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Food, Identity, and Belonging: Chinese International Students' Social Media Practices in the UK

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ABSTRACT

The growing popularity of social media has transformed how international students maintain cultural connections and construct identities while living abroad. However, few studies have examined how food-sharing practices on social media contribute to identity construction and cultural adaptation. This study investigates how Chinese international students in the United Kingdom use social media to share food-related content and how these practices shape their experiences of belonging, self-presentation, and adaptation. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with six participants and thematic analysis, the findings show that food sharing functions as a form of cultural capital through which participants communicate taste, lifestyle, and social positioning. Food-related content also helps participants maintain cultural connections, manage homesickness, and reinforce a sense of belonging. Cultural adaptation occurred alongside the maintenance of Chinese cultural practices, suggesting that adaptation did not require participants to abandon their existing cultural identities. Participants also adapted their self-presentation across different social media platforms and audiences. These findings demonstrate how food-sharing practices mediate identity construction, cultural continuity, and cross-cultural adaptation in digital environments.

Keywords: Chinese international students, cross-cultural adaptation, cultural identity, food sharing, sense of belonging, social media, thematic analysis

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the rapid expansion of global mobility and the internationalization of higher education have increased the number of international students worldwide. International students typically reside abroad for extended periods to pursue their educational goals while navigating complex processes of cultural adaptation and identity negotiation (Yen et al., 2018). Language barriers, social integration, and cultural differences can shape their everyday experiences and mental health (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Moreover, adaptation is not a unidirectional process but involves the negotiation of multiple and fluid identities within transnational contexts (Gu, 2015).

Social media has become an important space for international students to document their lives, maintain connections with their home cultures, and construct identities. Digital platforms allow users to share personal experiences, engage with diverse audiences, and participate in forms of self-presentation shaped by platform characteristics (Hu & Chen, 2023). Within these practices, sharing food images has become a widespread and culturally significant activity. Beyond its material function, food can express cultural memory, emotional attachment, and social belonging.

The literature has examined international students' social media use, identity formation, and cultural adaptation. However, few studies have explored how everyday digital practices such as food sharing contribute to these processes. Research on food-related social media content often focuses on trends, aesthetics, and social interaction (Cuykx et al., 2024; Göktepe et al., 2022), while the relationships among food sharing, identity construction, and cross-cultural adaptation remain underexplored, particularly among Chinese international students.

To address this gap, this study examines how Chinese international students in the United Kingdom share food-related content on social media and how these practices shape their identity construction and cultural adaptation. Using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, the study explores food sharing as a form of cultural expression, emotional connection, and selective self-presentation. By focusing on everyday digital practices, this research highlights social media's mediating role in identity construction and cultural adaptation within transnational contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous studies have examined the acculturation experiences of international students through the lenses of the acculturation process and identity negotiation. These studies indicate that international students face multifaceted psychological and sociocultural challenges—such as language barriers, social integration issues, and cultural differences—when they are adapting to new cultural environments (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). However, acculturation is not a linear process; rather, it is a dynamic process involving the ongoing negotiation of multiple cultural identities (Gu, 2015; Hall, 1990). Recent research further suggests that identity formation is closely linked to acculturation and plays a pivotal role in shaping international students' adaptation experiences (Jin & Wang, 2025). Consequently, the acculturation of international students involves more than simply adapting to the host cultural environment; it also involves negotiating and maintaining their own cultural identities across diverse cultural contexts.

Segmented assimilation theory and its concept of selective acculturation provide a useful framework for understanding this dynamic process of acculturation. Portes and Zhou (1993) argued that acculturation does not follow a single pathway of assimilation but may involve different trajectories of adaptation. Within this theoretical framework, selective acculturation emphasizes that individuals can retain cultural practices, values, and social ties associated with their culture of origin while adapting to a new sociocultural environment (Zhou, 1997). Although this concept originated in research on immigrant integration in the U.S., it provides a useful lens for understanding how international students negotiate their identities across home and host cultural contexts. From this perspective, acculturation does not require individuals to replace

their original cultural identities with those of the host culture. Instead, adaptation can involve selective engagement with new cultural practices alongside the continued maintenance of connections to their culture of origin. This perspective is particularly relevant to the present study, as food sharing on social media provides an everyday context in which cultural maintenance, cross-cultural adaptation, and identity negotiation can occur simultaneously.

The rapid growth of social media has transformed how individuals construct and express their identities in everyday life. Digital platforms provide spaces for individuals to present themselves, communicate with diverse audiences, and maintain connections across geographical boundaries. By suggesting that individuals strategically manage their self-presentation according to different social contexts and audiences, Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation offers a valuable perspective for understanding these identity practices. In digital environments, platform-specific features further shape self-presentation by influencing how users present themselves and interact with others (Hu & Chen, 2023). Consequently, social media has become an important space for international students to negotiate and express their identities across different cultural contexts.

Recent studies have also highlighted the role of social media in facilitating international students' cross-cultural adaptation. Xin et al. (2025) reported that social media supports adaptation through emotional support, information exchange, and social engagement. Research also indicates that platform-specific practices influence identity construction and a sense of belonging. For instance, McLean et al. (2026) reported that Chinese international students use Xiaohongshu to negotiate their identities and navigate their experiences of studying abroad, whereas Sun (2026) demonstrated how social media users strategically construct and communicate their identities to different audiences.

Food has become an increasingly significant cultural and symbolic resource within social media practices. Everyday food practices connect cultural memory, emotional attachment, and social belonging. Previous research has indicated that food can help individuals maintain cultural continuity and cope with the challenges of living abroad (Yen et al., 2018). The concept of belonging provides a useful perspective for understanding the significance of these practices. Cena et al. (2021) argued that belonging constitutes a core dimension of international students' academic, social, and intercultural experiences. Recent studies have further highlighted the importance of belonging in shaping international students' experiences. Paik and Braxton (2026) suggest that everyday cultural practices and community engagement can foster a sense of social belonging. This perspective indicates that daily cultural practices, including food-related activities, may help international students develop emotional security and social connections in their host countries. Against this backdrop, food functions not only as a material necessity but also as a symbolic resource through which students can reinforce their cultural identities and sustain a sense of belonging while living abroad. Moreover, growing scholarly interest in food-related content on social media has encouraged researchers to examine how food reflects lifestyles and social interactions (Cuykx et al., 2024; Göktepe et al., 2022). However, most studies focus on aesthetic presentation, consumption trends, or online interactions, with less attention given to how food-sharing practices contribute to identity construction and cross-cultural adaptation.

While previous studies have separately examined international students' acculturation (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Xin et al., 2025), sense of belonging (Cena et al., 2021; Paik & Braxton, 2026), and identity practices on social media (McLean et al., 2026; Sun, 2026), research integrating these dimensions remains limited, particularly with respect to how food sharing simultaneously contributes to identity construction, a sense of belonging, and cross-cultural adaptation. To date, few studies have examined how Chinese international students use food sharing on social media as a form of digital self-presentation to negotiate identity, maintain a sense of belonging, and navigate acculturation within their everyday transnational contexts.

This study aims to address this research gap by examining food-sharing practices on social media and exploring their role as a form of everyday digital self-presentation in identity construction and acculturation. By focusing on the sharing of everyday food-related content, this study highlights the mediating role of

digital platforms in shaping identity construction, acculturation, and a sense of belonging among Chinese international students.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a generic qualitative research design grounded in an interpretivist perspective to explore how Chinese international students construct and negotiate their identities through food-sharing practices on social media.

An interpretivist approach is appropriate because the study seeks to understand participants' subjective experiences, meanings, and interpretations of their everyday social media practices rather than measure objective outcomes. Identity construction, cultural belonging, and food-sharing practices are socially constructed and shaped by individual experiences and interactions. Qualitative research therefore enables an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives and meaning-making processes within their specific social and cultural contexts (Clark et al., 2021).

A generic qualitative research design was selected because the study focuses on understanding participants' everyday food-sharing practices within their social and cultural contexts rather than developing a substantive theory, identifying the essence of lived experience, or producing an ethnographic account of a cultural group. Unlike grounded theory, phenomenology, or ethnography, a generic qualitative approach allows the study to explore participants' experiences without adopting the specific methodological requirements associated with these traditions. This approach therefore provides an appropriate framework for addressing the research questions and developing a rich, contextually grounded understanding of participants' perspectives.

Participants

This research involved six female participants with Chinese backgrounds who were studying in the United Kingdom. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling within the university environment. As shown in Table 1, participants differed in their length of residence and transnational experiences, providing diverse perspectives on food sharing, cultural identity, and belonging. One participant had a distinct transnational background, having been born in the United Kingdom and living in China during part of her childhood before returning to the United Kingdom. Pseudonyms were used throughout the study to protect participants' identities.

Table 1
Participant Characteristics

Participant	Gender	Length of Residence in the UK	Academic Institution
Kelly	Female	1 year	University College London
Jennifer	Female	4 years	University College London
Zeiko	Female	1 year	University College London
Jay	Female	UK-born; lived in China until age 4, then returned to the UK	University College London
Amy	Female	4 years	University College London
Fiona	Female	4 years	University College London

Note. Participant names are pseudonyms.

Sample Size and Rationale

Given the exploratory nature of this study, the sample size was intentionally limited to six participants to prioritize depth and contextual understanding rather than statistical generalizability. The small sample enabled detailed engagement with each participant's account and supported a nuanced analysis of the meanings associated with food sharing, cultural identity, and belonging. This approach was particularly appropriate for examining how participants negotiated and constructed their identities through everyday social media practices.

Data Collection: Semi-Structured Interviews

In this study, semi-structured interviews elicited detailed accounts of participants' experiences and generated rich qualitative data. Semi-structured interviews provide a flexible yet guided approach, enabling participants to articulate their views in their own words while allowing the researcher to explore relevant topics in greater depth (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

Six one-on-one interviews were conducted online with Chinese international students studying in the United Kingdom. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 40 minutes. The interview guide focused on participants' social media practices, food-sharing practices, and perceptions of identity and cultural belonging.

All the interviews were conducted in Chinese to enable participants to communicate comfortably and express nuanced perspectives. With participants' informed consent, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim in Chinese. The analysis was conducted using the original Chinese transcripts, while relevant participant quotations were subsequently translated into English for reporting.

Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis

The original Chinese transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2013). Thematic analysis was selected because it provides a flexible and systematic approach to identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data while remaining compatible with an interpretivist research design.

The analysis began with repeated readings of the Chinese interview transcripts to develop familiarity with the data. Initial codes were then generated and organized into broader categories. Through an iterative process of reviewing, refining, and defining themes, the analysis identified key patterns related to food

sharing, identity construction, and cultural belonging. This process enabled a nuanced understanding of participants' experiences and interpretations of food-sharing practices on social media.

Methodological Considerations

The interviews were conducted and transcribed in Chinese, and the original Chinese transcripts were used for data analysis. This approach enabled participants to express culturally specific meanings and experiences in their preferred language and allowed the analysis to remain closely grounded in their original accounts. The relevant participant quotations were subsequently translated into English for reporting. Given that subtle semantic shifts can occur during translation, careful attention was given to preserving participants' intended meanings and culturally specific expressions.

Ethical Considerations

This study received ethical approval from the relevant institutional ethics committee and adhered to the ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2024). Informed consent was obtained from all the participants before the interviews, and the participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without adverse consequences.

All the data were anonymised, and pseudonyms were assigned to the participants throughout the study. Interview recordings, transcripts, and associated research materials were securely stored using password protection and encryption to protect participants' confidentiality and ensure data security.

FINDINGS

Food Sharing as Cultural Capital

Participants were highly selective in their food-sharing practices on social media, with aesthetic considerations playing an important role in their posting decisions. Rather than routinely posting photographs of meals, participants carefully evaluated whether a dining experience was suitable for online sharing. They frequently cited food presentation, restaurant ambience, and overall dining experience as important factors when they decided whether to post food-related content.

For instance, Kelly highlighted the importance of visual appeal when deciding whether to share food-related content: "Well, I only post photos of food on social media when both the presentation and the atmosphere of the restaurant are outstanding. For example, when I go to a Michelin-starred restaurant for dinner." (Kelly)

As shown in Figure 1, participants frequently associated food sharing with aesthetically appealing dining experiences. Kelly noted that even when food tasted good, she was unlikely to share it if the environment lacked aesthetic appeal. In contrast, participants often considered food presented in attractive settings more worthy of sharing, suggesting that food-related content could function as a marker of taste and distinction.

Figure 1

Food Presentation and Cultural Capital in Kelly's Social Media Post



Note. Participant-generated photograph.

Although not all the participants shared this view, some clearly emphasized the importance of visual presentation. Jennifer expressed a similar view: "The food pictures I posted on social media needed to be beautifully presented, and the restaurant setting needed to be elegant." (Jennifer)

These accounts indicate that aesthetic considerations often shaped participants' food-sharing practices. The participants used carefully selected food-related content to express their personal tastes, lifestyle preferences, and social identities. In this sense, food sharing on social media formed part of their identity construction, as participants selectively presented specific aspects of themselves through aesthetically appealing dining experiences.

Food, Belonging, and Emotional Connection

Food also played an important role in maintaining cultural identity, belonging, and emotional connections while living abroad. The participants frequently associated Chinese food with comfort, familiarity, and a sense of home. Food-related content shared on social media reflected these connections, allowing participants to represent culturally meaningful experiences and memories in their everyday digital practices.

Jennifer described how making dumplings with friends during Chinese New Year provided a sense of familiarity and connection to home:

"My friends and I were Chinese, and making dumplings for Chinese New Year gave us a sense of security, knowing that we could still eat food from home even when we were abroad." (Jennifer)

As illustrated in Figure 2, traditional food practices played an important role in maintaining emotional connections to participants' home cultures while living in the United Kingdom. Sharing these culturally meaningful food experiences on social media further enabled participants to express and maintain a sense of cultural belonging while abroad.

Figure 2

Traditional Chinese Dumplings Shared by Jennifer



Note. Participant-generated photograph.

Similarly, Fiona described experiencing homesickness and emotional attachment when preparing traditional Chinese desserts. Although she had adapted well to a Western diet and actively explored the diverse culinary landscape of the UK, Chinese food continued to hold cultural and emotional significance for her. Her experience suggests that engagement with the host culture could coexist with an enduring attachment to familiar Chinese food traditions and memories.

The participants also associated food with memories, relationships, and emotional experiences. Amy explained that food photographs often represented important social occasions and memories shared with friends. Rather than functioning solely as carefully curated images, these photographs also served as reminders of significant interpersonal experiences. Through sharing and preserving these food-related moments on social media, participants maintained connections to important relationships and memories, contributing to a sense of belonging while living in the UK.

Zeiko's experience further illustrates the emotional significance of food. Reflecting on her experiences of eating hotpots in the United Kingdom, she explained the following:

> The most important point was that I was from Sichuan because hotpot was one of the cuisines of Sichuan. I felt like I was home every time I ate hotpots. Especially when I ate hotpots in the UK, this homecoming emotion was even stronger. (Zeiko)

As shown in Figure 3, culturally significant foods such as hotpots were closely associated with feelings of warmth, familiarity, and cultural connection. Food-related content shared on social media reflected these emotional connections, allowing participants to express and maintain ties to culturally meaningful experiences while living abroad.

Figure 3

Traditional Sichuan Hotpot Shared by Zeiko



Note. Participant-generated photograph.

Several participants also described food photographs as reminders of specific experiences and emotions. Reflecting on this process, Zeiko explained, "When I saw the food, I felt like I could still remember how I felt when I tasted it." (Zeiko)

These accounts illustrate how food-related content could preserve memories, document experiences, and maintain emotional connections across geographical distances. Social media provided a space in which participants could express connections to Chinese cultural practices and memories while simultaneously documenting their everyday experiences in the UK.

Platform-Specific Self-Presentation

The participants demonstrated a clear awareness of the distinctive characteristics of different social media platforms and adapted their self-presentation accordingly.

Having grown up in the United Kingdom, Jay distinguished between platforms in her everyday social media use. She shared content on Snapchat in a spontaneous and informal manner, whereas on Instagram, she preferred more carefully curated and aesthetically appealing posts.

These platform-specific practices were also evident in her expression of cultural identity. Although Jay frequently shared Western-style food online, she maintained a strong attachment to Chinese culture and used Instagram to share culturally significant food-related content during traditional Chinese festivals. She explained, "I would post pictures of food during traditional Chinese festivals, such as making zongzi for the Dragon Boat Festival and dumplings for Chinese New Year." (Jay)

Similarly, Zeiko not only documented her daily life on social media but also used food-related content to introduce others to the cuisine of her hometown. Across participants' accounts, food-related posts conveyed different aspects of identity to different audiences, with posting practices varying according to the characteristics of each platform. These accounts suggest that participants' online self-presentation was selective and context dependent, with different aspects of identity becoming more prominent depending on platform norms, audiences, and social contexts.

Overall, participants' accounts illustrate that food sharing on social media was not simply a means of documenting everyday life. Instead, these practices served multiple functions, including aesthetic display, cultural expression, emotional connection, memory preservation, and selective self-presentation.

DISCUSSION

Food Sharing as Transnational Cultural Capital

The findings indicate that sharing food on social media goes beyond merely documenting meals and can function as a form of cultural expression and distinction within a transnational context. The participants emphasized that visual presentation, restaurant ambience, and aesthetic appeal were important factors in determining whether food-related content was considered worthy of sharing online. These practices resonate with Bourdieu's (2010) concept of cultural capital, which highlights how taste and consumption can operate as symbolic resources through which individuals express social distinction. These findings are also consistent with research on "foodstagramming," which suggests that food-related content on social media provides a means through which individuals communicate lifestyle ideals, personal tastes, and social identities (Göktepe et al., 2022).

The findings further indicate that visually pleasing dining experiences were often perceived as more "share-worthy" than everyday meals were. The participants frequently associated social media posts with aesthetically appealing food and upscale dining environments, suggesting that food imagery can serve as a symbolic marker of taste and social status. This pattern is consistent with previous research indicating that images of luxury food can convey exclusivity and social status in digital environments (Atwal et al., 2019). In this sense, food photography can function as a form of aesthetic expression through which individuals communicate not only what they eat but also aspects of the lifestyle and identity they wish to project.

Moreover, the findings reveal a discrepancy between participants' online portrayal and their everyday dietary practices. Although participants frequently shared visually appealing Western-style cuisine and upscale dining experiences online, their everyday food choices remained closely connected to Chinese

culinary traditions. This contrast suggests that food-related self-presentation does not simply reflect dietary preferences but is also shaped by audience expectations and platform culture. Consistent with the selective self-presentation observed among Chinese international students on social media (Hu & Chen, 2023), participants carefully curated food-related content to present aspects of themselves online. Food sharing therefore functioned not only as a form of cultural expression but also as a selective practice through which participants negotiated identity and visibility within transnational digital spaces.

Food, Belonging, and Cultural Continuity

Beyond serving as a form of cultural capital, food also emerged as an important medium through which participants maintained a sense of cultural belonging while living abroad. Chinese cuisine was frequently associated with emotional comfort, cultural familiarity, and a sense of security. Traditional food practices, particularly those associated with culturally significant occasions, allowed participants to maintain meaningful connections to their home culture while living in the UK. These findings are consistent with previous research showing that Chinese students abroad derive emotional comfort and maintain cultural continuity through food consumption (Yen et al., 2018).

These findings are consistent with Hall's (1990) view that cultural identity is not fixed or static but is continuously constructed through social and cultural practices. The participants' food-sharing practices did not merely reflect an attachment to their home culture; rather, they illustrated how a sense of belonging could be negotiated across multiple cultural contexts. This interpretation also aligns with Gu's (2015) argument that international students experience identity transformations through ongoing negotiation between their home and host cultures. In this sense, food photographs shared on social media can function as symbolic bridges, connecting participants' experiences in the host country with cultural traditions, memories, and social relationships associated with home.

The findings further indicate that social media played a mediating role in this process. By sharing culturally significant food online, participants maintained connections to cultural traditions and social relationships while simultaneously engaging with new social environments. This role of social media is consistent with the findings of previous research highlighting the importance of digital platforms in shaping the social experiences and identity construction of Chinese international students (Hu & Chen, 2023). In this sense, food-sharing practices can be understood as a form of digitally mediated belonging through which participants maintain cultural continuity while adapting to everyday life in the UK.

Selective Acculturation and Identity Negotiation

The findings suggest that participants' adaptation was selective rather than linear. After moving to the UK, participants did not simply replace their existing cultural practices; instead, they maintained Chinese cultural practices and emotional attachments while simultaneously adapting to their new environment. This pattern is consistent with segmented assimilation theory, which proposes that individuals may follow different pathways of incorporation rather than a single, uniform process of assimilation (Portes & Zhou, 1993). More specifically, participants' simultaneous engagement with the host environment and maintenance of culturally meaningful practices reflect elements of selective acculturation, whereby adaptation can occur alongside the retention of aspects of one's cultural heritage. As Zhou (1997) further emphasizes, processes of adaptation may follow different trajectories depending on individuals' social and cultural contexts, offering a useful perspective on how cultural retention can coexist with adaptation.

This process of selective acculturation was particularly evident in participants' food practices. While engaging with British and international culinary cultures, participants continued to maintain emotional connections to Chinese culinary traditions. Their openness to diverse cuisines coexisted with an attachment to culturally significant foods, particularly in contexts involving traditional festivals, homesickness, and emotional belonging. Food therefore provided a context in which engagement with the host environment and the maintenance of home-cultural connections could occur simultaneously.

This interpretation is also consistent with research suggesting that international student adaptation involves ongoing psychological and sociocultural negotiation rather than a singular process of adjustment (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). In this process, social media provided participants with a space to express different cultural affiliations and negotiate aspects of their identities across home and host cultural contexts. Viewed alongside selective acculturation, these digital practices illustrate how participants could maintain connections to Chinese culture while also representing experiences shaped by their lives in the UK.

Food Images as Emotional Archives

Another important finding of this study concerns the role of food images as emotional archives. Participants associated food photographs with meaningful experiences involving particular people, places, and moments. Rather than functioning solely as visual records of food consumption, these images carried memories of friendships, cultural traditions, homesickness, and emotional connections.

These findings add another dimension to the existing research on digital self-presentation. While social media platforms have been understood as spaces in which individuals construct and perform identities (Van Dijck, 2013), the findings of this study suggest that food photographs can also acquire emotional significance as records of personally and culturally meaningful experiences. Through photographing and sharing food, participants created digital records of their experiences abroad that could evoke memories across time and geographical distance. This interpretation also resonates with previous research highlighting the role of food in maintaining emotional and cultural connections among Chinese students living abroad (Yen et al., 2018).

For some participants, sharing food online was less concerned with aesthetic self-presentation than with documenting relationships and meaningful social experiences. Social media therefore functioned not only as a space for self-presentation but also as a digital environment in which memories and personal narratives could be recorded and revisited. Understanding food images as emotional archives offers an additional perspective on how international students use digital media to make sense of their experiences abroad and maintain connections to culturally and personally significant memories.

Platform-Specific Self-Presentation and Identity Negotiation

The findings also indicate that the characteristics of social media platforms shaped how participants expressed and negotiated their identities online. The participants demonstrated an awareness of platform-specific norms and adjusted their self-presentation accordingly. The distinction between spontaneous sharing and carefully curated posts illustrates how participants adapted their online behavior to the communicative expectations and conventions of different platforms.

These practices are consistent with Goffman's (1959) view that self-presentation is shaped by audience expectations and social context. The findings further suggest that platform characteristics influenced which aspects of participants' identities became visible and how they were presented. Different platforms encouraged distinct modes of communication and self-presentation, shaping how participants managed their visibility and audience online. This platform-specific presentation of identity resonates with Van Dijck's (2013) analysis of how self-presentation varies across different social media environments. These findings also align with previous research showing that Chinese international students strategically manage their online visibility and self-presentation across different social media environments (Hu & Chen, 2023).

For international students, platform-specific self-presentation provided opportunities to express multiple dimensions of identity. The participants selectively emphasized different aspects of their cultural experiences according to platform norms, audiences, and communicative purposes. Social media therefore functioned not only as a channel for identity expression but also as a mediated environment in which identity was selectively constructed and negotiated. These findings add to the existing understanding of platform-mediated identity construction by illustrating how participants' identity negotiation was shaped not only by their cross-cultural experiences but also by the characteristics and communicative expectations of different social media platforms. In this way, platform-specific food-sharing practices provided

participants with a means of negotiating cultural belonging and self-presentation while adapting to life in the UK.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the study involved only six participants in the United Kingdom. Although the small sample size enabled an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, the findings are not intended to be representative of the broader population of Chinese international students. In addition, participants had different migration and cultural backgrounds, which may have shaped their experiences of cultural identity and adaptation. These sample characteristics should therefore be considered when the findings are interpreted.

Second, the study relied primarily on semi-structured interviews and participants' self-reported accounts of their social media practices. These accounts may not fully capture participants' actual practices across social media platforms. Future research could combine interviews with methods such as digital ethnography or social media content analysis to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how food-sharing practices are related to identity construction and cultural adaptation.

Third, all the interviews were conducted and analyzed in Chinese, with selected participant quotations subsequently translated into English for reporting. Although care was taken to preserve participants' intended meanings during translation, some linguistic nuances and culturally specific meanings may have been lost in this process.

Finally, this study was situated within the specific social and cultural context of the United Kingdom. The findings may therefore reflect the characteristics of this context. Future research could examine food-sharing practices among Chinese students in other national contexts and explore how different cultural and social media environments shape the relationships among food sharing, cultural identity, and adaptation.

Conclusion

This study examined how Chinese students in the United Kingdom use social media to share food-related content and how these practices contribute to identity construction and cross-cultural adaptation. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with six participants, the findings indicate that food sharing on social media served multiple functions extending beyond the documentation of everyday meals.

First, food-related content functioned as a form of cultural capital through which participants communicated personal tastes, lifestyle preferences, and aspects of their social identities. Second, food sharing played an important role in maintaining cultural connections, emotional attachments, and a sense of belonging while living abroad. Traditional foods such as dumplings and hotpots were associated with comfort, familiarity, and connections to home. Third, participants adapted their self-presentation across different social media platforms, illustrating the selective and platform-specific nature of digital identity construction.

These findings further suggest that cultural adaptation does not necessarily require participants to abandon existing cultural practices or attachments. Instead, engagement with the host cultural environment occurred alongside the continued maintenance of Chinese cultural traditions and emotional connections. This coexistence reflects elements of selective acculturation, illustrating how cultural maintenance and adaptation can occur simultaneously. Social media provided a mediated space in which participants could express and negotiate these different cultural affiliations through everyday food-sharing practices.

This study contributes to the growing literature on international students' digital practices by illustrating how food, social media, and identity intersect in experiences of cultural adaptation and belonging. The findings also suggest that food images can function as emotional archives, preserving personally and culturally meaningful memories across geographical distance. In addition, the platform-

specific nature of participants' self-presentation highlights the role of digital environments in shaping which aspects of identity become visible and how they are communicated to different audiences.

These findings have practical implications for universities and student support services. Recognizing the role of digital spaces in students' experiences of belonging, cultural connection, and identity negotiation may help institutions develop a more nuanced understanding of international students' social and emotional experiences. Future research could examine similar practices among students from different cultural backgrounds and national contexts and across a wider range of digital platforms.

Overall, this study highlights food sharing on social media as a cultural, emotional, and identity-related practice through which participants expressed belonging, maintained connections to culturally significant experiences, and negotiated their identities while adapting to life in the UK.

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