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Exploring the Role of Social Media on International Students' Adaptation in the Process of Transcultural Communication Within the Context of the Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract: In recent years, with the advancement of the Belt and Road initiative (BRI) there has been an increasing number of students from participating countries coming to China for study and exchange. This trend provides a practical pathway for global cooperation in transcultural communication research. Social media has emerged as a crucial platform for the collaborative development of the BRI and as a primary channel for understanding China in the context of transcultural communication. Thus, investigating how social media facilitates transcultural communication within the BRI framework is a key area of current research. International students often face challenges in adapting to new environments during their transcultural communication process. Understanding how these students in China manage adaptation stress, comprehend the BRI policies for mutual development, and improve their adjustment to Chinese society are urgent questions in transcultural communication research. Social media offers a multifaceted platform for communication that can help alleviate these adaptation challenges. However, existing research predominantly emphasises the potential of social media in aiding the adaptability of international students, lacking a comprehensive explanation of how it alleviates stress and promotes gradual adaptation. Therefore, this study aims to critically analyse relevant empirical research, theoretical frameworks, and conceptual models to address this gap. The research findings offer general conclusions regarding the adaptation of international students using social media in the process of transcultural communication, further providing a theoretical basis for the adaptation of students from BRI countries to China. Through the research findings, it is observed that international students may predominantly use social media to escape the adaptation stress of a new environment rather than genuinely alleviate stress

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and better adapt to the local society. Additionally, students from different countries exhibit varying attitudes towards using social media to cope with stress, warranting further investigation. This research contributes to understanding the genuine adaptation of students from BRI countries in the process of transcultural communication in China, promoting mutual cultural cooperation and shared development.

Keywords: social media; transcultural communication; adaptation; international students; the Belt and Road initiative (BRI)

1 Introduction

The BRI proposed by the Chinese government, is aimed to promote global development and deepen regional cooperation along the ancient Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road (Yu 2014). It is a measure for China to enhance transcultural communication. As the BRI fosters partnerships with the participating countries, it strengthens economic and political ties and encourages cultural exchanges (Chen 2016). International students play a crucial role in these cultural exchanges, contributing to the economic and technological development of host countries and exemplifying the effectiveness of transcultural communication in their adaptation processes (Cudmore 2005). Through transcultural communication, international students serve as both transmitters and recipients of cultural exchanges, fostering a deeper understanding among diverse cultures (Song and Xia 2021). Driven by the BRI, cooperation in fields such as economy, culture, and education between China and participating countries has become more frequent, with over half of the international students in China coming from BRI participating countries (Xiao 2021). Effective transcultural communication is essential for international students to understand cultural and social policies and to adapt better to host countries (Wei and Hu 2017). Therefore, understanding the adaptation challenges faced by international students from BRI countries in China and providing theoretical support are crucial for comprehending the BRI policy and facilitating its implementation. Adaptation in unfamiliar environments is a dynamic process, involving initial pressure, gradual adjustment, and eventual integration with the host country's society (Kim 2017). Research indicates that social media is a vital tool for international students in addressing adaptability challenges during transcultural communication (Yu, Foroudi, and Gupta 2019). Analysing the role of social media in this context provides practical insights for the successful promotion of the BRI, helping international students in their adaptation to China and enhancing transcultural communication.

Currently, BRI countries are the primary source of international students in China, constituting over half of the international student population, with numbers steadily increasing (Yang 2005). These students are key facilitators of cultural exchanges, with their presence and interactions under the BRI framework increasing the frequency of transcultural communication. International students from BRI countries are vital for talent reserves and international exchanges between China and their home countries (Tao 2019). Supporting these students in their cross-cultural adaptation helps them better understand and appreciate Chinese culture (Ma 2018). This study aims to provide a critical review to enhance our understanding of how to guide BRI students in achieving positive cross-cultural adaptation in China and fostering transcultural communication for mutual development.

Understanding the adaptation issues of international students involves integrating individuals with different cultures into the host society's values and social norms while minimally preserving their original cultural habits (Kim 2005). Extensive research on cross-cultural adaptation provides generalizable insights, applicable to BRI students in China. Social and cultural adaptation levels depend on factors such as length of residence, understanding of the host culture, interaction with locals, cultural differences, language proficiency, and adaptation strategies (Ward and Rana 1999). Psychological adaptation is assessed by individuals' well-being, life satisfaction, coping strategies, and social support (Berry 2006).

In summary, international students face adaptation pressures both psychologically and socio-culturally in unfamiliar environments. They aim to reduce internal pressures like tension and uncertainty while managing external pressures from the new environment, social interactions, and cultural obstacles (Ye 2006). Social media, as a primary means of establishing social support, plays a crucial role in both psychological and socio-cultural adaptation (Kwon, Stefanone, and Barnett 2014). Examining social media's role in cross-cultural adaptation offers insights into addressing the adaptation challenges faced by international students from BRI countries in China.

While existing studies indicate that social media aids international students in adapting to new environments (Berry 2006), the specific ways and extent to which it alleviates adaptation pressures remain underexplored. (Kwon, Stefanone, and Barnett 2014) highlights social media's role in maintaining emotional and social support from home country connections. Although social networks from the home country may not fully resolve adaptation difficulties, they provide essential emotional support (Ye 2006). Research by Sovic (2008), Mahmood and Burke (2018) underscores communication as a key driver for better adaptation. However, these studies do not conclusively address how and whether social media can significantly alleviate the pressures faced by international students.

This study's core objective is to critically analyze existing literature on how international students use social media to manage adaptation pressures and promote integration. By discussing global trends among international students, the study provides insights into the real role of social media in the cross-cultural adaptation of international students from BRI countries in China.

To achieve this goal, the study comprehensively reviews relevant empirical research, theoretical frameworks, and conceptual models, aiming to understand how international students utilize social media to alleviate stress and promote adaptation during transcultural communication. Emphasizing social media's role in meeting individual needs, facilitating communication, and fostering development perspectives, the study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of international students' adaptation processes. The conclusions aim to offer robust support for scientific and educational cooperation and mutual benefit.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Cross-Cultural Adaptation of International Students from BRI Countries in China

The BRI has facilitated interaction and contact among diverse cultures, which, in academic discourse, is regarded as transcultural communication. Transcultural communication entails conscious exchange and interaction between individuals from different cultural backgrounds, encompassing the global dissemination of various cultures (Baker 2016). This perspective highlights the complexity of interactions between different cultural groups. Notably, the implementation and practice of the BRI provide a significant policy foundation for transcultural communication (Li and Li 2020). Since its inception in 2013, the BRI has been a vital conduit for cultural exchange between China and various cultures representing an essential initiative for China to narrate its story to different countries effectively.

As the BRI progresses, it has offered more opportunities for students from participating countries to study in China. The number of international students from BRI countries, including Southeast Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, and Africa, has been on the rise. As highlighted by Ding and Zhou (2019) and Liu (2016), the initiative has enhanced economic and educational cooperation between China and participating countries. In particular, BRI participating countries have become the most significant source of international students in China in recent years. From 2013 to 2019, the proportion of international students from BRI countries studying in China increased from 47 % to 52.44 % of the total international student population

(Chu and Zhu 2023). This signifies that the rapid development of cultural exchanges and contacts is conducive to more effective cooperation among nations. For instance, exchanges and improved adaptation between international students from ASEAN countries and other nations provide opportunities for addressing cultural and national differences, enriching the narrative of the BRI (Tan 2020).

To enhance understanding and strengthen cooperation among countries participating in the BRI for mutual learning and benefit, a deeper understanding of the cross-cultural of international students from participating countries in China is crucial. Research on the cross-cultural adaptation of international students from BRI countries enables timely understanding of the current status and obstacles in cultural exchanges between cooperating countries, enhances understanding of the initiative among countries, and reduces conflicts arising from different cultures (Li 2007; Liu and Jia 2014). The current status of cross-cultural adaptation of international students from BRI countries in China holds significant implications for fostering talent development, improving international relations, and further enhancing China's future international influence (Xia 2017).

However, international students from BRI countries currently face challenges such as a lack of understanding of Chinese culture and values, as well as interpersonal communication and daily life challenges. For instance, research by Huang (2016) on students from Southeast Asian BRI countries in Shaanxi indicated that 41.2 % of students often miss their hometowns and find it challenging to adapt to Chinese communication styles. Similarly, Arab students studying in Zhejiang, besides academic and daily life challenges, express difficulties in adapting to Chinese culture due to religious and interpersonal communication barriers (Li 2007). Despite facing varying degrees of cross-cultural adaptation challenges, current research still lacks strategies to address the difficulties encountered by international students from BRI countries during their adaptation process. Studies suggest that social media serves as an effective tool for enhancing communication, understanding, and adaptation (Demes and Geeraert 2015). Hence, this study reviews the broader international use of social media by international students and its role in their cross-cultural adaptation, aiming to provide theoretical support for better assisting international students from BRI countries in adapting to China.

2.2 Cross-Cultural Adaptation of International Students Using Social Media

Adapting to life in a host country is a challenging task for international students, often accompanied by pressure and difficulties. Social interactions require

international students to adapt to new cultural customs and norms, interact with locals, and establish social relationships (Yan and Berliner 2013). Additionally, they must adapt to academic life to better understand the teaching content in the host country (Schachner et al. 2014). The adaptation process involves multiple issues such as understanding the language, culture, and policies of the host country (Smith and Khawaja 2014).

In recent years, the increasing use of social media as a communication channel and source of emotional support has helped international students adapt to studying and living in unfamiliar environments. Social media refers to interactive platforms that facilitate interaction and communication between users (Kim 2017). Through social media, international students can make friends, establish interpersonal relationships, maintain existing friendships, enhance communication, and gain emotional support through the use of social media (Choi and Shin 2017). Especially in the process of transcultural communication, due to the convenience of social media, international students can more easily use it to stay in touch with friends and family from their home countries. As social media provides an interactive platform for transcultural communication (Veronis, Tabler, and Ahmed 2018), the phenomenon of individuals from different cultures using social media for communication warrants further exploration.

Relevant literature suggests that social media use by international students contributes to their adaptation to transcultural communication. Recent studies indicate that closer social support through social media is associated with better psychological adaptation regardless of the nationality of international students (Bender, van Osch, Slegers, and Ye 2019). When individuals from different cultures move to a new or unfamiliar environment, establishing a new interaction and stable adaptation relationship with the new environment is understood as cross-cultural adaptation (Kim 2012). The adaptation process involves a dual process of cultural and psychological changes. This process will experience varying degrees of adaptation pressure, including physical and mental health, socio-cultural aspects, and identity (Berry 2005).

The adaptation process is a fluid and evolving one. The adaptation process in transcultural communication evolves from experiencing pressure to gradually transitioning to adaptation, ultimately leading to better mutual development with the local society (Lysgaara 1955) summarised the adaptation process of individuals to different cultural environments as the honeymoon period, the frustration period, the recovery period, and the adaptation period. In other words, the cross-cultural adaptation of individuals is not static; it begins with curiosity about the unfamiliar environment, transitions to anxiety and stress as they become familiar with the environment, and eventually adapts gradually. Kim's theory of cross-cultural

adaptation also responds to this changing adaptation process, stating that cross-cultural adaptation is a dynamic state, with individuals going through three stages of facing stress, gradual adaptation, and ultimately, mutual growth during the adaptation process.

The pressure in the adaptation process refers to the individual's response to adapting to life and interaction in an unfamiliar environment (Berry 2005). For international students, the time to adapt to the host country is relatively short, and their cross-cultural adaptation requires maintaining academic performance while coping with various sources of pressure. When facing real-life situations and adapting to unfamiliar cultures, international students are likely to feel confused, anxious, isolated, or depressed, reflecting their psychological adaptation pressure (Constantine, Okazaki, and Utsey 2004). Many international students also face pressures of socio-cultural adaptation, such as interacting and communicating with members of the host country (Chapdelaine and Alexitch 2004). The process of leaving social relationships and family from the home country and experiencing adaptation is likely to be filled with challenges and pressures for international students (Hechanova-Alampay et al. 2002).

Although recent research on international student adaptation has focused on the role of social media, data suggest that social media has the potential to help international students adapt to unfamiliar environments. For example, research by Chen (2013) on the impact of Chinese students using Facebook found a positive correlation between their adaptation to American culture and the use of Facebook, as well as a positive correlation between their identification with Chinese culture and the use of the Chinese social networking site Renren. Social media is considered an effective tool for international students to obtain social support and adapt to unfamiliar environments. Generally, social media provides individuals with a platform that is easy to access for information, communicate, interact, and feel a sense of belonging (Park and Oh 2012).

However, whether the use of social media can truly reduce the pressure of cross-cultural adaptation and achieve better adaptation has not been effectively verified. In particular, the adaptation process of using social media does not always produce positive effects, and in some cases, it even hinders the process of adapting to the host country. Research by Blease (2015) on Facebook indicates that the use of social media has negative effects on users of all age groups and may lead to stress and feelings of discomfort (Chen and Lee 2013). Although research on the negative effects of social media use by international students has not been widely discussed, its negative impact on users is objectively present.

Therefore, this study critically examines whether social media can truly reduce the pressure of cross-cultural adaptation and achieve better adaptation. The complexity of social media's role in the adaptation process is evident. For example,

French Muslim international students using social media to reinforce their Islamic identity are less willing to accept the values of the host country (Croucher and Cronn 2011). Therefore, further verification is needed on how international students' use of social media alleviates pressure and provides a comprehensive explanation for further adaptation processes.

3 Methods

3.1 Rapid Review Method

To gather pertinent literature to assess available literature related to BRI, international students, cross-cultural adaptation, and “social media,” a rapid review method was employed. This approach, guided by the rapid review protocol developed by Virginia Commonwealth University, aims to efficiently provide robust evidence within a constrained timeframe (Grant and Booth 2009). The purpose was to conduct a comprehensive systematic review of English and Chinese studies published from September 7, 2013, to September 7, 2023, using electronic databases, adhering to established review guidelines. The selected timeframe was intended to capture studies examining the impact of the BRI on the cross-cultural adaptation of international students in China post-2013.

The critical assessment aimed to identify and provide insights into the role of social media in the adaptation process of international students from BRI countries. The review focused on two primary research questions:

1. What is the current situation regarding the adaptation of international students from BRI countries in China?
2. What role does social media play in the cross-cultural adaptation of these students?

Rapid reviews, as a variant of systematic reviews, balance time constraints while adhering strictly to established protocols (Watta et al. 2008). Accordingly, this review categorized relevant studies into thematic areas and searched six research databases: SAGE, ProQuest, ScienceDirect, Routledge, Taylor & Francis, and CNKI. Additionally, Google Scholar was used to conduct a broader search, ensuring the inclusion of studies not indexed in the primary databases. Both Chinese and English studies were reviewed to provide a comprehensive view of social media's role in the adaptation of international students from BRI countries in China.

Searches in Google Scholar and databases used keywords relevant to the study, such as social media, digital media, international students, foreign students, cross-cultural adaptation, adaptation, and the BRI. Advanced search

techniques, including Boolean operators (AND/OR), were utilized to ensure thorough coverage and to avoid overlooking relevant articles. This method expands the search scope across multiple keyword combinations, increasing the breadth of research resources (Finfgeld and Johnson 2013). Combining keywords in search queries is particularly effective for retrieving a broader range of relevant data while focusing on specific research topics using similar yet distinct terms (Mahood et al. 2014).

3.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The scope of the study, as determined through the rapid review, includes academic papers and theses relevant to the topic. Non-academic articles, such as those from social media platforms, were excluded. The studies included in this review are divided into two parts:

1. Research on the cross-cultural adaptation of international students from BRI countries studying in China. Studies focusing on the adaptation of international students in China without a clear indication of their origin from BRI countries were excluded.
2. Studies discussing the role of social media in the cross-cultural adaptation of international students. Studies focusing solely on the role of social media in education, rather than adaptation, were excluded.

To avoid redundancy, literature reviews were excluded. The inclusion and exclusion criteria are outlined in Tables 1 and 2. After the search, 196 articles were retrieved, of which 38 were related to the BRI and the remaining 158 were about social media and adaptation. Following screening, 17 articles on the cross-cultural adaptation of international students from BRI countries in China and 32 studies on the use of social media for cross-cultural adaptation were included. Articles unrelated to adaptability were excluded based on abstracts and keywords, along with those unrelated to the BRI. This left 85 articles relevant to international

Table 1: Inclusion and exclusion criteria for the adaptation of international students in China from BRI countries.

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Article topic	Study on the adaptation of international students from the Belt and Road initiative countries in China	Study sample not from the Belt and Road initiative countries
Article type	Academic articles and dissertation	Literature reviews, letters, reports, social media posts
Time period	7 September 2013 to 7 September 2023	Articles outside the time period

Table 2: Inclusion and exclusion criteria for international students’ use of social media and their cross-cultural adaptation.

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Article topic	A study to discuss international students’ use of social media and their cross-cultural adaptation	Lack of discussion of the role of social media in the adaptation of international students
Article type	Academic articles and dissertation	Literature reviews, letters, reports, social media posts
Time period	7 September 2013 to 7 September 2023	Articles outside the time period

students using social media for cross-cultural adaptation and 28 articles relevant to BRI international students. Additionally, duplicates and articles lacking full text or not meeting the time frame criteria were excluded, along with reports, letters, and editorial comments lacking scientific rigor (Donohue and Fox 2000). One literature review was also excluded. Analysis was conducted based on the inclusion criteria for abstracts and full papers.

3.3 Data Extraction and Integration

The identified characteristics of the literature included study design, sample size, nationality of the sample, countries where the research was conducted, results, and study limitations. To integrate the data and provide descriptive results relevant to this study’s theme, content analysis was conducted on the included studies following Creswell’s and Tashakkori (2007) coding technique.

Initially, studies were examined and similar data were classified into categories by summarizing descriptive phrases to generate open codes. This provided an understanding of the effects of social media on international students and the current status of cross-cultural adaptation of international students from BRI countries in China.

Subsequently, axial coding was used to analyze relationships between the open codes, establishing connections to determine the role of social media in the cross-cultural adaptation of BRI international students in China. Figure 1 illustrates the literature selection process.

Finally, a comprehensive summary of the themes and relationships identified in the axial coding was formed. Specifically, 17 studies on the cross-cultural adaptation of BRI international students in China and 32 studies on the use of social media for cross-cultural adaptation were coded separately. The codes were grouped based on similarity to address the core question of this study: the role of social media

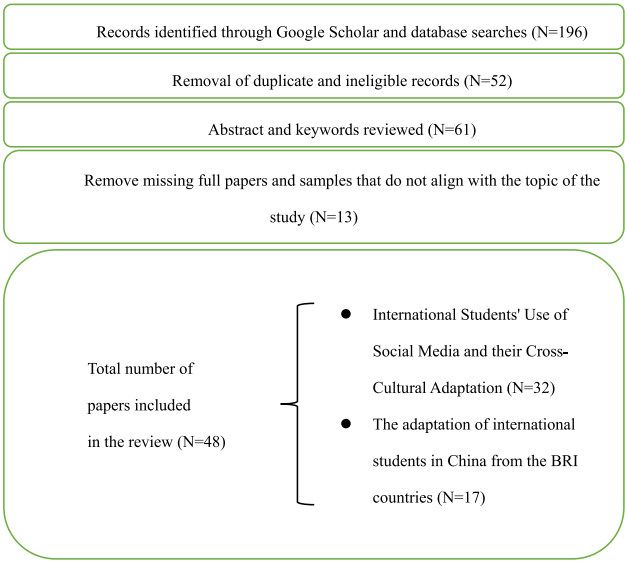


Figure 1: Selection process reviewed.

in the cross-cultural adaptation of BRI international students in China. The data underwent multiple reviews to maintain coding consistency.

4 Descriptive Results and Findings

4.1 Literature Overview

As shown in Figure 2, the majority of studies on international students' use of social media for cross-cultural adaptation involved samples of East Asian countries (N = 16). Next is the study that does not specify countries and regions (N = 11), and students from West Asian countries (N = 2), Southeast Asian countries (N = 2), and South Asian countries (N = 1).

Figure 3 illustrates that among the 32 studies reviewed on international students' use of social media for cross-cultural adaptation, 15 focused on students of unspecified nationality using social media for adaptation in the United States. This was followed by four studies conducted in Australia and three studies on international students in China. Figure 4 shows that 50 % of these studies utilized survey methods, followed by interviews (28 %) and mixed methods (19 %).

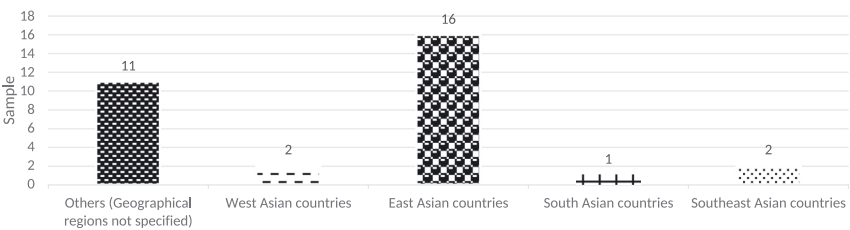


Figure 2: X ray: Sample nationalities in the study of international students' use of social media.Y ray: Sample size.

Regarding studies on the cross-cultural adaptation of BRI international students in China, Figure 5 shows that 70 % of the studies did not specify the students' countries of origin. The remaining 18 % are focused on South Asian countries, while the other 12 % are observed in African countries and South-East Asian countries, separately. Figure 6 indicates that 40 % of these studies employed survey methods, followed by mixed methods (35 %), case studies (18 %), and interviews. Through a critical review of the literature, the following research questions are addressed.

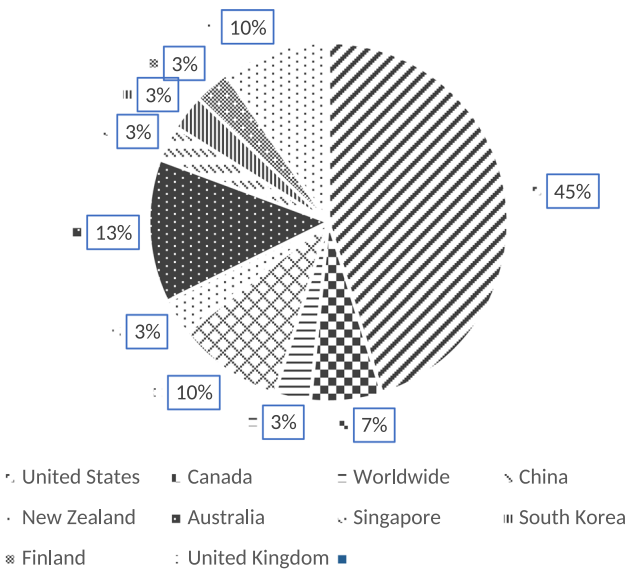


Figure 3: International students' use of social media adaptation studies concerned countries.

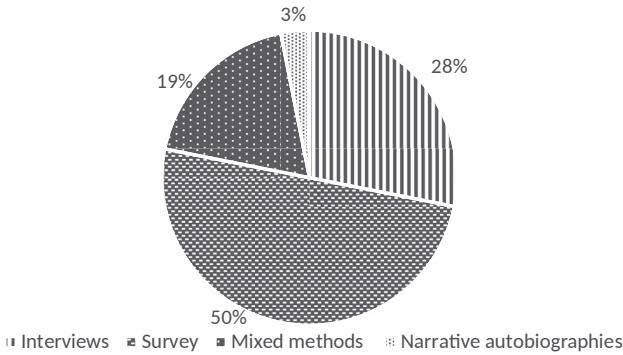


Figure 4: Methods used in studies of international students' adaptation and social media.

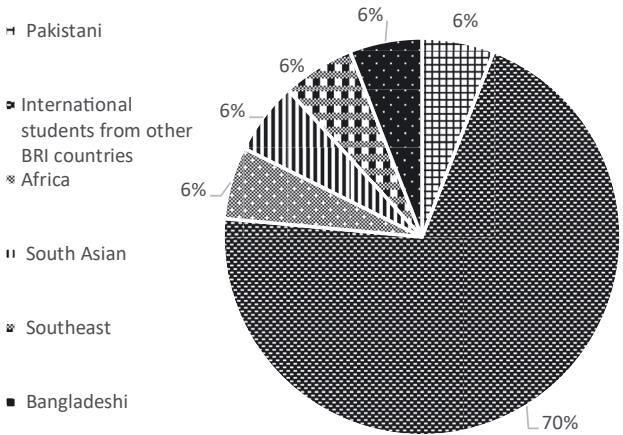


Figure 5: Sample of international students from BRI countries.

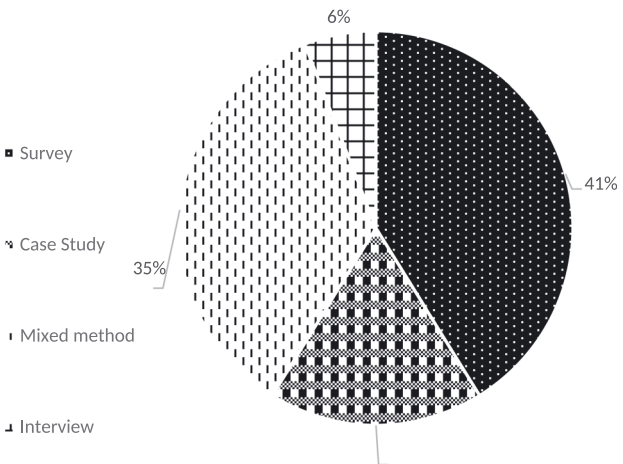


Figure 6: Methods of international students from BRI countries.

4.2 Findings and Addressing Question 1: How Is the Cross-Cultural Adaptation of International Students from BRI Countries in China?

A rapid review of studies on the cross-cultural adaptation of international students from BRI countries in China reveals consistent adaptation challenges. For instance, Wang and Zhao (2019) noted that students from BRI countries face difficulties integrating into the Chinese environment and adapting to learning methods due to cultural differences. Similarly, Fan (2020) found that 116 Bangladeshi students at Yunnan University struggled with understanding Chinese values and bridging cultural gaps, leading to increased psychological adaptation difficulties and loneliness.

These studies, conducted across various universities in different Chinese cities, indicate that the challenges in adapting to Chinese culture, daily life, and interpersonal communication are consistent regardless of location. This aligns with theoretical perspectives on cross-cultural adaptation by Berry (2005) and Kim (2017), suggesting that adaptation stress varies according to cultural interactions. While a deeper understanding of language and culture can help overcome these barriers (Sun 2019), homesickness and interpersonal relationship issues remain primary challenges (Wang 2017).

Additionally, the lesser social and emotional support received by international students compared to domestic students exacerbates their emotional pressure from missing home social networks (Pedersen 1991). Effective communication, as noted in studies across various Chinese provinces, are crucial for building emotional connections and promoting adaptation (Lu 2019; Zhou 2019).

In summary, international students from BRI countries face significant cross-cultural adaptation challenges, primarily due to a lack of emotional support and a longing for home-country relationships. While expanding communication channels could enrich their lives and promote adaptation, the role of social media in this process remains underexplored. As Blease (2015) suggests, social media can facilitate cross-cultural communication and maintain personal networks, highlighting the need for further investigation into its impact on BRI students' adaptation.

4.3 The Role of Social Media in the Cross-Cultural Adaptation of a Wider Range of International Students

This review also aims to understand how international students utilize social media for cross-cultural adaptation and whether it alleviates their adaptation pressures.

Research indicates that the primary need for social media use among international students in unfamiliar environments is to stay connected with people from their home countries. Social media provides a platform for communication and emotional support, helping students express nostalgia and gain support during their adaptation process (Chang and Gomes 2017; Li and Peng 2019). It also facilitates cultural contact and understanding, easing the discomfort of adapting to new cultures (Nuraryo 2014).

For example, international students often use social media to maintain contact with friends and family, providing emotional support and alleviating stress in unfamiliar environments (Hendrickson and Rosen 2017).

Social media also helps establish social networks in host countries, beneficial for adapting to local life (Henze and Zhu 2012).

In summary, social media's communicative and interactive nature helps international students gain social and emotional support, reduce stress, and adapt to new environments. This supports the second research question, highlighting social media's role in promoting better cross-cultural adaptation through emotional and social support.

Although findings indicate that social media plays a role in international students' emotional support and achieving better cross-cultural adaptation, social media is a crucial factor in achieving better adaptation in the process of cross-cultural communication. It is closely related to individuals' sense of belonging, communication behaviours, information transmission, and social participation. However, according to (Kim 2012), the adaptation process of individuals in unfamiliar environments can be divided into three stages: facing pressure, gradual adaptation, and ultimately, co-development with the host country. As individuals gain a deeper understanding of the environment, feelings of unfamiliarity and novelty will be replaced by anxiety and pressure, furthering adaptation as the cross-cultural process deepens (Lysgaare 1955). Therefore, this study critically discusses the role of social media in the cross-cultural adaptation of international students. It also examines whether it reduces their adaptation pressure, helping them to adapt better. Furthermore, it aims to provide an understanding for guiding future social media use in the cross-cultural adaptation of international students from BRI countries in China.

4.4 International Students Use Social Media to Escape Adaptation Pressure Rather than Reduce It

Adaptation stress is a response to challenges exceeding one's coping resources (Sheng 2021). Some international students prefer using social media in their native

language to avoid face-to-face interactions in the host country, which may hinder adaptation (Zhang and Goodson 2011).

For example, international students from China often use WeChat to share their negative experiences and cultural differences in the host country's society to their family and friends while also being more resistant to facing challenges in the host country's society (Park, Song, and Lee 2014). Similarly, frequent communication with one's home country's culture through social media may better maintain their cultural identity, which is likely to deepen inherent biases or negative views towards the host country, thus hindering adaptation to the local society (Oommen 2014).

Therefore, the process of international students using social media can be seen as a refuge in virtual space to protect themselves from the pressure of adapting to a foreign society. International students often experience academic and life anxiety in the host country due to language and cultural differences. For instance, Chinese students in the UK, because of language proficiency, are unwilling to participate more in face-to-face communication with local classmates, which makes them feel anxious and uneasy, and they prefer to interact through social media to avoid more offline communication (Newsome and Cooper 2016). Thus, while social media provides emotional support, it can also act as a refuge, which can hinder genuine adaptation to the host culture. This highlights the need for balanced social media use to ensure it supports rather than hinders cross-cultural adaptation.

4.5 Enhancing Understanding of the Challenges for BRI Students

The findings underscore the need for effective communication channels and emotional support to help BRI students in China alleviate their loneliness and homesickness, promoting better adaptation. For instance, Li (2021) conducted a study at Gansu University with students from Central Asia and Southeast Asia, highlighting that organising diverse forms of cultural communication and connecting these students with both their home culture and Chinese culture through communication can reduce the discomfort caused by the unfamiliar environment.

It is worth noting that research shows that social media plays a significant role in the cross-cultural adaptation of international students. Social media is an important platform for interaction, communication, and emotional sharing. Studies have found that international students use various social media platforms, including Renren, WeChat, Twitter, and Facebook to keep up with friends' activities in their home countries and to stay in touch with family members (Li and Peng 2019). Therefore, the use of social media can help international students obtain social and emotional support, promote positive emotions, and aid in adaptation.

International students from BRI countries are integral to China's diverse student community. Understanding the role of social media in supporting these students is crucial to enhancing its positive impact. While cross-cultural communication inherently involves pressure, its intensity varies based on individual experiences and circumstances (Ward and Fischer 2008, pp. 159–173). Social media offers interactive communication options for BRI country students in China, potentially aiding their cross-cultural adaptation by providing emotional and social support.

However, some minority ethnic international students have reported feeling isolated from their home culture due to an overload of mainstream host country values on social media (Ren et al. 2021). For instance, Finnish Iranian students using social media to access Finnish information often feel disconnected from their Iranian roots, preferring communication with Iranian peers (Hosseini and Kotilainen 2021). Similarly, many Indonesian Muslim students turn to social media primarily for Islamic cultural information and favor face-to-face interactions with Muslim classmates, anxious about prevalent stereotypes (Nuraryo 2014).

Students from Egypt, Iran, and Indonesia, among others, face challenges in China. Zhou's (2019) research highlights the adaptability concerns of Indonesian, Thai, and Vietnamese students, particularly regarding dietary and religious practices. The predominance of mainstream cultural content on social media can increase the sensitivity and vulnerability of minority ethnic students in China.

In summary, social media is a vital tool for the adaptation of international students and offers insights into the cross-cultural challenges faced by students from BRI countries in China. Yet, it may not significantly alleviate the psychological and emotional pressures they experience. Relying on social media for emotional support from home country networks, while it may reduce mental stress, could also be a way of avoiding pressure, and might not contribute to effective cross-cultural adaptation.

5 Discussion

With the advancement of the BRI, cooperation and cultural exchange among participating countries continue to deepen. Exploring the adaptation process of international students using social media in transcultural communication can provide valuable insights for individuals from different countries to better adapt to China. Although previous research has confirmed the significant impact of social media on the adaptation of international students, there is a dearth of studies discussing whether social media can alleviate stress and genuinely facilitate adaptation. Additionally, detailed explanations of this process are lacking.

This study, grounded in the theory of cross-cultural adaptation (Kim 2012), focuses on the transition from stress to better adaptation during the adaptation process, ultimately leading to a dynamic process of co-development with the local society. The results indicate that the role of social media in alleviating stress for international students is limited and not always positive. It is also evident that the psychological and emotional stress experienced by international students in unfamiliar academic and living environments cannot be significantly reduced by using social media. This directly impacts their ability to truly adapt to life in a foreign country.

6 Limitations

This study has several limitations. Firstly, the sample size in the literature is relatively small, and the use of convenience sampling in some surveys may limit its representativeness and generalizability to a more diverse population of international students. Secondly, although most studies are cross-sectional and suggest an association between international students' use of social media in transcultural communication and their adaptation, it remains uncertain whether a causal relationship exists between using social media and the shift from stress to adaptation. Further comprehensive research is needed to establish how the use of social media by international students contributes to the transition from stress to adaptation.

Finally, all the literature discussed in this study relies on surveys that use self-report measures. Due to limitations such as self-subjectivity bias, these assessment scales may yield results that are not entirely objective. Moreover, the majority of participants in most studies are from East Asia or other minority ethnic groups, making it challenging to capture the full diversity of countries and cultural backgrounds.

7 Conclusions

In the context of the BRI, increasing cultural interactions and collaborations among countries provide diverse practical pathways for transcultural communication. Social media, as a crucial tool in promoting BRI developments, serves as an effective communication platform for fostering cooperation and mutual development among different nations. This study focuses on the theoretical perspective

of the relationship between social media and adaptation in the practice of trans-cultural communication. Through a critical examination of the role of social media, it provides theoretical support for better understanding the spread of the BRI across different cultures.

Firstly, this study demonstrates that the use of social media significantly influences the adaptation of students from BRI partner countries to China. Consistent with previous research, the findings suggest that utilising social media as a tool for information acquisition and communication aids international students in establishing interpersonal networks in Chinese society while maintaining social relationships in their home countries. This process plays a significant role in providing psychological and social support to international students, thereby contributing to their adaptation. International students use social media to share experiences and seek emotional support, facilitating encouragement and support from their home countries during the adaptation process (Park and Oh 2012).

However, this study reveals that the use of social media by international students does not genuinely reduce the stress experienced in the process of trans-cultural communication and their adaptation. It is highly probable that the use of social media serves as a means to escape stress rather than effectively alleviating it. Additionally, the content on the host country's social media platforms can lead to feelings of isolation and anxiety among some international students, thereby increasing the pressure on their adaptation process.

This perspective provides a more detailed explanation of the adaptive role of social media in the process of transcultural communication. The adaptation process is understood as complex and dynamic, involving adapting to stress, alleviating stress, and continuous growth to successfully adapt to the host country (Berry 2006). Moreover, most participants perceived significant cultural differences between their home country and the host country and were more inclined to communicate with friends from their home country. For instance, Chinese students in the UK were more willing to use Chinese social media to interact with Chinese friends, avoiding more face-to-face communication with local students (Newsome and Cooper 2016). Although previous research has consistently suggested that international students' use of social media helps them adapt better to life in the host country, the results of this study offer an alternative understanding. Specifically, the use of social media is potentially a way of escaping the pressure of the adaptation process and may not fundamentally assist international students in better adapting to a foreign country. In the process of transcultural communication, the pressure of adaptation is consistently present.

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