

1
2 **Patterns and Purposes of Social Media Usage among International Students in Xi'an: A Descriptive Study**
3

4 **Abstract:**

5
6 Social media has become an important part of international students' everyday lives, especially in cross-cultural
7 educational settings where it supports communication, information seeking, and social connection. However, less
8 attention has been paid to the specific patterns and purposes of social media usage in localized Chinese contexts
9 such as Xi'an. This study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional survey design and collected data through a structured
10 questionnaire from international students in Xi'an, China. After data screening, 381 valid responses were retained
11 for analysis. Descriptive statistics were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics, including frequencies and percentages
12 for platform preferences and means and standard deviations for ten social media usage-purpose items. The findings
13 showed that WeChat and Douyin were the most widely used platforms. The highest-ranked usage purposes were
14 learning about Xi'an's culture and history, finding friends with similar experiences, obtaining local information, and
15 sharing experiences to receive feedback. Lower-ranked purposes included attention-seeking and participation in
16 formal online communities. Social media functions primarily as a practical and relational resource in the everyday
17 lives of international students in Xi'an, particularly for local orientation, peer connection, and everyday adaptation.
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19

20 **Key words:-**

21 International students; social media usage; platform preferences; uses and gratifications; Xi'an
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23 **Introduction:-**

24 Social media has become an essential part of international students' everyday lives. In cross-cultural educational
25 settings, it functions not only as a communication tool but also as a resource for information seeking, social
26 connection, and adjustment to the host environment. Although previous studies have examined the relationship
27 between social media and international students' adaptation, less attention has been paid to the specific patterns and
28 purposes of social media usage in localized contexts. This issue is particularly relevant in China, where international
29 students engage with a distinctive digital ecosystem dominated by local platforms such as WeChat, Douyin, and
30 Xiaohongshu. Xi'an offers an especially meaningful setting for such a study because it combines a growing
31 international student population with a historically rich and culturally distinctive urban environment. In this context,
32 social media may play an important role in helping students access local knowledge, connect with others, and
33 navigate everyday life. Therefore, this study examines the major patterns and purposes of social media usage among
34 international students in Xi'an. Focusing on platform preferences and item-level usage purposes, it aims to provide a
35 localized descriptive contribution to research on international students and digital media.

36 **Literature Review:-**

37 **Social media and international students:**

38 Social media has become a central part of international students' everyday communication, information seeking, and
39 social adjustment. As digital platforms increasingly mediate daily life, international students rely on social media not
40 only to maintain contact with family and friends, but also to obtain practical information, interpret unfamiliar
41 cultural environments, and build new social ties in the host society. In this sense, social media functions as more
42 than a communication channel; it is also an adaptive resource embedded in students' academic, cultural, and
43 interpersonal experiences abroad (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

44 Existing studies suggest that social media can play several roles in the lives of international students. First, it
45 supports information access by helping students locate practical knowledge about transportation, accommodation,
46 food, campus life, and local services. Second, it facilitates social connection by allowing students to maintain
47 transnational ties while also interacting with peers in the host environment. Third, it can provide forms of emotional
48 and psychological support, especially during periods of uncertainty, homesickness, and culture shock. Forbush and
49 Foucault-Welles (2016), for example, showed that social media use was closely related to the adjustment

50 experiences of Chinese students studying in the United States. Similarly, studies conducted in the Chinese context
51 have found that platform use may support social integration, information access, and everyday adaptation among
52 international students (Kuang & Wu, 2019; Wang, 2022; Wang, 2023).

53 At the same time, the literature also points to the ambivalent nature of social media use. While social media may
54 help international students reduce uncertainty and navigate new environments, over-reliance on familiar or home-
55 country platforms can also reinforce cultural retreat and limit deeper engagement with the host society. Wu (2024)
56 noted that international students may experience difficulties in adapting to China's distinctive digital ecosystem,
57 especially when they continue to depend primarily on non-Chinese platforms. This means that the significance of
58 social media does not lie only in whether students use it, but also in which platforms they use and for what purposes.
59 However, much of the existing research has focused on adaptation outcomes or causal relationships, while giving
60 less attention to the descriptive structure of platform preferences and major usage purposes in specific local contexts.

61 This gap is particularly important in China. Unlike contexts dominated by global platforms, China's digital
62 environment is shaped by local platforms such as WeChat, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu. For international students,
63 adapting to life in China often means adapting to a new platform ecology as well. Although previous studies have
64 shown that Chinese social media can help international students access local information, maintain communication,
65 and support adaptation, more localized descriptive research is still needed to understand how these platforms are
66 actually used in everyday student life (Kuang & Wu, 2019; Wang, 2022; Wang, 2023).

67 **Uses and Gratifications Theory:**

68 Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) offers an appropriate framework for understanding why international
69 students use social media in particular ways. Rather than asking what media do to audiences, UGT emphasizes what
70 audiences do with media. It assumes that users are active and selective, and that they choose media in order to
71 satisfy specific needs, including cognitive, emotional, social, and identity-related needs (Katz, Blumler, &
72 Gurevitch, 1973).

73 This perspective is especially useful for studying international students, because students in cross-cultural
74 educational settings often face multiple demands at the same time. They need information about local culture and
75 daily life, emotional continuity with familiar networks, opportunities to build new relationships, and ways to manage
76 uncertainty in unfamiliar environments. Social media can satisfy these needs simultaneously. At the cognitive level,
77 it helps users obtain local knowledge and practical information. At the emotional level, it provides reassurance and
78 continuity with home-based relationships. At the social level, it facilitates both maintaining old ties and establishing
79 new ones. At the identity level, it offers a space where students can interpret their own experiences and negotiate
80 belonging in a foreign setting.

81 UGT is particularly relevant to the present study because this article is concerned with patterns and purposes of use,
82 rather than with effects alone. If international students are active media users, then identifying their dominant
83 purposes of use becomes theoretically meaningful. In the Xi'an context, purposes such as learning about local
84 culture, finding information about tourism and food, connecting with peers, sharing experiences for feedback, and
85 using social media for relaxation can all be understood as different gratifications sought through digital media. In
86 this way, UGT helps explain why social media use among international students is likely to be multidimensional
87 rather than singular. A student may use WeChat for practical communication, Douyin for entertainment and cultural
88 observation, and Instagram for maintaining transnational ties; these uses reflect different gratifications rather than
89 contradictory behaviors.

90 Therefore, a descriptive study grounded in UGT can contribute to the literature by showing not only that
91 international students use social media, but also how their platform choices and usage purposes reflect the practical,

92 emotional, and relational demands of studying abroad. This makes UGT especially suitable for interpreting social
93 media use as patterned and purposeful behavior in the everyday lives of international students.

94 **Xi'an as a localized context:**

95 Although international students in China are often discussed as a broad national category, their experiences are
96 shaped by local institutional and cultural environments. Xi'an provides a particularly meaningful setting for studying
97 social media usage among international students. As one of China's historically significant cities and an important
98 inland hub of educational internationalization, Xi'an combines a strong cultural identity with a growing international
99 student population. The city is widely associated with the Silk Road, the Belt and Road Initiative, and a rich
100 historical landscape, while also functioning as a major university city in western China. Over the past decade, Xi'an
101 has attracted a substantial number of international students, making it an important site for intercultural contact and
102 educational exchange in the Chinese context (Li, 2016).

103 This localized context matters because international students in Xi'an are likely to use social media for purposes that
104 go beyond generic communication. On the one hand, Xi'an offers abundant opportunities for cultural learning,
105 tourism, symbolic engagement with Chinese history, and everyday exploration of local life. On the other hand,
106 international students also face practical challenges related to language, social integration, classroom interaction,
107 and daily adaptation. In such a setting, social media may become especially important as a tool for local orientation,
108 allowing students to interpret the city, search for relevant information, and connect their experiences to the host
109 environment.

110 The Xi'an setting also matters because much of the existing research on international students in China tends either
111 to treat students as a homogeneous national group or to emphasize general relationships between social media and
112 adaptation without sufficient attention to regional variation. Yet Xi'an differs from coastal metropolises and globally
113 branded urban centers in important ways. Its historical identity, local symbolic resources, and educational
114 positioning suggest that international students' digital practices may reflect a more localized and context-sensitive
115 pattern of use. A Xi'an-based study can therefore offer a geographically grounded account of social media use that
116 enriches the broader literature on international students in China.

117 **Present study:**

118 Taken together, the existing literature suggests that social media plays an increasingly important role in the lives of
119 international students, and that UGT provides a useful framework for understanding media use as purposeful
120 behavior. However, current research still leaves two gaps. First, much of the literature emphasizes the effects of
121 social media on adaptation outcomes, while paying less attention to the descriptive structure of students' everyday
122 platform use and usage purposes. Second, relatively limited work has examined these patterns in localized Chinese
123 contexts such as Xi'an.

124 To address these gaps, the present study focuses on the major patterns and purposes of social media usage among
125 international students in Xi'an. Specifically, it examines which platforms are most widely used and which usage
126 purposes are most salient in students' everyday digital practices. By doing so, the study provides a localized
127 descriptive contribution to research on international students and digital media, while also offering a uses-and-
128 gratifications perspective on how social media is embedded in the lived experience of studying abroad in Xi'an.

129 **Materials and Methods:-**

130 **Research design:**

131 This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to examine the major patterns and purposes of
132 social media usage among international students in Xi'an, China. A structured questionnaire was used to collect self-
133 reported data on respondents' demographic characteristics, social media platform preferences, and the main

134 purposes for which they used social media in their daily lives. The article is derived from the broader dissertation
135 project on social media usage and acculturation among international students in Xi'an, but the present paper focuses
136 specifically on the descriptive analysis of Research Question 1. Therefore, the analysis reported here centers on
137 platform preferences and item-level usage purposes rather than on hypothesis testing or mediation modeling.

138 A cross-sectional design was considered appropriate because the purpose of this study was to capture the current
139 social media usage profile of international students during a single period of data collection. Such a design is widely
140 used in descriptive survey research when the goal is to identify usage tendencies, distributions, and prominent
141 purposes rather than to assess changes over time.

142 **Sample:**

143 The target population of this study consisted of international students enrolled in higher education institutions in
144 Xi'an. To ensure that participants had sufficient exposure to the host environment and could meaningfully report
145 their media practices in local life, only students who had studied in Xi'an for at least one semester were considered
146 eligible. This criterion was retained from the larger dissertation design to ensure that respondents had already
147 entered the early stages of adaptation and were likely to have formed relatively stable patterns of digital media use.

148 Because it was not feasible to obtain a complete sampling frame of all international students in Xi'an, a non-
149 probability sampling strategy was adopted. Data were collected primarily through online questionnaire distribution
150 using channels commonly accessed by international students, including WeChat groups, student association
151 networks, and other online communities. Convenience sampling was combined with limited snowball distribution to
152 improve access to a geographically dispersed and institutionally diverse student population. After data screening and
153 quality checks, a total of **381 valid responses** were retained for analysis.

154 **Measures:-**

155 This article focuses on two groups of variables drawn from the broader questionnaire: demographic/background
156 variables and social media usage variables. These measures were selected because they directly support the
157 descriptive analysis of platform preferences and usage purposes among international students in Xi'an.

158 **Demographic and Background Variables**

159 The questionnaire included several demographic and background items to describe the respondent profile, including
160 gender, age group, length of stay in Xi'an, and Chinese language proficiency. Respondents were also asked which
161 social media platforms they primarily used. Because multiple choices were allowed for the platform-use item, each
162 platform option was treated as a separate binary indicator (selected vs. not selected).

163 **Social Media Platform Use:**

164 To capture platform preferences, respondents were asked to indicate which social media platforms they primarily
165 used from a list including WeChat, Weibo, Douyin, Xiaohongshu, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter/X, and other
166 platforms. These data were used to identify the distribution of platform use across the sample and to determine
167 which platforms occupied the most prominent place in respondents' everyday digital practices.

168 **Social Media Usage Purposes**

169 To examine the major purposes of social media usage, the study used a set of ten items reflecting different reasons
170 for using social media in the Xi'an context. These items covered purposes such as learning about Xi'an's culture and
171 history, finding information about tourism and food, connecting with local Chinese students, communicating with
172 other international students, joining online communities, using social media for relaxation and entertainment,
173 sharing experiences for feedback, sharing experiences for attention, finding friends with similar experiences, and

174 developing a stronger sense of belonging. All items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly
175 Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree. Higher mean scores indicated stronger agreement that a given item represented an
176 important purpose of social media usage. In this article, these items were analysed descriptively at the item level
177 rather than being combined into a causal model, which is consistent with the study's focus on identifying the relative
178 prominence of different usage purposes.

179 **Data analysis**

180 The data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics. Because this article focuses on the descriptive investigation of
181 Research Question 1, the analysis emphasized descriptive rather than inferential modeling procedures. First, the
182 dataset was screened to ensure data quality. Cases with problematic response patterns were removed during the
183 broader data-cleaning stage, and the final dataset used in this article consisted of 381 valid responses. Missing values
184 were retained at a minimal level where appropriate, and descriptive analyses were conducted using valid responses
185 for each item.

186 Second, frequency distributions and percentages were used to summarize respondents' demographic profiles and
187 platform-use preferences. These analyses were used to describe the composition of the sample and the relative
188 popularity of different social media platforms. Third, means and standard deviations were calculated for the ten
189 social media usage-purpose items. These statistics were used to identify the major purposes of social media usage
190 among international students in Xi'an. The items were then ranked according to their mean scores to show which
191 purposes were most prominent and which were comparatively less important. Finally, the descriptive findings were
192 interpreted in relation to the broader context of international students' everyday digital practices in Xi'an.

193 **Results:-**

194 **Respondent profile**

195 Table 4.1 reports the demographic profile of the respondents. A total of 381 valid responses were included in the
196 analysis. The sample consisted of 211 males (55.4%), 161 females (42.3%), and 9 respondents identifying as other
197 (2.4%). In terms of age, most respondents were in the 18–24 group (60.1%), followed by 25–30 (28.1%), 31–35
198 (7.3%), and 36 or above (4.5%).

199 Regarding length of stay in Xi'an, 35.2% of respondents had stayed for less than six months, 22.8% for six months
200 to one year, 23.4% for one to two years, and 18.6% for more than two years. For Chinese language proficiency,
201 14.7% reported no Chinese proficiency, 35.4% reported basic understanding only, 28.1% reported being able to
202 communicate in daily conversations, and 21.8% reported being fluent. Overall, the sample included respondents
203 with varied demographic backgrounds, lengths of stay, and levels of Chinese language ability.

204

205

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 381)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage(%)
Gender	Male	211	55.4
	Female	161	42.3
	Other	9	2.4
Age Group	18–24	229	60.1

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage(%)
	25–30	107	28.1
	31–35	28	7.3
	36 or above	17	4.5
Length of Stay	Less than 6 months	134	35.2
	6 months – 1 year	87	22.8
	1–2 years	89	23.4
	More than 2 years	71	18.6
Chinese Level	No Chinese proficiency	56	14.7
	Basic understanding only	135	35.4
	Daily communication	107	28.1
	Fluent	83	21.8

206

207 **Platform preferences**

208 Table 4.2 presents the social media platforms used by the respondents. Because multiple responses were allowed,
 209 the percentages reported in this table do not sum to 100%. The most widely used platform was WeChat, selected by
 210 370 respondents (97.1%). This was followed by Douyin (297; 78.0%) and Xiaohongshu (195; 51.2%).

211 Among non-Chinese or globally familiar platforms, Instagram was used by 177 respondents (46.5%), while
 212 Facebook was used by 142 respondents (37.3%). By comparison, Weibo was selected by 117 respondents (30.7%),
 213 Twitter/X by 77 respondents (20.2%), and other platforms by 29 respondents (7.6%). These results show that
 214 Chinese mainstream platforms occupied the most prominent place in respondents' platform use, with WeChat and
 215 Douyin ranking clearly above the other platforms listed in the questionnaire.

216 **Table 2: Social Media Platforms Used by Respondents (Multiple Responses Allowed, N = 381)¹**

Platform	Frequency	Percentage(%)
WeChat	370	97.1
Douyin	297	78.0
Xiaohongshu	195	51.2
Instagram	177	46.5

¹ Note: Multiple responses were allowed; therefore, percentages do not sum to 100%.

Platform	Frequency	Percentage(%)
Facebook	142	37.3
Weibo	117	30.7
Twitter/X	77	20.2
Other	29	7.6

217

218 Major purposes of social media usage

219 Table 4.3 presents the mean scores and standard deviations of the ten social media usage items. The item with the
 220 highest mean score was SMU1 (“I use social media to learn about Xi’an’s culture and history”), with a mean of
 221 4.13, which was tied with SMU9 (“Social media helps me find friends with similar experiences”), also with a mean
 222 of 4.13. These two items ranked first among the ten indicators. They were followed by SMU2 (“I use social media to
 223 find information about tourism and food in Xi’an”) and SMU7 (“I share my experiences on social media to receive
 224 feedback”), both with a mean score of 4.12.

225 The middle-ranked items were SMU4 (“I communicate with other international students via social media”) and
 226 SMU6 (“I use social media for relaxation and entertainment, such as watching short videos or browsing social
 227 feeds”), both with a mean score of 4.05, followed by SMU3 (“I use social media to connect with local Chinese
 228 students”) at 4.02 and SMU10 (“I feel a stronger sense of belonging because of social media”) at 3.99. The lowest-
 229 ranked items were SMU8 (“I share my experiences on social media to gain attention”), with a mean of 3.97, and
 230 SMU5 (“I have joined online communities or chat groups related to international students in Xi’an”), with the
 231 lowest mean of 3.65.

232 Across the ten items, the highest mean scores were associated with learning about Xi’an, finding peers with similar
 233 experiences, obtaining local information, and receiving feedback from experience sharing. Lower-ranked items were
 234 associated with attention-seeking and participation in formal online communities. N varied across items because of a
 235 small number of missing responses.

236

Table 4.3 Mean Scores and Standard Deviations of Social Media Usage Items²

Item	Statement	N	Mean	SD	Rank
SMU1	I use social media to learn about Xi’an’s culture and history.	374	4.13	2.191	1
SMU9	Social media helps me find friends with similar experiences.	372	4.13	2.144	1
SMU2	I use social media to find information about tourism and food in Xi’an.	370	4.12	2.167	3
SMU7	I share my experiences on social media to receive feedback.	373	4.12	2.008	3
SMU4	I communicate with other international students via social media.	376	4.05	2.123	5
SMU6	I use social media for relaxation and entertainment, such as watching short videos or browsing social feeds.	375	4.05	2.161	5

² Note: N varies across items due to a small number of missing responses.

Item	Statement	N	Mean	SD	Rank
SMU3	I use social media to connect with local Chinese students.	377	4.02	2.108	7
SMU10	I feel a stronger sense of belonging because of social media.	372	3.99	2.172	8
SMU8	I share my experiences on social media to gain attention.	377	3.97	2.056	9
SMU5	I have joined online communities or chat groups related to international students in Xi'an.	376	3.65	2.173	10

237

238 **Discussion:-**
 239 **Interpretation of findings**

240 This study set out to describe how international students in Xi'an use social media, with particular attention to
 241 platform preferences and the major purposes of use. Three findings stand out. First, respondents showed a clear
 242 preference for Chinese mainstream platforms, especially WeChat and Douyin. Second, the highest-ranked usage
 243 purposes were related to local information seeking, cultural learning, and peer connection. Third, more performative
 244 or formalized forms of use—such as attention-seeking and participation in organized online communities—were
 245 relatively less prominent. Taken together, these findings suggest that social media occupies a practical, relational,
 246 and locally embedded place in the everyday lives of international students in Xi'an.

247 The strong dominance of WeChat and the high uptake of Douyin indicate that international students in Xi'an are not
 248 using social media only as a generic or globally standardized technology. Rather, their digital behavior appears to be
 249 shaped by the specific platform ecology of the host society. This is an important finding because it shows that
 250 adaptation to life in China also involves adaptation to Chinese digital infrastructures. In practical terms, using
 251 WeChat is not simply a matter of platform preference; it is closely tied to how communication, daily coordination,
 252 information circulation, and social participation are organized in the local environment. Likewise, the prominence of
 253 Douyin and Xiaohongshu suggests that short-video and lifestyle-oriented platforms have become important channels
 254 through which students observe local culture, access city-specific information, and make sense of everyday life in
 255 Xi'an. This extends previous China-based research that has often emphasized WeChat alone by showing that
 256 international students' digital practices are now distributed across a broader local media ecology (Kuang & Wu,
 257 2019; Wang, 2022; Wang, 2023).

258 The item-level findings further show that the most salient purposes of social media use were not random or purely
 259 entertainment-driven. The top-ranked items were learning about Xi'an's culture and history, finding friends with
 260 similar experiences, obtaining information about tourism and food, and sharing experiences to receive feedback.
 261 This pattern suggests that social media use among international students is organized around a combination of
 262 orientation, peer linkage, and interactive sense-making. In other words, respondents were not using social media
 263 only to consume content; they were also using it to position themselves within the host environment and to find
 264 relational anchors in a new city. This is consistent with the wider literature showing that digital media help
 265 international students reduce uncertainty, access local knowledge, and maintain social connection in unfamiliar
 266 contexts (Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016; McCarthy, 2010; Shuter, 2015).

267 At the same time, the relatively lower scores for gaining attention and joining online communities related to
 268 international students in Xi'an are equally revealing. These lower-ranked purposes suggest that respondents did not
 269 primarily approach social media as a performative space oriented toward visibility, nor did they strongly depend on
 270 formal online groups as their main mode of engagement. Instead, their usage appears to be more situational and
 271 problem-oriented. This points to a distinction that is often blurred in discussions of social media: there is a
 272 difference between using social media as a public stage and using it as an everyday adaptive resource. In this study,

273 the latter appears to be more important. The results therefore complicate any simple assumption that international
274 students mainly use social media either for leisure or for self-presentation. In the Xi'an context, social media seems
275 to function more as a practical tool for local orientation and a relational tool for peer-based adjustment.

276 Another noteworthy finding is that the mean for connecting with local Chinese students was moderate rather than
277 especially high. This suggests that while respondents do use social media to approach the host environment, local
278 peer integration may be more difficult or less immediate than information seeking or connection with similar others.
279 This is an important nuance. It indicates that social media may be highly effective for learning about the host city
280 and maintaining peer support, but not necessarily sufficient on its own to guarantee deeper host-national integration.
281 In this sense, the findings point to a layered structure of digital adaptation: local platforms may facilitate access and
282 awareness, while more meaningful intercultural integration may still depend on additional institutional, linguistic,
283 and offline conditions.

284 Finally, the results also suggest that international students' digital practices in Xi'an are best understood as hybrid
285 rather than exclusive. While Chinese platforms clearly dominated, globally familiar platforms such as Instagram and
286 Facebook were still used by substantial proportions of respondents. This implies that international students are not
287 simply switching from one digital world to another; rather, they are managing multiple platform environments at the
288 same time. Their social media practices therefore reflect both local embedding and transnational continuity. This
289 hybrid pattern is important for understanding contemporary international student life, because it shows that digital
290 adaptation does not necessarily involve abandoning prior media habits. Instead, it often involves layering new
291 platform practices onto existing communicative routine.

292 **Theoretical Implications**

293 The findings of this study provide support for the usefulness of Uses and Gratifications Theory in understanding
294 international students' social media practices. UGT assumes that media users are active and selective and that they
295 choose media to satisfy specific needs (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). The present findings align well with this
296 perspective. The dominant usage purposes identified in this study—local information seeking, cultural learning, peer
297 connection, and feedback-oriented sharing—suggest that respondents were using social media in a purposive
298 manner to meet cognitive, social, and affective needs. This is important because it reinforces the view that social
299 media use in cross-cultural settings should not be treated as a vague background behavior. Instead, it should be
300 understood as need-driven action structured by the practical conditions of living abroad.

301 At a more specific level, this study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that platform choice and usage
302 purpose should be analytically linked. Much of the literature on social media and international students has focused
303 on general usage or on broad adaptation outcomes. By contrast, the present findings show that different platforms
304 occupy different positions within students' everyday media repertoires, and that these platform choices are tied to
305 distinct but overlapping gratifications. WeChat's near universality, for example, suggests its role as a core
306 infrastructural platform, while Douyin and Xiaohongshu appear to support observational, lifestyle-related, and city-
307 oriented forms of engagement. This platform-sensitive perspective adds precision to prior discussions of digital
308 adaptation, which have often treated "social media" as an undifferentiated category.

309 The study also offers a localized theoretical contribution by foregrounding the importance of host-country platform
310 ecologies. Existing international student research often addresses social media in broadly global terms. However, the
311 Xi'an findings indicate that media use is deeply shaped by the host society's own communicative infrastructure.
312 This suggests that theoretical discussions of international student media use should pay more attention to local
313 digital environments rather than assuming that the meaning of social media use is transferable across national
314 contexts. In the Chinese case, where local platforms dominate daily communication and information flows, the host-
315 country digital environment is not a peripheral factor; it is part of the adaptation environment itself.

316 At the same time, the findings also indicate the value of descriptive research as a theoretical foundation. In
317 communication and adaptation research, descriptive patterns are sometimes treated as preliminary or secondary to
318 explanatory models. Yet the present study shows that identifying what students actually do with social media can
319 itself generate theoretically meaningful insights. Before asking whether social media predicts adaptation, it is
320 necessary to understand the structure of students' usage in the first place. In that sense, this study contributes
321 conceptually by showing that descriptive mapping of platform preferences and usage purposes is not merely a
322 technical step; it is an important way of clarifying how digital behavior is organized in real-world intercultural
323 settings.

324 **Practical implications**

325 The findings also have practical implications for universities, international student offices, and communication
326 practitioners in Xi'an. Most immediately, the results indicate that student support communication should be built
327 around the platforms that international students are already using. Because WeChat and Douyin occupy such a
328 central position in respondents' digital lives, universities should not rely solely on conventional administrative
329 channels or static website-based information. Instead, they should treat these platforms as core infrastructures for
330 student communication, orientation, and engagement. Timely and accessible information delivered through WeChat-
331 based channels, short-form video content, and localized digital communities is likely to reach students more
332 effectively than abstract institutional messaging alone.

333 A second implication concerns the type of content institutions should prioritize. Because the highest-ranked usage
334 purposes were related to local information, cultural learning, and finding similar others, support strategies should
335 move beyond formal announcements and focus more on practical, city-specific, and student-centered content.
336 Universities and support offices could develop multilingual digital resources on transportation, food, housing,
337 healthcare, campus life, and local cultural norms. They could also use social media to explain how life in Xi'an
338 works in everyday terms, rather than assuming that international students will find this information through official
339 channels or offline trial and error.

340 A third implication is that peer-oriented digital support matters. The relatively high ranking of finding friends with
341 similar experiences and sharing experiences to receive feedback suggests that students value interactive spaces
342 where experiences can be exchanged rather than merely consumed. This means universities should pay greater
343 attention to facilitating responsive and trust-based online peer environments. Moderated WeChat groups, student
344 ambassador accounts, peer-led content, and practical question-and-answer spaces may be especially valuable,
345 particularly for new students who are still developing confidence in navigating Xi'an.

346 At the same time, the findings also suggest that institutions should not assume that formal online communities
347 automatically produce engagement. Because joining online communities ranked comparatively low, students may
348 not be looking for highly institutionalized or heavily managed online spaces. Instead, they may respond better to
349 communication that is useful, specific, and integrated into daily problem-solving. This has an important managerial
350 implication: effectiveness may depend less on creating more official digital groups and more on improving the
351 quality, relevance, and responsiveness of the support already offered.

352 Finally, the Xi'an context itself should be treated as a communicative resource. Because one of the highest-ranked
353 purposes was learning about Xi'an's culture and history, universities and local organizations have an opportunity to
354 connect international students' digital practices with the cultural distinctiveness of the city. Social media
355 communication that introduces historical sites, cultural traditions, local food practices, and everyday urban customs
356 in accessible ways may do more than provide information; it may also strengthen students' sense of orientation and
357 cultural familiarity. In this sense, communication support for international students should not be limited to
358 institutional administration. It should also include mediated cultural orientation to the host city.

359 **Conclusion:-**

360 This study examined the major patterns and purposes of social media usage among international students in Xi'an.
361 Based on 381 valid responses, the findings showed that WeChat and Douyin were the most widely used platforms,
362 while the most prominent purposes of use were local information seeking, cultural learning, peer connection,
363 experience sharing, and entertainment. By contrast, attention-seeking and participation in formal online communities
364 were less prominent.

365 Overall, the findings indicate that social media functions as a practical and relational resource in the everyday lives
366 of international students in Xi'an. Rather than being used mainly for self-presentation, social media was more often
367 used to navigate the local environment, obtain useful information, and maintain meaningful peer connections. By
368 providing a localized descriptive account of platform preferences and usage purposes in a Chinese host-city context,
369 this study contributes to a more grounded understanding of international students' digital practices.

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