

A Balancing Act: The Construction of Identities, Social Media, and Homesickness Among International Student Sojourners

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This study investigates the processes of acculturation, identity construction, and homesickness for international students during study abroad experiences. Specifically, the researchers analyze how language proficiency and social media usage intersect with the various identities international students negotiate across multiple and complex communities of practice (Wegner 1998) while adapting to the host country's social and academic culture. Thurber and Walton (2007) show that sustained and frequent contact with home tends to exacerbate symptoms of homesickness and outline strategies to minimize symptoms of homesickness, including limiting contact with family and friends back home. Relatedly, it has been shown that international students use social media to stay connected with their home communities during their first year abroad (Omori & Schwartz 2022). Thus, the ubiquity of social media makes some of Thurber and Walton's (2007) strategies unsustainable. Using Wegner's Communities of Practice (1998) and Berry's Acculturation Model (1990) as theoretical frameworks, the researchers investigate the following question. What is the relationship between social media, acculturation, language proficiency, and the construction of identity as international students enter new social, academic, and linguistic contexts? The researchers gathered qualitative data in focus groups. Participants described their experiences with acculturation, homesickness, and their uses of social media. Findings from the current study will expand our understanding of what international students experience as they balance their identities across home and host communities. Sending and receiving institutions will be able to use the findings to prepare students for their study abroad experiences.

Key Words: acculturation, communities of practice, social media, language acquisition, homesickness

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