Coming to America: Exploring the Cross-Cultural Adaptation of African International Students at a PWI and HBCU in the U.S. South

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COMING TO AMERICA: EXPLORING THE CROSS-CULTURAL ADAPATION OF AFRICAN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT A PWI AND HBCU IN THE U.S. SOUTH

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
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requirements for the degree of
Master of Mass Communication

in

The Manship School of Mass Communication

by
Adwoa Frimpomaa Baffour
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ABSTRACT

African international students undergo significant challenges in their cross-cultural adaption in the United States. The cross-cultural adaptation of international students, particularly those from African countries, in a new environment assumes paramount importance due to its direct correlation with their mental and social well-being (Shafaei and Razak, 2016). Furthermore, the mental and social well-being of African international students attending universities in the southern United States has a profound impact on their overall success and overall college experience. This underscores the urgent need for future research to delve deeper into the cross-cultural adaptation experiences of African international students at United States universities, especially in the South. This study aimed to explore the role of communication in the cross-cultural adaptation process by examining interactions between African international students and domestic students at both predominantly white institutions (PWIs) and historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in the United States, while also considering the impact of social media. Specifically, it sought to understand how African international students perceive their interactions with domestic students, how relationships are formed between them, and how these dynamics affect their cross-cultural adaptation. The findings of this study reveal that interactions between African international students and domestic students in the Southern United States are still suboptimal and highlight the challenges that African students face in their daily interactions with their domestic counterparts.

**Keywords:** Cross-cultural adaptation, African international students, Domestic students, U.S. South, Reciprocal communication.
STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The rising enrollment of African international students in U.S. higher education institutions necessitates a deeper exploration of their experiences and the process of cross-cultural adaptation. This investigation can play a pivotal role in assisting universities and colleges across the nation in achieving their objective of cultivating inclusive learning environments where domestic students can truly appreciate and establish meaningful connections with their counterparts from African nations (Irungu, 2013; Mostafa & Lim, 2020).

This study, titled "Coming to America: Exploring the Cross-Cultural Adaptation of African International Students at a PWI and HBCU in the U.S. South” aimed to investigate the intricate dynamics of cross-cultural adaptation among African international students in the context of their interactions with domestic students. Drawing upon cross-cultural adaptation theory and the pivotal role of communication in the cross-cultural adaptation process, particularly in an era influenced by social media, this research sought to answer crucial questions of how these interactions shape African international students' perceptions and impact their successful adaptation to the U.S. Additionally, the study intended to examine the role of social media in facilitating cross-cultural interactions and its implications for building relationships and aiding the adaptation process. Although a body of literature explores the application of cross-cultural adaptation theory to African international students, a significant research gap exists when examining the influence of interactions with domestic students on the cross-cultural adaptation of these expatriates at Southern United States universities and in the contexts of Predominantly White Institutions and Historically Black Colleges. This study also distinguished itself through its exploration of relationship building through engagement and its potential to enhance the experience of African international students. Remarkably, most Western studies have
frequently neglected to address the cultural adaptability of African international students, particularly within the framework of their dual identity or intersectionality as both Africans/foreigners and students (Qi et al. 2019). By exploring these dimensions, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the African international student experience and offers insights that can inform intervention strategies, policies, and initiatives to foster inclusivity, cultural awareness, and diversity in university settings. The methodology involved in-depth interviews with African international students attending LSU and SU, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of their experiences.

I'm speaking from my experience...When we come from home to school here, you can think about racism, but you don't really think about all those things. Then people make passive-aggressive comments, and you don't notice until you start noticing. And that kind of alters the way you start to interact with domestic people. It also makes you fall back. Initially, I didn't care. I mean, I interacted the way I would back home—openly and freely, you know? But slowly, I started gaining awareness of these racial issues. I remember there was this one time when a white old man was walking down the street. He looked so frail. I didn't even know if he was going to make it to wherever he was going. So, I was sitting, waiting for the bus, and I decided to look down at my phone and scroll. The next time I looked up, I saw the man falling down, and I thought, “Oh my God, he's actually falling.” My initial reaction was to go and help him, but then I held myself back. I thought, “What if he says, 'don't touch me'?” These are the new things that we kind of pick up when we get here, and it's going to change the way we interact.

Clara - 32-year-old female Ugandan graduate student.
INTRODUCTION

In many ways, the arrival of African international students in the United States can be likened to the plot of the classic comedy film "Coming to America," starring Eddie Murphy. Just as Murphy's character “Prince Akeem” ventures to the U.S. in search of something or someone he values, these students embark on a journey filled with hope, ambition, and the pursuit of knowledge. Their presence on American campuses mirrors the cultural collision depicted on the silver screen. But beyond the laughter and excitement in this movie, these students face a complex reality.

Over the years, the influx of African international students into U.S. universities has increased, bringing a rich diversity of cultures and perspectives to campuses. Students from African countries make up a significant portion of the student population in the United States (Iyama et al., 2016; Irungu, 2013). A total of 37,062 students from African nations studied at U.S. universities or colleges from 2009 through 2010 and 36,890 from 2010 to 2011 (Irungu, 2013). From 2013 through 2014, about 25,000 African international students were enrolled at universities or colleges in the United States (Macharia-Lowe, 2018). In 2015, African students constituted 14.5% of the international student population in the United States, with a substantial majority originating from Nigeria, Kenya, and Ghana (Okusolubo G.S. 2018).

These students' experiences and interactions with host nationals or domestic students play a crucial role in shaping their cross-cultural adaptation. Their adaptation, however, into this new environment is riddled with several challenges. While all international students likely experience feelings of alienation and isolation when adjusting to a new life, culture, and education system, African international students encounter additional hurdles including racism and prejudicial treatment that predisposes them to greater acculturation stress (Boafo-Arthur,
2013; Mwaura, 2009). Furthermore, the existing stereotypes in Western host countries, such as the United States, about Africa, greatly influence the experiences of African international students (Beoku-Betts, 2004), and may undermine their efforts to build relationships with host nationals (Hayes & Lin 1994). These biased perceptions are usually influenced by global discourses that portray the "civilized West" and "barbaric Africa," along with the U.S. construction of the culture of poverty in Africa (Asante & Brown 2016).

Despite extensive research on international students, there is a relative scarcity of academic literature regarding how interactions with domestic students affect the cross-cultural adaptation of African international students in the United States (Okusolubo, 2018). Different ethnicities and ethnic groups may experience the cross-cultural adaptation process differently (Smokowski et al., 2008), so generalizing research for all international students may restrict the applicability of results.

Moreover, this study’s significance lies in its focus on African International students in the US. South. Historically, the South's connection to slavery remains a defining feature. The institution of slavery, which flourished in the antebellum South, fueled economic prosperity in the region but came at an immeasurable cost to the enslaved individuals. The legacy of slavery has woven a complex web of racial tensions, stereotypes, and inequalities that persist in contemporary America. The era of Jim Crow laws further exemplifies the South's historical contribution to racial discrimination. Segregation and systemic discrimination against African Americans were deeply entrenched in southern states, impacting every aspect of life. The ramifications of this era continue to influence racial dynamics in the broader United States. Prejudices deeply ingrained in the South's history can influence interactions with host nationals.
These biases may inadvertently undermine African students’ efforts to build meaningful relationships during their stay in the United States.

The increase in enrollment of African international students at U.S. higher education institutions, together with the gaps in research discussed, warrant understanding their experiences and cross-cultural adaptation. This can help universities or colleges in the country achieve their goal of developing empowering learning communities where domestic students value and create meaningful relationships with their peers from African countries (Irungu, 2013; Mostafa & Lim, 2020). By fostering cross-cultural understanding and exchange, these institutions can cultivate a rich tapestry of perspectives and experiences, enhancing the educational environment for all students involved.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Cross-Cultural Adaptation

Cross-cultural adaptation is a dynamic process in which individuals who relocate to an unfamiliar cultural environment establish or reestablish and maintain relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationships with their environment (Kim, 2001). In the context of cross-cultural adaptation theory, deculturation and acculturation are vital interrelated processes that shape an individual's transformation when moving to a new culture (Kim, 2001). Deculturation involves losing some aspects of one's original cultural habits, whereas acculturation entails acquiring new habits from the new culture while maintaining one's culture of origin. These experiences cumulatively aid in adapting to mainstream culture (Kim, 2001).

The cross-cultural adaptation theory posits that individuals adapt to challenges from a given environment and try to maintain equilibrium within the system by using varying forms of communication (Kim, 1991, Kim & Ruben, 1988; Ruben, 1983). Originally known as the integrative communication theory, this framework was first introduced by Yun Young Kim during the 1970s as an integral component of her doctoral research on Korean immigrants (Click, 2016; Kim, 1988). Kim's academic curiosity was driven by her desire to comprehend the intricate experiences she encountered as a Korean international graduate student in the United States. Her comprehensive model encompasses various factors, including individuals' predispositions such as readiness for change, ethnic proximity, and adaptive personality, all of which serve as exogenous variables influencing the dynamics of intercultural communication (Kim, 2001; Lee, 2018).
Other scholars have also corroborated the central role of communication in the cross-cultural adaptation process (Lee & Chen, 2000; McKay-Semmler & Kim, 2014; Qi et al., 2019). Communication serves as the foundation and progression of cross-cultural adaptation, with host communication competence playing a significant role (Lee & Chen, 2000). Research has demonstrated a direct link between host communication competence and psychological health during adaptation, underscoring the importance of individuals' ability to adapt to communication standards in new environments (Lee & Chen, 2000; McKay-Semmler & Kim, 2014). Additionally, making friends and establishing a support network in the country where international students are studying is essential to make it easier for them to adapt to the new culture and have a successful experience (Hayes & Lin, 1994; Yeh & Inose, 2003).

The cross-cultural adaptation theory is widely regarded as a complex theoretical framework for understanding the adaptation process (Shafaei & Razak, 2016), making it the best to guide this study. While there is existing literature discussing the application of cross-cultural adaptation theory to African international students, there is a notable gap in research when it comes to how interactions with domestic students impact the cross-cultural adaptation process of these expatriates at universities in the southern United States. Notably, most Western studies have often overlooked the cultural adaptability of African international students, particularly in the context of their dual identity or intersectionality as both Africans and students (Qi et al., 2019).

The Experiences of African International Students

African international students undergo significant challenges just to reach the U.S., including financial sacrifices, navigating rigorous visa processes, and taking English proficiency exams, all while bidding farewell to everyone and everything they have ever known. They find
solace in the pursuit of their dream to study abroad, but the initial excitement of coming to the
United States is frequently overshadowed by feelings of loneliness and anxiety (Berry, 2006; Rui & Wang, 2015). When international students move to a new country for the first time, they often feel a deep sense of loss, leading to reduced confidence, ongoing stress, and general confusion (Hayes & Lin, 1994).

A study conducted by Constantine et al (2005) sheds light on this issue. This study, which included interviews with students from Ghana, Nigeria, and Kenya attending a college in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States, revealed a stark contrast between the students' initial perceptions of the country as an ideal environment and their actual experiences. The students gradually came to terms with the realities and challenges of living in the United States, prompting them to adjust their expectations (Constantine et al, 2005). To cope with the stress, these students learned to accept reality, modify their expectations over time, and seek support from other international students (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011).

While research indicates that building friendships with people from the host country is crucial for a positive experience while studying abroad (for e.g., Hayes & Lin, 1994; Yeh & Inose, 2003), it can be quite difficult and uncommon for international students to establish friendships with U.S. American students (Williams & Johnson, 2011). American students' responses to international students can vary significantly. Some may form friendships, while others may not (Ward, 2001). The hostility towards African international students is in some cases driven by certain Americans' perceptions of intellectual superiority and perceived competition for opportunities (Lee & Rice, 2007; Okusolubo 2018).

Moreover, these students face greater challenges in adjusting to a new culture compared to their fellow international students from macro-cultural groups. Unlike white international
students, African students often encounter racism, prejudices, and stereotypes from their host national peers (Awuor, 2021; Briscoe et al., 2020; Williams & Johnson, 2011), which also hinder their chances at building relationships.

The Role of Organizations

African international students often rely heavily on their fellow African peers as a primary source of support and a means of coping with the challenges of studying abroad. They actively participate in microcultural groups where they engage in various activities, forge meaningful friendships, and cultivate lasting relationships. One such example is the African Graduate Student Association (AGSA) at Louisiana State University, which plays a pivotal role in enhancing the well-being of African graduate students in several impactful ways. AGSA achieves this by orchestrating a multitude of initiatives, including networking events, academic workshops, and advocacy for volunteering opportunities tailored specifically for African students. Through these endeavors, AGSA significantly helps these students develop friendships, establish valuable networks, and deal with acculturative stress, all while having some fun.

Southern University also boasts an African student organization dedicated to supporting the adaptation of African students. Although not as prominent or active as its counterpart at LSU, this association provides a valuable platform for African students at SU to unite for cultural events, social gatherings, and networking opportunities. Through this organization, students can foster meaningful connections, exchange experiences, and cultivate friendships, contributing to a sense of belonging and community within the university. Additionally, the organization serves as a resource hub, offering support and guidance to African students navigating the challenges of adjusting to life in a new cultural environment. Overall, while perhaps not as widely recognized,
the African student organization at Southern University plays a vital role in enhancing the collegiate experience and promoting cultural exchange among African students on campus.

While these microcultural groups offer international students a profound sense of belonging and a platform to share common values, it is important to recognize that they can also potentially lead to increased feelings of isolation (Hayes & Lin, 1994). Exclusively engaging with members of one's in-group has its drawbacks. It frequently confines social interactions to individuals who share similar backgrounds. This self-segregation can hinder opportunities to connect with a more diverse range of peers, potentially leading to feelings of exclusion and a lack of cross-cultural exposure. Consequently, international students may find it even more challenging to integrate into the broader student community and establish meaningful relationships outside of their microcultural group, ultimately contributing to increased isolation.

The International Cultural Center (ICC) at Louisiana State University has a more diverse reach than the African Graduate Student Association. ICC, according to its website, serves as a vibrant hub for over 1,500 international students, along with faculty and scholars, offering essential resources and support to facilitate their transition to campus life and the Baton Rouge community (International Cultural Center, n.d.). ICC organizes a diverse array of educational, social, and cultural programs throughout the year, aiming to promote global understanding and awareness within the LSU community. While its primary focus is on international students, the ICC also collaborates with various university entities and student organizations to broaden the reach of its events and programming, with the goal of enriching the overall campus environment and fostering a globally enriched learning experience.

However, ICC's primary focus on facilitating relationships among international students may inadvertently exclude opportunities for meaningful engagement with domestic students.
While the ICC excels in its global outreach, it remains an area for growth in bridging the divide between international and domestic students, especially for the benefit of African international students seeking a more comprehensive cross-cultural experience.

Engagement in multicultural organizations could be a solution to address this issue and enable African students to broaden their horizons. However, African students do not utilize these organizations as much, (S. Arnold, personal communication, September 26, 2023). The Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA) at LSU is one such organization that collaborates closely with students, faculty, staff, and members of the community to actively cultivate an environment that is both inclusive and inviting. According to their website, whether students’ interests revolve around participating in university-wide events, engaging with student organizations, or nurturing interpersonal connections, OMA offers a diverse range of opportunities tailored to students’ specific preferences and needs.

An informal interview conducted with Sharalle Arnold, the director of the African American Cultural Center (a subsidiary of the Office of Multicultural Affairs) on Tuesday, September 28, 2023, shed light on the underutilization of multicultural organizations by African international students on campus. This organization, designed to serve as the epicenter for cultural, social, and academic engagement within the Black student community at LSU, faces challenges in reaching this specific demographic. The director noted that her interactions with African students during her tenure at LSU have been limited, primarily occurring during an event hosted at the International Cultural Center. She raised the possibility that LSU's status as a Predominantly white institution (PWI) may influence how these students access campus services. This observation aligns with the experiences of even Black American students, who also
encounter difficulties accessing resources compared to their counterparts at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) (S. Arnold, personal communication, September 26, 2023)

The director emphasized her belief in the importance of “bringing services to the students” especially if they do not actively seek them out. Over the years since it was opened in 1993, the African American Cultural Center has employed various strategies to bridge this gap, such as organizing career expos, African cultural nights, and events focused on on-campus employment and general employability for international students. (S. Arnold, personal communication, September 26, 2023)

AACC offers services including access to study spaces, confidential reporting services, meeting facilities, and project spaces (Clarence L. Barney Jr. African American Cultural Center, n.d.). The Director's aspiration is that more African students will engage with these services, enhancing their overall experience at LSU. By doing so, they can fully leverage the resources available to them, ensuring a more fulfilling and enriching educational journey (S. Arnold, personal communication, September 26, 2023).

For many individuals, religion serves as a means of escape and a source of solace during challenging periods. In discussing the role of organizations in the cross-cultural adaptation process, it is crucial not to overlook the significance of religious organizations. This is particularly true for Africans, who often hail from collectivist backgrounds. In the context of cross-cultural adaptation, a religious community can play a significant role in fostering relationships and aiding individuals in their journey of adjustment. In a 2019 study by Philip et al., the authors employed qualitative research methods, specifically phenomenological inquiry, to delve into the experiences of international students who utilize religion and spirituality as coping mechanisms for acculturative stress. The findings highlighted the multifaceted nature of religious
and spiritual experiences among these students, with variations in concepts, beliefs, practices, traditions, and intensity. They also demonstrated that religion significantly contributes to enhancing psychological, cognitive, and social well-being, exerting a discernible impact on students' academic performance.

Furthermore, the study illuminated the deeply personal and daily pursuit of religion and spirituality by most participants, often used as tools for coping with stress (Philip et al. 2019). These practices included prayer, scripture reading, meditation, and engagement with like-minded individuals, depending on their respective faiths. Importantly, religion and spirituality were found to be significant psychological resources, providing solace, encouragement, motivation, resilience, courage, perseverance, and hope in the face of acculturative stress, regardless of the diverse beliefs and practices of the participants. Another reason for these benefits could be the fact that international students may have the opportunity to meet and build relationships with host nationals at religious gatherings. This underscores the role that religious organizations can also play in the cross-cultural adaptation of African international students.

Gender

While there is limited research on gender differences in adaptation among African international students, the few existing studies on international students have produced varying perspectives. Sapranaviciute et al. (2012) suggest that male international students tend to adapt better than their female counterparts. One key factor contributing to this difference is the higher acculturative stress experienced by female international students. This stress can be attributed to several factors, including the value these female students put on meaningful relationships, which are often difficult for them to obtain at their host universities or colleges (Sawir, 2007).
Another possible explanation for this difference lies in the societal expectations placed on men and women. Society often encourages women to develop greater sensitivity to the needs of others, as theorized by Gilligan (1982). Consequently, women may have access to superior support resources. In fact, both men and women tend to perceive women as more reliable support providers, as noted by Flaherty and Richman (1989). Individuals with an expressive, feminine orientation, characterized by warmth, compassion, and nurturance, seem to have more extensive social support networks. They are also more inclined to utilize these resources when facing challenging circumstances (Burda et al., 1984).

While men are often less likely to seek or acknowledge their need for social support, they may require it the most. Paradoxically, they may also be the least knowledgeable about how to access support or unwilling to take the necessary steps to obtain it (Hayes & Lin 1994). As such, these varying viewpoints necessitate the need to further study the role of gender in the cross-cultural adaptation of African international students.

Social Media

Scholars are also examining how the relationship between new media (e.g., social media networks and the Internet) and psychological health affect the cross-cultural adaptation process of expatriates, specifically individuals who are university or college international students (Croucher, 2011; Hendrickson & Rosen; 2017; Nakamura, 2019; Pitts, 2016). Academics argue that new media are important factors in the cross-cultural adaptation process because they help international students deal with the challenges they face when transitioning into higher education (Rui & Wang, 2015).
International students at higher education institutions consistently use new media for acculturation or assimilation (Croucher, 2011). Furthermore, these technological tools can positively impact the psychological health of university or college international students (Boateng & Thompson, 2013; Hendrickson & Rosen, 2017; Rui & Wang, 2015). For instance, Nakamura (2019) asserts that international students at a university in Japan, comprising mostly of Chinese and European students of different ethnicities, engage in native and host news browsing on Twitter and Facebook. Consequently, the students have strong relationships with host nationals because the consumed knowledge allows them to connect with these individuals.

Hendrickson and Rosen (2017) explain that white U.S. international students who use new media, such as video chat and Facebook, to communicate with family and friends in the United States and their host country have an easier time during the cross-cultural adaptation process (Pitts, 2016). This is because the students feel supported by native friends and family (Hendrickson & Rosen, 2017). Students can also interact with online host content or host friends to learn the cultural behaviors and language of their host country (Boateng and Thompson, 2013; Hendrickson and Rosen, 2017; Pitts, 2016).

Thus, international students can use new media as leverage for maintaining interpersonal communication competence with natives and host nationals, which results in good psychological health (Nakamura, 2019; Pitts, 2016; Rui & Wang, 2015). Psychological well-being significantly impacts the overall performance and quality of life of African international students, underscoring the importance of investigating the role of social media in this context.
Relationship Building and Management

Effective communication is at the heart of building and maintaining relationships, and this principle is particularly relevant to the experience of African international students in the United States. Reciprocal communication, as emphasized by Samsup and Yungwook (2003), serves as a cornerstone for fostering open dialogues and enabling the exchange of perspectives between organizations and stakeholders. This concept closely aligns with Grunig et al.'s (2006) public relations model, known as two-way symmetrical communication, that prioritizes the equilibrium of interests between the organization and its publics. In this approach, there is a continual exchange of feedback, ensuring that both parties have a voice in the communication process. It is widely recognized as more effective in nurturing long-lasting relationships compared to other public relations models.

This model can be effectively applied to relationships between African international students and domestic students. When African international students build relationships with domestic students, two-way communication and a balanced approach can play a pivotal role in strengthening their connections. Just as in public relations, where mutual understanding and reciprocal communication foster positive and sustainable relationships, these principles can greatly enhance the experience of African international students.

By embracing these communication strategies, both groups can create an environment that encourages cultural exchange and lays the foundation for meaningful, enduring connections, ultimately enriching the overall educational and interpersonal experiences of the students involved. This not only enhances the adaptability of African international students but also contributes to the overall cultural diversity and inclusivity of the university environment.
After relationships are built, it is important to consider how to manage and maintain them. In an article by Ni (2012) exploring how relationships can be managed strategically between organizations and their publics, he discusses four factors that illustrate the overall quality of relationships between organizations and their publics: trust, control mutuality, relational satisfaction, and relational commitment. Trust cultivates a sense of security and openness. Control mutuality ensures that both groups have a say in relationship goals, meeting their mutual needs. Relational satisfaction relies on positive expectations and interaction, promoting adaptability. Additionally, relational commitment, encompassing continuance and affective commitment, underscores the dedication of African international students and their domestic counterparts in nurturing meaningful cross-cultural relationships. By building trust, ensuring control mutuality, enhancing relational satisfaction, and promoting relational commitment, both groups can work together to create an inclusive and enriching environment that benefits everyone involved. These strategies not only apply to individual relationships but also contribute to a more culturally diverse and harmonious university community.
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions stem from firsthand experiences as an African international student in the U.S. and my interactions with fellow African international students whose diverse encounters with domestic students have played a pivotal role in shaping their adaptation experiences. These inquiries have been further prompted by an enlightening interview with the director of the African American Student Association who underscored the limited involvement of African international students in their activities. The research questions that emerge from these contextual considerations are as follows.

The first research question is to directly capture firsthand narratives and perceptions of African international students regarding their interactions with domestic students. Is there truly a problem regarding interactions with domestic students? It seeks to provide a platform for these students to share their unique stories and viewpoints. By doing so, I can validate and contextualize the issues and challenges they face during their study abroad experience.

RQ 1. How do African international students perceive their interactions with domestic students, and how do these interactions impact their cross-cultural adaptation during their study abroad experience in the U.S. South?

The second research question delves into the role of social media platforms in connecting African international students with domestic students. It assesses the extent to which social media helps facilitate cross-cultural interactions and relationships. The research examines the impact of digital communication on bridging cultural gaps, fostering friendships, and promoting intercultural understanding.
RQ 2. To what extent does the usage of social media platforms facilitate cross-cultural interactions and relationship building between African international students and domestic students?

This question explores the potential influence of gender on African international students' ability to interact and build relationships with domestic students. It investigates whether gender plays a role in the ease or difficulty of cross-cultural interaction. Additionally, the research aims to identify any factors that may contribute to differences in the cross-cultural adaptation experiences between genders, providing valuable insights into gender-specific challenges and opportunities in international education settings.

RQ 3. To what extent does gender influence the ease of interaction and relationship building with domestic students, and what factors contribute to potential differences in the cross-cultural adaptation of different genders?
METHODOLOGY

Qualitative methodology, as Lewis & Ritchie (2004) argue, combines scientific investigation with creative exploration, vividly elucidating the cognitive attitudes and behaviors of the sample. This approach enables a detailed understanding of participant responses, a facet often missing in quantitative research. In-depth interviews, specifically, provide an effective means to delve into how participants perceive and experience issues that impact them, allowing for follow-up questions that enhance clarity (Lewis & Ritchie, 2004).

To address the research questions comprehensively, I employed in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom. In-depth interviews offer the advantage of delving deeply into individuals' perspectives on interactions with domestic students, allowing for a thorough comprehension of the contextual nuances surrounding the research phenomenon (Lewis & Ritchie, 2003).

I conducted semi-structured interviews because they enable the collection of open-ended data and encourage more inclusive responses from participants (Morales, 2022). These interviews were conducted via Zoom, which eliminated geographical constraints and provided a user-friendly alternative for participants who may have faced challenges attending in-person interviews. Furthermore, in-person interviews can be intimidating, potentially deterring the target respondents from participating. Zoom's transcription feature also proved advantageous during the data transcription process.

Although focus groups are part of qualitative methodology, they are less potent compared to in-depth interviews (Smithson, 2010). In focus groups, certain participants may dominate discussions, silencing others who may hold valuable information. Dominance can lead to
“groupthink,” where participants feel compelled to conform to the majority's opinions, resulting in inaccurate results. Focus groups, especially on sensitive topics, may discourage participants from expressing their true opinions, leading to unreliable findings and misinformation dissemination (Smithson, 2010).

Procedure/Data Collection

A snowball sampling method was used to identify and engage potential participants among African international students. The snowball sampling technique involves reaching out to potential respondents through direct contact with a few initial participants. This approach enabled me to expand their network by leveraging referrals from those initial contacts (Macqueen et al., 2011). This technique involved targeted communication outreach conducted both in person and via social media platforms. Initial contacts were established through personal connections, and participants expressing interest were then given the option to initiate contact with me. I also designed and distributed a study flyer (Appendix B) primarily on WhatsApp, recognizing its prominence as a key social media platform for Africans. Additionally, the flyer was shared in the WhatsApp group of the African Graduate Student Association, effectively targeting the association's African student members. The recruitment process was dynamic, characterized by diverse approaches tailored to individual preferences and circumstances. Participants meeting the specified criteria chose whether or not to participate and contacted me when they were willing and ready. Additionally, participants were encouraged to share the study flyer within their social circles to reach peers who also met the outlined criteria.

The eligibility criteria required participants to be enrolled at either Louisiana State University (LSU) or Southern University (SU). The selection of these specific higher education institutions stemmed from their untapped potential, as no prior research had delved into this topic.
within their campuses. Additionally, these universities were chosen for their significant African international student populations, as substantiated by enrollment data trends.

Moreover, participants were required to be pursuing undergraduate, master's, or professional degree programs, as these were the predominant academic categories at LSU and SU. They were also required to have been at LSU or SU for at least one semester. This ensured that participants had sufficient time to immerse themselves in the academic and social environment of the institution, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of their experiences and adaptation process. The age range for inclusion spanned from 18 to 50 years, covering the typical age spectrum of university and graduate students. The broad age criterion also permitted exploration of potential age-related themes should they have emerged in the analysis.

Furthermore, eligible participants were African nationals studying as international students in the United States. The study exclusively considered in-person, regular, and full-time students, intentionally excluding online and part-time students. This selection criterion was rooted in the belief that in-person, full-time students had a more immersive university experience, which could significantly differ from the experiences of online or part-time students. This distinction was particularly relevant as some international students did not physically relocate from their home countries when pursuing online or part-time education.

Individuals who aligned with the established criteria and expressed interest were subsequently contacted through text or email, depending on preference to coordinate in-depth interviews conducted via the Zoom platform. This approach allowed for flexibility in scheduling interviews and facilitated the participation of a diverse group of African international students.
Before each interview, I sent Zoom invitation links ahead of the scheduled time. Participants were then asked to confirm their readiness before I read the consent form (Appendix C) aloud to them. After this, participants were requested to give verbal consent to proceed with the interview. Interviews commenced only after participants had provided verbal consent and indicated their readiness for the discussion to begin. The participants were also asked to provide a preferred pseudonym as a means of maintaining anonymity.

Each interview session was designed to last approximately 15-45 minutes, providing a balance between depth of conversation and the participants' time commitments. The interviews followed a semi-structured format, allowing for a flexible yet comprehensive exploration of participants' experiences. This format encouraged detailed responses, fostering a rich source of qualitative data for the research.

To express gratitude for their valuable contributions, participants were offered the opportunity to enter a draw for a $20 gift card reward. This incentive was implemented to motivate engagement and acknowledge the significance of their input to the study. The approach aimed to foster a collaborative and appreciative research environment, encouraging active and open participation from the interviewed individuals.

Participants

Eighteen African international students (10 female & 8 male) participated in comprehensive in-depth interviews conducted via Zoom. The recruitment process targeted individuals enrolled at either Louisiana State University (LSU) or Southern University (SU). Out of the total participants, 6 were enrolled at Southern University, while the remaining 12 were enrolled at Louisiana State University. This distribution reflects a larger African international
student population at LSU compared to Southern University. The selection of these specific higher education institutions was strategic, motivated by the untouched research potential within their campuses and the notable presence of African international student communities, as evidenced by enrollment data trends.

The diverse participant pool included African international students from 7 African countries: Ghana (n = 7), Nigeria (n = 5), Uganda (n = 2), Cote d’Ivoire (n = 1), Cameroon (n = 1), Kenya (n = 1), and Malawi (n = 1). The inclusion of individuals from these countries was deliberate, aiming to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives on the research topic.

Participants were distributed across various academic levels, with four pursuing undergraduate studies, and fourteen engaged in graduate programs. This categorization aligns with the predominant academic divisions at LSU and SU, facilitating a nuanced exploration of the experiences within each academic tier. To ensure a meaningful and insightful contribution to the research, participants had a minimum tenure of one semester at LSU or SU. The age range spanned from 18 to 39 years. Recruiting undergraduate students proved more challenging than anticipated, resulting in the relatively small number of participants in this category. A few obstacles were encountered during the recruitment process, including difficulties persuading undergraduates to participate in the study and instances where confirmed participants failed to attend scheduled interviews. These challenges may have arisen due to various factors, such as competing academic commitments, limited understanding of the study's significance, or general unwillingness to be interviewed.

Despite these recruitment hurdles, the study aimed to capture the perspectives of undergraduate students to enrich the overall findings. The inclusion of this demographic segment was deemed essential for a comprehensive understanding of cross-cultural adaptation.
experiences within the university context. Furthermore, participants were exclusively full-time students, a selection criterion grounded in the belief that their in-person, immersive university experience substantially differs from that of online or part-time students. This distinction is particularly pertinent, acknowledging that some international students may opt for online or part-time education without physically relocating, thus influencing their overall university encounter.

Figure 1. Gender Distribution of Participants
Figure 2. Level of Study Distribution
Figure 3. Participants’ Institution
Figure 4. Participants’ Country of Origin Distribution

Reflexivity Statement

Reflexivity pertains to the recognition that as a researcher, I am embedded within the research I aim to understand, thereby influencing my interpretation of it (Holland, 1977). Holland (1999) emphasizes the critical role of reflexivity in qualitative research, asserting that researchers must adopt a reflexive stance when discussing their own existence and the social groups they belong to. This approach acknowledges their personal investment in these groups. Reflexivity is increasingly recognized as essential for ensuring the "accuracy" and "trustworthiness" of research, particularly in qualitative research (Berger, 2015).
As a researcher, my personal experiences as an African international student pursuing a master's degree at LSU profoundly influence my engagement with this study. Reflecting on my journey, I encountered significant challenges adapting to my new environment and navigating interactions with domestic students. There were days when I hesitated to speak up in class, feeling acutely uncomfortable and unseen amidst unfamiliar cultural dynamics. Moments of being talked over left me feeling voiceless, intensifying my struggle to adapt to my academic and social surroundings. The fear of not being understood or being assessed by how I sounded or pronounced my words intensified my self-consciousness, causing me to meticulously contemplate before mustering the confidence to contribute to discussions.

These personal experiences served as the impetus for this research endeavor. My own journey illuminated the complexities and nuances of cross-cultural adaptation, prompting a deeper exploration into the experiences of African international students in the US South. By acknowledging my lived experiences as an integral part of this research process, I aim to approach the study with empathy, insight, and a commitment to amplifying the voices of those who share similar challenges.

As I delved into this research, I recognized the importance of reflexivity in understanding how my identity as an African international student shape my perspective and interactions with participants. My positionality within the research context underscores the need for sensitivity and awareness of power dynamics that may influence data collection and analysis. By foregrounding my personal experiences within this reflexivity statement, I seek to establish transparency and authenticity in my research approach while honoring the significance of lived experiences in shaping scholarly inquiry.
Data Analysis

The qualitative study employed a thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis is an approach used to examine qualitative data, which entails identifying recurring concepts known as themes within a dataset (Jason & Glenwick, 2016). Thematic analysis surpasses the simplistic counting of specific words or phrases, instead emphasizing the identification and description of both implicit and explicit ideas inherent in the data—known as themes (Guest et al, 2012).

Analysis commenced concurrently with data collection, where I systematically documented insights through analytic memos following each interview. These memos served to capture initial thoughts, concerns, and conclusions related to the study's conceptual framework and research questions. Upon concluding data collection, recorded interviews were transcribed for analysis. I audio recorded the interviews and transcribed using the word online transcription tool. Initially, I utilized Zoom transcriptions but later switched to the Word online transcription tool due to accuracy concerns. The transcripts obtained from Zoom contained numerous errors, prompting the decision to switch to the Word online transcription tool for better accuracy. I uploaded the interview recordings to the Word online tool, a secure platform, especially considering its association with LSU Office Word online, which offers an extra layer of protection. Subsequently, I deleted all recordings after transcription, ensuring data security and confidentiality.

I then began reviewing transcripts, highlighting salient points, identifying recurring themes, and highlighting commonalities. Additionally, I cross-referenced interview recordings with the transcripts to ensure accuracy, making corrections where necessary due to occasional inaccuracies in the transcription. Subsequently, themes were grouped and sub-grouped iteratively.
to organize the data. Through this process, I refined categories and discerned connections among themes.

After iterative coding and grouping, six overarching themes and one sub-theme emerged, encapsulating the essence of the data. These themes represent the primary findings of the study, shedding light on the salient patterns and insights derived from the qualitative data analysis. This thematic framework provided a structured approach to interpreting and understanding the data, facilitating meaningful insights into the phenomenon under investigation.

Figure 5. Data Collection and Analysis Framework
FINDINGS

Six prominent themes and one sub-theme emerged from interviews conducted with African international students from Louisiana State University (LSU) and Southern University, each of which directly addresses at least one of the research questions. These findings were also consistent across both the PWI and HBCU.

Table 1. Themes and Definitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cross-Cultural Social Anxiety</td>
<td>African international students experience anxiety when interacting with domestic students due to a fear of being misunderstood or misinterpreted. They also struggle with navigating social cliques that seem difficult to integrate into.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accent-Based Exclusion</td>
<td>African International students face exclusion or bias due to their accents, hindering their integration into academic and social circles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Validation</td>
<td>African international students feel the need to constantly prove their academic abilities to gain validation and respect from their peers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Success for Community Image (sub-theme)</td>
<td>In addition to seeking validation for themselves, African international students also feel pressure to excel academically to create a positive image for other African students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epiphany of Racial Realities</td>
<td>African international students experience a realization and first-hand experience of racial issues, influencing their perceptions and interactions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Isolation and Subcultural Dependence</td>
<td>African international students may resort to self-isolation and reliance on subcultural groups for support, impacting their integration into broader campus communities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media as a Multipurpose Tool</td>
<td>Social media serves as a multifaceted tool for students, facilitating communication, support networks, and cultural expression.</td>
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Theme 1. Cross-Cultural Social Anxiety

All eight male students interviewed expressed varying degrees of anxiety in their interactions with domestic students, particularly female domestic students. They described a fear of their intentions being misunderstood, using terms such as "being careful," "treading cautiously," and "calculating steps" to articulate their approach when engaging with female
domestic students. This sentiment was consistent in their interactions with both black and white female domestic students. These responses were elicited from questions probing their perceptions of interactions with domestic students, the nature of interactions with domestic students outside the classroom, and the role of gender in their university experiences. Kwame, a 28-year-old Ghanaian student at LSU, expressed his anxiety and the extra thought that went into his interactions with female domestic students:

“I know the culture is different. Maybe you might think somebody looks good, maybe just a passing comment. But I mean, you also have to be very careful in saying these things especially because of the way in America, there's so much tagging of people, especially black African men, I'm quite careful and think about a lot of the things that I say.”

While male African students found it easier to bond with peers of the same sex over shared interests like sports, they still remained cautious or limited their interactions with female domestic students to avoid potential misunderstandings. Anabi, a 25-year-old male Ghanaian student, said:

“I am a bit reserved because I’m in a new jurisdiction. I may not know what to say and I don't want to say the wrong thing. And so my interactions with female students have been very, very formal and careful because I don't want to say the wrong thing. With the boys, you can sometimes talk about football and all that stuff and other social stuff. But with the females, it's purely academic and nothing more…I don’t have the luxury to mess up.”

Daniel, a 33-year-old Nigerian student, highlighted how the fear of approaching female domestic students impacted the romantic prospects of single African international students, citing concerns about potential legal repercussions. He said:

“Let me say, for the single people, generally we have a lot of issues. Because I think when I go out these days and, I don't know. Like in Nigeria, you can see somebody you like and just walk up to them, right? You know. But here, it seems that’s not possible. I don't know. I have not done it. I don't want somebody to call the cops on me.”

Another aspect of the cross-cultural social anxiety experienced by African international students manifests in the form of cliques and social groups formed by domestic students. Seven
out of ten female African international students expressed frustration over the prevalence of cliques among their domestic counterparts. They found these cliques difficult to penetrate, attributing their exclusion to the pre-established friend groups formed during their undergraduate studies. This situation led to feelings of exclusion and anxiety among international students, especially when it came to working in groups. Tara, a 28-year-old Nigerian female student, shared her perspective:

"Well, first of all, I think that most of them were previously undergrads at LSU, so they already had groups. They know each other from way back, so it's harder for an international student like me to fit in... The main issue is that they've already formed friendships and bonds long before I even arrived on campus. So, it's quite challenging to break into those circles and form meaningful connections beyond academics."

The anxiety experienced by these African students stemmed not only from the difficulty in forming friendships but also from the challenge of finding groups where they felt fully welcome for collaborative academic work. Interestingly, undergraduate international students, though a smaller group, did not face significant challenges with cliques, likely due to their stage of undergraduate studies where clique formation is more common. In essence, they are at that stage where groups are formed, and have the opportunity to be a part of those cliques. However, one outlier was an older Ghanaian female undergraduate student, aged 25, who felt differently. Her age relative to her cohort may have influenced her experiences and treatment by domestic classmates.

**Theme 2. Accent-Based Exclusion**

A recurring theme across all interviews was the significant impact of accents on the experiences of African international students, shaping perceptions of intelligence and often leading to feelings of alienation. Interviewees revealed that accents often served as a barrier to effective communication, resulting in the need to repeat oneself frequently. Additionally, having
an accent equated to being “not so smart.” Twelve students identified accent-related challenges as their most significant hurdle, hindering their ability to join social groups and contributing to feelings of being misunderstood or underestimated. Melody, a 25-year-old female Ivorian student, candidly shared her struggles with having an accent:

"I'm not a native English speaker sometimes when I want to give my point because I have to think about like the English words for certain things. And sometimes when I start talking about something and then I will stutter just because I'm really just thinking about something else, and they will just look at you. You will lose their interest and they will just want to do something else...So sometimes it is hard and sometimes I feel like I would lose my voice...Oh my God. The first few years here were a disaster. Now it's a little better because I've just learned not to care... But it used to be very embarrassing. But even today, like, when something is going on, they'll be talking within themselves, and when you want to talk, it's like. You can see on their faces. It’s like, ‘oh, she's about to talk, we're not going to understand’ and like you’re dumb. It's not a really good situation to be in.”

Melody further discussed feeling pressured to adopt an American accent:

"Sometimes I felt like the more American I sound the better it is and the more accent you have, I guess it's just harder. So yeah, definitely I've had to prove that I know English. I've had to do that a lot, whether it's in school or in projects. Over here at the school like I've had to push my American accent a little further. And even though I do that, my accent still comes out. But sometimes, yeah, I would try to go home and work on it again and again, just to come back and let him know, hey, I can try. I can speak like you too.”

Accent-based exclusion, apart from being frustrating, also affected academic confidence, as expressed by Clara, a 32-year-old female Ugandan student:

"I hate the fact that I have to repeat myself sometimes when we are speaking, when I'm speaking. I think also the accent is such a big deal. At times, I feel like I'm not going to get by on some things because of my accent and how I sound. I'll give an example of a research project that I'm working on right now. I figured, it was best for me to work with domestic people and domestic students and a domestic professor because it would have been it's going to be easier for me to collect data from. people. Yeah, I feel like getting them into the project is it would help me like, you know, like collect data and like, get it moving faster than if it was just me.”

Accounts like Clara's highlight a concerning trend where students begin to doubt their own capabilities and feel reliant on domestic students for assistance on projects solely due to
their accents. These accounts underscore the pervasive impact of accent-based exclusion on social interactions, academic pursuits, and the overall well-being of African international students within university settings.

The issue of accent-based exclusion relates to stigma theory. Goffman (1963) classically defined stigma as an "attribute that is deeply discrediting." This concept highlights the pervasive impact of societal judgments on individual identity. Stigma can manifest in various forms, ranging from readily discernable attributes such as skin color or body size to concealed yet discreditable traits like a criminal record or struggles with mental illness. In the context of accents, individuals may experience stigma based on the way they speak, which can influence how they are perceived and treated by others.

**Theme 3. Academic Validation**

African international students felt a pressing need to validate themselves academically in order to gain acceptance from domestic students or to simply feel acknowledged and heard. This drive stemmed from the prevalent stereotypes they faced, being looked down upon for their African origins and accents. Eight students recounted instances where they felt excluded until they demonstrated their academic prowess, noting that recognition from lecturers also played a significant role in earning respect.

Anabi, a 25-year-old male Ghanaian student, shared his experience:

"So last semester we had a project, and the teacher put up a sign-up sheet. After ten people, I was like the 11th person to put my name. Nobody put their name next to mine, so I ended up working alone...After I was done, I was the second highest in class. The next group work came, and five people wanted to partner with me...They want you to prove yourself academically before they want to associate with you. And I think it's not fair, because they don't have to prove themselves to you. So why do I have to prove myself to you?"

Mike, a 30-year-old male Ghanaian student, echoed similar sentiments:
"In group projects, I developed the impression that some domestic students feel that international students know little. We often have to struggle for our input to be acknowledged...Some domestic students look down on our ability to express ourselves vocally due to our accent. They would assign the trivial parts of the presentation to international students...Recognition from lecturers and peers also played a significant role. I think I had qualities that made me stand out, so I started getting respect."

Subtheme. Academic Success for Community Image

Interestingly, African international students didn't just strive for academic excellence for themselves; they felt a responsibility to uplift the image of future African international students as well. They aimed to leave a legacy that would positively impact the perception of African international students as a whole. Denzel, another male Ghanaian student, shared how his identity as a Ghanaian motivated him to excel academically, not only for himself but also to uplift the image of the entire Ghanaian community.

"I feel like the mere fact that I'm Ghanaian compels me to strive academically. I need to demonstrate that Ghanaians, and Africans in general, should not be underestimated. We are incredibly intelligent."

Denzel's words reflect a sense of responsibility to challenge stereotypes and showcase the intellectual prowess of his people, resonating with a broader desire for recognition and respect within academic environments.

Theme 4. The Epiphany of Racial Realities

Before African international students arrive in the United States, they often have some awareness of racial issues such as racism, prejudice, and discrimination. However, this understanding may be superficial until they experience it firsthand. For many, the realization of the depth and seriousness of racial issues can be a rude awakening, profoundly affecting their interactions with domestic students. This theme is intricately linked to cross-cultural social
anxiety, as some African students may choose to distance themselves from domestic students rather than confront subtle or overt forms of racism.

Clara, a 31-year-old female Ugandan student, shared her personal experience and epiphany:

"I'm speaking from my experience... When we come from home to school here, you can think about racism, but you don't really think about all those things. Then people make passive-aggressive comments, and you don't notice until you start noticing. And that kind of alters the way you start to interact with domestic people. It also makes you fall back. Initially, I didn't care. I mean, I interacted the way I would back home—openly and freely, you know? But slowly, I started gaining awareness of these racial issues. I remember there was this one time when a white old man was walking down the street. He looked so frail; I didn't even know if he was going to make it to wherever he was going... The next time I looked up, I saw the man falling down, and I thought, 'Oh my God, he's actually falling.' My initial reaction was to go and help him, but then I held myself back. I thought, 'What if he says, 'don't touch me'? These are the new things that we kind of pick up when we get here, and it's going to change the way we interact."

Clara's experience highlights the profound impact of the epiphany of racial realities on African international students. It underscores the need for greater awareness and sensitivity to racial issues within the campus community, as well as the importance of providing support and resources for students navigating these challenges. This theme emphasizes the complexities of cross-cultural interactions and the need for ongoing dialogue and education to promote understanding and inclusivity.

Theme 5. Self-isolation and Sub-cultural Group Dependence

After encountering a series of negative experiences with domestic students, African international students often retreat and choose to keep to themselves. Participants recounted instances of seeking help but being met with indifference, facing microaggressions, enduring ignorant comments, experiencing exclusion based on their accents, and feeling consistently left out or uninvited to events. These repeated encounters make it abundantly clear that they are not wanted or valued within certain social circles. Tara, a 28-year-old female Nigerian student
expressed how she did not appreciate feeling unwanted: “I'd rather not put myself in a situation where I feel unwanted.”

In response to feeling marginalized and overlooked, African international students tend to seek solace and support within subcultural groups. These groups offer assistance and connections that are lacking in interactions with domestic students. It is noteworthy that almost every LSU student interviewed mentioned their affiliation with either the African Graduate Student Association or the African Student Organization. These organizations serve as a refuge, filling the void left by interactions with domestic students and providing a profound sense of belonging that African international students come to cherish and rely on. Daniel, a 33 year old Nigerian student expressed how helpful the association has been:

“When I came here, it was AGSA I knew. Even before I came. Before I started looking for other stuff. So AGSA actually helps. Even with the orientation, you know…There was a meeting they had like, for international students coming. Like what they should know, what they should do, what you shouldn’t do, you know? So even though most of the things we talked about, I knew them before, I still attended the meeting just to learn more and meet people I can relate to. Yeah, they were really helpful.”

Magu, a 39-year-old male Malawian student explained that the African Graduate Student Association gave him “a sense of belonging” he couldn’t find anywhere else on campus. This is especially significant since he has not met any other Malawians in Baton Rouge. These subcultural groups serve as a refuge for African students when they encounter less than welcoming attitudes from domestic peers. They represent a familial support system away from home, offering a sense of belonging and understanding that may be lacking in their interactions with domestic students.

At Southern University, although the African Student Association may not match the level of activity seen at LSU, students still forge bonds and form communities. Students naturally coalesce, often identifying with broader African identities or clustering around shared
nationalities. The Ghanaian students for example, despite the absence of a formal association, have established a thriving Ghanaian community. They frequently come together for gatherings, festivities, and cultural celebrations, fostering strong connections and a sense of belonging among themselves.

Theme 6. Social Media as a Multi-purpose Tool

All participants reported utilizing at least one social media platform, including Instagram, WhatsApp, Snapchat, TikTok, LinkedIn, Facebook, among others. They emphasized the indispensable role of social media in facilitating their cross-cultural adaptation process. Even before arriving in the United States, social media served as a vital resource for connecting with peers, seeking advice on school applications, and navigating various challenges associated with relocation.

Participants said that social media platforms enabled them to interact with peers and learn about American culture and societal norms. They found it invaluable for understanding public issues, observing American behavior, and gaining exposure to diverse perspectives. Moreover, social media served as a medium for discovering events and activities, enhancing their cultural immersion experience.

Participants also emphasized the ease of communication with both domestic and international peers through social media channels. Eight participants expressed that without social media, they would probably not interact with domestic students at all. For some reason, some domestic students were more receptive on social media, and so some African international students felt more comfortable interacting with them online.

“I will say in LSU here I have more than 300 connections on LinkedIn with domestic students that I have not met physically. But when I write to them on LinkedIn, they are
willing, and they do reply to me and give me information that I want, though we’ve not met beforehand.” – Mike, 30-year-old male Ghanaian student.

Social media platforms also acted as translation tools for non-native English speakers, bridging language barriers and facilitating seamless communication. This made such African students more confident in their communication. Jamal, a male Cameroonian student expressed this thought:

“I think that social media is kind of like, you know. Let’s say, an African international today doesn’t really know how to speak English. It will kind of help because then they had like use the translator on the phone to translate it before they send the message. Instead of like having to talk to the person and like having to talk one-on-one face to face with the person and messing up.”

Furthermore, social media plays a crucial role in maintaining communication with family members back home, particularly through platforms like WhatsApp. All participants cited utilizing social media to engage in audio and video calls, as well as exchanging text messages, with their loved ones abroad University-specific social media pages provided updates and information, keeping participants informed about campus events and cultural activities. One male participant recognized social media’s potential to educate domestic students about African culture, fostering mutual understanding and appreciation. By sharing aspects of their culture through pop culture references and personal experiences, they hoped to break down stereotypes and promote cross-cultural dialogue.

“Per our music alone, like even per memes and all those things, you understand. I mean, some of these things really go viral. And when these people, I mean, when I say these people, I mean the domestic student. They come across all these memes. Once they come across all these memes, they begin to understand some of our lingo, you understand. So, when you’re interacting with them and you can see something they at least they kind of have an idea of what you’re trying to say.” – Denzel, 29-year-old male Ghanaian student.

While acknowledging its benefits, two participants also highlighted the potential downsides of social media, such as alienation and distraction. Platforms like WhatsApp, primarily used by international students, could inadvertently contribute to isolation by limiting
interactions with domestic peers. Additionally, at least three participants indicated that the addictive nature of social media posed challenges in managing time effectively.

Despite these challenges, social media played a pivotal role in breaking away from segregation by facilitating connections and fostering a sense of community among diverse student populations. Through cross-cultural interactions and information exchange, social media served as a powerful tool for bridging divides and promoting inclusivity within the university environment.
DISCUSSION

This study aimed to investigate how interactions between African international students and domestic students in the US South influence cross-cultural adaptation. The findings of this study have revealed a myriad of experiences and communication dynamics between these two groups. Addressing research question 1: "How do African international students perceive their interactions with domestic students, and how do these interactions impact their cross-cultural adaptation during their study abroad experience in the U.S. South?"

This research question sought to directly capture firsthand narratives and perceptions of African international students regarding their interactions with domestic students. It seeks to provide a platform for these students to share their unique stories and viewpoints. This helped to validate and contextualize the issues and challenges they face during their study abroad experience. To answer this, the themes of accent-based exclusion, academic validation, epiphany of racial realities and self-isolation come into play.

African international students commonly perceive limitations in their interactions with domestic peers due to their accents, sometimes exhibiting alienating behaviors or failing to afford them the necessary respect, particularly in collaborative academic settings. This experience often erodes confidence and may detrimentally impact academic performance. The influence of accents on perceptions of people aligns with existing research. Fuertes et al. (2011) conducted a comprehensive meta-analysis examining the impact of accents on speaker evaluations. Their review of 20 studies comparing assessments of speakers with standard accents, representative of the majority population, to those with non-standard accents revealed a significant influence of accents on perceptions, echoing previous research findings. Even amongst Americans, accent-related judgments are not uncommon, with stereotypes such as
associating Northern accents with intelligence and Southern accents with niceness (Kinzler & DeJesus, 2013). According to (Kinzler & DeJesus, 2013) accent attitudes in adults are typically thought to reflect knowledge of cultural stereotypes about different groups of individuals and resulting subjective judgements about their speech. This suggests that the tendency to judge African students based on their accents is fundamentally rooted in these pervasive stereotypes. In essence, the discrimination faced by African students due to their accents serves as a tangible manifestation of broader societal biases and preconceived notions.

African international students candidly voiced the pressure they feel to adopt an American accent as a means to enhance their visibility or avoid reliance on domestic peers for collaborative research endeavors. There exists a prevailing perception that the degree to which one sounds "African" correlates with the likelihood of being underestimated or overlooked. This expectations and biases within academic and social spheres. Nevertheless, this struggle may persist beyond academia and impact career prospects. Drawing from Goffman's (1963) stigma theory, Russo et al. (2017) explored the consequences of non-native accents on individuals' professional trajectories. Their study proposed a conceptual framework rooted in stigma theory, which revealed that non-native accents significantly influence managers' perceptions of fluency, performance expectations, social regard, and supervision styles. Consequently, individuals with non-native accents often contend with feelings of exclusion and devaluation in the workplace, leading to a tendency to adopt avoidance strategies in certain work contexts. Accent based exclusion or stigma underscore the pervasive influence of accents on individuals' experiences and highlight the potential for discriminatory treatment in both academic and professional environments. This aligns with Goffman's characterization of stigma, wherein certain attributes
or behaviors result in social discredit, hampering the positive experiences of individuals with non-native accents.

The epiphany of racial realities among African international students marks a significant shift from theoretical understanding to firsthand experience of racial issues. While African students may be aware of racism and prejudice before studying abroad, it's only when they encounter these realities firsthand that the seriousness of the issue truly dawns on them. Being part of a majority culture in one's home country and transitioning to the United States as a minority prompts reflections on race and status dynamics in the U. S. (Lee & Rice, 2007). This concept ties back to existing literature highlighting how African international students face additional hurdles, including racism and prejudicial treatment, which contribute to greater acculturation stress (Boafo-Arthur, 2013; Mwaura, 2009). Moreover, the pervasive stereotypes about Africa in Western host countries, like the United States, not only influence how they are perceived but also affect their efforts to build relationships with domestic students (Hayes & Lin 1994). As a result, African international students become more attuned to their environment and interactions with domestic students, akin to the concept of cross-cultural anxiety. In essence, the epiphany of racial realities underscores the transformative nature of firsthand experiences with racism and prejudice for African international students, shaping their perceptions and interactions within their host country's cultural context.

African students also experienced the pressure to prove their academic capabilities in order to earn respect and acknowledgment from their domestic peers. This parallels the challenges encountered by various minority groups who must exert additional effort to establish themselves in particular settings. Davis et al. (2004) explored the university experiences of accomplished Black undergraduate students at a predominantly white Southeastern institution.
Their research uncovered that these students frequently felt pressured to exceed normal expectations to earn validation and acceptance within the university community. As African international students began to excel academically and received commendations from professors, some of their peers recognized their merit and were eager to collaborate with them on group tasks. African students felt a sense of obligation to represent all African international students positively, driven by their unwavering belief in the academic proficiency of international student cohorts. This sense of responsibility is likely influenced by the communal and collectivistic values inherent in African cultures, where the collective achievements of the group hold significant importance. Consequently, their dedication to academic excellence not only serves their personal aspirations but also upholds the broader legacy of international student success.

Having confronted numerous hurdles, including being marginalized due to their accents—a characteristic they may not be able to alter, and should not have to—African international students experienced a sense of resignation and withdrew into self-imposed isolation. Understandably, individuals gravitate towards environments where they feel valued and acknowledged. Connecting back to the literature, effective communication emerges as a pivotal factor in cultivating and nurturing relationships, a notion that holds significant relevance for the experiences of African international students in the United States. The concept of reciprocal communication, explained by Samsup and Yungwook (2003), stands out as a fundamental principle for facilitating open dialogues and facilitating the exchange of diverse perspectives between entities and stakeholders. This principle resonates closely with Grunig et al.'s (2006) model of public relations, which advocates for two-way symmetrical communication, prioritizing the balance of interests between organizations and their publics. In
the context of African international students, the absence of reciprocal two-way communication can lead to feelings of isolation and disconnection. When students do not feel heard or understood, they may withdraw from social interactions and retreat into self-imposed isolation.

Some students promptly seek refuge in subcultural groups like the African Student Association, finding solace and camaraderie among peers who shared similar experiences. Conversely, others underwent a period of loneliness and seclusion, navigating feelings of alienation before eventually discovering a community where they felt appreciated and understood. Here, the principle of reciprocal and two-way symmetrical communication exists as a cornerstone, leading to the success and effectiveness of interactions among African international students, where both parties engage in active listening, exchange perspectives, and seek mutual understanding. This journey underscores the significance of finding a supportive network that fosters a sense of belonging and acceptance, ultimately aiding in the adjustment and integration process for African international students in unfamiliar academic and social landscapes. While interacting with diverse groups is optimal for aiding in better adaptation, in situations where such opportunities are limited, African students at least have their own community to fall back on.

African international students perceive their interactions with domestic students as less than ideal, indicating a need for interventions to improve cross-cultural interactions and enhance the overall study abroad experience in the U.S. South.

Relating to RQ 2: "To what extent does the usage of social media platforms facilitate cross-cultural interactions and relationship building between African international students and domestic students?"
This question delves into the role of social media platforms in connecting African international students with domestic students. It assesses how social media helps facilitate cross-cultural interactions and relationships and examines the impact of digital communication on bridging cultural gaps. The emerging theme of social media as a multipurpose tool showed how it plays several roles and has numerous benefits for the adaptation of African international students.

The theme of social media as a multipurpose tool answers this research question. Social media helps with communication through translations, serves as a tool for information, keeps students up to date, helps students reach family back home, and provides entertainment. It also facilitates making friends and learning about American culture and social issues. An important point is how social media helps domestic students learn about African culture through music and related content. However, social media also has its downsides; it can be distracting and prevent students from focusing on academic work. Findings indicated that some social media platforms like WhatsApp are also alienating since most domestic students don’t use them. African students who mainly use WhatsApp were at risk of self-alienation. While social media greatly helps, some students admitted that without it, they would have been forced to try harder to connect with domestic students. Social media gives them unlimited access to their family and friends back home, sometimes diminishing the need to build new connections after trying and failing.

The role of social media in cross-cultural adaptation established in this study supports the existing literature in the field, which emphasizes the significance of new media in facilitating the adaptation process for international students (Rui & Wang, 2015). While acknowledging that social media can sometimes be distracting and potentially alienating, the study underscores its predominantly positive impact on cross-cultural adjustment.
For RQ 3: "To what extent does gender influence the ease of interaction and relationship building with domestic students, and what factors contribute to potential differences in the cross-cultural adaptation of different genders?"

This question explores the potential influence of gender on African international students' ability to interact and build relationships with domestic students. It sought to discover whether gender plays a role in the ease or difficulty of cross-cultural interaction and aims to identify factors contributing to gender-specific challenges and opportunities in international education settings.

It is apparent from this study that both males and females experience struggles in cross cultural adaptation, albeit differently. Male students, in particular, encounter difficulties stemming from the fear of being misunderstood and potentially facing repercussions for unintentional missteps in communication. This apprehension often leads them to withdraw and maintain a distance, especially in interactions with female domestic students. Consequently, this hampers their ability to form romantic connections, as they may perceive themselves as being at risk of being misjudged or falsely accused due to prevailing negative stereotypes about black men.

The reluctance to engage with others, particularly white individuals, stems from broader societal perceptions of black men as inherently aggressive and violent. These stereotypes, deeply ingrained in societal narratives, result in disproportionate scrutiny and unjust treatment of black men in various spheres of life, including encounters with law enforcement and authority figures (Johnson, 2018). As highlighted by Johnson (2018), the experiences of black men, especially big black men are often characterized by prejudice, discrimination, and assassination of character, perpetuating a cycle of marginalization and mistrust. Male African students, cognizant of these
societal dynamics, opt to distance themselves rather than risk becoming victims of societal prejudice.

Furthermore, African international students are not American citizens, and may also grapple with the additional fear of legal repercussions, including the risk of deportation, further exacerbating their apprehension in cross-cultural interactions. This underlying anxiety underscores the complex interplay between racial stereotypes, legal concerns, and social dynamics, shaping the adaptation experiences of male African students in foreign environments.

Female African students, on the other hand, struggled to penetrate already formed cliques or groups of domestic students, which affected them academically. Some female students noted that male international students often found it easier to forge friendships with male domestic students, particularly through shared interests like sports. Similarly, they observed that male international students could bond over common activities such as football. In contrast, female domestic students tended to form cliques, making it challenging for female international students to establish connections within these groups. Interestingly, some male students perceived that female international student had an advantage in making connections, particularly with male domestic students. This was attributed to the belief that help was more forthcoming to female African international students. However, this could stem from females being more likely to ask for and vocalize their needs. This observation aligns with existing literature suggesting that individuals with an expressive, feminine orientation—marked by traits such as warmth, compassion, and nurturance—tend to have broader social support networks. Females, in particular, are more inclined to utilize these resources when confronted with challenging circumstances (Burda et al., 1984). Therefore, the perceived ease with which female international students can connect with male domestic students may be linked to their
communicative style and willingness to seek support, highlighting the interplay between gender norms, social dynamics, and cultural adaptation within university environments.

Both male and female undergraduates did not really have pre-existing clique problems, possibly because they are still forming cliques and have a chance to be part of them. The only undergraduate student who felt otherwise was a 25-year-old female student who was older than her cohort, indicating the possibility of age-related segregation.

The themes found in this study are interconnected. Accent-based exclusion and the recognition of racial issues lead to cross-cultural anxiety, causing students to self-isolate and rely on subcultural groups for support. While social media mostly helps, it can sometimes cause more alienation and distraction. However, it is important to note that not all domestic students treat African students negatively; many international students reported encountering a few people who were extremely nice, respectful, and helpful to them. Overall, the role of time in the cross cultural adaptation process is apparent. Time plays a significant role, as with time, things generally improve for African students. They either adapt naturally, make connections, or become more resilient to challenges and do not care anymore. Some African students acknowledge that if they could turn back time, they would try not to give up after a few unpleasant experiences.
PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research makes significant contributions to the field of mass communication by shedding light on the robust dynamics of intercultural interactions within higher education settings. The findings and implications of this study offer valuable insights that can empower institutions of higher learning in the United States to cultivate inclusive campus environments, thereby ensuring the genuine integration and support of African international students by their domestic counterparts.

Intervention and Policy Implications: The implications of this research extend to the formulation and implementation of strategic interventions and policies within university settings. By leveraging the insights garnered from this study, educational institutions can devise targeted programs and support services tailored to the specific needs of African international students. For instance, this study has shed light on the pressing need for culturally specific career expos that address the unique employment challenges faced by international students, particularly concerning visa regulations and sponsorship requirements. African international students have special requirement related to working after school. Some African students mentioned how collaborative efforts between universities and relevant stakeholders, such as companies willing to sponsor international students, can facilitate the development of initiatives aimed at enhancing post-graduation employment opportunities for this demographic.

Building Cultural Awareness: A key implication of this research pertains to the cultivation of cultural competence among domestic students within university campuses. By raising awareness of the distinct experiences and challenges encountered by African international students, educational institutions can foster empathy and understanding among the student body. This heightened cultural awareness can serve as a catalyst for the creation of a more inclusive
and respectful campus culture, wherein students from diverse backgrounds feel valued and integrated into the academic community. Educational initiatives aimed at sensitizing domestic students to the nuances of cross-cultural interactions can contribute significantly to the promotion of diversity and inclusion within higher education environments.

Strengthening Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives: The insights derived from this study can inform the development of comprehensive diversity and inclusion initiatives within academic institutions. By leveraging the findings of this research, universities can design programs and initiatives that celebrate cultural diversity and promote meaningful cross-cultural engagement. Collaborative partnerships between the international student office and student organizations, such as African student associations, can facilitate the implementation of tailored support services and onboarding initiatives for African international students. Moreover, ongoing efforts to assess and address the evolving needs of international student populations are essential for sustaining an inclusive campus environment that fosters academic success and personal growth for all students.

The practical implications of this research underscore the importance of proactive measures and targeted interventions aimed at fostering inclusivity, understanding, and cooperation within diverse higher education communities. By capitalizing on the insights generated by this study, educational institutions can embark on a journey toward creating welcoming and supportive environments that empower African international students to thrive academically and socially.
Strengths

The study's strength lies in its focused research scope. Walliman (2005) contends that scholars should pursue studies with specific research topics, allowing for in-depth exploration and comprehensive problem-solving within the subject. Additionally, the inclusion of a theoretical framework enhances the study's robustness, as theoretical frameworks guide research, clarifying phenomena through empirical evidence and aiding readers in applying theoretical knowledge (Lewis & Ritchie, 2004; Walliman, 2005).

The diverse sample of African international students included participants from various countries, providing rich insights into the range of experiences within this population. Additionally, the qualitative approach allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives and experiences, yielding nuanced findings that contribute to the existing literature on cross-cultural adaptation and intercultural interactions.

Moreover, the study's use of semi-structured interviews facilitated open and unrestricted communication with participants, allowing them to share their stories without barriers. This methodology encouraged participants to express themselves freely, resulting in rich qualitative data that captured the complexity of their experiences.

The study's emphasis on African international students provides a distinct strength, as it delves into the specific challenges and opportunities encountered by this particular demographic. By focusing on this subgroup, the research unveils nuanced insights that may otherwise remain obscured within broader studies encompassing all international students. Recognizing that culturally specific challenges extend beyond the general obstacles encountered by international students at large, this study contributes significantly to the understanding of the diverse needs
within the international student community. Consequently, it offers valuable guidance for institutions striving to develop more targeted and inclusive support systems tailored to the unique experiences of African international students.

Limitations

The sample size of participants, although diverse, may not fully represent the entire population of African international students studying in the US South. The study was conducted at just two schools in one city in Louisiana, which limits the generalizability of the findings to the broader U.S. South region. Different schools in other cities or states within the region may have distinct cultural dynamics and student populations that could influence the experiences of African international students differently.

Additionally, the study primarily relied on self-reported data, which may be subject to biases or inaccuracies. Participants may have provided responses that they perceived as socially desirable or that reflected their own interpretation of their experiences, potentially affecting the validity of the findings.

Future Research

Future research in this area can take several directions to deepen our understanding of the experiences of African international students in the US South. One avenue for exploration is to investigate the perspectives of domestic students. By understanding how domestic students perceive and interact with their international peers, researchers can gain insights into potential barriers and opportunities for cross-cultural engagement on campus.

Another important aspect to consider is age-based segregation among students. Exploring how age dynamics shape social interactions and support networks can provide valuable insights
into the adaptation experiences of African international students. Understanding how age intersects with cultural identity can help identify strategies for fostering inclusive environments that support students of all ages.

Longitudinal studies tracking students' experiences over time can also provide valuable insights into the trajectory of adaptation and integration. By examining changes and patterns in students' experiences across different stages of their academic journey, researchers can identify critical moments of transition and factors contributing to resilience or vulnerability.
CONCLUSION

This study illuminates the nuanced experiences and challenges confronting African international students as they engage with domestic students in the US South. The parallels drawn between the experiences of these students in the U.S. South and the narrative of "Coming to America" are similar in interesting ways. Much like Prince Akeem's immersion into the unfamiliar culture of Queens, New York, these students traverse the intricate layers of American society, often facing hurdles unique to their identity as international students and Africans. In a manner akin to Prince Akeem, they find themselves navigating through cultural intricacies, adapting to unfamiliar social norms, and grappling with the intricate dynamics of race in their interactions with domestic peers.

However, the experiences of African international students are far more than a mere comedy film. They encompass a rich tapestry of challenges, triumphs, and personal growth. While "Coming to America" provides a humorous lens through which to view cultural adaptation, the reality for these students is multifaceted and often complex. They contend with issues of identity, belonging, and cultural assimilation, all while striving to excel academically and build meaningful connections in a foreign environment.

Through in-depth interviews, this study provides evidence that African international students encounter various obstacles that hinder their integration into campus life. Among these challenges is accent-based exclusion, where differences in pronunciation and speech patterns can lead to misunderstandings and marginalization. Additionally, issues such as academic validation and self-isolation further compound the difficulties faced by these students as they strive to find their place within the academic community. This study also reveals a profound epiphany among African international students regarding racial realities in the United States. Many students
express surprise and disillusionment upon encountering instances of discrimination and prejudice, challenging their preconceived notions of America as a land of opportunity and equality. These experiences underscore the importance of fostering a more inclusive campus environment that acknowledges and addresses systemic inequalities and biases.

By recognizing these challenges and implementing targeted interventions and policies, institutions of higher education can create a supportive and welcoming environment for African international students. Initiatives such as cultural competency training for faculty and staff, mentorship programs, and support services tailored to the needs of international students can help alleviate the barriers to integration and promote cross-cultural understanding.

Ultimately, enhancing the experiences of African international students not only benefits the individual students but also contributes to a more vibrant and enriching academic community for all. Just as Prince Akeem's journey in "Coming to America" leads to personal growth and enlightenment, so too can the journey of African international students in the United States lead to greater understanding, empathy, and collaboration across cultural boundaries. By embracing diversity and fostering inclusivity, institutions of higher education can fulfill their mission of cultivating global citizens who are equipped to navigate an increasingly interconnected world.
APPENDIX A. INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

LSU Office of Research & Economic Development

TO: Jim Coleman Broussard
LSUAM/ Sch of MCOM | Mass Communication | CC00235
FROM: Alex Cohen
Chairman, Institutional Review Board
DATE: 17-Oct-2023
RE: IRBAM-23-1073

SUBMISSION TYPE: Initial Application
Review Type: Expedited Review
Risk Factor: Minimal
Review Date: 17-Oct-2023
Status: Approved
Approval Date: 17-Oct-2023
Approval Expiration Date: 16-Oct-2024
 Expedited Categories: 07
Requesting Waiver of Informed Consent: Yes
Re-review frequency: Annually
Number of subjects approved: 15
LSU Proposal Number:

By: Alex Cohen, Chairman

Continuing approval is CONDITIONAL on:

1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU’s Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects*
2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submission of a termination report) prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins), notification of project termination.
4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 5 years after the study ends.
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.
6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.
8. SPECIAL NOTE: When emailing more than one recipient, make sure you use bcc. Approvals will automatically be closed by the IRB on the expiration date unless the PI requests a continuation.

* All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU’s Assurance with DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at http://www.lsu.edu/research

Louisiana State University
O 225-578-5833
APPENDIX B. RECRUITMENT FLYER

Are you an African international student at Louisiana State University or Southern University? Your unique experiences matter!

We invite you to participate in a research study, “Coming to America: Exploring the Cross-Cultural Adaptation of African International Students at a PWI and HBCU in the U.S. South.” I aim to understand how your interactions with domestic students impact your cross-cultural adaptation. Your insights can help create a more inclusive academic environment.

BE PART OF A SHORT INTERVIEW

- Share your perspective!
- Contribute to a more diverse and welcoming community!
- Make your voice heard!
- Your Privacy is assured!
- And you will be put in a draw for the chance to win one of two $20 amazon gift cards!

NB: Participants must be 18 and above.

Adwoa Baffour
LSU MMC Student

To join the conversation or for more info, please contact:
2254774198
abaffo5@lsu.edu
APPENDIX C. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS WITH EXPLORATORY NARRATIVE

“Hello. My name Adwoa Baffour, a student at Louisiana State University, and conducting this study titled "Coming to America: Exploring the Cross-Cultural Adaptation of African International Students at a PWI and HBCU in the U.S. South."

This is in fulfillment of my MMC degree.

**Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of African international students at Louisiana State University (LSU) and Southern University (SU) in the United States. Cross-cultural adaptation is a dynamic process in which individuals who relocate to an unfamiliar cultural environment establish or reestablish and maintain relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationships with this environment (Kim, 2001).

Specifically, we aim to investigate the interactions between African international students and domestic students and understand how these interactions affect the cross-cultural adaptation of African international students. There is currently limited research on this important topic.

**Procedures:** If you agree to participate, you will be asked to take part in an interview conducted via Zoom, which will be recorded for research purposes. During the interview, you will be asked questions related to your experiences as an African international student, your interactions with domestic students, and your cross-cultural adaptation process. The interview is expected to last approximately 45 minutes.

**Storage of data:** Interview recordings will be saved for a specific duration to fulfill the research objectives and any legal requirements. After this period, they will be securely deleted.
Risks and Benefits: There may be minimal risks associated with discussing personal experiences, such as the potential for emotional discomfort or distress when sharing sensitive information. However, every effort will be made to ensure your comfort and well-being throughout the interview. Benefits of participating in this study include contributing valuable insights that may help improve the experiences of African international students at LSU and SU. If you find yourself in need of support or someone to talk to, we recommend the following mental health support services:

1. Mental Health Service at the student health center
   - Mental Health Service (MHS) provides clinical services that enhance LSU students' personal growth and development, address psychological needs, and support the pursuit of academic goals.
   - **Contact**: 16 Infirmary Lane
     Baton Rouge, LA 70803
     Telephone: 225-578-6271

2. The Psychological Services Center (PSC)
   The Psychological Services Center (PSC) is an on-campus unit of the LSU Department of Psychology that offers testing and outpatient psychotherapy services for adults, adolescents, and children.
   - **Contact**: at 33 Johnston Hall
     Telephone: 225-578-1494

Confidentiality: Your identity will be kept confidential. Your real name will not be used in any research reports or publications, and your interview data will be stored securely.
Only researchers will have access to the recorded interviews, and identifying information will be removed during transcription.

**Voluntary Participation:** Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may choose not to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or consequences. Your decision will not affect your relationship with your university or any future interactions with researchers.

**Contact Information:** If you have any questions or concerns about the study, you may contact Adwoa Baffour at abaffo5@lsu.edu.

**Consent:** By agreeing to participate in this study, you acknowledge that you have understood the information provided in this consent form. You voluntarily consent to participate in the research study, understanding that you can withdraw at any time without consequences.

This study has been approved by the LSU IRB. For questions concerning participant rights, please contact the IRB Chair, Alex Cohen, at 225-578-8692 or irb@lsu.edu. 10.

By continuing with this interview, you are giving consent to participate in this study.

**Demographics**

A. What is your gender?

B. How old are you?

C. What is your country of origin?

D. What school do you currently attend, program, and your level of study?

E. What pseudonym would you like for us to use for you?
Overall Experience at Higher Education Institutions and Interactions with Domestic Students

A. How long have you been a student in the US?

B. How would you describe your overall experience at Louisiana State University/ Southern University?

C. What do you like most about it?

D. What do you like least about it?

E. What are some of your most memorable/ salient experiences?

F. How do you perceive your interactions with domestic students, including classmates at Louisiana State University/Southern University?

- How often are these interactions?
- To what extent are they positive or negative?
- Are these interactions strictly academic or do they extend beyond the classroom?

Classroom

A. What is the nature of interactions in the classroom?

B. How do your classmates engage with you when you speak or present?

C. When asked to pick groups, how do you feel?

- When working on group projects, do you feel seen or heard?
- What challenges or conflicts have you faced in your interactions with black and white domestic students? How would you describe them?
Beyond the classroom

A. If you interact with domestic students outside the classroom, what is the nature of these interactions?
• Are these interactions limited to having conversations after class or on the way home?
• Are you invited to the movies, bars, etc.?
• How often are you invited home or to dinner?
• Are these interactions mainly about academics, or do they involve other fun conversations?

B. If you don’t socially interact with any domestic students outside of classroom settings or group-related projects, why?

C. What, if any differences are there in your interactions with White domestic students as compared to Black domestic students?

D. To what extent have your interactions with domestic students contributed to your overall experience and cross-cultural adaptation at Louisiana State University/Southern University? In other words, how have your interactions with domestic students contributed to how comfortable and welcome you feel in the US?

Gender

A. To what extent does your gender play a role in your experiences at Louisiana State University/Southern University?
• How easily do you make friends?

B. How differently do you perceive your experiences at Louisiana State University/Southern University as compared to members of the other gender?
Social media

A. What social media platform(s) do you spend the most time on?

B. How does this social media platform(s) help you, if at all, adjust to university life at Louisiana State University/Southern University?

C. How would you describe your interactions with domestic students on social media?

D. Which social media platforms do you interact with domestic students on?

E. How do these social media interactions play a role in your cross-cultural adaptation?

F. How different do you think your experiences would be without this social media platform(s)?

G. To what extent do you think that social media platforms facilitate cross-cultural interactions and relationship-building between African international with domestic students?

H. If you do not use social media, what other media help you if at all, adjust to university life at Louisiana State University/Southern University? (e.g., T.V., podcasts, print or online newspapers, blog posts, etc.

Organizations

A. Are you a member of any multicultural or other organization on campus?

B. How actively involved are you?

C. What is your motivation for being involved?

Concluding Questions

A. What would you change about your experience in the classroom/outside of the classroom in the US South?

B. Is there anything else we haven’t discussed, and you would like to add?
### APPENDIX D. PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC AND INTERVIEW DATA

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VITA

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Her academic pursuits have been fueled by a keen interest in strategic communication, intercultural, and interracial communication. Currently in the final stages of her master’s program, she anticipates graduating in the spring of 2024. With a firm foundation in her chosen field, Adwoa aims to pursue a doctoral degree to further delve into her research interests and contribute to the advancement of communication scholarship.