

Social Media and International Students' Adaptation to College

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PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to explore how international students negotiate and transition from high school to college and how social media shapes this process. This research investigates how students use social media to assimilate into new cultural contexts, and to convey their sense of identity. It further examines how social media impacts belonging and cultural understanding—acting both as a bridge for connection and a potential barrier to integration. Ultimately, this study seeks to understand the role of social media in a period of transition.

METHOD

- Design: Quantitative survey
- Participants: 33 international students
- Location: The College of Wooster
- Analysis: SPSS (descriptive statistics, correlations, t-tests)

TABLE 2

Social Media and Cultural Identity and Adaptation

	Cultural Identity		Adopt lifestyle		Balance difficulty		Feel accepted	
	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
Connection	.550	<.001	.292	.099	.206	.250	.189	.293
Campus Resources	.635	<.001	.364	.037	-.226	.207	.027	.881
Culture Norms	.511	.002	.059	.743	-.036	.841	.082	.649
Positive of S.M	.441	.010	.268	.132	-.056	.757	.394	.023
Negative of S.M	.349	.046	-.101	.578	-.384	.027	.352	.045
Entertainment	.172	.346	.294	.102	-.046	.802	.242	.182
Identity Negotiation	.205	.260	.336	.060	-.051	.781	.089	.626

Note. The *df* for each correlation is 31.

Connection (social interaction + reliance):

Using social media to communicate and maintain relationships with others.

Campus Resources:

Using social media to access campus information, events, and support services.

Cultural Norms:

Using social media to understand social behaviors and cultural expectations.

Positive of Social Media:

Positive attitudes toward social media as helpful and beneficial.

Negative of Social Media:

Negative attitudes toward social media as stressful or overwhelming.

Entertainment:

Using social media for relaxation, enjoyment, and leisure activities.

Identity Negotiation:

Adjusting and expressing one's identity in different social and cultural contexts.

KEY FINDINGS

- Social media are widely used to **maintain relationships** and stay connected across distance
- Students rely on social media to access **campus information and resources**
- Social media help students understand **cultural norms** in the host environment
- Cultural identity was significantly related to multiple aspects of social media use (e.g., connection and campus resources)
- Positive perceptions of social media are linked to a stronger sense of **feeling accepted**

Social media support students' transition, but are not the primary drivers of adaptation.

The ANOVA results indicated that none of the variables showed statistically significant differences across the time-use groups. One possible explanation is that social media serve multiple functions for international students during the transition to college. Regardless of the amount of time they spend online, students may use social media for similar purposes, such as maintaining connections, gathering information about campus resources, observing cultural norms, and engaging with entertainment content. Because these functions remain relevant to many students, the amount of time spent on social media may not strongly influence the specific ways in which these platforms are used.

TABLE 4

Time Spent on Social Media

	1-3 hrs		4-6 hrs		6+		<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Connection	4.65	.843	4.63	.814	4.85	.586	0.26	2,30	.771
Campus Resources	4.80	.902	5.27	1.01	5.63	.719	2.16	2,30	.133
Culture Norms	5.20	.789	5.23	1.01	5.20	1.87	.002	2,30	.998
Positive of S.M	4.62	1.23	5.11	.961	5.28	.900	1.11	2,30	.342
Negative of S.M	4.17	1.30	4.26	1.28	5.43	1.25	3.18	2,30	.056
Entertainment	3.93	.90	3.72	1.18	4.93	1.80	2.41	2,29	.107
Identity Negotiation	4.13	.87	4.35	1.21	4.82	1.46	0.81	2,29	.455

IMPLICATIONS

- Social media function as **supportive communication tools** rather than primary drivers of adaptation
- Adaptation is a **complex process** influenced by both online and offline experiences
- Colleges can use social media to better support **international students' transition**
- Digital platforms can complement, but not replace, **in-person interactions**

LIMITATIONS

- **Small sample size** (N = 33)
- Survey-based data limits **depth of understanding**
- Limited measurement of frequency and context of **social media use**

FUTURE RESEARCH

- Explore specific types of social media use in greater depth
- Use qualitative methods (e.g., interviews)
- Compare international and domestic student experiences
- Examine long-term adaptation beyond the first-year transition

