a key resource in managing everyday life, particularly in contexts where institutional support was limited or unclear. Participants used messaging platforms and online tools to access information, coordinate activities, and maintain connections. This pattern can be understood as digitally mediated support practices emerging in response to institutional gaps.

Participants emphasized the role of group-based communication in reducing uncertainty. P6 explained that "it was the fastest way to figure things out when we didn't know what to do," highlighting the immediacy of peer-based information sharing. P7 noted that "we used group chats to arrange rides and confirm plans quickly," illustrating how digital tools facilitated coordination across participants. These practices were closely connected to limitations in formal institutional support. These institutional gaps included both limited detail in pre-arrival information and insufficient ongoing guidance related to transportation and everyday logistics. P2 suggested that "if there had been more detailed information beforehand, it would have been easier," indicating that support structures did not fully address the practical realities of the setting.

Digital communication also supports reflective engagement with experiences. P2 described that "writing about my experiences helped me understand what I was going through," suggesting that digital platforms functioned not only as tools for coordination but also as spaces for interpretation and meaning making. Across these accounts, digital communication did not operate as a separate domain but as part of the infrastructure through which support was organized. These practices were shaped by the interaction between spatial constraints, institutional limitations, and available communication tools. Digital tools functioned as material elements of practice, enabling participants to coordinate information, mobility, and relationships under conditions of institutional incompleteness.

## DISCUSSION

Across the findings, support was produced through configurations of materials, competencies, and meanings. Transportation systems, digital platforms, and institutional information shaped what was possible; coordination and information-seeking shaped how students acted; and meanings of independence, dependence, and relational responsibility shaped how support was interpreted.

**Reframing Support as Practice**

The findings of this study suggest that social support is not best understood as a stable resource that students possess or receive. Rather, it is produced through ongoing engagement with everyday situations shaped by the conditions of the host environment. Participants did not encounter support as something readily available. Instead, they organized it through repeated interaction, coordination, and adjustment.

Informational access, mobility, and relationships were not separate domains but interconnected aspects of everyday activity through which support was assembled.

This perspective shifts the analytical focus from support as a fixed resource to support as a process, complicating dominant approaches in international student research that emphasize access to resources or institutional provision (Beri et al., 2025; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). In contexts where such structures are limited, support is not simply accessed but actively produced through practice. The point is not that coordination itself equals support, but that support emerges when coordination enables students to act, adapt, and maintain everyday life.

**Material Conditions and the Structuring of Support**

The findings show that material conditions played a defining role in shaping how support was organized. Geographic isolation, limited transportation, and restricted access to services structured what participants could do and how they organized everyday activities. From a practice perspective, these conditions can be understood as material elements that shape possible forms of action (Reckwitz, 2002; Shove et al., 2012). The absence of accessible transportation did not only restrict mobility but reorganized everyday life by requiring participants to coordinate with others, plan in advance, and adjust activities based on available resources (Kenyon, 2011; Lertora et al., 2017).

Digital communication also functioned as a material component of support. Messaging platforms enabled coordination and information exchange, partially compensating for spatial limitations. These tools were not supplementary but integral to how support was organized, particularly where physical access to services and social networks was constrained (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014).

**Competencies of Coordination and Everyday Adaptation**

Participants' experiences highlight the importance of competencies in organizing support, including the ability to ask for help, coordinate schedules, interpret incomplete information, and navigate unfamiliar systems. These competencies were not pre-existing but developed through repeated engagement with everyday challenges. Participants learned how to identify relevant sources of support, initiate interaction, and coordinate with others to sustain everyday activities.

This challenges models of international student adjustment that emphasize independence and self-sufficiency (Zhang & Goodson, 2011). In this context, adaptation did not involve becoming more autonomous in an individual sense but developing the ability to operate within interdependent arrangements. Asking for help, rather than signaling dependency, functioned as a necessary and effective competence.

These patterns also reflect broader dynamics identified in research on mobility and inequality, where access to movement and resources is unevenly distributed and shaped by social and spatial conditions (Farrugia, 2016). The need to coordinate mobility and rely on others is therefore not simply an individual challenge but part of a broader structuring of opportunities and constraints that shapes how everyday practices are organized.

**Reconfiguring the Meaning of Independence**

Participants' accounts indicate that the meaning of independence was reshaped through experience. Independence was no longer understood as the ability to act alone but as the ability to manage relationships and coordinate support. From a practice perspective, this reflects a shift in meaning that emerges through participation in specific arrangements (Warde, 2005). Reliance on others became normalized as part of everyday life and, in some cases, valued as a way of building relationships and maintaining stability. This finding complicates dominant narratives in international education that equate independence with self-sufficiency. In this context, independence is relational and contextually shaped, enacted through interaction rather than defined by the absence of dependence.

### Digital Mediation as Support Infrastructure

Digital communication played a central role in how participants organized support, functioning as both a tool for coordination and a medium for maintaining relationships and interpreting experience. In contexts where institutional support was limited, digital platforms enabled participants to access information, coordinate activities, and sustain ongoing connections. These practices suggest that digital mediation operates as part of the infrastructure of support (Hofhuis et al., 2023; Komito, 2011; Madianou, 2016; Pang, 2020).

Digital environments also helped participants overcome some constraints of physical distance by providing spaces for coordination, reassurance, and reflection independent of physical proximity. In this sense, digital mediation did not simply supplement existing support systems but formed part of the conditions through which support became possible (Hofhuis et al., 2023; Pang, 2020). Reliance on shared digital communication spaces may create uneven access for those less connected or less comfortable participating, suggesting that digitally mediated support remains contingent rather than uniformly available.

### Theoretical Contribution

The findings extend research on international student support by offering a practice-based account of how support is organized in everyday life. Rather than treating support as a resource that students possess or receive, the analysis shows how it is produced through ongoing interaction shaped by the host environment. These findings show how materials, competencies, and meanings are reconfigured in a non-urban context, shaping how support is organized in practice. This perspective also reframes adjustment. Participants' experiences suggest that adaptation depends less on individual independence and more on coordinating with others, managing uncertainty, and sustaining relationships over time. Independence, in this sense, is reconfigured through relational and situational practices (Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

These patterns highlight the role of broader social expectations. While gender was not treated as an analytic category, the all-female composition of the sample likely shaped how help-seeking, coordination, and relational reliance were enacted. Rather than treating these practices as universal, they are understood as situated accomplishments that may reflect gendered expectations. Future research could examine how such practices are organized across different gender contexts.

The study also contributes by foregrounding spatial context. Focusing on a non-urban environment, it shows how geographic isolation, limited transportation, and uneven access to services shape how support is organized and experienced (Kenyon, 2011; Lertora et al., 2017; Olt & Tao, 2020). Support is therefore not a fixed condition but an ongoing accomplishment emerging through everyday practices involving coordination, interaction, and adaptation within specific spatial and institutional contexts.

## PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings highlight how students construct support through everyday practices and where these processes place additional burden on individuals. Participants' accounts point to areas where both students and institutions can better respond to the conditions of non-urban environments.

### Individual-Level Practices

Navigating a non-urban campus requires sustained engagement in practices that are less necessary in resource-rich settings. Students described the need to prepare for uncertainty and actively develop ways of accessing support where services are limited. Information-seeking was described as a routine practice rather than an occasional response. Participants noted that institutional information was often insufficient for everyday needs, requiring them to ask questions, cross-check sources, and engage with peers. Informational support was therefore actively assembled rather than passively received.

Mobility requires advance planning and coordination. Transportation depended on shared arrangements, requiring students to initiate requests, negotiate schedules, and align plans with others. These practices reflect how mobility is organized through relational coordination rather than individual access.
Participants also emphasized the importance of building relationships. Early connections with peers, senior students, and faculty enabled access to information and practical assistance. In this sense, relationships were central to how support became possible.

Digital communication formed part of these practices. Messaging platforms were used to ask questions, coordinate plans, and maintain connections. Participation in group chats and online networks enabled access to timely information in contexts where institutional guidance was limited, illustrating how digital tools are embedded in everyday coordination (Komito, 2011).

**Institutional-Level Support**

Participants identified several areas where institutional support could reduce the burden of adjustment by aligning more closely with everyday practices. This implication is consistent with recent research emphasizing that institutional support should be responsive to students' well-being, belonging, and academic and social adjustment rather than limited to formal service provision alone (Anani & Apambila, 2026; Beri et al., 2025; Caligiuri et al., 2020; Marangell & Baik, 2022).

Pre-departure and arrival information was often described as too general and not reflective of non-urban conditions. Participants suggested providing guidance on everyday situations such as transportation from regional airports, access to services without a car, and navigation of local systems. Examples based on prior students' experiences were considered particularly useful, as they reflect the practical realities students encounter.

Building on this, participants emphasized the value of connecting incoming students with those who had already completed the program. Informal opportunities to engage with previous exchange students, such as orientation sessions, small-group meetings, or question-and-answer forums, were described as particularly helpful for sharing context-specific knowledge. These interactions provide access to experiential knowledge that is often absent from formal institutional materials and support the early formation of networks through which everyday practices can be organized.

Mobility support was another key area. Participants suggested regular shuttle services to essential off-campus locations, along with orientation activities that introduce the spatial layout of the campus and surrounding area. Such measures can reduce reliance on informal arrangements and make everyday activities more manageable. Relational support also required attention. Participants recommended structured peer programs connecting incoming students with domestic students or experienced peers. These arrangements can provide stable points of connection in environments where informal networks may be difficult to access.

Participants also emphasized the need for ongoing communication. Regular check-ins, accessible support channels, and digital communication opportunities can help students respond to challenges as they arise. Support needs were described as evolving over time, suggesting that support should be understood as a continuous process rather than a one-time intervention. Institutional support, in this sense, is most effective when it reflects how everyday life is organized in non-urban environments. Attention to mobility, access, communication, and peer-based knowledge sharing can reduce reliance on informal coordination and make everyday practices more sustainable under conditions of spatial constraint (Kenyon, 2011; Lertora et al., 2017).

## CONCLUSION

This study examined how international students organized social support in a non-urban campus environment shaped by spatial constraints and limited institutional resources. Focusing on Korean exchange

students, it explored how support was produced through everyday practices involving information-seeking, mobility, relationships, and digital communication.

The findings show that support was not readily available within the institutional environment but was produced through ongoing coordination, negotiation, and adaptation. Informational access, mobility, and relationships were closely interconnected in shaping how students managed everyday life, with digital communication playing a central role under conditions of limited access and geographic distance. This perspective contributes to research on international student adjustment by conceptualizing support as an outcome of everyday practices rather than a static resource. It also highlights how non-urban contexts shape the everyday conditions through which support becomes possible, necessary, and meaningful. While grounded in a specific context, this conceptualization may apply to other settings characterized by spatial constraints and limited institutional provision.

**Limitations and Future Research**

This study has several limitations. First, it is based on a small, single-institution sample in which all participants identified as female. While this provided a consistent basis for examining shared experiences, it limits the range of perspectives and may reflect gendered patterns of coordination and help-seeking. The study does not allow for systematic comparison across gender, and the organization of support practices may differ under other conditions.

Second, the data rely on retrospective written accounts. Although this format supported reflection on patterns over time, it may not fully capture how practices unfolded in real time, particularly in situations of uncertainty or disruption. As a result, the analysis may emphasize more easily articulated patterns while underrepresenting more transient or situational aspects of practice.

Third, the study focuses on Korean exchange students in a specific non-urban U.S. context. While this provides a clear case for examining spatial constraints, it limits the extent to which findings can be extended to other groups or settings. Exchange students may also differ from degree-seeking students in levels of institutional integration and duration of engagement.

Finally, the study does not systematically examine variation within the sample. Factors such as academic discipline, prior mobility experience, language proficiency, and individual expectations may shape how students engage with resources and relationships.

Future research could extend this work by examining similar processes across different institutional and geographic contexts, including comparisons between urban and non-urban settings. Studies including more diverse participant groups could further explore how gender, nationality, language, and program type shape the organization of support. Methodologically, longitudinal or real-time approaches may provide deeper insight into how support practices develop, stabilize, and change over time.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, Jihyun Woo; Literature review, Hyokju Maeng; Data preparation, Hyokju Maeng and Hyunjin Kwon; Data collection, Jungsuk Woo; Methodology, Jihyun Woo; Software, Jungsuk. Woo, Hyokju Maeng, Hyunjin Kwon and Jihyun Woo; Formal analysis, Jihyun Woo; Software, Jungsuk. Woo, Hyokju Maeng, Hyunjin Kwon and Jihyun Woo; Writing, review and editing, Jihyun Woo; Software, Jungsuk. Woo, Hyokju Maeng, Hyunjin Kwon and Jihyun Woo.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The research protocol was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Eastern New Mexico University (Protocol #2526035). The study was classified as exempt, with approval granted on February 17, 2026, and approval valid through February 17, 2027.

**AI Disclosure Statement:** AI-assisted tools were used to support the initial translation of Korean responses into English and to improve the grammar, clarity, and readability of the manuscript. All translated materials and AI-assisted edits were reviewed, revised, and verified by the authors to preserve contextual meaning, analytic accuracy, and scholarly integrity. The authors take full responsibility for the content, interpretation, accuracy, and ethical compliance of the manuscript.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**Disclaimer/Publisher's Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of the publisher and/or the editor(s). The publisher and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.

## REFERENCES


Aguiar, J., Tavares, O., & Sin, C. (2024). Impact of international student mobility in rural Portuguese regions. *International Journal of Educational Research, 127*, Article 102439. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2024.102439

Anani, J. L., & Apambila, D. S. (2026). International students' acculturation experience in the United States: Perceptions of the role of international students' engagement in higher education institutions. *Journal of International Students, 16*(16), 329–354. https://doi.org/10.32674/ytjnn020

Andrade, M. S. (2006). International students in English-speaking universities: Adjustment factors. *Journal of Research in International Education, 5*(2), 131–154. https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240906065589

Beri, N., Thakur, K., & Kumar, N. (2025). Cross-cultural examination of social support, academic support, and well-being: A comparative study of Indian and international students. *Journal of International Students, 15*(2), 169–182. https://doi.org/10.32674/devfax39

Blue, S., Shove, E., Carmona, C., & Kelly, M. P. (2016). Theories of practice and public health: understanding (un)healthy practices. *Critical Public Health, 26*(1), 36–50. https://doi.org/10.1080/09581596.2014.980396

Boyd, d. m., & Ellison, N. B. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 13*(1), 210–230. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00393.x

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health, 11*(4), 589–597. https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806

Brisset, C., Safdar, S., Lewis, J. R., & Sabatier, C. (2010). Psychological and sociocultural adaptation of university students in France: The case of Vietnamese international students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 34*(4), 413–426. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2010.02.009

Brooks, R., & Waters, J. (2011). *Student mobilities, migration and the internationalization of higher education*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Caligiuri, P., DuBois, C. L. Z., Lundby, K., & Sinclair, E. A. (2020). Fostering international students' sense of belonging and perceived social support through a semester-long experiential activity. *Research in Comparative and International Education, 15*(4), 357–370. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745499920954311

Cohen, S., & Wills, T. A. (1985). Stress, social support, and the buffering hypothesis. *Psychological Bulletin, 98*(2), 310–357. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.98.2.310
Collins, F. L. (2010). International students as urban agents: International education and urban transformation in Auckland, New Zealand. *Geoforum, 41*(6), 940–950. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2010.06.009
Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Sage.
Dekker, R., & Engbersen, G. (2014). How social media transform migrant networks and facilitate migration. *Global Networks, 14*(4), 401–418. https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12040
Farrugia, D. (2016). The mobility imperative for rural youth: the structural, symbolic and non-representational dimensions of rural youth mobilities. *Journal of Youth Studies, 19*(6), 836–851. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2015.1112886
Hillman, N. W. (2016). Geography of College Opportunity: The Case of Education Deserts. *American Educational Research Journal*, *53*(4), 987-1021. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831216653204
Hofhuis, J., van Egmond, M. C., Lutz, F. E., von Reventlow, K., & Rohmann, A. (2023). The effect of social network sites on international students' acculturation, adaptation, and wellbeing. *Frontiers in Communication, 8*, Article 1186527. https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2023.1186527
Holloway, S. L., & Jöns, H. (2012). Geographies of education and learning. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, 37*(4), 482–488. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-5661.2012.00542.x
Holdsworth, C. (2009). 'Going Away to Uni': Mobility, Modernity, and Independence of English Higher Education students. *Environment and Planning A, 41*(8), 1849–1864. https://doi.org/10.1068/a41177
Holton, M., & Riley, M. (2013). Student Geographies: Exploring the Diverse Geographies of Students and Higher Education. *Geography Compass, 7*(1), 61–74. https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12013
House, J. S. (1981). *Work stress and social support*. Addison-Wesley.
Kenyon, S. (2011). Transport and social exclusion: access to higher education in the UK policy context. *Journal of Transport Geography, 19*(4), 763–771. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jtrangeo.2010.09.005
Komito, L. (2011). Social media and migration: Virtual community 2.0. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology, 62*(6), 1075–1086. https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.21517
Lee, J. J., & Rice, C. (2007). Welcome to America? International student perceptions of discrimination. *Higher Education, 53*(3), 381–409. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-005-4508-3
Lertora, I., Henriksen, R. C., Starkey, J., & Li, C-S. (2017). International Students' Transition Experiences in Rural Texas: A Phenomenological Study. *The Qualitative Report, 22*(7), 1989–2005. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2017.2780
Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.
Madianou, M. (2016). Ambient co-presence: transnational family practices in polymedia environments. *Global Networks, 16*(2), 183–201. https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12105
Marangell, S., & Baik, C. (2022). International Students' Suggestions for What Universities Can Do to Better Support Their Mental Wellbeing. *Journal of International Students, 12*(4), 933–954. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v12i4.3877
Olt, P. A., & Tao, B. (2020). International Students' Transition to a Rural State Comprehensive University. *Teacher-Scholar: The Journal of the State Comprehensive University, 9*, Article 4. https://doi.org/10.58809/CBSX6080
Pang, H. (2020). Is active social media involvement associated with cross-culture adaption and academic integration among boundary-crossing students? *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 79*, 71–81. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2020.08.005
Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (4th ed.). Sage.
Reckwitz, A. (2002). Toward a Theory of Social Practices: A Development in Culturalist Theorizing. *European Journal of Social Theory, 5*(2), 243–263. https://doi.org/10.1177/13684310222225432

Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.). Sage.
Sawir, E., Marginson, S., Deumert, A., Nyland, C., & Ramia, G. (2008). Loneliness and International Students: An Australian Study. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 12*(2), 148–180. https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315307299699
Shove, E., Pantzar, M., & Watson, M. (2012). *The Dynamics of Social Practice: Everyday Life and How it Changes*. Sage.
Smith, R. A., & Khawaja, N. G. (2011). A review of the acculturation experiences of international students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 35*(6), 699–713. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2011.08.004
Temple, B., & Young, A. (2004). Qualitative Research and Translation Dilemmas. *Qualitative Research, 4*(2), 161–178. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794104044430
Thoits, P. A. (2011). Mechanisms Linking Social Ties and Support to Physical and Mental Health. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 52*(2), 145–161. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022146510395592
Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative Quality: Eight "Big-Tent" Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 16*(10), 837–851. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121
Warde, A. (2005). Consumption and Theories of Practice. *Journal of Consumer Culture, 5*(2), 131–153. https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540505053090
Wu, H., Garza, E., & Guzman, N. (2015). International Student's Challenge and Adjustment to College. *Education Research International*, Article 202753. https://doi.org/10.1155/2015/202753
Ye, J. (2006). Traditional and Online Support Networks in the Cross-Cultural Adaptation of Chinese International Students in the United States. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 11*(3), 863–876. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2006.00039.x
Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications* (6th ed.). Sage.
Zhang, J., & Goodson, P. (2011). Predictors of international students' psychosocial adjustment to life in the United States: A systematic review. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 35*(2), 139–162. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2010.11.011

**Author Bios**

**Jungsuk Woo,** PhD, is a Visiting Researcher in the School of Geography, Politics and Sociology at Newcastle University. His research interests include international mobility, industrial development and geography education. Email: jungsuk.woo@newcastle.ac.uk

ORCID: http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7738-6007

**Hyokju Maeng,** PhD, is an Assistant Professor in the College of Education and Technology at Eastern New Mexico University. His research interests include K–12 adaptive physical education and student well-being in higher education. Email: hyokju.maeng@enmu.edu

ORCID: http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0373-4539

**Hyunjin Kwon,** PhD, is an Assistant Professor in the College of Education and Technology at Eastern New Mexico University. Her research interests include physical activity, sport management, and student support. Email: hyunjin.kwon@enmu.edu

ORCID: http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2204-1220

**Jihyun Woo,** PhD, is an Assistant Professor in the College of Education and Technology at Eastern New Mexico University. Her research interests include culturally diverse learning, exchange student experiences, and global competencies. Email: jihyun.woo@enmu.edu

ORCID: http://orcid.org/0009-0007-3906-1301