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**INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
ADVANCED RESEARCH (IJAR)**

Article DOI: 10.21474/IJAR01/23167
DOI URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/23167>



RESEARCH ARTICLE

**PATTERNS AND PURPOSES OF SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE AMONG
INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN XI'AN: A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY**

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Manuscript Info

Manuscript History

Received: 4 February 2026
Final Accepted: 8 March 2026
Published: April 2026

Key words:-

International students; social media usage; platform preferences; uses and gratifications; Xi'an

Abstract

Social media has become an important part of international students' everyday lives, especially in cross-cultural educational settings where it supports communication, information seeking, and social connection. However, less attention has been paid to platform preferences and reported purposes of social media usage in localized Chinese contexts such as Xi'an. This study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional survey design and collected data through a structured questionnaire from a surveyed sample of international students in Xi'an, China. After data screening, 381 valid responses were retained for analysis. Descriptive statistics were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics, including frequencies and percentages for platform selections, means and standard deviations for ten reported social media usage-purpose items, and a Friedman test to assess differences across item ratings. The results showed that WeChat and Douyin were the most frequently selected platforms in the questionnaire item. Relatively higher-rated reported purposes included learning about Xi'an's culture and history, finding friends with similar experiences, obtaining local information, and sharing experiences to receive feedback. The Friedman test indicated statistically significant differences across the ten usage-purpose items; however, the effect size was very small, suggesting that these differences should be interpreted cautiously. Overall, the findings suggest that, within this sample, social media was reported as a practical and relational resource for local orientation, peer connection, and everyday adaptation in Xi'an.

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Introduction:-

Social media has become an essential part of international students' everyday lives. In cross-cultural educational settings, it functions not only as a communication tool but also as a resource for information seeking, social connection, and adjustment to the host environment. Although previous studies have examined the relationship between social media and international students' adaptation, less attention has been paid to the specific patterns and purposes of social media usage in localized contexts. This issue is particularly relevant in China, where international

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students engage with a distinctive digital ecosystem dominated by local platforms such as WeChat, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu. Xi'an offers an especially meaningful setting for such a study because it combines a growing international student population with a historically rich and culturally distinctive urban environment. Against this background, the present study examines platform preferences and reported purposes of social media usage among international students in Xi'an. Specifically, it describes the platforms most frequently selected by respondents and identifies the usage purposes that received relatively higher ratings in the survey. By adopting a descriptive approach in a localized Chinese context, this study contributes to a more grounded understanding of international students' digital practices in Xi'an.

Literature Review:-

Social media and international students:

Social media has become a central part of international students' everyday communication, information seeking, and social adjustment. As digital platforms increasingly mediate daily life, international students rely on social media not only to maintain contact with family and friends, but also to obtain practical information, interpret unfamiliar cultural environments, and build new social ties in the host society. In this sense, social media functions as more than a communication channel; it is also an adaptive resource embedded in students' academic, cultural, and interpersonal experiences abroad (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Existing studies suggest that social media can play several roles in the lives of international students. First, it supports information access by helping students locate practical knowledge about transportation, accommodation, food, campus life, and local services. Second, it facilitates social connection by allowing students to maintain transnational ties while also interacting with peers in the host environment. Third, it can provide forms of emotional and psychological support, especially during periods of uncertainty, homesickness, and culture shock. Forbush and Foucault-Welles (2016), for example, showed that social media use was closely related to the adjustment experiences of Chinese students studying in the United States. Similarly, studies conducted in the Chinese context have found that platform use may support social integration, information access, and everyday adaptation among international students (Kuang & Wu, 2019; Wang, 2022; Wang, 2023).

At the same time, the literature also points to the ambivalent nature of social media use. While social media may help international students reduce uncertainty and navigate new environments, over-reliance on familiar or home-country platforms can also reinforce cultural retreat and limit deeper engagement with the host society. Wu (2024) noted that international students may experience difficulties in adapting to China's distinctive digital ecosystem, especially when they continue to depend primarily on non-Chinese platforms. This means that the significance of social media does not lie only in whether students use it, but also in which platforms they use and for what purposes. However, much of the existing research has focused on adaptation outcomes or causal relationships, while giving less attention to the descriptive structure of platform preferences and major usage purposes in specific local contexts. This gap is particularly important in China. Unlike contexts dominated by global platforms, China's digital environment is shaped by local platforms such as WeChat, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu. For international students, adapting to life in China often means adapting to a new platform ecology as well. Although previous studies have shown that Chinese social media can help international students access local information, maintain communication, and support adaptation, more localized descriptive research is still needed to understand how these platforms are actually used in everyday student life (Kuang & Wu, 2019; Wang, 2022; Wang, 2023).

Uses and Gratifications Theory:

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) offers an appropriate framework for understanding why international students use social media in particular ways. Rather than asking what media do to audiences, UGT emphasizes what audiences do with media. It assumes that users are active and selective, and that they choose media in order to satisfy specific needs, including cognitive, emotional, social, and identity-related needs (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). This perspective is especially useful for studying international students, because students in cross-cultural educational settings often face multiple demands at the same time. They need information about local culture and daily life, emotional continuity with familiar networks, opportunities to build new relationships, and ways to manage uncertainty in unfamiliar environments. Social media can satisfy these needs simultaneously. At the cognitive level, it helps users obtain local knowledge and practical information. At the emotional level, it provides reassurance and continuity with home-based relationships. At the social level, it facilitates both maintaining old ties and establishing new ones. At the identity level, it offers a space where students can interpret their own experiences and negotiate belonging in a foreign setting.

UGT is particularly relevant to the present study because this article is concerned with patterns and purposes of use, rather than with effects alone. If international students are active media users, then identifying their dominant purposes of use becomes theoretically meaningful. In the Xi'an context, purposes such as learning about local culture, finding information about tourism and food, connecting with peers, sharing experiences for feedback, and using social media for relaxation can all be understood as different gratifications sought through digital media. In this way, UGT helps explain why social media use among international students is likely to be multidimensional rather than singular. A student may use WeChat for practical communication, Douyin for entertainment and cultural observation, and Instagram for maintaining transnational ties; these uses reflect different gratifications rather than contradictory behaviors. Therefore, a descriptive study grounded in UGT can contribute to the literature by showing not only that international students use social media, but also how their platform choices and usage purposes reflect the practical, emotional, and relational demands of studying abroad. This makes UGT especially suitable for interpreting social media use as patterned and purposeful behavior in the everyday lives of international students.

Xi'an as a localized context:

Although international students in China are often discussed as a broad national category, their experiences are shaped by local institutional and cultural environments. Xi'an provides a particularly meaningful setting for studying social media usage among international students. As one of China's historically significant cities and an important inland hub of educational internationalization, Xi'an combines a strong cultural identity with a growing international student population. The city is widely associated with the Silk Road, the Belt and Road Initiative, and a rich historical landscape, while also functioning as a major university city in western China. Over the past decade, Xi'an has attracted a substantial number of international students, making it an important site for intercultural contact and educational exchange in the Chinese context (Li, 2016). This localized context matters because international students in Xi'an are likely to use social media for purposes that go beyond generic communication. On the one hand, Xi'an offers abundant opportunities for cultural learning, tourism, symbolic engagement with Chinese history, and everyday exploration of local life. On the other hand, international students also face practical challenges related to language, social integration, classroom interaction, and daily adaptation. In such a setting, social media may become especially important as a tool for local orientation, allowing students to interpret the city, search for relevant information, and connect their experiences to the host environment.

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

Present study:

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

To address this gap these gaps, the present study focuses on platform preferences the major patterns and reported purposes of social media usage among international students in Xi'an. Specifically, it examines which platforms were are most frequently selected by respondents widely used and which reported usage purposes received relatively higher ratings are most salient in the survey students' everyday digital practices. In By doing so, the study provides a localized descriptive contribution to research on international students and digital media, while also offering a uses-and-gratifications perspective on how social media is embedded in China. the lived experience of studying abroad in Xi'an.

Materials and Methods:-**Research design:**

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to examine the major patterns and purposes of social media usage among international students in Xi'an, China. A structured questionnaire was used to collect self-reported data on respondents' demographic characteristics, social media platform preferences, and the main purposes for which they used social media in their daily lives. This The article is derived from the broader dissertation project on social media usage and acculturation among international students in Xi'an, but the present paper focuses specifically on the descriptive analysis of platform preferences and reported purposes of social media usage. Research Question 1. Therefore, the analysis reported here centers on platform preferences and item-level usage purposes rather than on hypothesis testing or mediation modeling. A cross-sectional design was considered appropriate because the purpose of this study was to capture the current social media usage profile of international students during a single period of data collection. Such a design is widely used in descriptive survey research when the goal is to identify usage tendencies, distributions, and prominent purposes rather than to assess changes over time.

Sample:

The target population of this study consisted of international students enrolled in higher education institutions in Xi'an. To ensure that participants had sufficient exposure to the host environment and could meaningfully report their media practices in local life, only students who had studied in Xi'an for at least one semester were considered eligible. This criterion was retained from the larger dissertation design to ensure that respondents had already entered the early stages of adaptation and were likely to have formed relatively stable patterns of digital media use. Because it was not feasible to obtain a complete sampling frame of all international students in Xi'an, a non-probability sampling strategy was adopted. Data were collected primarily through online questionnaire distribution using channels commonly accessed by international students, including WeChat groups, student association networks, and other online communities. Convenience sampling was combined with limited snowball distribution to improve access to a geographically dispersed and institutionally diverse student population. After data screening and quality checks, a total of 381 valid responses were retained for analysis. Because the survey was distributed through open online channels, the resulting sample should be interpreted as a convenience sample rather than a statistically representative sample of all international students in Xi'an.

Measures:-

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

Demographic and Background Variables:-

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

Social Media Platform Use:

To capture platform preferences, respondents were asked to indicate which social media platforms they primarily used from a list including WeChat, Weibo, Douyin, Xiaohongshu, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter/X, and other platforms. These data were used to identify the distribution of selected platforms platform use across the sample. The item captured sample and to determine which platforms occupied the most prominent place in respondents' reported platform selections rather than frequency, intensity, or duration of use everyday digital practices.

Social Media Usage Purposes:-

To examine the major purposes of social media usage, the study used a set of ten items reflecting different reasons for using social media in the Xi'an context. These items covered purposes such as learning about Xi'an's culture and history, finding information about tourism and food, connecting with local Chinese students, communicating with other international students, joining online communities, using social media for relaxation and entertainment, sharing experiences for feedback, sharing experiences for attention, finding friends with similar experiences, and developing a stronger sense of belonging. All items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly

Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree. Higher mean scores indicated relatively stronger agreement with that a given reported purpose item represented an important purpose of social media usage. In this article, these items were analyzed descriptively at the item level rather than being combined into a causal model, and which is consistent with the resulting mean differences should be interpreted cautiously because most item means were close to study's focus on identifying the scale midpoint. relative prominence of different usage purposes.

Data analysis:-

The data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics. Because this article focuses on the descriptive investigation of Research Question 1, the analysis emphasized descriptive rather than inferential modeling procedures. First, the dataset was screened to ensure data quality. Cases with problematic response patterns were removed during the broader data-cleaning stage, and the final dataset used in this article consisted of 381 valid responses. Missing values were retained at a minimal level where appropriate, and descriptive analyses were conducted using valid responses for each item. Second, frequency distributions and percentages were used to summarize respondents' demographic profiles and platform-use preferences. These analyses were used to describe the composition of the sample and the relative popularity of different social media platforms. Third, means and standard deviations were calculated for the ten social media usage-purpose items. These statistics were used to describe and identify the reported major purposes of social media usage among international students in Xi'an. The items were then arranged ranked according to their mean scores to provide a descriptive comparison across the ten reported purposes show which purposes were most prominent and which were comparatively less important. Finally, the descriptive findings were interpreted in relation to the broader context of international students' everyday digital practices in Xi'an. In addition to descriptive statistics, a Friedman test was conducted to examine whether the ten social media usage-purpose items differed significantly in their ratings across the same respondents. This non-parametric test was appropriate because the ten items were measured on the same 7-point Likert scale and represented repeated within-respondent ratings. Only complete cases with valid responses on all ten items were included in this analysis (N = 319).

Results:-

Respondent profile

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

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

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

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage(%)
Gender	Male	211	55.4
	Female	161	42.3
	Other	9	2.4
Age Group	18–24	229	60.1
	25–30	107	28.1
	31–35	28	7.3
	36 or above	17	4.5

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

Platform preferences:-

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

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

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

Platform	Frequency	Percentage(%)
WeChat	370	97.1
Douyin	297	78.0
Xiaohongshu	195	51.2
Instagram	177	46.5
Facebook	142	37.3
Weibo	117	30.7
Twitter/X	77	20.2
Other	29	7.6

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

Major purposes of social media usage:-

Table 4.3 presents the mean scores and standard deviations of the ten social media usage items. The item with the highest mean score was SMU1 (“I use social media to learn about Xi’an’s culture and history”), with a mean of 4.13, which was tied with SMU9 (“Social media helps me find friends with similar experiences”), also with a mean of 4.13. These two items ranked first among the ten indicators. They were followed by SMU2 (“I use social media to find information about tourism and food in Xi’an”) and SMU7 (“I share my experiences on social media to receive feedback”), both with a mean score of 4.12. The middle-ranked items were SMU4 (“I communicate with other international students via social media”) and SMU6 (“I use social media for relaxation and entertainment, such as watching short videos or browsing social feeds”), both with a mean score of 4.05, followed by SMU3 (“I use social media to connect with local Chinese students”) at 4.02 and SMU10 (“I feel a stronger sense of belonging because of social media”) at 3.99. The lowest-ranked items were SMU8 (“I share my experiences on social media to gain attention”), with a mean of 3.97, and SMU5 (“I have joined online communities or chat groups related to international students in Xi’an”), with the lowest mean of 3.65. Across the ten items, the highest mean scores were associated with learning about Xi’an, finding peers with similar experiences, obtaining local information, and receiving feedback from experience sharing. Lower-ranked items were associated with attention-seeking and participation in formal online communities. N varied across items because of a small number of missing responses.

Major purposes of social media usage

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

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To assess whether the observed differences across the ten item ratings were statistically significant, a Friedman test was conducted using complete cases. The result indicated a statistically significant difference in ratings across the ten social media usage-purpose items, $\chi^2(9) = 25.00$, $p = .003$, $N = 319$. However, the effect size was very small (Kendall’s $W = .009$), indicating that the differences across item ratings were statistically detectable but substantively modest. Within this item set, relatively higher mean scores were observed for learning about Xi’an, finding peers with similar experiences, obtaining local information, and receiving feedback from experience sharing. However, because the absolute mean differences were small and most item means were close to the midpoint of the scale, these rankings should be interpreted cautiously.

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

Item	Statement	N	Mean	SD	Rank
SMU1	I use social media to learn about Xi’an’s culture and history.	374	4.13	2.191	1
SMU9	Social media helps me find friends with similar experiences.	372	4.13	2.144	1
SMU2	I use social media to find information about tourism and food in Xi’an.	370	4.12	2.167	3
SMU7	I share my experiences on social media to receive feedback.	373	4.12	2.008	3
SMU4	I communicate with other international students via social media.	376	4.05	2.123	5
SMU6	I use social media for relaxation and entertainment, such as watching short videos or browsing social feeds.	375	4.05	2.161	5
SMU3	I use social media to connect with local Chinese students.	377	4.02	2.108	7
SMU10	I feel a stronger sense of belonging because of social media.	372	3.99	2.172	8

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

Item	Statement	N	Mean	SD	Rank
SMU8	I share my experiences on social media to gain attention.	377	3.97	2.056	9
SMU5	I have joined online communities or chat groups related to international students in Xi'an.	376	3.65	2.173	10

Discussion:-

Interpretation of findings:-

This study set out to describe how international students in Xi'an use social media, with particular attention to platform preferences and the major purposes of use. Three descriptive observations emerge from the results findings stand out. First, respondents in this sample more frequently selected showed a clear preference for Chinese mainstream platforms, especially WeChat and Douyin. Second, the relatively higher-rated reported highest-ranked usage purposes were related to local information seeking, cultural learning, and peer connection. Third, more performative or formalized forms of use—such as attention-seeking and participation in organized online communities received comparatively lower ratings—communities—were relatively less prominent. Taken together, these results findings suggest that, within this sample, that social media was reported as occupies a practical practical, relational, and relational resource locally embedded place in respondents' daily the everyday lives of international students in Xi'an. The high selection rates for strong dominance of WeChat and the high uptake of Douyin suggest indicate that respondents international students in this sample were engaging with Xi'an are not using social media only as a local Chinese generic or globally standardized technology. Rather, their digital behavior appears to be shaped by the specific platform ecology rather than relying only on globally familiar platforms of the host society. This pattern is consistent with the view an important finding because it shows that digital adaptation to life in China may involve engagement with locally dominant communication also involves adaptation to Chinese digital infrastructures. However, in practical terms, because the platform item did using WeChat is not measure frequency or intensity simply a matter of use platform preference; it is closely tied to how communication, these results should be interpreted as reported platform selections rather than as evidence of platform dependence. Daily coordination, information circulation, and social participation are organized in the local environment. Likewise, the prominence of Douyin and Xiaohongshu suggests that short-video and lifestyle-oriented platforms have become important channels through which students observe local culture, access city-specific information, and make sense of everyday life in Xi'an. This extends previous China-based research that has often emphasized WeChat alone by showing that international students' digital practices are now distributed across a broader local media ecology (Kuang & Wu, 2019; Wang, 2022; Wang, 2023).

The item-level results suggest findings further show that respondents gave relatively higher ratings to the most salient purposes related of social media use were not random or purely entertainment-driven. The top-ranked items were learning about Xi'an's culture and history, finding friends with similar experiences, obtaining information about tourism and food, and sharing experiences to local receive feedback. This pattern suggests that social media use among international students is organized around a combination of orientation, peer linkage, and interactive experience sharing sense-making. At the same time, in other words, these interpretations should remain cautious, as most item means respondents were not using social media only to consume content; they were close also using it to position themselves within the midpoint of the scale host environment and the absolute differences across items were modest to find relational anchors in a new city. This is consistent with the wider literature showing that digital media help international students reduce uncertainty, access local knowledge, and maintain social connection in unfamiliar contexts (Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016; McCarthy, 2010; Shuter, 2015). At the same time, the relatively lower scores for gaining attention and joining online communities related to international students in Xi'an are equally revealing. These lower-ranked purposes suggest that respondents did not primarily approach social media as a performative space oriented toward visibility, nor did they strongly depend on formal online groups as their main mode of engagement. Instead, their usage appears to be more situational and problem-oriented. This points to a distinction that is often blurred in discussions of social media: there is a difference between using social media as a public stage and using it as an everyday adaptive resource. In this study, the latter appears to be more important. The results therefore complicate any simple assumption that international students mainly use social media either for leisure or for self-presentation. In the Xi'an context, social media seems to function more as a practical tool for local orientation and a relational tool for peer-based adjustment.

Another noteworthy finding is that the mean for connecting with local Chinese students was moderate rather than especially high. This suggests that while respondents do use social media to approach the host environment, local peer integration may be more difficult or less immediate than information seeking or connection with similar others.

This is an important nuance. It indicates that social media may be highly effective for learning about the host city and maintaining peer support, but not necessarily sufficient on its own to guarantee deeper host-national integration. In this sense, the findings point to a layered structure of digital adaptation: local platforms may facilitate access and awareness, while more meaningful intercultural integration may still depend on additional institutional, linguistic, and offline conditions. Finally, the results also suggest that international students' digital practices in Xi'an are best understood as hybrid rather than exclusive. While Chinese platforms clearly dominated, globally familiar platforms such as Instagram and Facebook were still used by substantial proportions of respondents. This implies that international students are not simply switching from one digital world to another; rather, they are managing multiple platform environments at the same time. Their social media practices therefore reflect both local embedding and transnational continuity. This hybrid pattern is important for understanding contemporary international student life, because it shows that digital adaptation does not necessarily involve abandoning prior media habits. Instead, it often involves layering new platform practices onto existing communicative routine.

Theoretical Implications:-

The findings of this study provide support for the usefulness of Uses and Gratifications Theory in understanding international students' social media practices. UGT assumes that media users are active and selective and that they choose media to satisfy specific needs (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). The present findings align well with this perspective. The dominant usage purposes identified in this study—local information seeking, cultural learning, peer connection, and feedback-oriented sharing—suggest that respondents were using social media in a purposive manner to meet cognitive, social, and affective needs. This is important because it reinforces the view that social media use in cross-cultural settings should not be treated as a vague background behavior. Instead, it should be understood as need-driven action structured by the practical conditions of living abroad. At a more specific level, this study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that platform choice and usage purpose should be analytically linked. Much of the literature on social media and international students has focused on general usage or on broad adaptation outcomes. By contrast, the present findings show that different platforms occupy different positions within students' everyday media repertoires, and that these platform choices are tied to distinct but overlapping gratifications. WeChat's near universality, for example, suggests its role as a core infrastructural platform, while Douyin and Xiaohongshu appear to support observational, lifestyle-related, and city-oriented forms of engagement. This platform-sensitive perspective adds precision to prior discussions of digital adaptation, which have often treated "social media" as an undifferentiated category.

The study also offers a localized theoretical contribution by foregrounding the importance of host-country platform ecologies. Existing international student research often addresses social media in broadly global terms. However, the Xi'an findings indicate that media use is deeply shaped by the host society's own communicative infrastructure. This suggests that theoretical discussions of international student media use should pay more attention to local digital environments rather than assuming that the meaning of social media use is transferable across national contexts. In the Chinese case, where local platforms dominate daily communication and information flows, the host-country digital environment is not a peripheral factor; it is part of the adaptation environment itself. At the same time, the findings also indicate the value of descriptive research as a theoretical foundation. In communication and adaptation research, descriptive patterns are sometimes treated as preliminary or secondary to explanatory models. Yet the present study shows that identifying what students actually do with social media can itself generate theoretically meaningful insights. Before asking whether social media predicts adaptation, it is necessary to understand the structure of students' usage in the first place. In that sense, this study contributes conceptually by showing that descriptive mapping of platform preferences and usage purposes is not merely a technical step; it is an important way of clarifying how digital behavior is organized in real-world intercultural settings.

Practical implications:-

The findings also have practical implications for universities, international student offices, and communication practitioners in Xi'an. Most immediately, the results indicate that student support communication should be built around the platforms that international students are already using. Because WeChat and Douyin occupy such a central position in respondents' digital lives, universities should not rely solely on conventional administrative channels or static website-based information. Instead, they should treat these platforms as core infrastructures for student communication, orientation, and engagement. Timely and accessible information delivered through WeChat-based channels, short-form video content, and localized digital communities is likely to reach students more effectively than abstract institutional messaging alone. A second implication concerns the type of content institutions should prioritize. Because the highest-ranked usage purposes were related to local information, cultural learning, and finding similar others, support strategies should move beyond formal announcements and focus more on practical,

city-specific, and student-centered content. Universities and support offices could develop multilingual digital resources on transportation, food, housing, healthcare, campus life, and local cultural norms. They could also use social media to explain how life in Xi'an works in everyday terms, rather than assuming that international students will find this information through official channels or offline trial and error.

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

At the same time, the findings also suggest that institutions should not assume that formal online communities automatically produce engagement. The relatively lower rating for Because joining online communities suggests that formal international-student-related online groups ranked comparatively low, students may have been less strongly endorsed than some other reported purposes in this item set. This should not be interpreted as evidence that respondents avoided group-based looking for highly institutionalized or heavily managed online spaces. Instead, they may respond better to communication in general that is useful, especially given the high overall selection rate for WeChat-specific, and integrated into daily problem-solving. This has an important managerial implication: effectiveness may depend less on creating more official digital groups and more on improving the quality, relevance, and responsiveness of the support already offered.

Overall

Finally, the findings suggest that respondents in this sample reported using social media Xi'an context itself should be treated as a practical communicative resource. Because one of the highest-ranked purposes was learning about Xi'an's culture and relational resource for history, universities and local orientation organizations have an opportunity to connect international students' digital practices with the cultural distinctiveness of the city. Social media communication that introduces historical sites, cultural traditions, information seeking local food practices, and peer connection. These results everyday urban customs in accessible ways may do more than provide a localized descriptive account information; it may also strengthen students' sense of reported platform preferences orientation and usage purposes among surveyed cultural familiarity. In this sense, communication support for international students in Xi'an should not be limited to institutional administration. It should also include mediated cultural orientation to the host city.

Conclusion:-

This study examined platform preferences the major patterns and reported purposes of social media usage among international students in Xi'an. Based on 381 valid responses, the findings showed that WeChat and Douyin were the most widely used platforms, while the most prominent purposes of use were local information seeking, cultural learning, peer connection, experience sharing, and entertainment. By contrast, attention-seeking and participation in formal online communities were less prominent. Overall, the findings indicate that social media functions as a practical and relational resource in the everyday lives of international students in Xi'an. Rather than being used mainly for self-presentation, social media was more often used to navigate the local environment, obtain useful information, and maintain meaningful peer connections. By providing a localized descriptive account of platform preferences and usage purposes in a Chinese host-city context, this study contributes to a more grounded understanding of international students' digital practices.

Acknowledgments:-

The author would like to express his sincere appreciation to Associate Professor Dr. Awan for his invaluable guidance, insightful comments, and continuous encouragement throughout the development of this study. The author is also deeply grateful to the international students in Xi'an who generously participated in the questionnaire survey and contributed their time and responses to this research. In addition, the author would like to acknowledge the support provided by KLUUST, which made this study possible.

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