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Overcoming Academic Challenges in Malaysia: Social and Digital Media Support for Chinese Undergraduates

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ABSTRACT: *Many studies have focused on the academic adaptation of Chinese international students studying in Western countries. However, the academic adaptation of these students in Malaysia has received little attention. This paper aims to analyze the challenges faced by Chinese undergraduates in Malaysia and propose key strategies from the perspective of social and digital media support. The research employed qualitative methodologies, comprising eight focus group discussions with 40 Chinese undergraduates from four public and four private Malaysian universities, as well as interviews with six international officials from these institutions. The study revealed that Chinese undergraduates encountered a range of academic challenges, including language barriers, diverse pedagogical approaches, and issues with academic collaboration. These findings have implications for Chinese undergraduates in developing effective strategies to address academic challenges, as well as for higher education institutions and university administrators in Malaysia to increase academic support and services for international students.*

INTRODUCTION

The number of international students in Malaysia has experienced significant and rapid growth in recent years, mainly due to the internationalization and globalization of higher education. Malaysia has witnessed a sixfold increase in its international student population over the past twelve years, with Chinese students forming the largest cohort since 2019, numbering 56,198 in 2024 (MOHE, 2024). While most of them received an academic education in China before pursuing undergraduate studies in Malaysia, they lack experience living and learning in an overseas context, posing numerous adaptation challenges.

Scholars have suggested that academic, social, and psychological adjustments to the new environment significantly contribute to the academic success of international students (Rui & Wahab, 2022). Moreover, a substantial body of research concentrates on overseas students from China. Many studies have been conducted on the academic adaptation challenges faced by Chinese international students studying in a Western context (e.g., the USA, New Zealand, the UK, Germany, Belgium), which creates a conspicuous gap in understanding their experiences in non-Western environments such as Malaysia (Cao et al., 2021; Lashari et al., 2023; Singh & Jack, 2018).

Research on the academic adaptation of Chinese international students in Malaysia is limited. At the same time, Chinese international students are part of the research population of those limited studies (Zhao et al., 2023). These researchers have focused on the adjustment problems of Chinese international students in Malaysia, including fear and uncertainty, homesickness and loneliness, language barriers, and academic writing anxiety (Zhai & Razali, 2022). Instead, there needs to be a process and systematic perspective to analyze the academic challenges that Chinese international students encounter in Malaysia. This study employs a qualitative methodology to investigate the academic experiences of Chinese international undergraduates in Malaysia and their coping mechanisms in response to academic issues, focusing on social and digital media support.

Theoretically, this study verifies Kim's (2001) stress–adaptation–growth model from the perspective of cross-cultural academic adaptation in the digital era. This finding reinforces the notion that social support and digital media support play a significant role in shaping the academic adaptation experiences of Chinese international undergraduates in Malaysia. Practically, the findings are essential for understanding the specific difficulties faced by Chinese undergraduates during their academic adaptation process and designing targeted support services for Malaysian higher education institutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theory of Integrative Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation

Kim (2001) proposed the stress–adaptation–growth model, which views cross-cultural adaptation as a positive and dynamic process for managing stress.

When strangers perceive changes in any aspect of their lives under the stress of cross-cultural adaptation, this theory suggests that they should utilize relevant resources and coping strategies to alleviate stress and achieve growth in their cross-cultural adaptation. Central to this model is the concept of social communication. Kim (2001) categorizes such communication as either host or mass communication, and as either ethical interpersonal or mass communication. However, in the new context, digital media technologies have enabled simultaneous engagement in both ethnic and host communication. There is a need for a systematic study focusing on the role of host new media and home new media in the process of cross-cultural academic adaptation among international students. Thus, Kim's (2001) theory predicts and explains the dynamic transformation process that individuals undergo when entering new cultural environments. Understanding the cross-cultural academic adaptation experience and examining the use of new media platforms among Chinese undergraduate students studying in Malaysian universities can be highly relevant.

Chinese International Students' Academic Challenges

Numerous studies have been conducted on the academic challenges faced by Asian international students, particularly those from China, in Western countries. The primary academic challenges faced by them include language barriers, access to academic resources, participation in academic activities, and effective time management (Wang & Hannes, 2014). Many studies have revealed that Chinese students pursuing major subjects in either the host language or English reported difficulties comprehending the instructional content and course assessments at the beginning of the study (Li, 2019). Moreover, numerous prior studies indicate that silence and minimal participation in class have traditionally been perceived as typical communication behaviors among Chinese international students (Cao et al., 2021). Consequently, research on the academic experiences of international students in Malaysia remains at a preliminary stage (Singh, 2018). Through a quantitative survey, Malaklolunthu and Selan (2011) revealed that international students in Malaysia have academic, religious, personal, social, economic, and linguistic adjustment problems. This study adopted qualitative methodologies to supplement existing research on the cross-cultural academic adaptation experiences of Chinese students in Malaysia.

Social Support in Academic Adaptation

Many scholars have asserted that social support is a significant predictor of the academic adjustment of international students (Lashari et al., 2023). Interaction among peers enables students to exchange new experiences and collaboratively address challenges, serving as a significant mechanism through which this variable positively influences academic achievement (Cao et al., 2021). There are many sources of social support, including faculty staff, lecturers, tutors, peers at the same university (Zhang& Hasim, 2023), and families and friends in the home country (Hofhuis et al., 2023). Chinese students who cope by seeking

help from their social networks are also more successful in academic adaptation over time (Heng, 2019). According to Li (2019), social integration with host nationals can significantly enhance the academic integration of Chinese international students by improving their language proficiency and fostering greater cultural awareness. Those students who were not socially integrated still managed to achieve their academic goals by turning to other Chinese people for help. Social communication with conational students serves as a significant predictor for international students overall and specifically for Chinese students (Cao et al., 2021).

Digital Media Support in Academic Adaptation

A prior study indicated that international students' use of digital media improved their acculturation process and engagement in academic and social activities through information seeking, establishing contacts, and entertainment (Dwumah Manu et al., 2023). For example, Chen (2023) highlighted the importance of utilizing online collaboration tools to facilitate better communication and enhance the learning experience for international students, ultimately aiming to improve their sense of belonging in academic settings. For another example, Zhang and Hasim (2023) demonstrated that internet resources and translation tools were beneficial for Chinese students in addressing issues associated with English academic writing. International students can also acquire social support from social networks built on social media. Engagement with host nationals via digital platforms is correlated with reduced acculturative stress through enhanced host country support (Li & Peng, 2019). Recently, Wong et al. (2024) emphasized the significance of online communities in shaping socialization and facilitating adaptation among international students in Malaysia. However, some investigations have emphasized the adverse effects of excessive social media usage on academic achievement, with decreased performance being relatively prevalent (Masood et al., 2020; Pang, 2024b).

Overall, prior research has shown that both social support and digital media support can facilitate and complicate the academic adaptation of international students. Nonetheless, there remains an absence of a process-level analysis among Malaysian higher education institutions that distinguishes between home and host media pathways and specifies situations under which conational versus host relationships are beneficial or detrimental. Guided by this analytical framework, this qualitative study is designed to answer the following research questions: What are the predominant academic challenges faced by Chinese international undergraduates in Malaysia, and how do social support and digital media support mediate the process of encountering, experiencing, and coping with these academic challenges?

METHOD

Participants

This study integrates focus groups and in-depth interviews to provide a comprehensive understanding of the cross-cultural academic adaptation experiences of Chinese international undergraduates in Malaysia, from both students' and educators' perspectives. The participants were forty Chinese international undergraduate students from four public and four private Malaysian universities in Kuala Lumpur, as ranked by the QS World University Rankings 2025, and six international officers from those institutions. The forty Chinese undergraduates (twenty males and twenty females) are mainland Chinese students with full-time enrollment in different majors and have been residing in Malaysia for at least one year. The mean number of semesters was 4.75 (ranging from 2--10, SD=1.691). The mean age was 20.98 years (ranging from 19--23 years, SD=0.891). Among those Chinese students, thirty-six did not have any overseas experience before undergraduate education in Malaysia. Table 1 displays the demographic data of the focus group discussion participants. The six international officers (three males and three females) were from Malaysia and China. Among them, three are Malaysian, two are mainland Chinese, and one is Malaysian Chinese. Table 2 displays the demographic data of the interview participants.

Table 1: Demographic Information of the Focus Group Discussion Participants

GN	Univ.	Pseud	Major	Sem.	Gender	Age	EA
	RU1	S1	Computer system &network	5	F	21	N
	RU2	S2	Business Administration	8	M	22	Y
1	RU3	S3	Computer Science	4	F	21	N
	RU4	S4	Creative Media	5	F	22	N
	RU5	S5	Electrical & Electronic Engineering	2	M	19	Y
	RU3	S6	Accounting	4	M	21	N
	PU2	S7	Mobile Computing & Networking	6	M	21	N
2	RU2	S8	Human Development Science	7	F	22	N
	RU1	S9	Computer Science	6	M	22	N
	PU4	S10	Music Performance	6	F	22	N
	RU2	S11	Communication	7	M	22	N
	RU3	S12	Business management	5	F	21	N
3	RU4	S13	Human Resources Development	5	M	21	N
	PU3	S14	Traditional Chinese Medicine	10	M	23	N
	PU2	S15	Business management	6	F	21	N
	RU4	S16	Industrial Design	5	F	21	N
	RU3	S17	Psychology	5	M	21	N
4	RU2	S18	Economics	6	F	22	N
	PU1	S19	Business Administration	3	M	20	Y
	PU3	S20	Marketing	3	F	20	N

GN	Univ.	Pseud	Major	Sem.	Gender	Age	EA
	RU1	S21	Sport Management	3	M	20	N
	RU4	S22	Psychology with Human Resource	6	F	22	N
5	PU1	S23	Advertising & Brand Management	6	F	21	N
	PU3	S24	Business Administration	4	M	21	N
	PU4	S25	Computer science	3	M	20	N
	RU1	S26	English Language & Linguistics	4	F	21	N
	RU3	S27	Communication	3	M	20	N
6	PU4	S28	Communication	4	M	21	N
	PU3	S29	Business management	3	F	20	N
	PU2	S30	English Language &Communication	3	F	20	N
	RU2	S31	Economic	5	F	21	N
	RU4	S32	Management	3	M	20	N
7	PU3	S33	Fashion Management & Communication	6	F	22	N
	PU1	S34	Digital Media	3	M	20	N
	PU4	S35	Design Communication	5	M	21	Y
	RU1	S36	Social Administration	3	M	20	N
	RU4	S37	Electronic Systems Engineering	6	M	22	N
8	PU1	S38	Digital Media	6	F	22	N
	PU2	S39	Mass Communication	3	F	20	N
	PU4	S40	Business management	3	F	20	N

Note. GN = Group Number, Univ. = University, RU = Research University, PU = Private University, S = Student, Pseud = Pseudonym, Sem. = Semester, M = Male, F = Female, EA = Experience Abroad, Y = Yes, N = No

Table 2: Demographic Information of the Interview Participants

NO.	Univ.	Pseud	Identity	Gender
1	RU1	IO1	Malaysian	M
2	RU2	IO2	Malaysian	F
3	RU3	IO3	Malaysian	M
4	PU1	IO4	Chinese	F
5	PU2	IO5	Malaysian Chinese	M
6	PU3	IO6	Chinese	F

Note. No. = Number, Univ. = University, Pseud =Pseudonym, IO =International officer, M = Male, F = Female

Data collection and analysis

Eight focus group discussions were held in Chinese via the Tencent meeting platform, involving a total of 40 participants from eight universities. The participants were organized into eight mixed-gender groups, each comprising five individuals, with a gender ratio of two men to three women or three men to two women. The participants originated from either two public universities and three private universities or three public universities and two private universities. Mixed

university and gender groups can enhance the quality of discussions and enrich their outcomes. Each focus group discussion was audio-recorded and lasted between 77 and 99 minutes (M = 89.63, SD = 7.689). Zoom and Tencent Meeting tools were used to conduct six interviews. Each interview was audio-recorded and lasted from 39--70 minutes (M =50.67, SD =13.604). The purpose of the study was explained in detail to the participants at the outset, and signed consent forms were obtained from all participants, detailing their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

After data translation and transcription, intercoder reliability was implemented by two trained coders. The coders were assigned to code the same documents from the focus group discussion, and they were familiar with the research methodology, topic, and communication theories. On the basis of Holsti's (1969) measurement formula, the agreement level between the coders

was $\dfrac{2\,(80)}{99 + 99}$ = 0.8, which was greater than 0.7. To enhance the credibility and content validity of the study, two experts in the field of communication studies were invited to conduct a thorough validity review. The study conducted a thematic analysis in which two panellists independently reviewed selected transcripts and then met as a group to develop a code set to code all transcripts. The Atlas. Ti9 was adopted in this study to analyze the transcript data. This process was performed on the basis of the six-step thematic analysis process suggested by Braun & Clarke (2006). The data are then systematically coded by each theme and subtheme so that all quotations around a single issue can be retrieved and reviewed in detail.

RESULTS

The data analysis revealed five main challenges faced by Chinese undergraduates studying in Malaysia: (1) English language barriers, (2) pedagogical and learning adaptation challenges, (3) academic collaboration and conflict, (4) media technology challenges in academic adaptation, and (5) cultural shocks.

English Language Barriers

The eight groups reported that their initial language obstacle was inadequate English communication proficiency. In group 1, one student's experience upon arrival in Malaysia highlights the initial struggle with the language: "When I first came to Malaysia, my English was very poor. Once I heard the teacher, I was tired. Inadequate spoken English proficiency also prevented Chinese undergraduates from participating in class discussions and delivering presentations. Participants S1 (RU1) and S2 (RU3) stressed that making a presentation in English is stressful for them. The six international officers also reported that the predominant problem encountered by Chinese undergraduates studying in Malaysia is the language barrier. For example, IO1 (RU1) mentioned that "Some of them cannot speak English well. They have trouble even telling me

what their problem is. So often we play this guessing game." Moreover, some participants indicated that initially, their listening abilities were inadequate, the teacher's speech was comparatively rapid, and the local instructors possessed a notably strong accent, particularly the Indian educators. Consequently, this poses a significant challenge for students' listening comprehension, requiring considerable time for adaptation (Singh & Jack, 2022).

The study revealed that interacting with host nationals and international peers provided an excellent opportunity for Chinese international students to improve their language skills. A participant from group 8 (S40, PU4) suggested that increased interactions with locals were beneficial for adapting to various accents and enhancing English communication skills. The IO6 from PU3 also noted that "Chinese students are encouraged to participate in local community and club activities positively. There are many clubs with Malaysians and foreigners at the university, so getting in touch with them more often will help improve language and cross-cultural skills." Moreover, digital media tools such as translation apps play significant roles in supporting language learning and academic adaptation. In Group 1, S3 (RU2) and S5 (PU2) both mentioned that they used voice instant translation apps to assist them during lectures, especially when faced with heavy accents. The international officer IO3 from RU2 also expressed the same situation when dealing with consults from Chinese students: "When Chinese students come to the office to inquire about some exchange student programs, I have no way of understanding their English expressions. Then, they will use a Google Translate tool in their language and ask me to speak on the phone."

Many Chinese students reported significant improvements in their English language skills, particularly in listening, speaking, and communication. In the third group, S11 (RU3) noted, "There has been a significant improvement in my English... My ability to use English in daily situations has increased; now I can speak it smoothly." Other Chinese undergraduates reported an improvement in their English communication skills and greater confidence in their interactions with teachers and classmates.

Pedagogical and Learning Adaptation Challenges

A key challenge faced by Chinese undergraduates in Malaysia is the transition from a lecture-based, teacher-centered approach to a more interactive, student-centered pedagogy. In Malaysia, Chinese undergraduate students are expected to take responsibility for their learning, engage in classroom discussions, and engage in critical thinking, which can be overwhelming for those who have not been trained in such approaches. Assessment practices in Malaysia posed another challenge for Chinese undergraduates during their academic adjustment. S18 (RU3, GN4) expressed that the institution's course evaluation approach imposes significant strain on her because of the increased number of examinations. Interviews with international officers indicated that Chinese students facing significant challenges in course assessments often exhibit either inadequate English language proficiency or insufficient subject knowledge and consequently fail their examinations (IO6, PU3). Furthermore, the participants

from each group expressed difficulties in course learning and academic writing. As shared by one participant, S8 (G2, RU3), "Owing to the weak academic logic and academic language ability, it was also challenging for me when writing assignments."

Social support from both host nationals and conationals has a significant positive correlation with the academic adaptation of Chinese undergraduates in Malaysia. Local teachers and students are well versed in the educational system and can offer valuable insights and guidance to help Chinese undergraduate students navigate academic challenges. The study also revealed that conationals can provide a supportive academic environment, making the transition to a new country smoother by being familiar with the academic environment, sharing study materials and experience, providing tips on how to succeed in specific courses, and even collaborating on group assignments. Additionally, the research demonstrated that both home and host new media offer support to Chinese undergraduates by enhancing access to academic resources. Home new media platforms, such as RedNote and BiliBili, offer a wealth of academic content, including study materials, writing skills tutorials, and open-access lectures. Host new media platforms such as YouTube and Google Scholar are frequently utilized by students to supplement their studies, which offer a vast array of educational content, including lectures, tutorials, and academic presentations. Furthermore, ChatGPT, for example, is utilized by Chinese undergraduates for various purposes, including assisting with assignment completion, searching for academic materials, providing frameworks for academic writing, and responding to questions.

Chinese undergraduates in Malaysia are experiencing significant academic growth as they adapt to a new educational system. In Group 7, a participant, S35 (PU4), stated that his character, thinking, and perspectives on several matters have undergone significant transformation. Many participants expressed that their academic writing and research skills had been enhanced, which prepares them for higher academic pursuits and future careers. Chinese undergraduates also reported that becoming more disciplined in their academic schedules and planning is crucial for managing the open and flexible course structures they encounter in Malaysia.

Academic Collaboration and Conflict

The selection of team members is a crucial preliminary phase in collaborative tasks, as Chinese undergraduate students frequently articulate the difficulty of identifying appropriate group members. Many of the participants expressed disappointment with collaborating in groups with Chinese students due to differences in individual learning capabilities and learning attitudes. They addressed the pressure of academic performance and the fear of being let down by teammates in group assignments. The participants from groups 2, 3, 4, 5, and 8 further reported that some team members contribute less to group tasks, leading to an unequal distribution of workload. Additionally, the study revealed that cross-cultural collaboration problems also exist in group work due to cultural

differences, language proficiency, and excessive cultural expectations. Cultural disparities can lead to misunderstandings and divergent expectations, thereby hindering a group's progress.

Research has indicated that selecting to collaborate with Malaysian Chinese individuals is one of the most beneficial decisions for Chinese undergraduates. The participants noted that Malaysian Chinese individuals excel in both English and Chinese, demonstrate responsibility and activity in collaborative tasks, and display high academic ability, all of which contribute to their outstanding academic performance. The participants further reported that collaborating with local classmates and international peers in group work enhanced their understanding of local culture, increased their English-speaking proficiency, and improved their intercultural communication ability. The international officer also suggested, "I would recommend that Chinese students try to be grouped with students from other countries, or even with Malaysian Chinese students. Chinese people do not only group with Chinese people; it is not good for language enhancement and cross-cultural communication. (IO6, PU3)" Moreover, the study reported that Chinese undergraduates preferred to use host new media such as WhatsApp and Telegram, which offer instant messaging and group chat features, enabling users to share files, stay connected with classmates and teachers, and discuss group work.

Many participants reported that they made numerous friends and formed intercultural friendships in Malaysia, including those from China, locals, and international peers. These friendships contribute to a sense of belonging and support, which is essential for emotional well-being, social adjustment, and academic adaptation. Moreover, forming friendships with locals and international peers from multiple countries also broadens the worldviews of Chinese undergraduate students, making them more receptive to diverse cultures and experiences.

Media technology challenges in academic adaptation

Chinese undergraduate students depend excessively on digital media tools such as ChatGPT for academic tasks, undermining their ability to solve problems independently. One participant remarked, "I like to use ChatGPT for writing assignments, which makes me think less deeply. When I need to write papers without ChatGPT, I find it hard to write. (S4, PU1, GN1)" Participants from 8 groups extensively remarked that their study processes were constantly interrupted by various social media and applications, which consumed a large amount of time and energy and impacted their study efficiency. For example, many participants reported spending excessive time on platforms such as WeChat and Douyin, which negatively impacts their study habits and daily routines. One officer from UM (OF1) said, "I think it is a common thing for students to use a cell phone, instead of focusing. However, I do not think that is a specific issue for Chinese students. It is for all the students". The participants are also concerned about the accuracy of the information offered by digital media platforms such as RedNote and ChatGPT. The spread of false and inaccurate information regarding

academic matters can mislead students and affect their decision-making processes.

Several participants proposed an open-minded attitude toward the Chat GPT, emphasizing its use not as a replacement for critical thinking or direct assignment generation but as a means to facilitate academics and assist in adjustments to the new educational environment. With respect to concentration and time management issues, several participants highlighted that self-discipline was particularly critical in balancing academic demands and adapting to Malaysian culture. They often mentioned creating structured routines, measurable goals, and strategies to maintain focus and manage their time effectively. Regarding the inaccurate and misleading information disseminated by media technologies, the study found that selecting professional platforms and establishing online academic networks through peer discussions and faculty guidance can provide more reliable recommendations than unverified online sources.

Many Chinese undergraduate students indicated a significant enhancement in their self-learning, self-discipline, and critical thinking abilities while studying in Malaysia. Moreover, problem-solving ability is a critical component of academic growth, particularly for Chinese undergraduates studying in Malaysia. It involves the capacity to identify, analyze, and address academic challenges effectively. The participants reported that they developed more critical thinking and self-regulation in solving media technology challenges in academic adaptation, such as navigating AI-generated and social media-based learning materials more effectively, thereby reducing the risk of academic misinformation and enhancing research integrity.

Cultural Shock

The study revealed differences in the adaptation of Chinese students between public and private institutions. Participants from public universities reported apparent difficulties in adapting to the dress code and local cuisine. Malaysia is a multireligious nation with a Muslim majority. Wearing long-sleeved shirts and trousers minimizes bodily exposure, aligning with the Islamic principle of modest attire. The participants from public universities reported that they faced severe criticism from their instructors and were prohibited from accessing local public venues because of inappropriate attention. The international officers, IO1 (RU1) and IO2 (RU2), both stated that Chinese undergraduates exhibit inappropriate dress in public restrooms, which causes discomfort among local students. However, Chinese students from private universities contend that universities have less rigorous dress code regulations and more dining options. Furthermore, the study revealed that all the participants encountered challenges in adapting to local working styles. All the groups discussed the communication delay between teachers and students and accessibility to faculty members, with strong dissatisfaction. For instance, IN6 (G2, RU2) mentioned that "Although WhatsApp is convenient, the professors do not reply to us very often, and even if they do, they do not reply in time... This may have caused me some issues with my studies." The study also revealed that, owing to differences in the institution's

information dissemination system, Chinese students initially lacked the habit of regularly checking their mailboxes, resulting in the frequent oversight of important announcements and events. As mentioned above, international officers "we provide daily updates and significant events to all students via email, Facebook, and Telegram groups. However, numerous Chinese students overlook this information because of infrequent email checks."

The international officers emphasized that it is essential for Chinese undergraduates to adopt a positive and active attitude and to integrate themselves into the local culture and environment. From the students' perspective, providing accessibility and approachability to faculty members at universities is crucial. This accessibility encourages students to seek help whenever they encounter academic difficulties. The study revealed that host new media technologies, such as social media and online event platforms, provide students with information about upcoming cultural events and opportunities to participate in them. As noted by one international officer (IO2, RU2), "In Malaysia, when we would like to publish our cultural programs or opportunities, we will use social media such as Facebook and Instagram to promote the program." The study also revealed that home new media platforms such as RedNote offer insights into local culture and lifestyle, helping students navigate their new environment and feel more integrated into the community.

A key aspect of personal growth is the development of a positive and inclusive attitude. All the groups reported that they overcame language barriers, learned about diverse cultures, and improved their intercultural communication competence by communicating with locals and international peers and engaging in various activities. Moreover, they became more positive and got along with people, making many friends. These personal growth indicators indicate a proactive approach to personal development and a willingness to learn from diverse sources, which is crucial for adapting to new environments and challenges.

DISCUSSION

Consistent with previous studies (Anuar et al., 2025; Lashari et al., 2023), this study highlights that Chinese undergraduates in Malaysia encounter considerable English language challenges, which impact their academic and social experiences. The findings indicated that the primary language barriers faced by Chinese undergraduates were insufficient English communication ability, heavy accents causing comprehension difficulties, and intercultural communication issues. Inadequate English communication proficiency prevents Chinese undergraduates from participating in class discussions, delivering presentations, expressing themselves, requesting assistance from professors in the classroom, and forming meaningful academic relationships (Cao et al., 2021; Xue & Singh, 2025). The participants reported that they preferred to communicate with Chinese and Malaysian Chinese in their native language, which hinders the enhancement of their English communication proficiency. This group-level pattern also supports Kim's (2001) conclusion that intense and prolonged involvement in ethnic

communication networks can impede the development of host communication competence. By actively attending a realistic English-speaking setting and communicating with locals and international peers, Chinese undergraduates enhance their English communication proficiency (Zhang & Hasim, 2023). Moreover, host new media tools, such as translation apps, have been utilized by Chinese undergraduates to enhance their English communication abilities and academic writing skills (Zhai & Razali, 2022).

Although Asian students have the same cultural background, our findings suggest that there are critical nuances in the cultural-educational experiences of Chinese undergraduates in Malaysia. Consistent with previous studies (Cao et al., 2021), Chinese undergraduates from both public and private universities were found to experience difficulties in adapting to different pedagogical approaches. The findings revealed that the pedagogical and learning challenges include teaching and learning style differences, assessment practice issues, difficulties in understanding course content, and academic writing problems. According to previous studies, social support is positively associated with the academic adaptation of international students (Lashari et al., 2023). When Chinese undergraduates receive support from their lecturers and peers from the host country, they can better manage their anxiety and uncertainty and acquire cultural and academic knowledge (Cao et al., 2021). The study also revealed that conationals could provide a supportive academic environment, making the transition to a new country smoother by being familiar with the academic system, sharing study materials and experiences, and providing tips on how to succeed in specific courses. In line with prior studies, digital media technology plays a significant role in the cross-cultural academic adaptation process of international students (Baines et al., 2022; Zhang & Hasim, 2023). The study indicated that Chinese undergraduates utilized both host and home new media platforms to search for information and online resources, seek academic support and assistance, establish social relationships and interactions, and engage in academic and social activities (Dwumah Manu, 2023).

This study revealed that academic collaboration and conflict occurred not only in cross-cultural contexts but also within intracultural settings. The findings revealed that the significant challenges faced by Chinese undergraduates in Malaysia were team member selection, unequal contribution and distribution of group work, and intercultural communication barriers. Concerning the issue of collaboration, individuals from both public and private universities expressed significant dissatisfaction and complaints. Furthermore, studies have indicated that Chinese undergraduates face challenges in group work and collaboration due to differences in communication styles, English language proficiency, work ethics, academic attitudes, and academic expectations (Zhang et al., 2024). Aligned with Li (2019), social integration with host nationals and multinationals could facilitate Chinese students' academic integration by enhancing their linguistic proficiency, cross-cultural academic collaboration, and intercultural communication competence. New media platforms have been extensively employed as academic resources to facilitate active and collaborative learning, encompassing the dissemination of academic information and resources, as well

as group discussions (Al-Rahmi et al., 2022). The research further indicated that Chinese undergraduates preferred to utilize the host new media to participate in academic discussions and conduct collaborative teamwork.

The findings indicated that Chinese undergraduates faced three major media technology challenges during their academic adaptation process, including overdependency on media technology; attention and time management issues; and inaccurate and unreliable information. Consistent with previous research (Pang et al., 2024a), media technology dependence has become a prominent phenomenon among international students and can increase their academic anxiety and negatively impact their academic performance. The findings indicated that Chinese undergraduate students from public and private universities relied excessively on new media platforms for academic tasks, resulting in deficiencies in critical thinking skills and independent problem-solving abilities (Tang et al., 2022). The study also revealed that Chinese undergraduate students were excessively engaged with new media platforms, particularly social media, for social and entertainment purposes, which undermined their academic focus and resulted in inadequate time management for studying, thereby affecting their learning efficiency (Foroughi et al., 2022).

The findings indicated that the cultural shocks encountered by Chinese students in Malaysia are predominantly conveyed in three domains: dress codes, food and dining, and different working styles. The findings revealed that public universities are more reliant on dress code regulations for students in public areas than private universities are. In contrast, private universities tend to have a greater degree of inclusivity in their dress code regulations and dining options, allowing students greater freedom in their wardrobe and food choices. This study also revealed that the information dissemination system in Malaysia is different from that in China, which has caused some confusion for students. By engaging with host nationals, Chinese international students can gain a deeper understanding of the local culture, which can enhance their overall experience and reduce cultural shock. Additionally, international officers responded that it is not about the transparency of the university's information transmission but rather the media usage habits and insufficient participation of Chinese students. They all encouraged Chinese students to be more proactive in focusing on official new media platforms to avoid missing crucial academic opportunities.

CONCLUSION

This study provides a comprehensive examination of the cross-cultural academic adaptation experiences of Chinese international undergraduate students in Malaysia, analyzing the challenges they encounter and the coping strategies they employ in a new cultural and educational context. The study employs qualitative methods, including eight online focus group discussions and interviews with six international officers, to provide in-depth insights into the experiences of Chinese international students and contribute to the broader discourse on international student mobility and cross-cultural adaptation in Malaysia. However, the research focused on Chinese undergraduates from four public universities and four private

universities in Kuala Lumpur, which presents an opportunity for future studies to explore similar phenomena in other regional universities, providing comparative perspectives.

Consistent with Kim's (2001) stress-adaptation-growth model, the findings underscore that the cross-cultural academic adaptation process of Chinese undergraduates is not linear but rather an ongoing cycle of academic stress, academic adaptation, academic growth, and personal growth. This study reinforces the notion that social and digital media support play a significant role in shaping the academic adaptation experiences of Chinese international undergraduate students in Malaysia. Kim's (2001) theory emphasizes host–national and conational friendships and does not predict specific relationships between multinational friends and adaptation outcomes. Multiple national friendships also play a crucial role in the adaptation process (Senci et al., 2022). Research has indicated that social support for academic adaptation among Chinese undergraduates in Malaysia originates primarily from conationals, host nationals, and multinationals (Bochner et al., 1977).

Moreover, this research further expands and broadens Kim's (2001) theory regarding host mass communication and ethnic mass communication. This study revealed that both host new media and home new media contribute to the process of cross-cultural academic adaptation among international students. A significant contribution to this study is its consideration of the adverse effects of host new media on the participants. The findings indicated that Chinese undergraduate students relied heavily on new media platforms, devoted excessive time to these tools, were distracted by them, and were deceived by misinformation. Another crucial contribution of this study is that it highlights the beneficial function of home media, particularly home social media platforms, in the academic adjustment of Chinese international undergraduate students. The study underscored the role of home social media as a vital resource for overseas students, alleviating homesickness (Schwartz & Omori, 2024) and navigating the challenges of academic life in an unfamiliar cultural environment (Cao et al., 2024). This perspective contradicts Kim's (2001) assertion that heavy involvement in ethnic social communication activities may impede sojourners' cross-cultural adaptation. The participants in this study reported using home social media to engage with family and friends in their home countries for emotional support and social assistance, which helped mitigate the psychological stress and homesickness they experienced throughout their studies. Conversely, pursuing academic assistance and establishing social connections with conationals in the host nation via home social media enhanced their academic and sociocultural integration. Finally, this study demonstrated that a diverse perspective that hosts social media interaction was beneficial for improving English language skills. Home social media activity hindered the improvement of English-language communication proficiency, as the participants primarily interacted in their native language (Guo, 2024).

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