

# COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE AND ACCULTURATION: HOW INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN AMERICAN COLLEGES USE SOCIAL MEDIA TO MANAGE HOMESICKNESS

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**Abstract:** Homesickness, a distinctly human phenomenon, is common among college students, domestic or international and is the focus of this research. In this study, we focused on international students in American institutions to better understand the relationship among homesickness, acculturation, and social media use. Through focus group interviews, international students shared their lived experiences of homesickness, use of social media, and acculturation. Four themes (i.e. 1. Social media as conflict, 2. Social media as distraction, 3. Social media as frenemy, and 4. Social media as functional) surfaced in the data to describe the relationships among social media use, homesickness, and acculturation. Our participants used social media mainly to communicate with people back home when they felt homesick, yet the use of social media did not help their homesickness. The results are discussed through the lens of communities of practice. The researchers offer practical implications for institutions and people directly involved with international and study-abroad education programs.

**Keywords:** homesickness, acculturation, social media, international students, communities of practice, focus group interviews

## Introduction

Homesickness, sometimes characterized as a “mini-grief” (Stroebe, van Vliet, Hewstone, & Willis, 2002), affects people when they have left their familiar context, e.g., home environment, for an extended period and are charged, formally or informally, with learning to live and function in a new environment. Frequent symptoms reported by individuals experiencing homesickness include a longing for family and friends back home (Furnham, 2005; Thurber & Walton, 2007).

Homesickness and the challenges of learning to function in a new sociocultural context is a complex process that includes more than simply learning where essential places like banks, grocery stores, and places of entertainment are relative to residences, schools, and work. Homesickness and its symptoms, in many ways, may actually be said to be outward manifestations of the need to belong to a community (Glass & Westmont, 2014) coupled with the challenges and anxieties brought on by the effects of entering and leaving a variety of Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998).

Because homesickness is induced by a strong desire for the home context, communication with family and friends is considered a mainstay for mitigating the effects of homesickness. Before the ubiquity of social media, coping strategies for managing homesickness included scheduled telephone calls, letter writing, and, when feasible, short trips home (Thurber & Walton, 2007).

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Interacting socially with the new context has also been identified as being critical for successfully mitigating the symptoms of homesickness (Thurber & Walton, 2007).

With improved communication technology and the expansion of social media, there has been some interest in investigating the effects that social media, primarily social network sites (SNS), have on international students. These studies have primarily been quantitative studies investigating the relationship of homesickness to acculturation stress (Iorga, Soponaru, Muraru, Socolov, & Petrariu, 2020; Jackson, & Ray, Bybell 2013;) culture shock (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004), attachment theory (Nauta, Rot, Schut, & Stroebe, 2020), belongingness (Glass & Westmont, 2014), depression (Shoukat, Callixte, Nugraha, Budhy, & Irene 2021), social media use (Poyrazli & Devonish, 2020) discrimination (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007) and adjustment (Thurber & Walton, 2012).

Further, limited studies directly tested the relationship between social media use and homesickness (Billedo et al., 2020; Hendrickson et al., 2011). Studying international students living in the U.S., Poyrazli and Devonish (2020) reported that the intensity of social media use to communicate with people back home was positively associated with homesickness. However, Billedo et al. (2020) reported that the use of Facebook to communicate with people back home was not associated with homesickness whereas the use of Facebook to communicate with people in the host country was associated with less homesickness. Based on these incompatible results, Billedo et al. (2020) advocated for more research on this topic with a more “in-depth examination of the dynamic processes within the various types of social interactions and their impact on homesickness” (p.127) because the nonsignificant association between the use of social media to communicate with people back home and homesickness could be the co-existence of positive and negative effects. As such, the contradictory results in the previous literature warrant more research. Additionally, in its current iterations, social media serves a variety of functions. Previous studies did not clarify the functions for which international students use social media. Rather, they mainly focused on the frequency or length of time students use social media. Zhang (2012), for instance, found that Chinese international students used Facebook to read the posts of others in the host country and to stay current with the news while using Chinese SNS (Renren) to maintain relationships with people back home. As such, not just the frequency of use or length of usage, but types of activities and functions, not to mention the different types of social media should be included in the research.

As mentioned above, most of the previous literature on social media use, homesickness, and acculturation was conducted using quantitative methodology. With the quantitative research methods, it is difficult to understand “why” social media use helped or did not help international students’ homesickness, or “what” facilitated more social media use during bouts of homesickness. Thus, the aim of this study is to delineate international student sojourner’s use of social media in the host country more clearly using their lived experiences to better understand the relationship between the use of social media, homesickness, and acculturation among international student sojourners in the U.S.

## Literature Review

### *Homesickness and International Students*

People have never been more mobile than they are today. With the exception of the Covid lockdown year, the United States hosted an average of one million students in higher education institutions between 2015 and 2019 while the United States sent an average of 300,000 students abroad during the same time frame (Open Doors, 2023). While international exchange student numbers have not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels, 2022 saw an uptick in international student immigration to the United States, giving colleges and universities reason to believe that international education will rebound and exceed the 2018/2019 peak enrollment of 1,095,295 students, and that outward bound, study abroad students to international college and university destinations will eclipse the 320,939 peak also witnessed in the same 2018/2019 academic year (Open Doors, 2023). Thus, understanding

homesickness, its effects on international student sojourners, and being knowledgeable of known strategies for coping with homesickness is of import to the various communities connected, directly and indirectly, with international education including family members, friends, administrators, advisors, and faculty regardless of origin or host country.

### *Communities of Practice, Homesickness, and Acculturation*

The phenomenon of homesickness, as reported by Thurber and Walton (2007), has been observed since antiquity. Fisher and Hood (1987) define homesickness as "... a complex cognitive-motivational-emotional state concerned with grieving for, yearning for and being preoccupied with thoughts of home... with protracted grief and somatic symptoms such as giddiness, weakness, and insomnia" (p. 426). Expanding on Fisher and Hood's definition, Götz, Stieger, and Ulf-Dietrich (2019) state "...homesickness represents a multifaceted cognitive-motivational-affective state of distress, distinguished by a strong preoccupation with the home environment following relocation" (p. 691). They continue stating, "Homesickness is believed to result from a complex interplay of personality, situational circumstances, and environmental factors, and may also manifest itself on somatic and social levels (*ibid*). Likewise, Furnham (2005) identifies features of homesickness to be "... a strong preoccupation with thoughts of home, a perceived need to go home, a sense of grief for the home (people, place and things) and a concurrent feeling of unhappiness, disease and disorientation in the new place which is conspicuously, not home" (p. 20). They continue, "Home represents both people and places and is specifically about the familiar, safe and predictable environment. It represents, in its mildest form, a longing to be back home, and in its most severe form, an obsession" (*ibid*). Archer, Ireland, Amos, Broad, and Currid (1998) delineate the physical and psychological symptoms of first-year college students dealing with homesickness. These symptoms may include 1) missing parents or family, 2) missing friends or familiar faces, 3) missing familiar surroundings, 4) feeling insecure, and 5) missing comforts or the bedroom at home (p. 205). In summary, these definitions have in common the following psychological and emotional features: 1) Missing the familiar (people and context), 2) Nostalgia, and 3) A loss of security. Feature 3, a loss of security, may be thought of as a sub-feature of both the first and second features, since, if we feel safe and secure, then that is a community where the "rules" are known, where we interact freely, where we are known and where we know, where we are respected and respect, and where we can, unconsciously, satisfy essential human needs.

Essentially, the home context, if associated with positive feelings, may fulfill Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs for the physiological, as well as safety and security, love and belonging, and self-esteem (Mcleod, 2023). As summarized by Mcleod (2023) the Hierarchy of Needs claims that first, humans have a fundamental need for food, water, and shelter. Second, humans require safety and security, which can be understood to be personal security, employment, resources, health, and property. Third, love and belonging, or friendship, intimacy, family, and a sense of connection, are required. Fourth, seeking esteem from the self as well as from others in the form of respect, self-esteem, status, recognition, strength, and freedom. Self-actualization, the fifth layer, fulfills the need to grow "morally, intellectually, spiritually, creatively" (Mcleod 2023). In summary, leaving the familiar and entering the unfamiliar is a life disruption that necessarily requires attention to satisfying essential human needs.

While the Hierarchy of Needs adds a behavioral psychology perspective to homesickness, and its triggers, and offers a coping path, social learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) theory, specifically, "communities of practice" (Wenger, 1998) provides yet another framework for understanding the causes for homesickness as well as identifying potential coping strategies. As Wenger (1998) observes, humans all belong to myriad communities of practice. In fact, they are as ubiquitous to human behavior as language and culture, functioning virtually unconsciously. Humans, like other mammals, are communal beings, requiring community for survival. We depend on countless communities of practice to help us put food on the table, to provide a roof over our heads, and to

help us learn new concepts, practices, and behaviors. Communities are sites of contention, fraught with agreement and conflict, praise and punishment, and are highly fluid. At the same time, they are cohesive because members, knowingly and unknowingly, share or wish to share common knowledge, experiences, resources, and histories. We may know the members in a community of practice such as the nuclear family, or we may belong to a community of practice that is so large that it would be impossible to know every member, such as the community of motherhood. Yet, when a woman speaks of her experience with childbirth, mothers the world over will nod knowingly. In summary, communities of practice are everywhere, continuously functioning. We form and participate in communities of practice because they appeal to our core social behavior as humans. They scaffold our learning and facilitate the co-construction of our identities. Communities of practice, by their very nature, also serve as the conduit to helping humans satisfy their basic needs and facilitate belongingness.

What happens when our communities of practice are disrupted? Wenger (1998) proposes five trajectories of participation that describe people's positionality and by extension their identities as they navigate their communities of practice: peripheral, inbound, insider, boundary, and outbound (pp. 154-155). We enter, interact, and leave each of these communities of practice routinely with great facility. We do so partly because we, like others in the community of practice, know the rules of engagement, e.g., the language, the behaviors, and the pragmatics. As Furnham (2005) says, we know the "grammar" of the culture.

International student sojourners leave their home country communities of practice as they embark on their journeys. In so doing, international student sojourners are propelled into a world where unconscious acts necessarily become conscious again and where their identities are challenged, shaped, and reshaped as they learn to be in a new culture.

As international student sojourners' periphery and inbound trajectories begin to take shape, their boundary and outbound trajectories, i.e. home culture communities of practice become both a reaffirming source during the adjustment period while also a source for acculturative stress and a potential barrier to host country communities of practice.

### *Social Media Use, Homesickness, and Acculturation*

Acculturation, originally defined as "those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups" (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936, p. 149). Today, scholars tend to view acculturation not as a group phenomenon, but as an individual one and that it is a process of social, psychological, and cultural adjustment and adaptation (Berry, 1992).

As social media became ubiquitous gaining popularity across cultures, an increased number of studies on the use of social media among international students in relation to acculturation and adjustment proliferated, yet few studies were conducted to analyze the relationships between social media use and homesickness (Hofhuis et al., 2023; Poyrazli & Devonish, 2020; Wong & Liu, 2024; Yu et al., 2019). Social media is one such technology available to international sojourners that can facilitate communication with home communities. Posting, reading, and viewing are largely seen as a means of staying in touch with family and friendship networks when separated by distance. As such, people use social media to stay connected with people who are already in their social network (boyd & Ellison, 2008, Omori & Schwartz, 2022). Posting a selfie while lounging on a beach with a favorite beverage is the modern-day substitute for handwritten letters and long-distance telephone calls. To connect with various communities, people create profiles on social network sites (SNS), such as Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat. SNS, thus, have become virtual mechanisms for expanding, entering, bordering, and even exiting the myriad communities of practice in which people participate. Thus, people receive information that theoretically helps maintain an interpersonal relationship (Allabash & Ma, 2017).

Baines, Ittefaq, and Abwao (2022) suggest that social media serves three primary social support functions: emotional, informational, and instrumental. For example, international students might feel better by knowing someone cares through social media (emotional support). International students might also receive necessary information through social media to navigate life in a designated location (informational support). Lastly, international students might receive specific instruction from social media (instructional support).

Previous literature on social media use, homesickness, and acculturation reports incompatible results. For example, Li and Tsai (2015) reported that the use of Facebook facilitated international students' adaptation to US society. Billedo et al. (2020) reported that homesickness affected international students' social-cultural adjustment negatively in the short term. Hofhuis et al. (2019) reported that short-term international student sojourners who communicated with people back home felt homesickness and loneliness and tended to retain their home cultural values. As such, more studies are needed to clarify the relationship between social media use, homesickness, and acculturation.

Based on the literature review, this study asked the following research question:

RQ: What is the relationship between social media use, acculturation, and homesickness?

## Method

The researchers chose to use a qualitative study method combined with a brief demographic questionnaire to investigate the intersections of acculturation, homesickness, and social media. We believe that each international student's situation varies. Thus, we thought using qualitative data is important to hear each person's lived experiences including the contextual and situational information. Further, some students might misunderstand the questions asked in online surveys. Thus, we decided to use a focus group interview so that we could ensure participants understood our questions and we understood their stories.

Using phenomenology as a guide, the researchers created seven open-ended questions and invited participants to join a focus group session on Zoom. During the focus session, the participants discussed and described their experiences with homesickness, their coping strategies, and the role social media plays during their acculturation process. A phenomenological study, according to Creswell (1998), "...describes the meaning of the lived experiences of several individuals about a concept or **the phenomenon**" (emphasis in original) (p. 51). The primary method for collecting data in a phenomenological study is to write "...research questions that explore the meaning of the experience for individuals and asks individuals to describe their everyday **lived experience** (emphasis in original) (*ibid*, p. 54). Thus, for the current study, the researchers composed several open-ended questions designed to elicit participants' descriptions of homesickness, how they coped with their homesickness symptoms, what triggered homesickness, and the role of social media.

In order to secure validity and reliability, we first shared the definitions of homesickness with our participants in the Zoom chat before asking questions. The definition stayed in the chat so that the participants could refer to it throughout the discussion. Likewise, each focus group question was posted in the chat. Finally, participants were encouraged to ask questions if they didn't understand the questions. Each of these steps were efforts to help ensure validity and reliability.

The researchers arranged the open-ended questions so as to first establish participants' experiences with homesickness, the causes for their homesickness, strategies they invoke when they experience bouts of homesickness, social media's role in their homesickness, and if they were in the United States during the pandemic and how the pandemic influenced their homesickness. The following pre-structure questions were asked.

1. Have you experienced homesickness since coming to the United States?
2. In your experience, what triggers homesickness for you?

3. How often do you feel homesick and has the frequency changed over the time you've been in the United States?
4. Describe a time when you experienced homesickness since coming to the United States.
  - a. Describe the kind of support you sought during your homesickness.
  - b. Describe the kind of and level of support you had during your homesickness.
5. What do you do when you feel homesick?
  - a. Share your strategies you have for helping you with your homesickness.
6. Describe social media's role when you are feeling homesick.
  - a. Describe the role friends from here and from home play in coping with homesickness. Do you have many friends from here compared to home?
7. Were you here during the pandemic?
  - a. If so, did you change your SM use during the pandemic?
  - b. How did the pandemic influence your feelings of homesickness?

Before each focus group interview, we also asked participants to complete a brief demographic questionnaire in which we asked for information about gender, home language, country of origin, level of education, and length of stay in the United States. We also asked participants to self-rate their overall English proficiency using the very broad categories of beginning (CEFR A1-A2), intermediate (B1-B2), and advanced (C1-C2). For the purposes of organizing participant responses and to humanize the experiences of the participants, pseudonyms have been assigned to the participants. See Table 1

**Table 1. Participants' Characteristics**

| Pseudonym | Gender | Age   | Country of origin | Home Language                 | Length in US | Degree             | CEFR* |
|-----------|--------|-------|-------------------|-------------------------------|--------------|--------------------|-------|
| Menna     | F      | 30+   | Egypt             | Arabic                        | 0-3 months   | MA                 | C1-C2 |
| Kan       | M      | 20-22 | Myanmar           | Burmese/English               | 3-6 months   | Undergraduate (UG) | B2    |
| Samal     | F      | 26-29 | Kazakhstan        | Kazakh/Russian                | 3-6 months   | MA                 | C1-C2 |
| Katrya    | F      | 26-29 | Ukraine           | Ukrainian/Russian             | 1-2 yrs      | Ph. D.             | C1-C2 |
| Asmaa     | F      | 20-22 | Jordan            | Arabic                        | 1-2 yrs      | UG                 | B2    |
| Hoang     | M      | 26-29 | Vietnam           | Vietnamese                    | 2+ yrs       | UG                 | C1-C2 |
| Therese   | F      | 23-25 | Cameroon          | English/French                | 2+ yrs       | UG                 | C1-C2 |
| Faduma    | F      | 23-25 | Ethiopia          | Amharic                       | 2+ yrs       | UG                 | B2    |
| Esther    | F      | 23-25 | Cameroon          | French/Indigenous Language    | 2+ yrs       | UG                 | C1-C2 |
| Rosine    | F      | 26-29 | Rwanda            | French, Swahili / Kinyarwanda | 2+ yrs       | MA                 | C1-C2 |
| Genji     | M      | 30+   | Japan             | Japanese                      | 2+ yrs       | MA                 | C1-C2 |

\* Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

After receiving IRB approval, the researchers contacted the international office at the university where the study was conducted to ask that their office email an invitation to participate in the study to their international student listserv.

Thirteen participants completed the demographic survey; however, only 11 individuals completed both the demographic survey and participated in a Zoom focus group session. To accommodate people's schedules and to increase the number of participants, we offered two different Zoom focus group sessions on separate days. The researchers allowed the focus group sessions to take their natural conversational course while ensuring that everyone had a chance to share their experiences. The focus group sessions were recorded and then later transcribed using Office 365's

transcription application. Focus group one lasted one hour and 32 minutes and produced 12,501 words of text. Focus group two lasted one hour and 19 minutes and produced 12,700 words of text.

In order to secure validity and reliability, the researchers independently read, analyzed, and coded the transcripts for data that addressed the relationship between social media use, acculturation, and homesickness. While “triangulation...corroborating evidence from different sources” (Creswell, 1998, p. 202), is desirable in studies invoking qualitative methods, the researchers did not have access to environmental data, social media sites of the participants, institutional documents, etc, that might verify the comments participants made about homesickness and their use of social media. Another triangulation strategy is to share the researchers’ interpretations with the participants and ask for verification of the accuracy of the researchers’ interpretations; however, this practice of re-entering the field potentially leads to additional data that then needs to be analyzed, creating a circular dilemma (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Once the focus group sessions had been completed, the researchers, independent of each other, read through the transcripts, identifying comments that emerged as salient to our research question of the relationship between social media use, acculturation, and homesickness. Initial analysis of the data revealed a variety of topics across a wide spectrum of triggers and remedies, including essentials, agency, environmental, fear of missing out, -isms, language & culture, nostalgia, cognitive dissonance, acceptance, returning home, routine, regaining control, institutional, and rationalizing. From these broad categories, the researchers reorganized the data and grouped the categories according to the topics embedded in the focus group discussion questions of homesickness, adjustment, social media, and pandemic.

After the independent analysis, the researchers reconvened, compared coding, and identified the following broad themes as they relate to social media, acculturation, and homesickness: conflict, comfort, distraction, frenemy, and functional. After discussing each theme, we deleted “comfort” from the themes because comfort surfaced in relation to frenemy. As a result, a total of four themes are identified (i.e., 1. Social media as conflict, 2. Social media as distraction, 3. Social media as frenemy, and 4. Social media as functional).

## Results

The demographic survey revealed the participants’ SNS use preferences. Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube are the three sites used most frequently by the participants followed by Instagram and Snap. Messenger, LinkedIn, and TikTok were also used, though not as frequently as the other sites. Finally, Twitter (now X) and Reddit were used the least. WeChat and Line, while listed as an option in the survey, were not used by any of the participants. This can be partly explained by the limited audience for these two sites with WeChat being used primarily in China and Line nearly exclusively for Japan. While we had one participant from Japan, he did not click Line as an SNS that he uses frequently or at all. (Table 2)

**Table 2. Social Media Usage**

| Social media used by order of preference |    |
|--|----|
| Facebook                                 | 13 |
| YouTube                                  | 13 |
| WhatsApp                                 | 13 |
| Instagram                                | 9  |
| Snap                                     | 8  |
| Messenger                                | 6  |
| LinkedIn                                 | 5  |
| X (Twitter)                              | 3  |
| Reddit                                   | 2  |

At the beginning of the focus group interviews, we asked our participants about their experiences with homesickness and acculturation before they shared their experiences of using social media. As such, for reporting the results, we first explain how our participants experienced homesickness and what their acculturation process looked like. Next, we explain in depth the four themes that emerged in terms of the relationship between social media use, acculturation, and homesickness from our focus group interviews.

## Homesickness and Acculturation

All of the participants except one experienced some kind of homesickness although what triggered the feeling of homesickness varies somewhat. Some students experienced more homesickness during special holidays when family and friends back home get together usually. The participants explained that they felt as if they were missing out on important gatherings and events because they were away from home. Also, some participants said that longer vacations such as summer are difficult for them because American students tend to go home when international students, for a variety of reasons, are unable to travel home. In summary, participants cited such things as family, friends, food, the environment, language, absence, routine, and loss of control as things that bring on the symptoms of homesickness much as Furnham (2005) and Thurber & Walton (2007, 2012) found. Supporting Furnham (2005) and Thurber & Walton (2007, 2012), Rosine from Rwanda explains, *"We are a culture of like, we're very family oriented and my family is very family oriented... You know. It's very difficult."*

At the same time, missing home, food, friends, and family are also explained often as an integral part of "communal" practices in the focus group interviews. Specifically, several of our participants mentioned that missing important events such as the Lunar New Year celebration, family members' birthdays, and weddings or funerals are the times our participants felt homesick regardless of the length of time they are in the U.S. As Asmaa from Jordan says *"You feel like you're not part of everything going there anymore. It just hurt you some way."*

Faduma from Ethiopia reported losing her independence as something that sets off moments of homesickness. *"...even like being able to go from one place to another easily, because I think at the time I was using like the bus, or I had like family members drive me."* Rosine shared the same sentiment that Faduma shared, *"You, you need to take the bus. Maybe you used to being driven everywhere and then. Now you have to take the bus in the cold. You have to buy new shoes. They're not comfortable because it's so. All that stuff. You just want to go home."* Similarly, Katrya from Ukraine shared her feeling of frustration of not being able to control small chores like banking. As such, many of our participants struggled to learn a new way of life.

In terms of acculturation, learning new practices of the American community, having a routine, and finding a sub-community facilitated our participant's acculturation process. One participant, Menna from Egypt, had only recently arrived and was still in the initial stages of culture shock with everything being new and different, and the unknown dominating her thoughts. *"For me, actually I feel it's. I feel it now more than ever because it's my first month and a half. As I said, but I don't know if it will change over time."* Yet, others had been in the United States for a year or more and had established new communities and networks. Katrya observed that establishing a routine and making new friends helped. *"I met some friends and just like I started classes and like I kind of established a routine and I felt like, okay."* Menna also learned how to find the food she likes, which helps her adjust to a new place by stating, *"The food is different, but I asked some people say I'm Muslim as a religion, so I eating halal food. I couldn't find it so easy, but I discovered that the Jewish here in America eating halal food. So I found it easily in some supermarkets."*

Having institutional support was also cited as a significant factor in helping to deal with homesickness. Therese from Cameroon says *"The different cultural events, that's like the best way to like, you know, like it's a hug. It's like a hug that the school is trying to give you. We see the struggle. You're not alone."* Thus, institutional support and planned events that elevate cultures and



diversity communicate to international student sojourners that they belong and that the school is there for them.

The aforementioned strategies for coping with homesickness, communicating with family and friends back home, establishing new routines, and engaging with the local community, along the way to acculturation are tried and true, involving digital technologies minimally if at all. In the following section, we explain four themes that surfaced from the focus group interviews in relation to the social media use and homesickness.

### **Theme One: Social Media as Conflict**

Conflict addressed in our focus group interviews involves the positive and negative impact that social media causes in relation to homesickness. When people feel lonely or they are missing their family and friends back home, social media helps maintain the relationship bonds. A majority of our participants used social media to maintain their relationships back home even if they did not use social media regularly when living in their countries. At the same time, several participants mentioned that using social media can evoke a sense of helplessness or loneliness since it is not possible to be present in the flesh and actively participate as an insider who is physically present. For example, Asmaa of Jordan sums up feelings of conflict explaining that social media can delay the onset of homesickness, but not prevent it.

*But the thing is here social media help you to know others, like your friends, your close people to you. The people that you love. How they are doing? They're like updates and, but the thing that it doesn't really help with is homesickness other than your knowing about them, but things like I feel it's postponed it like the things like you will still feel like homesickness, but that's like help you a little bit to like kind of if it's not today, but that's gonna be tomorrow.*

When asked specifically if social media helps to mitigate the effects of homesickness the reactions were mixed. Esther from Cameroon said,

*I would say both. It helps a lot because like it helps with communicate with family members and just know, like everything that is going on in your country or over the world. But then at the same time when you see like other people, like from back home, like just like maybe like celebrating things or just happy things happening or even sad things. And it makes your homesickness worse. So, I don't know both.*

Esther succinctly states, "sometimes it's [social media] just like it doesn't help homesickness." Concurring, Asmaa states "it's have like a both sided effects it somehow negative and positive at the same time. As I already say, if you really look for the good things, you will find that. If you look for the bad thing, you will see it."

### **Theme Two: Social Media as Distraction**

One of the functions of social media is that of killing or passing time. Further, social media can be used as a medium to avoid the difficulties international students face at the moment, meaning social media serves as a means of distraction from the reality. Social media can also become a distraction or obstruction to acculturation. Faduma explains how spending time on social media to connect with people back home can be a distraction.

*I'm gonna be on social media and then I'll try to connect the people back home and but it's still it's not good because now even when I'm with people, I'm usually on my phone, maybe I'm scrolling TikTok and it's not a good thing. We don't only use it to find people, but we use it to distract. So like when we use social media and if you are really into it like we are missing*

*something that's like around us. And I said it before and that's what I noticed. Sometimes even like we are in group of people and talking and everything. You might see all of the peoples all of the sudden they will be on their phone.*

### **Theme Three: Social Media as Frenemy**

Theresa names social media a frenemy because it serves as both a friend, something that can provide comfort, or that can connect you with communities, while at the same time, it can be an enemy due to the amount of effort that goes into trying to stay connected and stay relevant with friends back home. This theme involves emotional support and burden. Theresa said, *"Here in the US, it hasn't really helped, but now with the ones back home, social media has been more like a frenemy. Because you have to do a lot of work to chase your friends back home. It's like you're wooing back the friendship, you're wooing back people to, like, stay connected with me."*

Hoang concurs with Theresa regarding the duality of social media and maintaining friendships. *"So I would say that was the toughest, and that was one of the worst homesickness that I got ever since I got to the US, but at the same time, I mean, I still I was using social media. I was seeing Facebook and all that. I got data. I got myself informed, but I didn't. It didn't help too much, because as a matter of fact, there's nothing I could do and I don't like that. So that was one of the reason why, after coming back from my country, I know. So I don't use social media much anymore."*

### **Theme Four: Social Media as Functional**

Our participants said that social media facilitates their acculturation by forming new social networks and obtaining the necessary information to understand the rules and cultural norms in a new environment. For example, Katrya stated,

*So I knew like instead of breaking into an established circle of friends like, I just need to make something new, and I get just like fellow international students really worked out in this. So, of course, you will navigate more towards people that are like you right, that you don't have to explain certain struggles to and you guys will just like be hand in hand support each other. And just drive through it.*

Further, Katrya acknowledges the functionality social media can play for international student sojourners.

*I use social media to learn more about the culture here and like be a little bit more knowledgeable of how things are working out. Let's say I have some health issues or have a question. I don't have friends or relatives from back home who are from here, so I can't really ask a question like where do I need to go if I need to do something? So instead, I turn to Reddit, and I just like post anonymous. Like say I need to get a new glasses prescription. How do I go about that and just random people kind of give you the info and that's how so, like Reddit is basically taking on parents for me, like helping me out.*

Thus, the emergence of these four themes demonstrates the complexity of social media as both a harbinger of homesickness and a facilitator of acculturation.

## **Discussion**

In this study, the researchers sought to understand the relationship between social media use, homesickness, and acculturation. The condition of homesickness has been observed since the epic adventure of the *Iliad*, and while communication technologies, travel, and educational institutions have changed since the time of the Greeks, homesickness triggers have remained relatively constant

in which people describe nostalgia for home and the familiar, and experience grief, depression, and somatic symptoms of insomnia and a lack of energy (Thurber & Walton 2007). Thus, the research was designed to investigate how people, specifically, the international student sojourner, cope with homesickness in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century using 21<sup>st</sup> Century technologies.

Our findings suggest that the causes of homesickness for international student sojourners fall into predictable categories of missing family, and friends, food, loss of control, and language difference, thus supporting previous studies (Stroebe, van Vliet, Hewstone, & Willis. 2002; Poyrazli, Lopez, 2007; Furnham, 2005; Thurber & Walton 2007 2012). At the same time, our participants used social media especially to reconnect with family and friends back home instead of engaging with the local community in the host country as reported in the previous literature (Hendrickson et al., 2011; Hofhuis et al., 2019; Omori & Schwartz, 2022).

### **Homesickness and Social Media Use**

From our focus group interviews, four major themes surfaced: 1. Social media as conflict, 2. Social media as distraction, 3. Social media as frenemy, and 4. Social media as functional. In terms of homesickness, social media can temporarily help international students suffering from homesickness by connecting with people back home (themes 1 and 3) and staying up to date with current events in their home countries (themes 1 and 4), or even just avoiding their current situation (theme 2). However, social media was not a “solution” to the feeling of homesickness for many of our participants. Instead, social media can exacerbate homesickness (theme 1) and delay or become a barrier to the development of forming and sustaining new social networks in their new environment (themes 2 and 3). In fact, Hoang from Vietnam stopped using social media because he felt hopeless when he was using social media to connect with people back home because he could not be there physically. Thus, he decided to “be present” and participate more actively in his new community. Inconsistent with Billedo et al. (2020), our participants did not use social media much to communicate with people in the host country. Instead, when our participants felt homesick, they tended to use social media to communicate with people back home, creating a cycle of trying to maintain an insider position by connecting with communities back home while never overcoming or lessening the symptoms of homesickness. As such, encouraging social media use to communicate with people in the host country, as Billedo et al. (2020) advocate, is crucial to breaking the homesickness cycle and facilitating the acculturation process.

As observed earlier, before digital technologies, letter writing was a primary medium for staying in touch with family and friends back home. While social media is more efficient, nearly instantaneous, less time intensive, and cheaper, it may very well be that the less efficient, more time intensive, and more expensive use of international snail mail has the power to preserve and even strengthen ties back home while allowing time for international student sojourners to engage with their new culture. Letters have the potential to be more intimate, are less public, and allow a person to sit and “be” with the letter writer while reading and re-reading the letter whereas social media posts are, by their very nature, more public, less personal, lack depth and intimacy, and are fleeting. “They fill and expand the in-between. Letters are written with the delays of snail mail in mind, if we’re lucky, let us develop a voice apart from others, with less (or no) attention to the pings and alerts of harried modern life” (Cave, 2024, p. 8). Thurber and Walton (2007) recommend that families plan and gauge their contact, giving children the emotional space they need to begin participating in their new surroundings. A letter mailed internationally, taking up to a week or more to reach its intended recipient, may provide the emotional space international student sojourners require to shift their focus from home to their new culture. Cave (2024) provides anecdotal support for the emotional, intellectual, and personal benefits letter writing offers, stating letters open up that “...intellectual space and the means to practice a method for asserting and exploring” (p. 9) in a way that social media cannot.

## Communities of Practice and Acculturation

Participants acknowledged social media's functionality in learning the "grammar" (Furnham, 2005) of the new culture and in helping to create a local community (theme 4). Several participants commented that connecting with other international students and attending "cultural events" that their campus provided facilitated their ability to create new friendship networks, which in turn helped to mitigate the symptoms of homesickness. The connection with other international student sojourners offered them a place to belong. It bears reiterating what Therese said, *"It's like a hug that the the school is trying to give you. We see the struggle. You're not alone."*

Homesickness involves people's cognitive-motivational-emotional state (Fisher & Hood, 1987; Götz, et al., 2019). Consistent with Baines et al. (2022), our results indicate that social media serves several functions that are related to emotional, informational, and instrumental social functions. Social media *does* provide a mechanism to communicate with people back home, and social media *does* provide functional support for international students. However, our participants did not generally speak positively of social media's role in maintaining insider trajectories with communities back home. Some went so far as to say that they found it frustrating because social media, while enabling contact, could not replace physical presence, thus, perpetuating symptoms of homesickness rather than alleviating them. In order to help international student sojourners' emotionally, it might be important for international students to use social media to connect with people in the host country more, instead of communicating with people back home. In doing so, international student sojourners can begin to feel more comfortable in their new environment, reinforcing feelings of "belongingness" (Glass & Westmont, 2014). Being part of the new community is fundamental was reiterated by several of the participants. Faduma sums up the need to connect with the local community nicely, *"And watching something, talking to people not outside, like, as she said, talking to the people that you know from back home, it's it's really helpful, but like it's just temporary because still they're not here and we still we need, we need to make a connection with people that are like surround us and I'm sure most of the people were not doing that at some point."* Or as Katrya says, *"Making friends over here, making new memories, making having new experiences and just staying in touch with friends from back home."*

Wenger (1998) claims that we all belong to myriad communities of practice. Our participants shared their experiences of bonding with other international students by talking about the joys and tribulations of learning to live and study in a foreign country, away from the familiar, security, and comforts of home and the home culture. They can talk and connect with other international student sojourners expressing empathy and understanding as only insiders can. Thus, finding and making friends with other international peers, building a new community, and establishing a sense of belonging appear to be common denominators for successful acculturation.

## Practical Implications

This study is important to several communities on both sides of the international student sojourner experience. For those in the home culture, this study suggests that it is good to try to maintain contact with the international student sojourner while they are away, but just like Thurber and Walton (2007, 2012) recommend, the contact should be scheduled and initiated by them, not the international student sojourner. Our results suggest that international students can feel more homesick when exerting excessive time and energy to be virtually present back home. In addition, spending too much time on social media to communicate with people in the home culture limits the time available to devote to the here and now, and reduces potential opportunities to create new social networks and interpersonal relationships in the host culture, thus, serving as a barrier to learning about the social norms of the new culture.

## Education Policy Implications

Two policy implications in education emerge from our findings. First, it is imperative to establish a robust support infrastructure within campus environments. Responses from our participants revealed a lack of awareness regarding available support mechanisms when experiencing feelings of homesickness. Hoang, for example, stated, “*where to get help, and I didn’t know if there’s any help available to be honest.*” Thus, the international office and other student support offices can communicate to international students about campus resources, including counseling services and healthcare facilities ensuring that international students are well-informed about the social and psychological resources available. Cultural and social system differences might deter international students from seeking assistance or reaching out to faculty or advisors. Many participants resort to social media platforms to manage feelings of homesickness by maintaining connections with people in their home countries. However, awareness of available campus support structures could redirect them towards more effective avenues for assistance.

Secondly, our results underscore the importance of establishing dedicated spaces for fostering communication among international students. Our results suggest that creating a place to communicate and connect with other international student sojourners helps mitigate homesickness and facilitates the creation of a new community of practice for international student sojourners. Social media can provide information and instructional support for newcomers to learn the grammar of the culture (Furnham, 2005) as they navigate their new environment. Many of our participants expressed that engaging with fellow international students provided solace through shared experiences, with some noting the enjoyable aspect of learning about different cultures through intercultural communication. Moreover, the presence of international events and organizations enriches the cultural tapestry of American academic institutions, rendering them a more diverse and intellectually stimulating environment on campus.

## Limitations

There are a few limitations to this study, all of which can be taken up in future studies. The first limitation is the smaller sample size although we reached the saturated points. Future studies with a large sample could generate more insight into how social media can both mitigate and exacerbate homesickness as well as how it can facilitate and prevent acculturation. For example, the researchers were not able to detect differences due to the length of stay, home cultures, or language proficiency due to the smaller sample size. Thus, narrowing the parameters for time away from home may help us to understand more about the effects length of stay has on homesickness and acculturation. Furthermore, the current study opened the research to all nationalities. Future studies could utilize multiple homogenous focus groups to try to learn if there are challenges unique to a specific nationality, duration of stay, or language proficiency.

## Conclusion

Expanding on the previous literature on homesickness and social media use, the results of this study supported the effects of physically leaving existing communities of practice while also striving to enter new communities of practice in a new environment. Homesickness is a malady that has affected people for a thousand years or more. Social media allows international student sojourners to communicate with people back home and stay up to date on current events in their home country instantaneously. By using qualitative data, this study was able to detect four major themes in relation to homesickness, acculturation, and social media use. Most of the previous studies were conducted using quantitative data, which did not provide in-depth information about the reasons why there were no associations between social media use to communicate with people back home and homesickness, such as Billedo et al. (2020). Through the themes, this study found that connecting with people back home can in fact trigger homesickness instead of alleviating

homesickness. Additionally, this study suggests that social media has the potential to disrupt the process of acculturation and obscure a sense of belongingness, making it a challenge to establish local, supportive, social networks in the new environment if social media is used to communicate with people back home excessively. Instead of getting lost in social media, attending cultural events on campus and meeting other international students are mentioned as good tactics to create “new memories” (Katrya) and form new communities of practice for international student sojourners.

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