Impact of social media use to maintain social and emotional competence of African international students

in the United States of America

By

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Abstract

Although students from Africa are among the least represented groups among international students in U.S. higher education, the number of enrollments in U.S. schools has significantly increased (Institute of International Education, 2020). The steady rise in African international students suggests a compelling need to qualitatively examine these students' experiences, particularly their social and emotional health and reliance on social media for additional support. This dissertation examined the impact of social media use and maintenance of the social and emotional competence of 17 first-generation African international students in American higher educational institutions. This dissertation found that African international students use social media for diverse purposes, sometimes different from the original purpose for which the developers initially designed the platform. Also, this dissertation found that in addition to the social and emotional competence that African international students use to navigate their new home and school environments, religion was a significant coping mechanism that propelled purpose and excellence.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all African international students in America. Your hard work, commitment, breakthroughs, and success has not gone unnoticed. And to Africans in the diaspora, keep climbing, and don't give up.

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In 2019, 5.5 percent (%) of the total student population enrolled in the American higher education system were international students (Institute of International Education, 2020). African international students were 4.5 percent (%) of this total, making them a minority among international students in American higher educational institutions (Migration Policy Institute (MPI), 2021; "Scholarships for Africans," 2022). Subsequently, because of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and its supporting restrictions, the number of international students enrolled in American educational institutions has since dropped. As of 2021, the number of international students enrolled in America was 948,519 ("Scholarships for Africans," 2022). Despite this decline, the enrollment of African international students continues to increase due to the quest for better education that American higher educational institutions have made available with state-of-the-art technologies, more significant advancement in research and opportunities, and a post-college work experience in multinational corporations (Okusolubo, 2018; Mwangi, 2016; Tas, 2013; Ette, 2012).

In the build-up of curriculum for different programs taught in higher educational institutions, much research goes into the structural design for students and learning styles for a desired learning outcome (O'Malley, 2017). There have been numerous studies conducted on international students in America. However, there has been little, or no research designed to focus on the unique experiences of African international students due to the homogenous categorizations such as "Black students" (Awokoya & Clark, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2007). This broad categorization does no justice in highlighting the distinctive characteristics of African international students. It ignores the complex realities of their identity and linguistic abilities

(Awokoya & Clark, 2008), thus limiting adequate resources needed to aid the acclimatization of African international students in America. It is also worth noting that African international students' backgrounds are vast and varied. The African continent comprises 54 countries with distinctive cultures, languages, environments, and backgrounds (Clarke et al., 2023). Therefore, with an increasing number of students from the African continent, American educational institutions have a duty of care to serve this growing population that has been outstanding in their academic pursuits in America (Okusolobo, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2018). This study, though broad in its scope and generalization of African international students, will be a solid foundation for further studies on individual African countries whose citizens pursue educational advancement in American higher education institutions. The outcome of subsequent research will help build a robust framework to better prepare American institutions for African international students and tap into the inherent benefits of African international students in the American higher education institution and economy.

As a social species, humans must rely on each other to overcome challenges and flourish (Tomasello, 2010). This concept applies to all students. However, for this study, our focus is on African international students. In their pursuit of academic qualifications in America, African international students have had reasons to leave the shores of their home country, traveling across the Atlantic for higher education in America. These students find themselves in a new environment and, as social species, need to utilize resources to survive and thrive. One resource that this research seeks to unravel is social media, its uses, importance, and benefits for African international students in America. Social media has become possible due to the advent of the Internet and thus become a platform upon which African international students' social and emotional competence, like other students as a social species, are built.

Social media provides a new and critical pathway for international students to maintain their well-being, stay in touch with their home communities, and develop new connections. Researchers have found that social media can create a "virtual diasporic living space" that enables social connections with diverse people at various geographical locations (Zhang, 2020; Jun et al., 2020; Lima, 2010). While social media directly impacts the experiences of international students abroad, it also impacts other factors like their self-awareness, which is an essential part of their social and emotional competence (Jin et al., 2020; Zhang, 2020). Some scholars believe that social media is an effective social networking tool that promotes a participatory culture, which encourages individual engagement in the learning environment (Halverson et al., 2018; Ito et al., 2010; Boyd, 2008; Boyd, & Ellison, 2008). Others argue that social media is merely a space for disclosing monotonous activities, such as a chronological depiction of one's day-to-day engagements or pursuits (Bazarova & Choi, 2014; Hough, 2009). As an underrepresented student group, it is imperative to explore and understand the experiences of African international students in America.

A scholarly examination of the relationship between social media and African international students' social and emotional competence is needed. Thus, the reason for this research – is to answer how African international students use social media as a tool for their social and emotional competence as they undergo higher education in American Educational Institutions.

Central to this study is African international students' social and emotional competence and ability to create and maintain social networks while pursuing academic success in their new home and school environments (Domitrovich et al., 2017; Conley, 2015). This study examined the typical challenges that African international students experience, their social and emotional

competence, and the role social media plays in helping them maintain their social and emotional capability or competence. Thus, the research focuses on African international students in America's higher education institutions. There are four main reasons why this study is significant. First, instead of using broad terms like Black students or African students, this study uses the term African international students to distinguish the experience of African international students from such homogenous categories (Awokoya & Clark, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2007), which will enrich the literature on African students, higher education literature, and international student literature. Secondly, the slight increase in the number of African international students in America amidst a general decline in the overall international student population makes this population essential to research. Third, research shows that social media is a tool that helps international students studying abroad to connect online in a way that could reduce feelings of loneliness abroad.

Further, Ito et al. (2010) define how individuals engage online. This study, therefore, looks at how African international students describe their social media usage while studying in an American higher education system. Fourth, research on the CASEL framework shows that socially and emotionally competent students have the skill set to adapt and cope in any situation; the reason for researching how African international students adapt and get through the challenges faced in their advancement for educational qualification in America. This dissertation examines how African international students use social media and how it impacts or influences their social and emotional competence. Social media is a possible connector of two frameworks discussed later: the Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out (HOMAGO) and Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) frameworks.

There are six chapters in this dissertation, including the introduction. The next chapter – the literature review – first discusses the challenges African international students experience in their new host country. It then examines the advent of social media, its uses, and the HOMAGO framework. Further, it discusses the CASEL framework that explains African international students' social and emotional competence in America to shed more light on the research topic. Chapter 3 presents the research design and the methodology. It explains the employment of qualitative research to address its semi-structured research questions. It then continues to provide a procedural description of instruments to collect and analyze data. Chapter 4 analyzes the data related to how social media is used as a tool by African international students for their social and emotional competence. Chapter 5 discusses the findings and concludes with recommendations and further research on this dissertation.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Experiences of African International Students in America

African international students may not be the top-ranking number in America, but their numbers have steadily increased. In 2019, for instance, when the overall international student enrollment in the U.S. increased by 0.05 percent, sub-Saharan African countries increased by 2.1 percent from 2018 (from 40,290 students in 2018 to 41,697 students in 2019) (Institute of International Education, 2020). One of the major attractions to enrolling in American institutions that may explain the gradual increase in enrollment numbers is the prospects of better career options and other opportunities that come with having an American degree (Okusolubo, 2018). Studying abroad also increases self-management skills, self-awareness, and self-esteem while expanding employment access, improving language skills, magnifying cultural awareness, and many more (Banjong & Olson, 2016; Okusolubo, 2018; Zhang, 2020). However, with every good thing comes challenges.

African international students experience several challenges as they pursue educational opportunities in America, primarily because of their unique background that spans the categorization of African nations as third-world countries and their peculiar characteristics. These challenges include racial discrimination, prejudice and stereotyping, immigration and visa issues, financial burdens, language competence and accent differences, academic obligations, and expectations, teaching customs and learning environment, family expectations, transitioning process, climate differences, and changes in standards of living (Jin et al., 2020; Zhang, 2020; Okusolubo, 2018; Kim, 2014; Tas, 2013; Hanassab, 2006). These challenges will be discussed in detail below.

Discrimination and Stereotyping

Discrimination and stereotyping are significant challenges African international students experience. Our beliefs and attitudes regarding diverse categories of people are not always harmful, but we tend to connote them negatively (Hanassab, 2006). For instance, categorized as third-world nations, African international students in America are typically discriminated against by their American counterparts, who perceive them to be an inferior race, primarily when negatively referring to their home countries or culture (Okusolubo, 2018). African international students are further perceived as a threat in the job market even though they are considered "intellectual and cultural assets" in academic institutions (Okusolubo, 2018, p.2). Different groups have different lenses to view African international students. Specifically, American educational institutions view them as brilliantly rich in natural and culturally diverse resources (Okusolubo, 2018; Ette, 2012). In another vein, because of their third-world categorization, research also shows that the negative perceptions of and attitudes toward Africans in American educational institutions directly result from damaging myths or media stereotypes of Africans in general (Okusolubo, 2018; Hanassab, 2006). Research shows these negative perceptions are concerning because they not only show the level of ignorance of the general American society, but such negative perceptions can negatively impact the African international student population. For instance, in a study on the "perceptions of Blackness," Mwangi and English (2017) found that racial discrimination detrimentally impacts foreign Black students' academic success. It also appears that the general American population develops prejudicial perceptions of people from different racial and ethnic demographics created by mainstream news outlets, which tend to do more negative news reporting (Mwangi, 2016; Mwangi & English, 2017). Media graphics equally have a significant impact on some of these negative perceptions. For African

international students, for example, the color of their skin coupled with images from "Lion King and Tarzan swinging from one tree to the other in the jungle start with children. Wild animal poaching, wars, disease, and starving people with AIDS are some of the media images shaping American students' understanding and conception of African international students… in the media (e.g., televised charities such as Save the Children and Christian Children's Fund as well as the Discovery Channel and National Geographic), and the curriculum in school and the home environment of their fellow students perpetuate these myths, stereotypes, and misperceptions" (Okusolubo, 2018, p. 3). The acceptance of these constant negative portrayals of dark-skinned people shows that there is a general lack of knowledge about Africa and Africans among Americans. Little is also known or taught about Africa in American schools, particularly the K-12 curriculum (Mwangi, 2016), thereby suppressing the voices of this disenfranchised group, mirroring hostile rhetoric by American media stations and other discourses, that Africa is in habitual poverty (Mwangi, 2016).

African international students also experience verbal discrimination and classroom and societal segregation (Okusolubo, 2018; Mwangi & English, 2017). For instance, the general practice of lumping discussions and findings in mainstream research is concerning because they become invisible in the use of broad terms such as "Blackness" (i.e., "Black" students or "Black" international students) (Awokoya & Clark, 2008; Mwangi, 2016). Whereas, Black international students include people from Jamaica, Tobago, Haiti, and African countries, yet discourse in research and practice seems to ignore this fact (Awokoya & Clark, 2008; Mwangi, 2016). Current research and perceptions on Africans also wrongly presume that all Africans are "Black" and non-English speakers or English learners. Such presumptions do not consider historical accounts of events like colonialism, where colonizers like Great Britain introduced their

language to the colonized. Therefore, these broad categorizations of Blackness hide African international students' diverse and complex identities, ignoring the realities of race, ethnicity, cultural identity, social identity, and linguistic abilities (Awokoya & Clark, 2008). Thus, the close look at students from Africa for this study.

Immigration and Visa Processes

Immigration and visa-related processes are other hurdles African international students face when pursuing an academic degree in America. Like any non-US citizen, Africans and other parts of the world must begin and receive approval for their immigration and visa application to gain entry to America (Migration Policy Institute (MPI), 2021). Despite steady growth in the enrollment figures of international students in recent decades, the visa and application process continue to be rigorous, intrusive, expensive, and stressful. All these processes begin in the country of origin, at the location on the initial application, and the requirement of a letter of acceptance to study at an accredited university (i.e., intent to study in the U.S. (Okusolubo, 2018). Students seeking student visas must also prove academic ability by completing a TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) or IELTS (International English Language Testing System) test. As well as demonstrating financial capability. (Tas, 2013; IIE, 2020).

Even if they have the required documents and meet all the application requirements, applying for a visa does not guarantee the award of a visa, nor does applying for a student visa multiple times, which some students do, in hopes of gaining entry to America. The reasons for visa denial are only sometimes obvious (Ette, 2012). Nevertheless, factors like political agendas may hinder a successful visa process, which is beyond the control of the visa applicant. For instance, the Trump administration planned and banned travel to the U.S. from targeted African

countries (i.e., Eritrea, Nigeria, and Tanzania), making it nearly impossible for citizens of those countries to gain entry to America.

Interestingly, African nations' enrollment numbers have remained relatively high (Martirosyan et al., 2019). Again, the reason for the steady incline in numbers is not conclusive. However, one speculation is that these immigration and student visa bans have made it essential for American higher education student support services to be more intentional about their international students' success and enrollment in pursuing higher education in America. After all, most of their financial capability comes from the international student population (MPI, 2021).

Furthermore, the mental stress that African international students undergo during the visa process does not disappear even when granted a visa. Mental stress also occurs due to financial burdens and other challenges they must bear for studying abroad (Martirosyan et al., 2019). Furthermore, there is a lack of discourse on the mental agility of African international students, even though there is a growing need for mental health awareness among international students. Though this paper does not seek to dive into mental health literature, knowledge is relevant for this paper as it relates to how their social and emotional competence influences the academic goals of African international students who hail from third-world impoverished nations.

Financial Pressures

African international students, as well as other international students and all students alike, also face monetary challenges in their academic pursuit of higher education. However, there is a scholarship program provision in the United States Code that enables the United States to award financial support to the general international student population from developing countries for their education to fortify their English acquisition skills and relationships between the United States and the developing country (Banjong & Olson, 2016). However, even though

there is a U.S. Code to provide financial support, funding is only guaranteed to a few international students (Martirosyan et al., 2019).

What is certain, though, is that the limited financial aid assistance through federal programs or academic institutions does not deter the increasing numbers of African international students in America. Moreover, as a subset of international students, African international students make significant contributions to the U.S. economy by funding their tuition and living expenses (MPI, 2021). Therefore, their economic and intellectual contributions should outweigh hostile public and research assumptions about their presence in the U.S. (Banjong & Olson, 2016; Okusolubo, 2018). Nevertheless, the reality remains that their economic and intellectual contribution is typically not reported in mainstream media and, thus, unknown to the public.

How can African International students generate so much wealth for the American nation when research shows that finance is challenging? Even without knowing the specific amount they contribute to the U.S. economy, their contribution is immense because the financial competence international students must prove during their visa and academic application is usually at least twice or thrice the expense of domestic students (Martirosyan et al., 2019; Okusolubo, 2018). Their financial documentation must show that they can effectively cover their tuition and living expenses. Such costs require international students to figure out how to pay for their tuition and other expenses before they arrive in America. They experience some burden because the financial expectation is much higher than their American student counterparts. The financial burden they experience is also due to the exchange rates from their home currency to the U.S. dollar, making these funds' availability very challenging. For example, in today's currency, $1 = ₦764.41, according to a basic Google search. So, pursuing educational opportunities abroad often results in families and communities selling personal property

(including land) and taking out retirement payments and pensions to gather enough money to cater for the financial expenses of living and studying abroad (Okusolubo, 2018; Ette, 2012). In some extreme cases, family members are given insurance to moneylenders in their home country to ensure that money is paid back (Okusolubo, 2018). So, when students in these circumstances arrive, their priority is getting money to start sending back to Africa to pay off their debt or any price tags on family members. Without a doubt, these financial pressures, especially when additional funding is not made available through funding sources in America, could lead to academic failure, anxiety, depression, loss of self, low self-esteem, and low self-confidence (Okusolubo, 2018; Banjong & Olson, 2016).

Language Proficiency and Non-American Accent

For this paper, African international students' fourth challenge relates to language proficiency or accent differences. As established above, African international students are from diverse linguistic backgrounds. This varied linguistical background may lead to their varying use of English and their non-American accent (Okusolubo, 2018; Martiroysan et al., 2019; Hanassab, 2006). American society negatively views the variation in their accent as inferior, which could generate negative feedback from professors and other students. Kim (2014), for instance, found that international students generally receive "negative feedback on their levels of English proficiency and linguistic ability from instructors and peers" (p.585) due to their accents. Moreover, the American community perceives the African continent as a monolithic identity and thus falsely assumes that all Africans do not speak English back home. Even though the African continent is diverse in culture and languages, there are some African countries whose official language is English. The official language in Africa is predominantly determined by who colonized the nation. Even with English being an official language in some African countries,

accent varies due to the local language or dialect. Therefore, irrespective of whether English is the official language of a nation or not, the fact is that those who speak English in their home countries as a primary or secondary language speak English with their cultural norms and rules (Okusolubo, 2018; Hanassab, 2006).

Faculty and non-African students do not always understand when African international students speak English because of the differences in their *intonations*, which may be mistaken as a new and different language when compared with that of their American counterparts (Okusolubo, 2018; Kim, 2014; Hanassab, 2006). Research shows that students whose primary language is not English struggle with speaking, reading, and listening. However, they have no choice but to engage in spoken and written English during lectures and for assignments (Hanassab, 2006). Nevertheless, because of their challenges in learning English, such students, like their international English-speaking counterparts, are wrongly and negatively perceived by the masses as intellectually and academically incapable of completing tasks and may be ignored by their professors and native English-speaking American peers (Kim, 2014). The differences in spoken English do not mean that the individual has a low proficiency level in English. Of course, only some Nigerians, for example, will have a high proficiency level in English, as only some American-born individuals can proficiently speak English. So, scrutinizing international students for solid non-American accents is very stereotyped. As such, international students should not feel, nor should they be, disrespected by faculty and administrators. Such disrespect is insulting and detrimental to the student. For example, in a study by Hanassab (2006), an international student participant reported, "I get very frustrated if a professor ignores me because my English is not as good compared to a native speaker…such times, I feel I am stupid." (p.162). Experiencing disrespect, in this context, demonstrates the low level of professionalism by

teachers and how biased and inexperienced students and teachers alike are with accented language (Hanassab, 2006). Additionally, these perceptions about self are essential in understanding how campus challenges can harm international students' academic aspirations in America.

Teaching and Learning Environments, Academic Requirements and Expectations

A fifth challenge African international students typically face in America is the academic environment and expectations of international students. No doubt, adapting to a new cultural environment is very challenging. So is adapting to a new academic culture and learning environment (Okusolubo, 2018).

Professors' expectations are also particularly challenging because they vary per institution, academic discipline, and class type (undergraduate and graduate) (Kim, 2014). Today's professors also require informal presentations, on-the-spot recitations, lecture comprehension, note taking, and a variety of other tasks, which may be unfamiliar to international students or challenging to engage with because of limited access to resources (i.e., laptop, Internet). (Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Kim, 2014). The challenge is that the lack of experience with such classroom culture may set an African international student (English-speaking and non-English speaking) back and make them play catchup. According to Okusolubo (2018), African international students will likely need to quadruple the time their native American-English speakers need to read and understand materials. The need for extra time puts them at a clear disadvantage in the classroom setting. Their information processing is more prolonged and unfavorable when put on the spot, understanding lectures in real-time, and even notetaking. It will take time for them to build the skills to match the pace of their American counterparts.

American teaching customs and learning environment is also not entirely reflective of African international students' learning background because of the cultural differences in the teaching and learning processes for African international students. For instance, American education is more student-centered than the African education context. In America, the teaching style is more inclusive and participatory. At the same time, in the African context, it is a directional style of teaching where the teacher regurgitates information for the students to memorize (Freire, 2005). There is typically no two-way dialogue, especially in the African classroom context. In America, professors encourage students to engage in conversation, critique materials, and so on in the classroom and beyond (i.e., during office hours) (Okusolubo, 2018; Adeniji-Neill, 2011).

Research provides a solution to these classroom scenarios. The remedy is for culturally relevant instructional content and materials in the American classroom (Akanwa, 2015). Professors need to put more effort into how their contents and materials will impact their international student population (Akanwa, 2015), such as internationalizing curricula with contents and topics, materials with international perspectives, and activities that require interaction with students from diverse backgrounds (Macgregor & Folinazzo, 2017). Nevertheless, with the current lack of cultural understanding of foreign populations, the burden is on higher education institutions to ensure that actions, policies, and curricula do not adversely impact international students (Akasha, 2013; Kim, 2014). To circumvent this challenge, educators must be culturally aware of their students' backgrounds while requiring them to be culturally aware of their host country (Akasha, 2013). For instance, African cultures only allow children to refer to their elders by name and talk to them if permitted. However, in the American context, professors are often referred to by their first names.

Similarly, in a study that examined elementary and middle school teachers' knowledge and perceptions of Arabic and Islamic cultures in the American southwest, findings showed they needed more cultural awareness of their Arabic student population (Akasha, 2013). In that study, educators could not distinguish between the religion (Islam) and the ethnicity (Arab), nor were they able to identify Islamic holidays. Results showed that most educators did not have basic knowledge of Muslim holidays, including Eid al Fitr, amongst other things. With this basic knowledge, these educators could pay attention to specific days of the year that are Islamic holidays to avoid scheduling tests on such days. Such educators need to be more experienced, thus not understanding an ethnically and linguistically diverse student population like African international students practicing different religious beliefs, including Christianity and Islam. Educators who portray negligence in understanding cultural diversity to the extent of curriculum development and classroom practices have caused students to feel that they do not belong to their academic environment, which may also negatively impact their academic outcomes (Akasha, 2013).

Therefore, the solution to a more inclusive curriculum and classroom practice is a culturally responsive curriculum and practice. Instructional strategies and multicultural curricula that are present in culturally responsive educators can validate a student's cultural identity while bridging any potential gap between school and home (Ladson-Billings, 1994). In short, culturally relevant pedagogy holistically empowers students (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Yeh et al., 2022). So, in a culturally competent classroom, international students will be given the space to adapt to the classroom materials and be allowed to engage in a way that equips them with the skills and knowledge they need to navigate their new learning environment successfully. In other words, professors need to take the time to understand who is in their classroom and create safe spaces

for their diverse student populations to acclimatize accordingly. Some of the approaches that a higher educational institution can adopt to cater to the diverse student population include having a slower lecture pace, ensuring all lecture materials are sent in advance to give enough time to international students to digest information, and even giving extra time in exams (Yeh et al., 2022).

Family Burden and Transitioning Process

Family burdens and transitioning abroad can be challenging for African and other international students in America. Generally, some international students' families are typically a close-knit unit that relies heavily on the success of those who go abroad because of the sacrifices made to create a pathway to studying abroad. In some extreme cases, families or even community members sell their personal properties and take out pensions to ensure that the student has enough funds for their journey (Okusolubo, 2018). So, unlike their American counterparts who can access different funding sources, including financial aid, African international students rely on family and community for funds. With this comes an added pressure to succeed because of their sense of responsibility to pay their family and community back. This pressure is enough to impact their academic and social terrain because their successes and failures are more significant, as their families and communities could be positively or negatively impacted (Okusolubo, 2018; Kim, 2014; Hanassab, 2006). This weight of familial obligations may also lead to loneliness, stress, and depression while pursuing their academic dreams (Okusolubo, 2018; Caldwell & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2016).

Additionally, separation from family and friends significantly challenges international students' social adjustment in America (Martirosyan et al., 2019). It is easy for them to feel displaced and alone. So, they must figure out how to prioritize things once the reality of settling

in America begins. During this time, they may be unable to access any potential support system because they hit the ground running when they arrive. Running against time to graduate, gather resources needed for their studies, and study and complete their program. Research suggests that to overcome feelings of isolation and lack of belonging, international students maintain their social and emotional awareness by connecting with other international students, perhaps because they can empathize with each other (Martirosyan et al., 2019). However, do all international students connect? If not, how is their social and emotional competence impacted if they do not engage with others? Research suggests that international students who become actively engaged with their campus will have an increased sense of belonging when there are university-based solid support programs and activities (Martirosyan et al., 2019).

Does this mean international students who do not actively engage with their campus have a limited sense of belonging even when university-based systems are in place? Or must it be assumed that they will engage with the resources available on campus because research shows they can only sometimes access all the resources needed through the transition process to America (Caldwell & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2016)? They have limited access to resources (i.e., laptops) and must prioritize freeing their families and communities from money lenders and poverty (Caldwell & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2016; Okusolubo, 2018). However, this assumes that *all* international students have financial constraints when they arrive in America. The reality is unknown because there is no data to report on the social class structure of African international students in America. Notwithstanding, regardless of social class, as a result of the vast difference in the educational system and resources in the United States in comparison with what is obtainable in African nations, as well as post-educational work opportunities, most African international students consider the U.S. a land flowing with milk and honey, or a land of

opportunity and they strive to overcome challenges in their path to success (Okusolubo, 2018; Ette, 2012).

Climate and Standards of Living

Another challenge is adapting to a new weather climate, particularly for those living in states with four seasons, including harsh winters like Wisconsin, Colorado, and Pennsylvania (Okusolubo, 2018). For example, without directions on what type of clothing to wear and where to get these items, African international students may not quickly get accustomed to the appropriate outfit suitable for each season (Okusolubo, 2018). Mainly because, depending on where they come from in Africa, they may not have winter jackets that would protect from -20-degree weather conditions, thermal winter wear, wool socks, winter hats, gloves, winter boots, and the like that are readily available in stores in states that accommodate such weather. These items may seem basic to those who live in such environments. However, it also presents an additional expense for African international students on a limited budget.

Interestingly, the exact living conditions of international students in America have yet to be discovered, including the neighborhoods or communities in which they find accommodation. With that said some international students may settle in a disorganized and unsafe neighborhood in urban areas to minimize expenses without prior knowledge or understanding of the terrain (Kim, 2014). With limited knowledge and understanding of the terrain, they may stick to lower rent costs that land them in areas that need to be deemed safe. On the other hand, they may also be charged excessive amounts for rent and other things for lack of knowledge. Similarly, the cost of food, transportation, and other necessities will be new to African international students who may not want to spend exorbitant amounts of money and hence may not know where to shop to get good food or good deals simply because of a lack of knowledge on how things operate. They

may also need to become more familiar with the variety of food options available in the American market, making it difficult to determine what to buy and how to eat or make certain foods.

All the challenges discussed are noteworthy as they show some of what African international students must overcome to succeed while pursuing an education in America. However, more than knowing about these challenges is required. Understanding the tools that they may need to persist and overcome in a foreign country and campus is also critical. One of the assumed tools of persistence is their social and emotional competence. Particularly, how do we determine their social and emotional competence? This study suggests that social and emotional factors influence their experiences in America. Additionally, this study suggests that social media engagement or participation is essential to African international students' social and emotional competence studying in America because it reflects how they navigate their new social and academic terrain. The following two sections of this chapter (social media and social and emotional competence) will discuss what it means for African international students to be socially and emotionally competent and the benefits of social media to their experiences.

Social Media

The invention of the Internet in the 20th century introduced modern ways of communication ('Social media history... How did we get here – Intro to social media,' 2022). The birth of the Internet has drastically increased the birth of modern technology that has aided fast, efficient, and effective social interaction or relationships. This new technology, now generally known as social media, has drifted far from the order of the day, that is, the pre-Internet era that required the physical get-together of people for social gatherings. Social media is increasingly becoming the global platform through which relationships and collaborative engagements are

formed and maintained, families are connected, and more. As such, schools, notably higher education institutions, are increasingly adopting it as part of their systems for student engagement through portals like Blackboard, Canvas, and other proprietary educational engagement applications developed by different educational institutions for use by varied stakeholders in an academic environment.

However, as universities increase opportunities for student engagement on social media, there is an assumption that *all* students will automatically buy-in by connecting and at least keep up online appearances on campus. Through a review of the literature on social media as a tool to maintain social and emotional competence, this dissertation focuses on African international students' experiences in America. As a result of the increasing number of African international students in American higher educational Institutions (Awuor, 2021) and also the fact that research has shown that Africans are some of the most highly educated students in America (Okusolubo, 2018), it is imperative to understand how social media is used as a tool by African international students to maintain their social and emotional competence during their academic pursuit in America.

As an evolution of face-to-face (or in-person) human interaction, social media is a highly interactive web-based technology platform for individuals, groups, and communities to engage (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Selwyn, 2012; Shirky, 2009; Junco, 2015). It is also an essential tool through which individuals and groups can share, create, co-create, and discuss any content they choose (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Selwyn, 2012). Given that African international students are thousands of miles from their countries of origin, social media may provide an important pathway to support social engagements, connections, interests, and academic goals.

Social media continues to reshape how people use the Internet because it allows for multiple collaborations simultaneously, thereby joining forces with like-minded online users to expand their access to information (Selwyn, 2012). Social media allows friends, family, acquaintances, employers, employees, and strangers to connect (Junco, 2015). As these interactions persist, social media becomes an essential resource for virtual human interaction. As a result, it is forever changing and reshaping how humans (families, friends, employers, employees, professors, students, and others) communicate depending on their friendship or interest-driven goals. For instance, connecting with family and friends may be solely to maintain social connections. In contrast, connecting with professors and students in the same academic department may be based on specific academic interests.

Online platforms like Facebook, LinkedIn, and YouTube, and now Instagram, Discord, and TikTok, have become the modern way of meeting new people, maintaining relationships, and communicating with old and new friends, family, work colleagues, and other acquaintances (Boyd, 2008; Boyd & Ellison, 2008). These online spaces defy traditional physical space boundaries by extending human connections in a virtual environment that interacts with human ties locally, nationally, and globally at one location – the Internet (Selwyn, 2012). Students, administrators, faculty, and educational establishments use social media platforms to connect and share information relevant to campus-related topics (Okusolubo, 2018). The virtual classroom is necessary for working professionals who, due to work schedules, cannot physically attend conventional classroom settings. So, while engaging online, their primary interest is tailored to their program and academic goals. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, online classes were strongly encouraged to avoid or limit the spread of the virus. Since then, social media and

online platforms have become a usual way to work, host societal functions (i.e., politics and human interactions), and engage with schooling (Perrin, 2015).

Mobile devices and computer web browsers are currently the main points of social media access (Herhold, 2018). The advent of the Internet and technology through the mobility of mobile devices has made social media accessibility relatively easy, thus increasing the number of people accessing social media (Csáji et al., 2013; see also *Figure 1*).

Social Media: its Uses and Benefit

As social creatures, "we need the companionship of others to thrive in life, and the strength of our connections has a considerable impact on our mental health and happiness" (Robinson & Smith, 2022, para. 1). There has been varied research for and against social media and its impact on the social well-being of people. This study focuses on social media's positive impact on African international students in American higher educational institutions. Generally, international students utilize social media as a platform that keeps them connected to their home country and existing relationships. The concept of social well-being is fundamental, and if not properly managed, its impact is devastating, such as loneliness, depression, and ultimately thoughts of suicide, which, if considered and actualized, forfeits the purpose to which African International students, as well as their other international counterparts, came to the United States.

Social media also enhances cultural identity, a sense of self, and a strong sense of self-management skills. In their study, Rice et al. (2016) found that social media was critical for Australia's Indigenous people to share and voice their thoughts and opinions. These young adults felt empowered through social media, enabling them to connect with communities of their choice. They excelled academically and socially through these interactions and gained positive health outcomes.

Figure 1: How people access social media

HOW PEOPLE ACCESS SOCIAL MEDIA

Mobile app — 67%
Computer web browser — 57%
Mobile web browser — 41%
Tablet app — 31%
Computer app — 28%
Tablet web browser — 23%
Smartwatch — 11%

Percent of total respondents; N=627 social media users
Source: The Manifest 2018 Consumer Social Media Survey
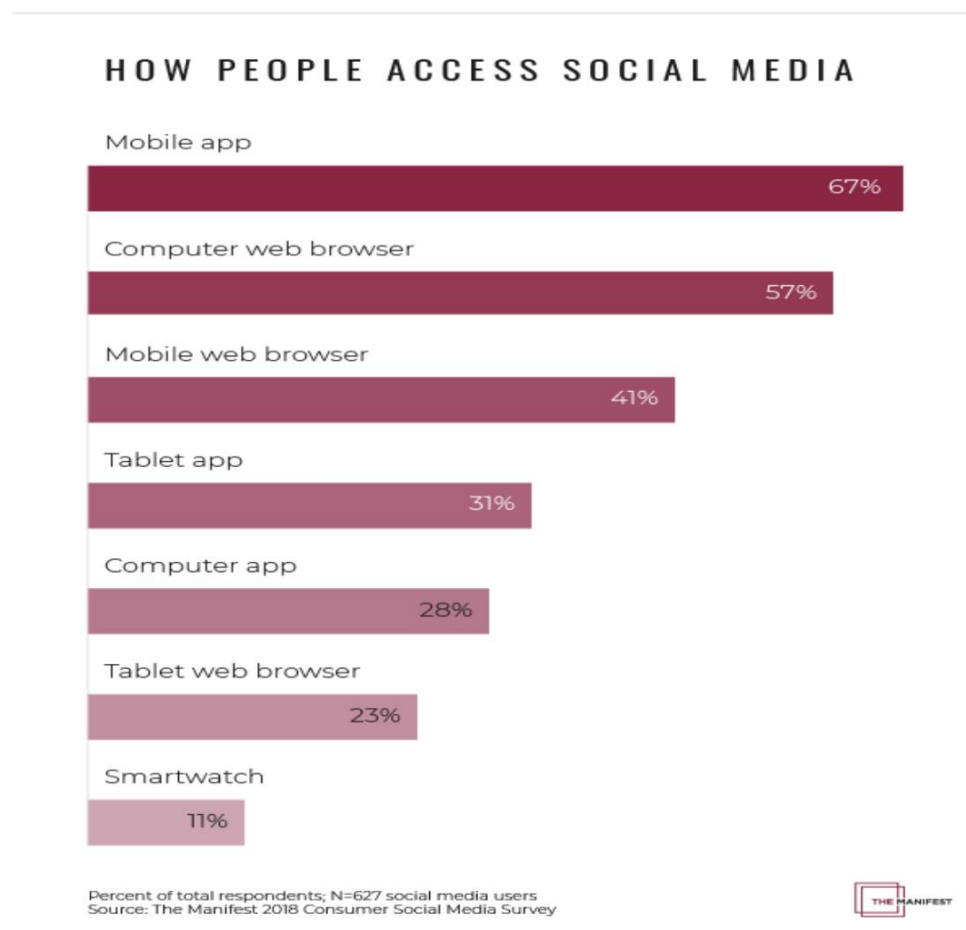
THE MANIFEST

Note. From *How people use social media* by Herhold, K. (2018), The Manifest: Lists of Top B2B Companies & Business News. (https://themanifest.com/social-media/blog/how-people-use-social-media). Copyright by The Manifest.

So, even if there may be some adverse outcomes, how individuals use it may outweigh those adverse outcomes and create positive ones (Rice et al., 2016). Individuals who overcome this are strongly determined to depend on their social and emotional competence amidst their challenges. In the case of the Indigenous people in Australia, for example, they prioritized their strong sense of self over societal suppression to air their voices out to the masses through social media.

The advent of the Internet and the rising technological advancement have fueled many social media platforms designed for various target audiences. Humans have primarily used the Internet (social media) to substitute the one-on-one connection that helps maintain the bond with others. Even though social media is not a perfect substitute for human connection, it is good enough to maintain and sustain relationships separated by distance.

Loneliness is a reality, and at its height, it can trigger mental health problems. Research suggests that routine use of social media is positively related to all three health outcomes: "social well-being, positive mental health, and self-rated health" (Bekalu et al., 2020, p. 71S). Since international students deal with challenges that come with higher education, feelings of nostalgia, and acclimatizing to a new environment, it is only safe that they adopt a coping mechanism to handle the stress they are facing, or else the new reality will become a burden that they cannot handle. In handling the reality of their new environment, social media platforms have helped to provide a coping mechanism whose outcome has proven to fill the gap that distance from home had created.

Research revealed different ways international students have used and are using social media. The following three stages categorize social media use: during application to an institution, after obtaining admission and upon resumption, and during the study year (Madge et al., 2019). African international students and their international counterparts join WhatsApp groups on their phones where new and existing students interact and share information during the admission process and before resumption. Information garnered from these WhatsApp groups may need to be more readily available or thought about by individual students. However, since conversation ensued on chat platforms, further questions are derived from original questions and thus create better insights and clarity to doubts or lingering thoughts in the minds of new and

prospective students. "Interactions on *WhatsApp* were not only about settling in or resolving practicalities relating to their studies, but it also became a digital space where the students could learn about other topics, people," and the world beyond the classroom (Madge et al., 2019, p. 274). Social media use is evolving to aid information circulation and provide a soft landing for old, new, and prospective students.

Social Media and African Students

In recent times, research on social media has increased as researchers are studying how students in higher education use social media (Arif & Kanwal, 2016; Zhao, 2017). In exploring the use of social media among students in academia, some researchers have studied student interactions with each other (Martin & Rizvi, 2014; Rice et al., 2016; Chukwuere and Chukwuere, 2017), and their family ties back in their country of origin (Okusolubo, 2018). There has also been a focus on social media addiction and its impact on mental health (Gazi et al., 2017; Bekalu et al., 2020). While these studies have highlighted essential trends, there is often an underlying assumption that *all* university students *everywhere* use social media. It assumes that students have ubiquitous internet access and overlooks the inequalities and tensions that unfold on social media.

Research on social media and African students from the South African context states that scholars advocate for social media use in distance learning education (Madge et al., 2019; Ng'ambi et al., 2016; Mwangi et al., 2018). Academically, student engagement and collaborative engagements are beginning to take shape on social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp (Madge et al., 2019). However, it is also used to connect with families back home (Zhao, 2020). Similarly, according to Ahmad (2014), virtual communities enable students migrating outside their home country to maintain social interactions or connections in their

country of origin by continuing or maintaining these connections online while living in the new host country. It also provides opportunities to practice transnational-like activities, enabling them to keep pre-existing relationships and lifestyle behaviors in their new environment (Zhao, 2020).

Chukwuere and Chukwuere (2017) found that social media is critical for maintaining international students' social and emotional competence. "Social media refines how female students think, interact, communicate, fall in love (find love), their social lifestyle, and many more" (Chukwuere & Chukwuere (2017, p. 9928). The primary goal of students in this category is intimacy. In this context, intimacy occurs in relationships beyond mere friendships, including connections between lovers and exes. Here, social media was the platform through which the participants flirted, dated, and potentially broke up with the individuals they found intimacy with online. Though this finding is in the South African context and not a study based on the American context, the results are still important to note.

In research conducted by Hancock et al. (2007), *online dating* is "where individuals create profiles and initiate contact with others through an online service." Walther (1996) classified online dating as a computer-mediated communication that surpasses the level of affection and emotion of parallel interaction. Wysocki (1998) supports Walther's viewpoint, arguing that forming relationships through the Internet progresses more (quickly and intimately) than face-to-face relationships due to the anonymous nature of online dating sites. According to Cooper and Sportolari (1997), relationships can be made offline through telephone contact and face-to-face meetings, with online contact acting to enhance self-integration, eroticization, autonomy, and intimacy. Other research found different aspects of online romantic relationships, including cyber-flirting (Whitty, 2003) and cyber-sex (Wysocki, 1998). A large-scale empirical study by Madden and Lenhart (2005) in the USA uncovered people's online dating site usage

behavior. Their study reveals that most Internet users are currently single and are looking for romantic partners; 74% of them have used the Internet in one way or another to further their romantic interests (Alam et al., 2011). Irrespective of the group under study, humans tend to behave similarly. Concerning social media use for online dating, the referenced research work aligns with the style of social media use globally, be it in North America or Africa.

This finding supports the inclusion of social media in this study to understand better the role it plays on African international students in America. In particular, the discourse on social media suggests that there are varying ways in which users engage online, and it is essential to understand how to frame these online engagements. We know that social connections may include friendship groups or interest-driven purposes, whereby users may hang out online or even mess around with each other online (Ito et al., 2010).

Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out - Conceptual Framework

The Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out (HOMAGO) framework is a conceptual model that describes the diverse ways in which people, especially young people, engage with digital media. The framework was proposed by Mizuko Ito and her colleagues in 2010, based on a large-scale ethnographic study of youth and digital media. This framework consists of three modes of engagement: hanging out, messing around, and geeking out. Different levels of expertise, intensity, and sociality characterize these modes of engagement.

According to HOMAGO, the first mode of engagement is hanging out. Hanging out refers to how users use digital media. Mainly, HOMAGO describes users' use of digital media to socialize and entertain themselves. In their study, Ito et al. found that participants primarily use digital media to maintain social connections, share experiences, and participate in online

communities. Hanging out is characterized by low engagement and expertise. Hanging out is often driven by social and emotional needs.

Messing around is the second mode of engagement. Messing around involves a more active and creative use of digital media by its users. According to Ito et al. (2010), young people experiment with digital media, remixing, and repurposing exciting content to create their own. Messing around is, therefore, characterized by higher engagement and expertise. Messing around enables young people to develop skills and explore their creative potential.

The third mode of engagement, geeking out, is characterized by deep involvement and expertise in a particular area of interest. Young people use digital media to pursue their passions, connect with like-minded individuals, and develop new skills and knowledge. Geeking out is characterized by high engagement and expertise and often involves more specialized and technical digital media use.

Overall, Ito et al. (2010) framework provides a valuable way of understanding the diversity of young people's engagement with social media. Scholars and educators can better support young people's learning and development in digital spaces by recognizing the different modes of engagement and their varying intensity, sociality, and expertise.

Social and Emotional Competence - CASEL Framework

Being so far away from home and familial networks, African international students must have the necessary social and emotional competence to navigate their new home environment and campus to achieve their academic goals when they arrive in America. Scholars like Domitrovich et al. (2017) have demonstrated that the development and maintenance of a socially and emotionally aware individual are dependent on five factors brought about by what they described as the CASEL framework (Collaborative, Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning

(CASEL) framework). These five factors include (1) Self-Awareness, (2) Self-Management, (3)

Responsible Decision Making, (4) Social Awareness, and (5) Relationship Skills (see *Figure*

2 and *Appendix A* for more information).

Figure 2: CASEL's five core competencies

Self-awareness: The ability to accurately recognize one's emotions and thoughts and their influence on behavior. This includes accurately assessing one's strengths and limitations and possessing a well-grounded sense of confidence and optimism.

Self-management: The ability to regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations. This includes managing stress, controlling impulses, motivating oneself, and setting and working toward achieving personal and academic goals.

Social awareness: The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures, to understand social and ethical norms for behavior, and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.

Relationship skills: The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. This includes communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, resisting inappropriate social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking and offering help when needed.

Responsible decision-making: The ability to make constructive and respectful choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, social norms, the realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and the well-being of self and others.

*Note. F*rom *What is SEL?(n.d.)* (https://casel.org/what-is-sel/). Copyright by CASEL.

The five components of the CASEL framework are essential in any setting (Conley,

2015). For instance, schools that incorporate social and emotional learning as an intervention

produce quality educational outcomes, better stress management among students, more engaged

and proactive students, as well as focused students who set goals and are self-motivated from

start to finish (Greenberg et al., 2003; Weisberg et al., 2015; Reinert, 2019). As a result of these

benefits, Weisberg et al. (2015) and Beauchamp and Anderson (2010) suggest that social-

emotional competence is essential to a child's adolescent years. The theoretical and empirical

literature on social and emotional learning (SEL) research is mainly applied to K-12 learners (Domitrovich et al., 2017; Greenberg et al., 2003; Weisberg et al., 2015).

So, what does this look like for individuals beyond K-12? Knowing the impact of the CASEL framework beyond K-12 will help us understand how practical social and emotional competence is for adult or college-age African international students in America. Further research about African international students' social and emotional competence needs in higher education is needed. Also, the impact of social and emotional awareness on diverse student groups (linguistically, racially, and so on) is limited in the literature. Thus, this research aims to hinge on the CASEL framework to understand how and why African international students use social media for their social and emotional competence while pursuing higher education in America.

With this level of insight and the potential potency of the positive outcomes one's social and emotional competence could have on academic and non-academic outcomes; it is alarming that there is limited discourse on it in higher education. All students need higher education institutions to pay attention to their social and emotional competence. In that case, it only makes sense to look at the competencies of the international student body, especially an increasingly diverse international student body. Amid broadening social and economic disparities in American society, the increasingly multicultural and multilingual diverse student body needs strong social and emotional skills (Guerra et al., 2014). This dissertation, therefore, intends to address that gap by explicitly examining the African international students' social and emotional competence as they pursue their academic studies in America and how social media influences their experiences. This examination will provide a better insight into their choices and the reason for their successes and failures.

It's Connected: Social Media (HOMAGO), and Social and Emotional Competence (CASEL)

It is all connected. How is it all connected? For this study, *Figure 3* was created to visualize how HOMAGO and CASEL are connected. *Figure 3* demonstrates that as social beings, African international students cannot do without social connectedness. They need social connections to make it, just like any other person. However, being so far away from home immediately creates a gap in the social network they are familiar with. Being so far from home also requires them to figure out or possess the ability to find their way around. They need an effective tool or resource like social media to navigate their new home and campus. Social media can be a crucial tool for building and making new connections that could help African international students build and maintain relationships while achieving what they traveled abroad to do: to excel in their academic and other pursuits. With this role, social media essentially acts as a bridge that connects African international students to tap into their social and emotional senses.

This research also posits that African international students must be socially and emotionally competent to navigate their new home and campus environments. Social and emotional skills include the ability to be self-aware, to make reasonable decisions, and build positively impacting friendships. Without this, research suggests that these students could struggle emotionally, academically, and more. In other to avoid the dire consequences of lacking social and emotional competence, African international students must ensure that they are equipped with the relevant tools and resources that will aid their success story abroad. For instance, they may not have a friendship group prior to arriving in America. But active engagement on social media could be an essential tool for maintaining relationships back home.

A foundation has already been built over a period with the familiar connections back home and social media essentially helps them maintain those relationships.

Additionally, social media could help these students make and build new social connections in America. These connections could include anyone that they meet and want or need to include in their social circle including course mates, professors, and more. These existing and new connections could help African international students to confidently navigate their new home and school environments. If this happens, they will be able to reap the benefits of studying abroad while overcoming any potential hurdles that they meet along the way.

Similarly, social media could influence the experiences of African international students by creating opportunities for them to understand their new environment better and enabling them to make connections that may be viable to their studies and other goals. Social media could also be essential to African international students' social and emotional competence to navigate their new home and academic environments.

Furthermore, in this study, the HOMAGO framework helped the researcher describe what African international students could do on social media. The students were given open-ended questions to describe their preferred platforms and how they use the platforms. The African international student participants were able to share as much or as little as they wanted about their social media engagement and the words, phrases, sentences were used helped the researcher identify is their engagement was in the form of hanging out, messing around or geeking out online. Similarly, CASEL framework described the outcome of what the students in this study could gain or learn through their engagement online. For this paper, the researcher was able to identify their preferred social media platforms, how they use it and what they use it for. Their responses helped the researcher get a better understanding of how their online

engagements impacted their social and emotional competence. In other words, their descriptions helped the researcher learn more about how they engagement with their social networks online while pursuing a higher education in American.

Figure 3: It's Connected: social media (HOMAGO) and Social and Emotional Competence (CASEL)
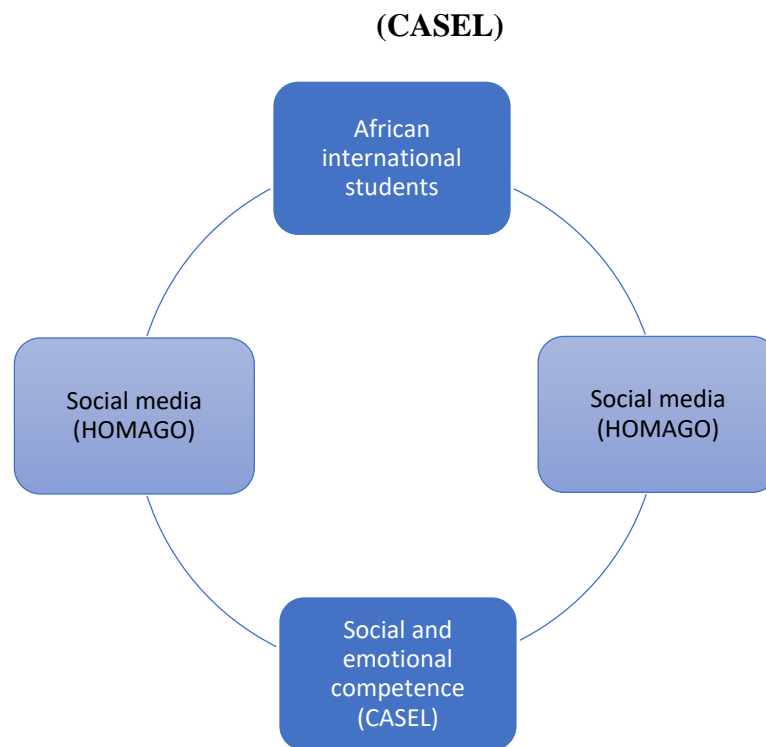
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

This study examines how African international students use social media as a tool for their social and emotional competence, as defined by the CASEL framework, while pursuing higher education in American educational institutions. The study will dig deep into their shared perspectives and worldviews to understand the participants' experiences. Researchers like Denzin and Lincoln (2000) and DeFranzo (2011) suggest that qualitative research and analysis sufficiently understand meanings, attitudes, and perspectives. This study adopts a qualitative approach to review personal accounts of African international students to examine how they use social media as a tool for their social and emotional competence as they adjust to their new home and academic environment in their pursuit of higher education in America. This study used semi-structured interviews as the qualitative tool to understand meanings, attitudes, and personal beliefs or perspectives of the unique experiences of the research participants. The research question below guides this study:

> *How do African international students use social media as a tool for their social and emotional competence as defined by the CASEL framework?*

Data Collection

The intended participants for this study are higher education students born in Africa and currently studying in America via student visa, otherwise generally termed in this dissertation as "African international students." To distinguish them from a similar term but not an exact representation portrayed by mainstream research categorizing black students. With that said, this study aims to focus on the African international student population studying in America. Additionally, this study intends to avoid the commonly used broad categorization of African students in America, i.e., international students or Black students (Awokoya & Clark, 2008).

Such broadly used terms hide African international students' diverse and complex identities, thereby ignoring the realities of identity and linguistic abilities. Thus, this study only included students in an American higher educational institution who were born and raised in Africa. The participants included were first-generation students - this is a study limitation. Further research could include other generations, which could also create an opportunity for comparison between the experiences of the different generations.

The researcher contacted international student services to recruit African international students across different universities and colleges in America. The researcher conducted a Google search of American universities, collected email contacts for the list of schools, and sent a flier with summarized information detailing the proposed research and the importance of gathering data through students at their campuses. Some institutions contacted include 17 in Alabama, 49 in Wisconsin, 52 in Tennessee, 63 in Texas, 53 in New York, 73 in Georgia, 45 in Florida, and 143 in California, totaling 495 institutions. The researcher sent emails to universities in the states where research shows most Africans settle upon arrival in the United States (including California and New York) (Pew Research, 2022; Israel & Batalova, 2021). The researcher also had some affiliations in other states in the initial email distribution request for participants (including Wisconsin, Florida, and Georgia). The researcher emailed some of these schools about whether they had an international student office or active African international students. Navigating the websites to gather information from some of these schools proved difficult. Not all schools provided a specific email address or contact information for their international student department. In those instances, the researcher sent email solicitations to the general info@school.edu email.

Additionally, the 495 schools are not a comprehensive list of all the schools in the eight states that were emailed solicitations to, as some schools do not have international students or an international student body (based on information on their website). However, some school websites only had a comment box and no email link or email address. In the recruitment process, two schools required the completion of their own IRB, but no student referral came from it.

Overall, the response rate was lower than anticipated, so the researcher leveraged her network and referral and generated 17 respondents in total. Data collection occurred between August 2021 and May 2022 from 17 eligible participants, the time frame submitted to the IRB. About 16 other referrals did not make the list because they were either not born in Africa, had graduated before data collection, or needed more time to commit the time needed for an interview. Meanwhile, three of the 17 participants who participated in the interview came from the researcher's emails to the schools. In addition, see Appendix B for a detailed breakdown of the categorization of the participants, including regions in Africa where the participants are from, the institutions they attend, and the course of study. The snowball sampling technique helped to recruit qualifying participants. However, the researcher could not reach saturation because of the limited number of participants for this study. However, the researcher was able to get up to 17 participants. Saturation requires further research, and the participants tally increased. Further research also calls for having close to equal participants from the 54 countries or regions. However, triangulation occurred through internal validity.

The hurdles the researcher faced while recruiting and collecting data caused a significant setback in the intended and attempted extensive data collection. Also, during data collection, the researcher underwent two surgeries, which delayed active word of mouth and follow-ups.

Interviews

Participants were engaged in one-on-one semi-structured 60–120-minute interviews. Some interviews took place over multiple sessions due to limited network issues or time constraints. So, the interviewer rescheduled and completed these interviews at a different date or time. Whenever it applied, the interviews continued from where the prior interview had stopped. Each interview was virtual. Each interview was recorded and stored in a secure Box folder and a password-protected personal laptop for easy access by the researcher. The semi-structured format of the interview protocol (see *Appendix C – Interview protocol)* allowed for questions to emerge from the discussion. These questions allowed for the clarification of responses. For example, when asked, "How have you handled your nostalgic feelings since you got to the United States?" one interviewee asked for clarification like "homesick-like feelings?" and the researcher was able to rephrase the question to – "Have you been homesick since you got here?" The semi-structured interviews gave the participants control over their responses because they could clarify the questions. This flexibility allowed them to tell their stories their way. Some gave short responses, while some elaborated as they desired. Any identifiable markers were removed from the data collected and will not be included in any publication of results as required by HIPAA laws and the University of Wisconsin-Madison Institutional Review Board.

Interview Protocol. The interview protocol was split into four different sections (reference *Appendix C*) as follows:

1. Participant Demographics

2. General Education Background (home and abroad)

3. Current Educational Experiences

4. Evaluation of Participants' Social and Emotional Awareness Using Social Media

   Platforms

Sections 1-3 enabled the researcher to develop a background understanding of each participant. As a qualitative study, knowing the participants and learning to understand their thinking process and the factors that enabled them to thrive in a new cultural environment is essential to understanding who they were before. Section 4 of the interview protocol then dives into the aspects of the research questions as stated above and in *Appendix C*.

Section 4 questions reflect the five CASEL domains and question how social media is used as a tool by African international students for their social and emotional competence.

- Self-awareness (how do they use social media as a tool for self-awareness?);

- Self-management (how do they use social media as a tool for self-management?);

- Social awareness (how do they use social media as a tool for social awareness?);

- Responsible Decision-making (how do they use social media as a tool for responsible decision-making?);

- Relationship Building skills (how do they use social media as a tool for their relationship building?).

The CASEL framework provided a structure to ask students about their academic progress and social and emotional competence (Domitrovich et al., 2017). The following sections will provide some details about the formation of questions in the context of the CASEL framework for the study.

Self-Awareness. According to CASEL, "Self-awareness" effectively assesses strengths and weaknesses. In other words, someone self-aware understands that their emotions and thoughts impact any action they choose. Tesoro (2020) suggests that self-awareness in the

college setting is "the systematic understanding of the educational system with knowledge of the norms, values, and interactions for undergraduates in college." Though this is specific to adolescents transitioning to college, the suggestion for this study implies that African international students are "self-aware" if they show that they understand the general expectations and demands of the higher education system they find themselves. However, judging African international students on the same cultural standards as their American counterparts or other "Black" students would be inappropriate because they are from a different cultural and academic environment. So, to determine if the participants in this study understand the norms of their university environment, this study considers the differences in their cultural environment. Considering their cultural backgrounds would expose their strengths and weaknesses during the transition process and help determine their self-awareness.

By this definition, self-awareness heavily relies on how African international students conceptualize their emotions and thoughts as they navigate their new educational and cultural space; the protocol includes questions like "To what extent does your family influence how you view yourself?" "How do you handle difficult situations?" and "What motivates you to progress?" These questions aimed to dive into how they assess their core self and how that translates into their actions when navigating their higher education studies, new campus environment, and holistic journey from their country of origin to their host country. These types of questions allowed participants to express their knowledge of the norms and values of their new cultural environment and the norms and values they possess. The questions brought to light their areas of strengths and weakness through which they found the aptitude to navigate as they pursued their degrees in America.

Concerning social media as a tool to help with self-awareness, the protocol included questions like "How often do you visit your most preferred social media platform?" and "To what extent does social media influence how you view yourself?" With research lacking on the impact of social media on the self-awareness of African international students, the findings from this research will contribute to existing research on social media with a particular focus on this diverse population. The research examined whether social media is a tool used by African international students to aid in their self-awareness as they study in America's higher educational institutions.

Self-Management. CASEL's *Self-management* is successfully managing stress, motivating oneself, and controlling impulses. DePaoli, Atwell, and Bridgeland (2017) describe self-management as controlling emotions while persevering through hardship. In other words, students who exhibit self-management as a skill can manage the stress of managing their coursework, projects, and other challenges that come with schooling and personal challenges. For this study, it was, therefore, necessary to assess how the African international student participants manage stress and other challenges brought on by their new academic and social environments. Given that they are far from home, there is no doubt that these students will face challenges more significant or different from their American counterparts or other Black students because of their responsibilities back home and the expectations of their families and communities awaiting positive academic outcomes.

The protocol asked questions like, "What propels you during challenging situations?" and "What have been your major struggles during your program, and how have you managed or handled them?" These questions invited participants to share as much or as little as they wanted to about any specific thing they identified as a challenge and the steps they took to overcome it.

Their responses highlighted the challenges they go through and how they overcome them and manage their lives. Generally, their responses ended with claims of focusing on their end goal, which includes graduation and attaining financial stability through a career pathway. Their focus and determination enabled them to endure everyday challenges even when not palatable. Some notable contributions include repaying family members for the financial, emotional, and spiritual support they provided to ensure that their academic journey abroad was not in vain. Their determination ensured they found ways to eliminate any distraction that could hinder or limit their ability to attain the success they traveled far from home for and created a strong sense of self-management.

Additionally, the study asked questions relating to how social media could impact their ability to self-manage. The critical question I asked was, "To what extent do you depend on social media to manage stress?" Since social media is known to be a critical tool of engagement for all willing users, do African international students use it beyond just essential connections, or are there aspects of the usage that enable them to manage their stress or even motivate themselves?

Since this study aims to examine whether social media is a valuable tool to aid students' experience in their pursuit of academic qualification in America, the question was open-ended to allow students to define stress and motivation and to express themselves as they saw fit freely. It also enabled them to say whether social media was even a tool they used. Just because it has become part of our everyday life (Boyd & Ellison, 2008) does not mean that everyone uses it or uses it the same way.

Social Awareness. CASEL's "Social awareness" is defined as understanding social and ethical norms for behavior and recognizing family, school, and other resources. Jagers, Rivas-

Drake, and Borowski (2018) suggest it is essential for students to understand the social climate to respect diversity, understand diverse perspectives, and empathize with others who are not from the same cultural background. Social awareness is essential; without it, students may feel alienated, stressed, and disengaged from their studies. Therefore, in the context of African international students, Jagers et al. (2018) claim that they will need to interact with not just themselves but with other students on campus to not feel alienated or disengaged from the campus. Nevertheless, how does one accurately define limited or much social interaction with others, and does this mean that all students who have limited social interaction with other students on campus will feel alienated and disengaged?

The protocol included questions that invited participants to express what they perceived as their needs for campus interactions. The three main questions were, "How would you describe your relationship with your campus?" "What assistance do you currently get from your international student services department/program?" and "How does your university bridge the cultural gap among students?" These questions enabled the participants to share how essential they thought they needed to interact with other students on campus. Some could share the extent to which they felt campus resources were relevant to their academic and personal progress. They could also share whether they felt engaged or disengaged based on campus culture. Their responses showed their social and cultural awareness of their new home environment.

The protocol also explored the role of social media in their social awareness: "What social media platforms do you use to acclimatize to your campus and residential environment?" and "To what extent does social media impact how you view the people and the world around you?" These questions helped clarify whether the research on using social media as a tool was correct – that social media aids or does not aid African international students. This study wants

to understand if they use social media to acclimatize to their campus environment and how effective it is to them. Part of being socially aware means one understands their social environment and can relate with diverse populations. So, if social media is essential for building connections, this study wanted to understand how participants use it.

Responsible Decision-Making. CASEL's responsible decision-making is the ability to realistically evaluate the consequences of various actions while considering others' well-being. Van Huynh (2018) suggests that an individual with responsible decision-making skills can make positive decisions based on ethical and moral standards that equally positively impact those around them. Responsible decision-makers can evaluate their options and are said to be aware of the potential consequences of their decisions so that the impact is not harmful to those around them. Students use these skills to solve challenges that come their way even if those challenges are not directly connected to them (i.e., a classmate's issue) (Van Huynh, 2018). This individual is also reflective of their actions and considerate of the impact of the solutions they bring forth.

The protocol included two key questions: "What are your orders of priority as an international student?" and "What factors do you consider before making a decision?" The goal was to understand how they decide about their personal or academic goals. So, assuming what their priority orders should be is insufficient just because they are currently students. The researcher felt it was necessary to get a glimpse at what they feel should be their priority and how that aligns with their student role. Additionally, the researcher also wondered what factors motivate their actions or choices. For example, we know from the discussion in the literature review above that some of these students come here with substantial financial burdens due to the sacrifices made by family and community members to enable them to study in America. Could that be a factor that drives the decisions they make? It is essential to understand why and how

they make their decisions to understand better their choices in resolving any challenges they may face in accomplishing their academic and non-academic goals.

The researcher further asked how social media could impact their ability to make responsible decisions. The critical question was, "How does social media impact your decision-making process?" to understand whether African international students use social media to help them effectively make decisions. If so, when and how do they use social media to help them make decisions? If not, how do they determine that social media will not be the tool selected when deciding?

Relationship Building Skills. According to CASEL, relationship building is communicating effectively, cooperating with others, and negotiating conflict constructively. Concurring, Wattanawongwan, Smith, and Vannest (2021) suggest that relationship building is essential to nourishing connections. These positive networks lead to positive educational outcomes and unity among individuals and groups. Relationship-building skills reduce harmful activities like bullying and other similar-like behaviors and instead reinforce social connectedness (Wattanawongwan et al., 2021). Relationship-building skills involve personal responsibility to ensure that actions nourish other individuals and community members. Without relationship skills, individuals will not have a sense of responsibility but could potentially possess destructive behavior that could hurt others within their community (Wattanawongwan et al., 2021). Hence, the importance of relationship-building skills for all individuals to possess. So, possessing relationship-building skills gives a holistic sense of belonging and connectedness in an academic setting, especially in a diverse environment.

The protocol included these questions: "What key factors attract you to people?" and "How do you resolve conflict with your peers?" Essentially, these questions were to get the

personal accounts of relationship management skills of the African international student participants, and the researcher left it open-ended so that they could contribute in any way they felt was relevant and shared critical characteristics that attracted them to people in the first place. Research shows that we naturally draw to people who appear to be like us (Launay & Dunbar, 2015). It is easier to engage and interact with people with similar traits. These questions allowed the researcher to understand how they choose their friends and what fundamental values they hold onto when looking for or even when offered friendship. The researcher also saw how and, in some cases, why they chose to resolve conflicts.

What is the role of social media in these experiences? The researcher asked about social media use in their relationship-building capacity: "What types of relationships do you seek online and why?" The researcher wanted to know whether social media plays any part in this process and to what extent the participants felt it was a practical or necessary tool to maintain or even build new connections. This open-ended question enabled them to describe the types of online relationships they have freely. The researcher also wanted to know if social media was helpful in that social media would or would not be an effective tool for building new or maintaining existing relationships online.

The responses to the research protocol questions allowed the researcher to make sense of African international students' social and emotional competence as defined by CASEL. It is not simply a question of whether they are socially and emotionally competent but how effectively these skills have enabled them to achieve success thus far. Hearing their responses also removes potential biases and assumptions. Hence, the importance of the CASEL framework to this study and the four sections of this interview protocol. It is also necessary to note how the researcher

connected social media to the research questions to gain a deeper understanding of the impact, if any, social media has on their social and emotional competence.

Data Analysis

Otter.ai, a paid subscription service, transcribed the data. Due to the small sample size, the researcher proofread the transcribed data to capture essential parts of the responses. However, the software partially captured the responses. The researcher had to eliminate the omissions by manually inserting missing or wrongly captured data. The quality of the final analyzed transcription was made possible through human intervention by playing back all the recordings and matching the software-transcribed data with manual transcription. For ease of reference, each response was copied and pasted into an Excel spreadsheet for coding.

The researcher inserted each participant's matching interview questions and responses in an Excel spreadsheet for coding to capture how the participants described their experiences. The researcher made some summaries in a place where the exact words were not entirely clear from the recording. The researcher created Excel sheets for each of the 17 participants. She copied the interview questions and participant responses on each sheet. She wrote down repetitive words, phrases, and sentences that stood out from each response, which was the first step of the low-level coding process.

The researcher then manually coded using low-level in-vivo coding. In-vivo coding refers to qualitative data analysis emphasizing the words used by research participants (Carspecken, 1996; Manning, 2017). In-vivo is also known as literal or verbatim coding (Manning, 2017; Saldaña, 2016). Low-level in-vivo codes are codes taken directly from the phrases taken from a participant (McCabe et al., 2020). The researcher primarily used low-level in-vivo coding to connect with the actual words used by each participant to develop codes. A list of raw codes and

their reference details were compiled and later reorganized multiple times into progressively tighter hierarchical schemes. The analytic criteria come from the intersection of the data, the CASEL framework on social and emotional competence, and social media literature, mainly taken from Ito et al. (2010).

Since the purpose of this research is about African international student's experience and to answer the question of how they use social media as a tool for their social and emotional competence while they undergo higher education in American Educational Institutions, this study relies on the personal accounts and perspectives of the participants. Low-level coding was thus the best determiner to look closely at the meaning of the words used by participants in this study. Additionally, low-level in-vivo coding revealed themes and categories that emerged from the data, and the researcher connected them with existing literature on social and emotional competence and social media. Specifically, this study's analytical goal was to adopt Carspecken's low-level in-vivo coding technique. Low-level coding also allowed the researcher to take references from the raw data, use such codes to create themes, and then reorganize the codes collected to fit the themes. Additionally, the researcher believed that low-level coding enabled her to interact with the data more closely to identify words, phrases, and even sentences that brought out the perspectives of the study participants on the specific topics discussed. She was comfortable using low-level in vivo coding to analyze her data once it was collected.

In Section 4, she hinged on the CASEL framework to create codes for the data. First, as discussed above, the CASEL framework is critical for this study because it helps one analyze the social and emotional competencies needed for success by the group under study. After collecting the data, using low-level in-vivo coding, she coded the data relating to the "Evaluation of Participants' Social and Emotional Awareness using Social Media Platforms" section of the

interview protocol (see *Appendix C*) using the CASEL framework as a coding guide. Then, she took a deep dive into the participants' interpretation of what online platforms they define as social media platforms, their coping strategies, and other factors that directly impact their progress. That is not to say that the previous sections were irrelevant because they did not specifically focus on social media and the social and emotional competence of the participants. Instead, the previous sections were vital as they are unique categorizations of each participant's background under study. Thus, they formed a fundamental foundation as the researcher progressed in gathering data that specifically addressed social and emotional competence and the use of social media as a tool.

In a work published in 2010 by Ito et al., a three-year-long ethnographic study resulted in 6 essential factors that impact the interactions of youth online: friendship, creative production, intimacy, gaming, and family. So, the researcher in the current study decided to see if the data collected involved all or some of the six factors related to participants' interactions on social media. Looking at the codes, she saw some similarities with Ito et al. (2010), which she coded accordingly. She soon found she had exhausted the relevant coding categories provided by Ito et al. and had to see what other categories organically arose from her study outside of Ito et al. and CASEL. Other categories the researcher found were "Entertainment," "Religion," "Meditation/Therapy," "Military and Political Influence," "Money, Wealth, and Fame," "Self-Identity/ Mental Health Awareness," "Cultural Influence," and "Relationship." So, she copied and pasted or summarized quotes under each of these codes per participant.

To demonstrate the frameworks, the next section of this chapter will discuss how these coding frameworks were necessary and how they align them to the study in making sense of the meanings and inferences drawn from the participants' accounts. To effectively demonstrate, the

next section of this chapter will break down each section of the interview protocol to provide examples of how these codes work, using some of the questions in the interview protocol.

Coding demonstrated using interview protocol structure

This section will be broken down into the four sections of the interview protocol (reference *Appendix C*) as follows: Participant Demographics; General Education Background (home and abroad); Current Educational Experiences; Evaluation of Participants' Social and Emotional Awareness using Social Media Platforms.

Participant demographics. Based on the personal descriptions of the participants, each participant identified themselves in the traditional gender descriptions of male and female: seven participants identified as female, and ten identified as male. While collecting data, each participant was also given a coded name in place of their given name for HIPAA, and the rest of the data collection flowed in line with that coded name to ensure that the data accurately reflected the perspectives of that personal individual. To keep track of who said what, the coded name was simply the first three letters of the name of the country, the participant is from (i.e., Nigeria became NIG), and beside the three-letter acronym, the researcher indicated that they were a participant by shortening the word to "PART." So, a Nigerian participant became NIGPART. The following action the researcher took was to indicate the order she received from each participant, based on their country of origin, by adding two zeros in front of the number. For example, NIGPART001 was the first Nigerian participant to participate in this study; the next Nigerian participant was NIGPART002, in that order. The researcher applied the same rule to other participants from the other 4 African countries (i.e., the first Ghanaian participant became GHAPART001).

The participants were then assigned real names. For tracking purposes, each name corresponds with their country of origin. The researcher achieved this by using a name that starts with the first letter of their country of origin and Googled to find a list of ethnic names with that letter. For instance, all names beginning with "N" are from Nigeria, and all names beginning with "C" are from Cameroon, and so on (see *Appendix D*). A name is part of one's identity, and the researcher did not want to take that away from the participants. The researcher also selected names that were gender specific as self-identified by the participants. For instance, Nnamdi identifies as a male participant from Nigeria, so he was given a male name that starts with "N." Christine is from Cameroon and identifies as female, so her female name starts with "C." Names that were short were also selected, easy to read, and that would not have the reader struggling with pronunciation.

General education background (home and abroad). The researcher asked several questions about their general education and inserted the previously mentioned responses on the data spreadsheet. Here, the researcher wanted to know their educational background before coming to America, as well as the length of time they had spent in America (i.e., "How long have you been in the United States?"), their current degree level (i.e., "What degree program are you currently pursuing?), and whether America would be their preferred choice if given another chance (i.e., "If given another opportunity, would you choose to study in the US again? (*Why? / Why not?*)"). These questions aimed to understand and help the researcher reflect on and summarize the essence of each subject's perception of their unique challenges and transition process. For example, not all participants would want to study in America again if given the chance. However, the reasoning is not because of the challenges of their academic program but social. For instance, Melina said she would not want to study in America, and this is because, in

her 1.5 years of being in the country, she has experienced political and social issues that negatively impacted her experience: *"During this time, you know, so much has happened, you know, with the pandemic and, you know, Black Lives Matter movement and everything. It's like, I kind of want to go to a place where it's just called less drama. Because I feel like here, What, like, a month just feels like three because there's so much happening. It's so Oh, it's very stressful for me."* The political and social issues that surrounded her made her experiences intolerable. She felt stressed and negatively impacted as a result.

Nevertheless, a key theme came from her quote: *mental health* because she elaborated on how the situation around her impacted her. She did not limit her expression solely to the ongoing issues she was privy to experience. This rich data or quote became a coded category: "Mental Health Awareness." Another example relates to repetitive words like "opportunity(ies)" that came up a few times among the participants. For instance, Nasiru would like to study in the US again "*because of the career opportunities and learning environment*." Kean said, "*Definitely…because of the opportunities again*." These themes were eventually labeled under the category: "Money, Wealth, Fame" to reflect the prospects of making money at the end of their program in terms of getting a job.

Current educational experiences. This section focused on the factors that could produce challenges for African international students on their path to success in America. The critical difference between this and previous sections was knowing their experiences as international students. The study took a deeper dive into understanding current challenges rather than their general background. For instance, the participants responded to the question about resources they lacked: "Are there any factors that would have made you perform better in your academics?" For example, Nasiru was content with his academics, but then he suggested that schools provide

laptops to their students. It is important to note that Nasiru used his laptop during the interview. However, he just referenced the preference of having one dedicated for educational purposes, which he felt should be provided for by the school, amongst other things. Likewise, for Naija, "*money*," "*funding*," and "*fellowship*" were listed as being some of the critical factors that could improve his academic posterity. These phrases united under the existing code: "Money, Wealth, and Fame." Some of the responses also fall under more than one category. For instance, Nimi's partial response was, "*Yeah. So as a research assistant, you know, I struggle with limited resources. For example, I have a family. My wife is on F-2, and based on immigration rules, she cannot work. So that means uh, we ... as a family, we depended on only my, my income, which is very, very limited.*" It was categorized under "Family" and "Money, Wealth, and Fame" using low-level in-vivo coding.

Before discussing the coding approach taken in the fourth section, it is essential to note that a total of 7 codes arose from the data taken from sections 1-3: (1) "Culture Influence," (2) "Meditation/Therapy," (3) "Money, Wealth, and Fame," (4) "Military and Political Influence," (5) "Mental Health Awareness," (6) "Entertainment," and (7) "Religion." These codes are separate from those listed in the CASEL framework, and Ito et al. (2010) framework, which is more prevalent in section 4, is discussed further below.

Evaluation of participants' social and emotional awareness using social media platforms. With the peculiarity and specifics of the questions in Section 4, the researcher sought literature to identify codes to capture what the participants were saying. So, for this section, two coding frameworks were used: CASEL and Ito et al.'s "Hanging Out," "Geeking Out," and "Messing Around". *Figure 4* displays the proposed codes taken from frameworks for this study. These coding frameworks provided the foundational structure for the coding practice in this

section, outside of the in-vivo level coding practice done in the other three sections, where the codes came solely from the data without referencing additional sources. The researcher was also curious to see if all the codes from the two literature sources would apply to the data. *Figure 5* shows a table of the final coding structures applied to the data.

Figure 4: Proposed Coding Frameworks from Literature

#	CASEL Coding Framework	#	Ito et. al (2010)'s Coding Framework
1.	Self-Awareness	1.	Friendship
2.	Self-Management	2.	Intimacy
3.	Social- Awareness	3.	Gaming
4.	Reasonable Decision-Making	4.	Creative Production
5.	Relationship-Building	5.	Work
		6.	Families

So, unlike the approach in the first three sections of the interview protocol, where the researcher looked at each response to see what words, phrases, or sentences stood out and how to categorize them, the fourth section took a different approach. In the fourth section, since the researcher was using codes already provided by literature and the codes she had previously come up with through the in-vivo low-level coding approach taken for the first three sections, in her pre-made Excel spreadsheet, she created new columns with the proposed codes in *Figure 4*. Then, she reviewed the participant responses to see what words, phrases, and sentences resonated with each coded category.

After reviewing the data to determine the applied literature codes, it revealed that unlike the CASEL codes, which all applied, only some of the proposed codes from Ito et al.

applied. *Figure 5* shows the codes that were applied. Only three of the proposed six codes applied, which was interesting. The three that did not apply were "Intimacy," "Gaming," and "Creative Production." Perhaps because Ito et al. (2010) 's research was primarily on teenage and young adult participants, whereas the participants in this study are international students all pursuing a higher educational degree, their interests may seem different from that in the literature; hence, why the codes did not necessarily apply. The participants in this study did not even mention gaming as part of their entertainment. They were more passive observers and mostly watched sports rather than playing actual video games. Likewise, intimacy was not discussed in detail, even though some participants mentioned having a spouse or desire to date or get married. Their primary responses needed to divulge more information to put into this category. The same thing applies to "creative production." None of the participants discussed actively creating videos to post online. Their connections with online video creation were mostly them watching YouTubers, skits, and other things online. They did not assert themselves as creators. Even Christine, who prides herself as an influencer, centered her influence on sharing what others have created. A second interview may reveal more details not otherwise captured at this time.

Figure 5: **Actual Coding Framework from Literature that Applied**

#	CASEL Coding Framework	#	Ito et. al (2010)'s Coding Framework
1.	Self-Awareness	1.	Friendship
2.	Self-Management	2.	Families
3.	Social- Awareness	3.	Work
4.	Reasonable Decision-Making		
5.	Relationship-Building		

Nonetheless, after exhausting the literature codes, the researcher went through pre-existing codes "Culture Influence," "Meditation/Therapy," "Money, Wealth, and Fame," "Military and Political Influence," "Mental Health Awareness," "Entertainment," and "Religion" to determine if any other code arose outside of these. No other code did, so no other code was created. Perhaps all the CASEL coding frameworks were applied because they formed the interview questions in this section. However, the researcher had asked social and emotional questions in this section using social media. Hence, Ito et al.'s framework was relevant even though only some of the codes described in theory applied. In addition, the researcher added pre-existing codes from the other three sections of the interview framework. Here are examples of how the codes derived from the literature to the data in Section 4.

Examples of Codes.

To demonstrate the types of codes that arose from the data collected, below are some examples from literature and in-vivo codes.

Code 1 – Self-Awareness (CASEL). CASEL describes "self-awareness" as assessing one's strengths and weaknesses. Here are some examples of self-awareness from the data collected.

- George said his family respects him "a lot."

- "The general idea is trying to become like my dad. That's the main goal. And if I remember that, I mean, that's enough motivation for me so..." (*Nnamdi*)

- "So, I view myself as a person who has special high self-esteem but is not quite there yet. You know, in transit, still broken, still healing, and then so on the way to becoming that special, you know, quote, some person who I can totally be proud of any day, anytime." (*Niyi*)

Code 2 – Self-Management (CASEL). CASEL defines "self-management" as successfully managing stress, motivating oneself, and controlling impulses. Here are some examples of how participants describe how they self-manage.

- "I actually think it's the fear of failure. I think I'm afraid to fail…. you know, like, I travel thousands of miles crossed oceans and continents to come here, so… Most of the time, it's like if it doesn't work out, then what will happen? So, it's always kind of, I guess, it has to work out." (*Kean*)

- "I always like to see light at the end of the tunnel; I always like to believe from your positive, optimistic, that it's gonna get better, it's gonna get better with time. It's not; it's not gonna last forever; it's gonna get better. This is like a setback. But, you know, it's challenging, but I'm going to overcome this, and I'm going to one day say, Hey, I've been there done that, you know, be able to be of help to somebody who's going through that situation." (*Niyi*)

- "I really, I just have to do it. So many times. I felt like, okay, I need to work. I need to; what am I doing here? Like, why am I doing this, but I don't remember where I'm coming from. So, I was like, Okay, I think I need to I need to sit tight." (*Nanoma*)

Code 3 – Social Awareness (CASEL). CASEL's "social awareness" is understanding social and ethical norms for behavior and recognizing family, school, and other resources. Here are some examples taken from the data collected from the participants.

- "Because there are thousands of international students.... each with their unique need. To some people, which is getting a job that would sponsor their visa after the education, that's a tough demand to place on the university. Maybe the university should help

international students, you know, to prepare them more and support them in a way that would make them employable." (*Naija*)

- "I feel like social media just doesn't really give you the insight of who a person really is, just who they pose. So, it's more of like, you are what you post…And I feel like a lot of people are a lot into just, you know, posting to show just to put out a portrayal of what they want people to see." (*Melina*)

- "My university is like a predominantly white university. So, the culture, the few people that you have that are international, I feel like this slide and oneness. You don't even feel like you're not among them. I mean, you're the same. I haven't felt like, oh, there's a need for you know, because everybody sees you as one as the same." (*Naden*)

Code 4 – Reasonable Decision-Making (CASEL). CASEL's "responsible decision-making" is the ability to realistically evaluate the consequences of various actions while considering others' well-being. Here are some examples taken from the participants of this study.

- "As an international student, my priority is my education first as an international student, but I can say my biggest priority is my family. But that's that aside, when it comes to my education, I have to make sure I have the right papers every year…. I follow the rules, and I just stay on the right track. Because you never know; things happen in this entire world. So yeah, I make sure my grades are in perfect accordance with my view of how good grades are supposed to be. I make sure I have the right materials for me to stay in this country. Yeah, I just make sure. Like I do my due, pay my taxes and all that." (*Kioni*)

- "I think why I am going for further studies is that we have come a long way with education matters in whatever we do back home in Nigeria. So, I want to see myself well

positioned in such a way that if I'm back in Nigeria, I will be able to contribute positively." (*Nura*)

- "Ah, my priority is, I'm trying to get As in my courses so I can maintain my assistantship. So, I think I put a lot of work into trying to meet my deadlines and get my assignments right, and study as hard as I can..." (*Nnamdi*)

- "Getting the best out of my graduate program in terms of publications, in terms of conferences, in terms of presentation in terms of coursework, in terms of quality research, in terms of networking with like, professors, recruiters, and other students collaborating on research projects, diverse research projects, landing a super job, and, you know, progressing in my career and you know, just been the best in the best at what I do." (*Niyi*)

Code 5 – Relationship-Building (CASEL). CASEL's "relationship building" is the ability to communicate effectively, cooperate with others, and negotiate conflict constructively. Here are some examples.

- "It's better to jaw than war… I prefer to talk. I prefer dialogue rather than using any other means of settling disputes." (*George*)

- "Sometimes I give time for people to reflect on what has happened, then we have a discussion on, you know, on that issue, that this was what happened and going forward, it will be good to go this particular way. So, I resolve it with people by talking about the issue. I mean, talking about the issue." (*Nimi*)

- "I've read a lot of books; I went to a school of management…, so we had to do a lot of difficult conversation, learning, conflict resolution learning…And it just gave me some strategies, you know, … that's getting to the point whereby I can look beyond my feelings, you know, beyond what was said to what was not said, not listening to the tone

of which, with which someone said something, but trying to listen to the why, you know, not passing judgments on people trying to reserve my judgment." (*Ngozi*)

Code 6 – Friendship (Ito et al., 2010). Briefly, and for this paper, Ito et al. (2010) 's friendship broadly includes social connections within the school environment, local community, and online. Additionally, research shows that "friendship" primarily impacts lives because it influences "acculturation, satisfaction, contentment, social support, and success for international students studying in foreign universities" (Hendrickson et al., 2011, p.2). Here are some examples of the types of friendships that the African international student participants described within their networks.

- "…when I am trying to understand a certain something, I ask someone... For me, that's the way I grow my friendship on social media. Most of them I've never met. But every week, you'll find someone saying, Hi, how are you doing today? Like, how was your day? Like, Hi, how was this cool day? You don't find people asking you that most times. But the way I talk to people on social media, I feel like it's the same as I talk to my friends every day. I just want to make them feel like I get what they do." (*Kioni*)

- Nasiru uses Facebook to connect with old friends.

- Naden is intentional in connecting with people who make her think big, smart, and wise "people like Bill Gates, Elon Musk, and all these kinds of people, like, how were they able to get to where they are."

Code 7 – Families (Ito et al., 2010). The family unit includes children, parents, and guardians. Participants in this study shared how they wanted to influence their children positively, and for those who did not have children, they felt their parents had some form of

influence on their decisions, which they mostly welcomed. For this demonstration, examples from the data will show the influence of the family unit among the participants.

- Christine feels that her children are "watching" her every move. She has a daughter who is in college, and that was due to her influence. She wants to use her experiences to guide her children to achieve what they can in life.

- Gifty does not feel her family influences her, but her mom is her support system when she has self-doubt. In those situations, she said, "I probably want to talk to my mom." She communicates with her mom on WhatsApp often.

- Nnamdi's dad influenced his current educational degree. His mom influenced his decision to consider marriage only after he finished his degree. He also has an assistantship to have some money to send to his mother, so the financial burden is not entirely on his mother.

Code 8 – Work (Ito et al., 2010). As described in the literature review in Chapter 2, work includes paid and unpaid activities that improve one's experience and skill in any industry. Work-related activities include schoolwork, house chores, and volunteerism (Ito et al., 2010). As such, schoolwork and similar activities were coded "work" in this study.

- Nasiru works hard to get grades, rewards, awards, and other things.

- Nimi works as a research assistant with his professor.

- Christine is a social influencer. Her goal is to use social media to impact the lives of others. For instance, she posts only inspirational quotes on her pages, nothing political, degrading, or violent.

Code 9 – Culture Influence (in-vivo). There is a wealth of research that shows that culture is a strong influence and an essential part of our existence as a human race (Khanal &

Gaulee, 2019; Teichier, 2017; Baba & Hosoda, 2014; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Hendrickson et al., 2011; Zhou et al., 2008). Understanding one's culture and the cultural environment of a host country is essential to students feeling connected (Hendrickson et al., 2011). Some participants experienced various culture shocks as they compared the US culture to their home culture. They realized the US is an individualistic society compared to their home culture, and in some cases, they felt alienated socially and dressing style. So, here are some examples of cultural influence that arose from the data collected from the participants of this study.

- Melanie arrived during the pandemic and experienced some culture shock at being treated differently because of her skin color, lack of interaction with her campus colleagues, and not the usual friendly greetings she was used to back home in Malawi and even Malaysia, where she completed some schooling.

- "So, I can say that my environment in Kenya was much more nurturing compared to my environment in the US because the US it's really individual, so I think I will thrive better in a communal environment where I can feed off of other people's energy and exchanges." (*Kean*)

- Kioni felt she stood out initially because her dressing style was more formal than her peers, and she had to revamp her wardrobe to try to blend into how her peers dress when on campus.

Code 10 – Meditation/Therapy (In-Vivo). Research shows that meditation is critical to positive education outcomes because it enhances information processing, high concentration levels, and awareness (Altinyelken et al., 2020). Though only one participant indicated that they meditate, others shared using similar wellness-related resources like therapy and counseling.

- Ndidi enjoyed using counseling and therapy sessions offered on campus, especially when she was at a crossroads of crucial decision-making.

- Nanoma felt that her counseling sessions on campus made her feel more connected to her campus environment.

- George meditates when going through challenges.

Code 11 – Money, Wealth, and Fame (In-Vivo). Though international students significantly contribute to the American economy (MPI, 2021; Institute of International Education, 2020), research on international students consistently claims that they struggle with finances when they are studying in America (Mori, 2000). Some participants did share their desire for access to additional funding while in the USA. At the same time, some discussed their desire to acquire more wealth. Here are some examples of these.

- Funding was critical to Naija's decision-making process to come to the US. He preferred other European schools but eventually turned them down because they did not offer him any funding.

- "I want to be the best. I want to be known. I want to be popular. I want to make money." (*George*)

- "I see a lot of people that show off their lifestyle on Instagram and have a lot of money. And sometimes you just want to have that kind of money." (*Nnamdi*)

Code 12 – Military and Political Influence (In-Vivo). There is no research on international students with prior military and political backgrounds and how that may influence their studies. However, one of the participants in this study shared the importance of his military connection. Here is a snapshot of what he said.

- George was the Chaplain in the Ghana armed forces. He was also introduced to politics by his uncle. His background influenced his interest in the course he is studying so that he can further his political aspirations.

Code 13 – Mental Health Awareness (In-Vivo). Growing research demonstrates the importance of mental health awareness among international students (Mori, 2000). However, a perceived stigma among international students creates a solid resistance to using mental health-related systems, including counseling and therapy (Golberstein et al., 2008). A few participants shared their use and interest in using these services, which is interesting to note. Here are some examples of how they interacted with such facilities.

- For Niyi, mental health is vital, and he strongly feels that his campus needs to create more programs and interventions to help their students in that area.

- Melanie sees a therapist or counselor as often as possible, especially when she needs to make an important decision.

Code 14 – Religion (In-Vivo). Research shows that religion could be a coping tool for international students feeling stressed in their new host environment (Philip et al., 2019). Students who cope with challenges by holding onto their religious beliefs tend to function better holistically, producing positive academic outcomes (Philip et al., 2019). Religion was one of the major coping strategies for many participants. Here are some examples of how some participants feel connected spiritually and how this connection generally helps them.

- "So that's when I face challenges. I pray about it. And I believe that there is a spirit that is living with me that will direct me on the right path." (*Ngozi*)

- Naden shared a testimony of how she had an assignment due at 11:59 pm on a Sunday and prayed to God to give her extra time, and she saw an email from her professor giving an additional three days to submit.

- "I think religion has really influenced my own life, personally, like 200%. I so much believe in what God had said, I so much believe in the life of God, I so much believe in, in upright living." (*Nasha*)

Code 15 – Entertainment (In-Vivo). Research shows that international students use social media as their primary entertainment system to relax and de-stress while in their host country (Gomes & Alzougool, 2013). However, the host culture does not always influence international students due to their reliance on and connection to their home country's entertainment options (Gomes, 2015). After all, their home entertainment is more relatable as no language barriers or cultural decoding is needed. Nonetheless, international students may watch programs from their host country to learn more about the culture (Gomes et al., 2013). Participants in this study mostly associated their use of entertainment media as a necessary tool for relaxing and staying connected to the rest of the world. Here are some examples.

- "I look for comedies like structured comedies from Nigeria, these skits makers, and just watch a bit of their videos, and I end up being fine after that. (*Nnamdi*)

- "I watch videos, listen to motivational speakers, listen to lectures, listen, watch funny movies watch, or jokes" to manage stress (*George*)

- "I try not to get myself involved in stressful situations. So, but if for some reason I'm stressed, if I can't sleep, I will probably just watch a skit on Instagram or a Yoruba movie on YouTube?" (Naija)

In sum, the researcher exhausted all the codes possible from the data. Although some of the codes created seem like multiple codes, like "Money, Wealth, Fame" or "Meditation/Therapy," could be deemed as three or two separate codes, they are rolled into one to make sense of the data. They were similar enough to be combined as one code for this study.

With that said, some ethical considerations needed to be considered in this study, primarily because it is a study on human research. Below are some discussions on the ethical considerations and limitations of this study.

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Several limitations and considerations may exist. First, this study is limited in terms of time and resources because the researcher is a part-time student, so it is impossible for her to spend unlimited time at the school. Secondly, protecting the participants and their schools is her primary ethical consideration. Participants were made aware of the implications of this study. Pseudonyms were given to each participant so that their identity was confidential, and the schools contacted were referred to by their geographic region. The University of Wisconsin-Madison Institutional Review Board approved before the data was collected. Once approved, data was collected and coded, and the researcher removed all identifiable markers. Data is in a safe place that only the interviewer can access. Destroying the data will occur after the publications of the results is final. Third, the researcher knows that spoken words may have different cultural meanings due to the diverse student participants, even though the interview was conducted in English (Qu & Dumay, 2011), even though none of the African international student participants self-identified as English language learners. However, due to limited audio quality in some cases and the challenge of fully understanding all responses due to differences in accent, the researcher took steps to analyze to make rich data carefully (Qu & Dumay, 2011;

Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; 2009) by replaying audio and summarizing statements instead of attempting to quote the data so as not to misconstrue meanings. Though this study does not seek to generalize the results to any specific populations, the purpose of this study is to provide a detailed description of the unique contextual factors present in the study's setting because, as a researcher employing qualitative research techniques, this description may aid readers in understanding the transferability of the results (concerning the extent to which the results of qualitative research apply in other contexts) (Lincoln & Guba, 1986; McDonald et al., 2019).

Research shows that interviews are a means of conversation that creates space for storytelling to obtain knowledge and information (Fontana & Frey, 1994; Johnson et al., 2021). Though there were pre-generated questions, there was a heavy reliance on open-ended questions to enable each participant to provide information beyond the breadth of the pre-generated questions, leading to a more significant data width (Fontana & Frey, 1994). Additionally, clarifying questions were asked during the interviews when needed to understand participants' perspectives.

The researcher's ability to identify the common challenges international students experience and their social and emotional competence, and the role social media plays in helping these students maintain their social and emotional well-being does enhance quality, transferability, and trustworthiness (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). While the results might not be generalizable, students in similar situations should be able to relate to the experiences described in the study. So, this gives the research external validity (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). The research also has internal validity through triangulation, a common approach to verifying ideas, issues, and perceptions (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007).

Another limitation of this study is the need to compare student groups and African international student participants. This limitation calls for further research on how other student groups use social media compared to their African international student counterparts. Other student groups could include 1.5-generation African international students and other international student groups. Further research could also compare students' experiences from each African country and different African regions.

Additionally, this study did not examine the relationship between virtual and in-person communities. Since the focal point of this study was how the students use and build social organizations online, future research could also include a comparison between online and offline communities and whether social media enhanced any of these connections.

Researcher Positionality

As a Black student in an American college, even though she was not an international student due to her immigration status, the researcher experienced a form of alienation. She is a student who is Nigerian-born, British-trained, and an American citizen. She spent her growing years, including primary, secondary, and undergraduate education, mainly in the United Kingdom, thus the peculiarity of her accent and mannerisms. In addition, she recently married a Nigerian-raised man whose culture, family lifestyle, and upbringing are Nigerian. Fortunately, her husband also schooled in the United States as an international student, and some of the challenges he shared that he went through resonated as she pushed forward in her research.

As a young graduate student in a master's class, having not been to her birth country since birth, and as the only black student in the class, she listened to some misrepresentations of some African countries that gave her concern about how students from such countries would have been able to cope if they seated in those classes. Though the intent may not have been to spite the

nations or their citizens, those are misrepresented data by media publications to malign the affected countries and generally do not showcase the potential or positivity associated with those countries, thus making a general claim as posited by media.

Experiencing such and complimenting her husband's experience during his graduate degrees and the huddle he went through to clarify issues in classes due to his accent remains a focal point and the need for better preparation for African international students as they increase in their numbers to pursue academic degrees in the United States for whatever reason inspires them. Research has stated that students from African nations are talented and mostly succeed in their academic pursuits despite the hurdles they must cross to reach this height.

Additionally, the researcher and her husband, at the points of entry, had to figure out a way to navigate their new home and academic environments after arriving in the United States of America. They had to figure out transportation, housing, food, and other vital social amenities they would need as new arrivals in the country. They used whatever connections they had access to, including online resources, to figure their way around, and where resources were scarce, they had to figure out other means to navigate around their new environments (i.e., learning to be street smart and letting experience lead them to the best outcomes).

This research, therefore, focuses and seeks to have in-depth knowledge of how African international students maintain their social and emotional competence in their pursuit of academic degrees and, most importantly, form the basis for further research toward a more acceptable policy-loving system that will address some of the barriers faced by African international students in American institution to create a more welcoming environment through value-driven institutions whose impact will mold well-rounded yet intelligent scholars that will positively impact the world at large.

Chapter 4: Research Findings

The primary focus of this chapter is to discuss the findings predicated by the research. This research is centered on the experiences of African international students, a distinct group different from other black students, and their use of social media as a tool for their social and emotional competence as they undergo higher education in American educational institutions. Having exhausted sections 1 to 3 of the interview protocol questions, section 4 of the interview protocol (as seen in *Appendix C*), titled "Evaluation of Participant's Social and Emotional Awareness using Social Media Platforms," asked participants questions needed for this portion of the study. This research examines how African international students use social media as a tool for their social and emotional competence as they undergo higher education in American educational institutions.

As discussed in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, the development and maintenance of a socially and emotionally aware individual depend on attaining the five domains derived from the CASEL framework developed by Domitrovich et al. (2017) (see also *Appendix A* for more information). The assumption here is that individuals who have attained these areas of competence will achieve positive academic outcomes, amongst other personal achievements. Therefore, the results presented in this chapter are relevant to these five domains: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision-making, and relationship-building.

CASEL Domain 1 – Self-Awareness

According to Domitrovich et al. (2017), self-awareness is essentially the ability "to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts" (*What is the CASEL framework*, 2021, para. 1). In trying to understand how African international students' emotions, thoughts, and values impact their academic pursuits, the first

question asked the participants how their family, culture, and environment influenced how they view themselves.

All 17 participants expressed that their family influences them, whether in a little way or to a large extent. Some also expressed the role family played in their emotional and academic outcomes, supporting existing research that shows that parental or family influence is paramount to students' learning outcomes and educational trajectories (Rong & Brown, 2007; Ito et al., 2010). One of the critical reasons parental influences are key is because of the emotional and physical support they provide to their international students. African international students are no exception to this influence, especially when they come from close-knit communal units that rely heavily on their success abroad. The monetary and other sacrifices families make for international students to study abroad also play a significant role in how these students set their priorities abroad. Nnamdi's parents, for example, influence him greatly but in different ways. For instance, his dad influenced his current educational degree – a master's in electrical engineering. His mom influenced his decision to consider marriage only after he finished his degree. He also works as a student assistant to have some money to send to his mother to alleviate some financial burden off her. With such a scenario, it is no surprise that parental influence significantly impacts the participant's behavior and self-awareness.

Since families feel responsible for the upkeep of their students, social media provides a platform through which they can maintain contact and keep engaged. Notably, families need to maintain contact through social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp so that international students do not feel as isolated as the distance from their home country could potentially make them (Chai et al., 2020), which is consistent with the results collected from this

study. *Table 1* is an excerpt from the interviews conducted with all 17 participants on their use of social media as a tool for self-awareness.

Table 1: Participants' social media use for Self-awareness

Participants	Social Media Platform	Purpose
George	Twitter & WhatsApp	Connection and Communication
Melina	Snapchat, Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook	Self-reflection through comment from followers, making calls; Maintaining existing relationship
Kioni	Facebook, Snapchat, WhatsApp, Discord, Tick Tok, Telegram, Pinterest, LinkedIn, Hangout	Knowledge gathering, Learning more about other cultures and Creating a sense of awareness
Nnamdi	Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Facebook	Informative power and communication
Naija	Twitter, Instagram, YouTube	Socio-political news, Sports news, Watching movies
Nasha	LinkedIn (most preferred), Twitter, Facebook, Instagram	Motivation and Connection
Niyi	LinkedIn, Instagram, Facebook & Twitter (but not posted anything to date)	Motivation and Connection
Ndidi	WhatsApp, Instagram, twitter, Snapchat, Tic Tok, Facebook (not as active), YouTube	Motivation, communication, and Connection
Nasiru	Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Snapchat	Communication, Connection and News
Nimi	Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter	Communication, Connection and News
Kean	WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, Reddit, GroupMe (for school), Heavily on YouTube	Communication, Connection, Relaxation, News and Followership
Naden	Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, WhatsApp	Communication, Connection, Motivation and News
Nura	Facebook and WhatsApp	Connection and Communication
Christine	Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram	Connection, News, and followership
Gifty	Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp	Connection, News, Communication
Ngozi	WhatsApp	Communication
Nanoma	WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn	Communication, Connection, News

Furthermore, the study participants all shared, in some capacity, the support they received from family and community members before and during their study abroad. The awareness of the insurmountable support they received and continue to receive from their families has enabled the students to maintain such connections online. It has firmly upheld the self-awareness factor

of the CASEL social and emotional competence. For instance, Nimi uses WhatsApp to connect with his folks back home because they motivate him to succeed. The following quote sums up the attachment he has to his family:

> *"What motivates me to make progress? My family. I don't want my family to be homeless or to be hungry. And again, being an international student on an F-1 visa, the only thing that ensures that I remain in status is to succeed. So, to make progress, I mean, appreciate progress. Also, coming from thousands of miles away from here, in my culture, there will not be any reason for failure, you know, you can't go back home and say, oh, you failed. So, there is a lot of motivation. So, there are people that have expectations of you, you know, as an individual, so your family, your parents, all of them are hoping or you know. So those are the kinds of things that motivate me. Yeah, basically, my family. Both my immediate family, nuclear family, and extended family."*

However, it was impossible to determine how much time the student participants spent connecting with their families online. Unlike the ethnographic design used in the Ito et al. (2010) study, the current study used semi-structured interviews. It was not privy to observing the participants' day-to-day activities to determine how much time they spend online with their families. Nevertheless, all 17 participants use their preferred social media platform daily. These interactions keep them motivated and focused on their academic pursuits and career aspirations.

Another question on self-awareness was, "How do you handle difficult situations?" Many participants claim that they talk to family and friends as they wade through difficult situations, including challenges related to their academics, which is consistent with existing research that shows that parental influence significantly impacts educational outcomes and other personal goals (Ito et al., 2010; Chai, Van, Wang, Lee, & Wang, 2020). In a study of 1,436 international

students at a university in the southern western part of the United States, Chai et al. (2020) found that perceived family support is crucial to international student outcomes and positively impacts cross-cultural adjustment because it strengthens their tenacity to achieve their academic goals.

Table 2: Quote from Participants' social media use for Self-awareness

Social Media Platform	Frequency	Participants	Purpose from research	Quote from Participants
WhatsApp	13	Ngozi	Communication	*I use [WhatsApp] every day because I speak with my family every day.*
Twitter	10	Nanoma	Communication, Connection, News	*I will say sports, soccer News comes first*
Facebook	13	Christine	Connection, News, and Followership	*Facebook is only for streaming and see what people are up to.*
Tik Tok	2	Ndidi	Motivation, Communication, and Connection	*Nothing Specific, just a user and I use social media generally to compare my progress with other people online*
Telegram	1	Kioni	Knowledge gathering, learning more about other culture and creating a sense of awareness	*Connection and information gathering for knowledge acquisition*
Pinterest	1	Kioni	Knowledge gathering, learning more about other culture and creating a sense of awareness	*Connection and information gathering for acquiring knowledge*
LinkedIn	6	Naden	Communication, Connection, Motivation and News	*I am selective on who to follow on social media and thus get inspired by the posts of those I follow. I am also motivated when I am messaged about my achievements.*
Hangout	1	Kioni	Knowledge gathering, learning more about other culture and creating a sense of awareness	*Connection and information gathering for acquiring knowledge*
Snapchat	4	Melina	Self-reflection through comment from followers, making calls; maintaining existing relationship	*I create content about my day to make people happy and I am motivated to keep doing that because of the feedback I receive that I am funny, and that people love my post.*
YouTube	3	Naija	Socio-political news, sports news, watching movies	*Enjoy watching Nigerian movies on YouTube.*
Reddit	1	Kean	Knowledge gathering, learning more about other culture and creating a sense of awareness	*Information gathering on topics I didn't understand in class.*
GroupMe	1	Kean	Communication, Connection, Relaxation, News and Followership	*General connection on messages received from friends.*
Instagram	9	Gifty	Connection, News, Communication	*I use Instagram as my professional page.*
Discord	1	Kioni	Knowledge gathering, learning more about other culture and creating a sense of awareness	*Connection and information gathering for acquiring knowledge.*

In furtherance to the use of social media as a tool for self-awareness by African international students in the United States, *Table 2* further describes what social media platform is used mainly by the participants and for what purpose precisely (see also *Appendix E* which includes a description of the app used). The table shows that WhatsApp and Facebook are the most popular social media platforms among the participants for self-awareness. The use of the two platforms is centered around communication, creating, maintaining, and sustaining relationships. Ngozi states that she uses WhatsApp daily because she speaks to her family daily, while Christine's use of Facebook centers around streaming and the trending lives of others online. The most accepted social media platform relevant to self-awareness by the participants rests on communication and connection. The impact of these two factors is fundamental to how the participants manage their self-awareness, a critical component in the CASEL social and emotional competency framework.

Overall, the responses gathered show the importance of family and relationship to the respondents' discovery of their self-awareness, and data has proven that social media is an effective tool that aids the connection that sustains the most crucial factor that influences African international students' self-awareness in American higher educational institutions.

CASEL Domain 2 – Self-Management

The CASEL framework defines self-management as "the ability to manage one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations and achieve goals and aspirations." (*What is the CASEL framework*, 2021, para. 1). The results show that the participants do different things, like meditating, praying, and talking to family and friends to help manage their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. Along with this, they also try to manage their time in a way that enables them to stay in line with their orders of priority, and the primary

motivator for this is the fear of failure. Given the context of this study, time and stress

management is the most effective self-management tool. They would disappoint their family

members if they cannot manage themselves amid challenges from family members. Even with

that, the data suggests that African international students like to find answers or solutions to their

problems independently. They rarely seek professional help on campus unless it directly relates

to a subject matter. Even then, most participants prefer using Google or similar resources if

stuck.

Table 3 displays a chart of the participants' responses toward the use of social media as a

tool for Self-Management.

Table 3: Participants' social media use for Self-management

Participants	Social Media Platform	Purpose
George	WhatsApp, YouTube, Twitter	Stress Management
Melina	WhatsApp	Communication
Kioni	Facebook, Snapchat, WhatsApp, Discord, Tick Tok, Telegram, Pinterest, LinkedIn, Hangout	Communication and Learning
Nnamdi	Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Facebook	Stress Management
Naija	YouTube; Instagram	Stress Management
Nasha	LinkedIn, WhatsApp	Motivation and Communication
Niyi	YouTube	Stress Management through music and comedy skits
Ndidi	YouTube	Learning - Knowledge acquisition
Nasiru	NA	NA
Nimi	Facebook	Stress Management and News
Kean	WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, Reddit, GroupMe (for school), Heavily on YouTube	Memories and Fun
Naden	LinkedIn	Motivation/Inspiration
Nura	Facebook and WhatsApp	Stress Management (relaxation), refreshment
Christine	Facebook; LinkedIn; Instagram	Stress Management and Learning/motivation

Gifty	Instagram	Connection, Learning
Ngozi	NA	NA
Nanoma	NA	NA

Stress management, relationship management (existing and new), communication, learning, and motivation are the prevalent goals for using social media to manage self during academic study in an American higher educational institution. The uses of social media vary among the participants. However, the impact of self-management is visibly centered around handling challenging situations, which helps to relieve the pressure that comes with attaining higher education. Even though they were in a new environment, these student participants showed tenacity toward achieving success, which showcases their determination to succeed no matter the cost. For example, 29% of the participants struggle with time management. Though they are not in the majority, it is still important to note because of the potential ramifications of one's inability to manage one's time effectively. For example, Christine struggles with time management because she homeschools her kids while studying and working. Naden also struggles with time management because she lectures as a teaching assistant (TA), takes classes, and does academic research. Though these students claim they have a method of managing their time, including asking for extensions or other accommodations, none complained. Instead, they discussed their challenges as part of their daily routine, showing they could navigate situations hindering their time management. They choose not to give up and remain focused on the goals they set out with so that they can make their families and home communities proud of their successes when they return home.

With that said, it will be interesting to do a comparative study on the self-management challenges African international students and their American counterparts experience to determine what aspects are unique to African international students, mainly because they do not

necessarily have the same access to the same academic, financial, and other resources since they are non-citizens and unfamiliar with their new and unfamiliar environment. However, they need specific accommodations to address their needs while studying in America. If American higher educational institutions can prioritize the needs of African international students, the assumption, based on research, is that they will not be potential candidates for depression, delayed graduation, and more (David et al., 2023). Further research is needed to understand what specific accommodations would be effective and beneficial for African international students. Academic institutions should not only prioritize the financial gains they receive from African international students but rather find ways to provide any necessary support that these students will need during their academic progression in America.

Table 4: Quotes from Participants' social media use for self-management

Social Media Platform	Frequency	Participant	Purpose	Quote from Participants
WhatsApp	7	Nura	Stress Management (relaxation), refreshment	*I am a part of the African Student Union on campus and our primary mode of communication is WhatsApp where we exchange ideas, thoughts, questions, and get feedback.*
Twitter	3	Nnamdi	Stress Management	*So, I look for comedies like structured comedies from Nigeria and just watch a bit of their videos to distress and feel after.*
Facebook	4	Nimi	Stress Management and News	*I sometimes go to Facebook whenever I am tired and feel like he is not making progress. It helps me to relax and use the time to check what's going on in the world.*
Tik Tok	1	Kioni	Communication and Learning	*I go to TikTok to see messages and also see videos created to counteract racism and what we think of other people.*
Telegram	1	Kioni	Communication and Learning	*Connection and information gathering for knowledge acquisition.*
Pinterest	1	Kioni	Communication and Learning	*Connection and information gathering for acquiring knowledge.*
LinkedIn	4	Christine	Stress Management and learning/motivation	*That's a good stress management tool for me because sometimes I go online and I'm like, Oh, my life is not that bad. Oh, look at what this person is doing, maybe this will help me"*
Hangout	1	Kioni	Communication and Learning	*Connection and information gathering for acquiring knowledge.*

Snapchat	2	Nnamdi	Stress Management	*So I look for comedies like structured comedies from Nigeria and just watch a bit of their videos to distress and feel after.*
YouTube	5	George	Stress Management	*"I watch videos, listen to motivational speakers, listen to lectures, listen, watch funny movies, or jokes"*
Reddit	1	Kean	Memories and Fun	*Information gathering on topics I didn't understand in class.*
GroupMe	1	Kean	Memories and Fun	*I use GroupMe for school activities.*
Instagram	5	Gifty	Connection, Learning	*I love cooking and I use Instagram to gather recipe and follow short videos to learn how to cook new food.*
Discord	1	Kioni	Communication and Learning	*Connection and information gathering for acquiring knowledge.*

Nevertheless, WhatsApp remains the most used social media platform for self-management, according to *Table 4* (see also *Appendix F* which includes a description of the app used). The data also revealed the acceptability level of other social media platforms under self-management. YouTube and Instagram are the second most popular social media platforms after WhatsApp. At the same time, Facebook and LinkedIn took the third position among the social media platform with high usage and acceptability by African international students for self-management.

Uses also vary among participants. Nura uses WhatsApp group functions where individuals with common identities share ideas, ask questions, and get feedback. Although this usage could be for building connections and communication, the participant categorizes its use as a stress management and relaxation platform.

The participants use YouTube and Instagram as the second most popular social media platform under self-management for stress management, connection, and learning. For instance, George uses the YouTube platform as a stress management tool where they watch funny videos, motivational videos, and the like. On the other hand, Gifty uses the Instagram platform for

connection and learning. Gifty states that she loves cooking and, as such, uses the platform to gather recipes as well as follow short cooking videos to learn how to cook new food.

In the third position for social media platform usage are Facebook and LinkedIn platforms. The users of these platforms utilize them for stress management, news gathering, learning, and motivation. Nimi says, "*I sometimes go to Facebook whenever I am tired and feel like I'm not making progress. It helps me to relax and use the time to check what's going on in the world*," while Christine uses LinkedIn in evaluating herself by looking at how others in her network are doing and thereby challenges and motivates herself to forge ahead. The CASEL framework for social and emotional competence has revealed that social media platform usage varies among the participants and is thus unique to the personality of the participants interviewed during the research.

CASEL Domain 3 – Social Awareness

According to CASEL, *social awareness* is "the ability to understand the perspective of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and contexts" (*What is the CASEL framework*, 2021, para. 1*)*. Discourse on social awareness typically centers on social adjustment and social networks. For instance, Andrade (2006) suggests that the positive academic outcomes of international students are heavily reliant on the expanse of their social network. In other words, for African international students to be successful, they need to increase their social networks. However, their limited social connectedness in America does not expose them to a wide range of diverse connections and may keep them feeling lonely and isolated. Research also suggests that the cause of their lack of quality social connectedness is mainly attributed to the limited presence of family and kinship ties (Andrade, 2006; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019).

Interestingly, Andrade (2006) found that Asian students who socialized more were less satisfied with their campus environment and did not typically engage in active learning and diversity-related activities. It is unknown whether African international students have the same conclusions as their Asian counterparts if they do not actively engage with their campus. However, the data shows that the participants who do not socialize still feel satisfied with their campus environment and do not even think there is a cultural gap on campus. However, unlike their Asian counterparts in Andrade (2006), African international students like Naden, in this study, do not socialize much or engage in campus activities but seem generally satisfied with their campus environment. Moreover, those who actively engage in campus activities do so minimally online via email and some social media platforms. However, the general reason participants are actively engaged on campus is that they prefer to spend time with their professors or manage their workload (i.e., program-specific activities or assistantship commitments), limiting their ability to interact with others on campus.

Nevertheless, even though the study participants do not seem to engage in campus activities, 29% claim they feel connected to their campus. For example, Naden states, *"This is where I belong and can interact with anybody at any time without having, you know, any doubts or anything."* Naden's statement is interesting because it is from someone who does not engage in her campus events. Nevertheless, she does not appear to have a negative experience that research suggests is common among international students.

Table 5 is a snapshot of African international students' use of social media as a tool for their social awareness in American higher educational institutions:

Table 5: Participants' social media use for social awareness

Participants	Social Media Platform	Purpose
George	Campus News	Data Gathering- News
Melina	Email	Information, covid was a barrier for connection
Kioni	Facebook and Instagram and Tick Tock	Connection - its importance since Pandemic
Nnamdi	Email, School Portal, and other social media outlet	Information gathering
Naija	Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube	News
Nasha	LinkedIn	Motivation, Connection and Learning
Niyi	Email, Instagram, LinkedIn	Information, News, and learning
Ndidi	Email, YouTube	Information, Learning
Nasiru	Microsoft Teams	Class activities
Nimi	LinkedIn and email	Information
Kean	GroupMe, Twitter, Instagram, Reddit	News, Information and Connection
Naden	Email and LinkedIn	News and Motivation
Nura	Email	Information and News
Christine	Email and Facebook	News and views
Gifty	Facebook	Connection and Job Search
Ngozi	WhatsApp and Emails	Information, Communication and Connection
Nanoma	Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter, LinkedIn, Zoom	Stress management, Connection

Table 5 shows that the African international student participants typically use social media for information gathering through news or newsletter or whatever social media platform they use. Prevalent is the use of email, which serves as the platform where vital information is being circulated. Another participant referenced Microsoft Teams, the school portal, Facebook for professionals, GroupMe, and even student WhatsApp groups to connect with course mates. Interestingly, these African international students only involve themselves a little with physical interaction outside of the classroom. Worthy to mention was the barrier of Covid-19 that brought

about social distancing and online classes, thereby widening the gap for physical interaction. It was also good to hear that because of the potential separation caused by covid, the students who relied on social media for updates and information gathering made them appreciate the importance of physical connection pre-covid, which supports David et al. (2023). David et al. (2023) found that covid significantly influenced the academic lives of the African international students in their study as it disrupted traditional networking and academic routines. They also found that these experiences were further impacted negatively by other social practices and legislation that acted as barriers for international students, such as banning certain African countries from entering the United States. Further research could be pursued to know how things have changed post-covid.

Even so, some participants in the current study recognize some of their universities' cultural efforts. They believe these efforts are the correct attempts to unite all students by encouraging student engagement. For instance, Nasha feels that his campus intentionally engages its international students because they create *"an avenue for international students to come live together, talk together, share ideas. And like, for instance, today, I had to go to the Thanksgiving program hosted by the international students in school."* For Christine, *"The university is bridging the gap by creating a language room for language learners, there's a writing center, professors are also available to discuss with, and information is available on resources."*

Looking closely at Christine's statement, research suggests that because international students struggle with accent and language barrier issues, it is essential for faculty to develop a culturally responsive curriculum (Jagers et al., 2019) and create an inclusive classroom to include connecting course content to relatable scenarios for all students, speaking at a slower pace, and being more explicit on assignments and class tasks ahead of time so that international

students can have the time to process expectations and classroom content (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Kim, 2014; Andrade, 2006). It is safe to conclude that using social media as a tool by African international students for social awareness is more of information gathering than the active engagement of African international students with their other student counterparts, thereby getting closer to learning about their school and living environment as well as the American culture.

Table 6: Quotes from Participants' social media use for social awareness

Social Media Platform	Frequency	Participant	Purpose	Quote from Participants
WhatsApp	2	Ngozi	Information, Communication and Connection	*I use [WhatsApp] every day, because I speak with my family every day.*
Twitter	3	Nanoma	Stress management, connection	*I just look at videos, and I laugh.*
Facebook	4	Gifty	Connection and Job Search	*I am on professional group of historians or scholars who study different aspects of Ghana's history" and there are job opportunities posted in that professional group too.*
Tik Tok	1	Kioni	Connection - its importance since Pandemic	*"...before the pandemic, I thought social media was horrible, before the pandemic, but during the pandemic, and after the pandemic, I realized that people are more human, and that we all just need to understand that different cultures, different colors, different languages, we can all come together and, and just exist peacefully thus using the platform for connection.*
LinkedIn	5	Naden	News and Motivation	*I get inspired by people's stories that would trigger me to want to do more.*
YouTube	2	Naija	News	*I am a compassionate conservative "So, I like to get a balanced view of the political spectrum through videos uploaded by different group.*
Reddit	1	Kean	News, Information and Connection	*I use the platform for news gathering.*
GroupMe	1	Kean	News, Information and Connection	*General connection on messages received from friends also for information gathering and news on events.*
Instagram	5	Niyi	Information, News, and learning	*I follow the official school handle on Instagram.*
Email	9	Christine	News and views	*I don't think social media impacts how I view people because I know that people just share their 5 seconds on Facebook.*
Campus News	1	George	Data Gathering- News	*I use Twitter to catchup on campus news 24/7.*
Zoom	1	Nanoma	Stress management, connection	*Well, I feel I miss my home. I miss Nigeria all the time. I just try to stay in touch in touch with my family via zoom calls, like video calls. So that really helps just staying in touch with what's happening in their life. Getting to hear what's happening in the country.*

Microsoft Teams	1	Nasiru	Class activities	*Uses Microsoft Teams to connect with classmates.*
School Portal	1	Nnamdi	Information gathering	*I use the portal to gather information relating to school programs, events, and news.*

A further deep dive into the respondents' feedback on social awareness revealed unique platforms used mainly by the participants as seen in *Table 6* (see also *Appendix G,* which includes a description of the app used): emails and newsletters. Traditionally, emails and newsletters are not social media platforms. However, the participant's responses believe it is and ranked first among the participants. Christine's response to the interview question about what social media platforms she uses to acclimatize to her campus and residential environment was worthy of mention. Christine's response was email and newsletter. A follow-up question, "To what extent does social media impact the way you view the people and the world around you?" better explains their attachment and perception of social media, which better explains why emails and newsletters are the platforms they perceive viable to help acclimatize to their campus and residential environments. Christine believes that the information shared on social media is not a complete story and, as such, might not be an excellent representation to impact one's life.

Other top-ranking social media platforms for social awareness by the participants are LinkedIn and Instagram, which 5 participants believe are viable platforms that help them acclimate to their campus and residential environments. The participants' responses depict that using social media for social awareness serves three primary purposes: information gathering (news), learning, and motivation. Naden uses LinkedIn for news and motivation because other people's stories inspire her to do more, while Niyi's use of Instagram as a social media platform for social awareness is primarily to get school updates by following the school's official Instagram handle. Participant responses reinforce that there are unique views to situations than can be imagined.

CASEL Domain 4 – Responsible Decision-Making

CASEL defines *responsible decision-making* as "the ability to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations" (*What is the CASEL framework*, 2021, para. 1*).* For African international students to be able to make caring and constructive choices, they need to have a goal or objective. Without a goal, they may be unable to make choices that positively impact themselves and their community effectively. To make reasonable decisions, according to Lewthwaite (1996), when far from home and during a challenge, international students prioritize the following three things: (1) make compromises that enable them to adapt well to their academic environment; (2) complete their academic requirements; and (3) seek deeper cultural integration. A glance at this order of priorities explains why international students do not generally engage in social engagements compared to their American counterparts. Interestingly, participants expressed a similar order of priorities in the current study. The students here prioritized their education and career goals.

The top priority for the participants in this study is their education, as 59% of the participants claimed they solely prioritize their academic requirements (i.e., graduation, attending conferences, and publishing). Why? Because of the fear of failure and the fact that they feel indebted to their families and members of the community back home, that paved their way to study in America. So, from the moment they land in America to the moment they complete their degree, African international students have no room to entertain any form of distraction because of the financial burden they carry as well as the fact that the burden of the following steps after graduation lies solely on them and their performance throughout their study. So, completing their degree is paramount, which resonates with Lewthwaite (1996) 's analysis.

Table 7 is a snapshot of the 17 participants' perceived use of social media as a tool for responsible decision-making. In this regard, the prevalent use of social media is for learning, information gathering, and research, which directly relates to the participants' priorities. Even though the participants' priorities vary, it hovers around the successful completion of their program and landing a job after their program. Therefore, learning, information gathering, and research is the modal reason African international students use social media for responsible decision-making. When in unfamiliar terrain, the best thing to do is research and gather relevant information that aligns with one's decision-making priorities.

Table 7: Participants' social media use for responsible decision-making

Participants	Social Media Platform	Purpose
George	Google and YouTube	Research and learning
Melina	Tic Tok, Pinterest and Google	Idea generation and Research
Kioni	YouTube and Google	Learning and Research
Nnamdi	Twitter	Motivation
Naija	Twitter	Information Gathering, Research
Nasha	LinkedIn	Learning and Awareness
Niyi	LinkedIn, Instagram, Facebook & Twitter	Perspective, information gathering
Ndidi	Instagram	Information gathering, learning other culture and Connection
Nasiru	Instagram; Facebook; WhatsApp; Snapchat	Trend, Information gathering and learning
Nimi	NA	NA
Kean	Quora; Reddit; YouTube	Information gathering
Naden	NA	NA
Nura	Google	Information Gathering
Christine	NA	NA
Gifty	NA	NA
Ngozi	NA	NA
Nanoma	NA	NA

According to Roy et al. (2016), the "earning potential after graduation" of sub-Saharan African students is critical to their course of study. In other words, African international students prioritize their career goals because it is the route through which they can potentially make the income they desire after completing their studies. So, when they come to America, their focus is not limited to their academic progression but also on the potential career opportunities available in America and back home. For example, Niyi, in *Table* 8 (see also *Appendix H* which includes a description of the app used), expressed his desire to have some of the wealth displayed online. Though the goal is always to return home, they are open to any opportunities in America that may be open to them if it leads to the same outcome: making money. Though Roy et al. (2016) do not go into much detail regarding how sub-Saharan African students define their earning potential, nor do they compare the earning potentials back home and in America, they strongly emphasize the importance of getting a job after graduation. Based on the findings in this study, their financial burden probably drives their motivation to seek gainful employment, which will help them repay their debts once they graduate.

Table 8: Quotes from Participants' social media use for responsible decision-making

Social Media Platform	Frequency of use by participants	Participant	Purpose	Quote from Participants
WhatsApp	1	Nasiru	Trend, Information gathering and learning	*I use social media to understand growing social norms like sexual orientations by following conversations online.*
Twitter	3	Nnamdi	Motivation	*I think I was really motivated to come here through Twitter. There's this trend where you take a picture of your passport, then you take a picture of the airport and take a picture of a class in a college. Then you write something like "we move" or something like that. That means that they left Nigeria, to come and school here. I saw that a lot before I came. So, I don't know maybe subconsciously it affected me....so a lot of people doing that then and I just wanted to also snap my passport and post my transition as well.*
Facebook	2	Niyi	Perspective, information gathering	*I see a lot of people that show off their lifestyle on Instagram and have a lot of money. And sometimes you just want to have that kind of money...*

Tik Tok	1	Melina	Idea generation and Research	*I see things on TikTok, get ideas from it and try things out.*
LinkedIn	2	Nasha	Learning and Awareness	*LinkedIn helps me to think about present and future research ideas and motivates me to achieve more*
YouTube	3	George	Research and learning	*Social media impacts strongly on how what I do and how I do them. If I have to decide certain things, I like to look at what people have done in the past by checking Google and YouTube*
Reddit	1	Kean	Information gathering	*N/A*
Instagram	3	Ndidi	Information gathering, learning other culture and Connection	*I use the platform to compare my progress with other people online and to learn about other people's cultures.*
Google	4	Nura	Information Gathering	*I use the platform to gather information on how to maintain my status and US regulations. This information is also shared by the international student services.*
Pinterest	1	Melina	Idea generation and Research	*It exposes me to a lot of things, and I sometime see something that interests me which potentially spurs my decision-making process.*
Quora	1	Kean	Information gathering	*I use Quora for next steps and career search.*
Snapchat	1	Nasiru	Trend, Information gathering and learning	*I use Snapchat primarily for my US connection and to get abreast of trends. It's also a way for me to learn about others.*

With that said, of the items Lewthwaite listed, only some African international student participants prioritized cultural integration. This does not mean that they do not believe in making new friends. Again, the data shows that these students only discussed their academics and career as two fundamental priority orders. So, further research is needed to know if seeking a more profound cultural integration interests them and, if so, where that is their priority.

The use of social media for responsible decision-making also shows a spread across different social media platforms. Responsible decision-making as it pertains to African international students in the United States cuts across different issues that include information on immigration status and information on academic success and post-study life. Feedback from our participants on social media platforms used to aid with this aspect of the CASEL framework reveals that most participants utilize the Google platform a lot more than any other platform for data gathering that will aid their decision-making. Nura uses Google to gather information on

maintaining his status and learn more about US regulations, even though international student services also share the information (see also *Table 8*). Just like the general saying, Google is "your" friend. It is calming to know that African international students and their counterparts utilize Google for relevant information for responsible decision-making.

The other social media platforms used by the African international student participants for responsible decision-making includes Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram. To engage in responsible decision-making, students use social media platforms for different reasons, including motivation, research and learning, and information gathering. Nnamdi decided to pursue a degree in the US because of what was trending on Twitter then. On the other hand, George uses YouTube and Google to reference what others have done to analyze options for informed decision-making critically. Overall data received is evidence of how participants in the African international student community utilize the different social media platforms for responsible decision-making.

CASEL Domain 5 – Relationship-Building

CASEL defines *relationship building* as "the abilities to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups" (*What is the CASEL framework,* 2021, para. 1). Research shows that quality student engagement yields positive student outcomes as well as improving their linguistic abilities (Akanwa, 2015). As discussed above, the African international student participants in this study do not prioritize student engagement but seem to be doing well academically as they appear to be on track to graduate. The reason for this is not that they do not have friends. They do. But they are under different forms of pressure that seems to make them prioritize schooling and career over new relationships. The data shows that they maintain existing relationships with friends and

family. They do this primarily through different social media outlets like WhatsApp and

Facebook, and to them, these connections are more than sufficient to maintain during their study.

However, research shows that social adjustment in their new environment requires new social

capital to ensure no feelings of isolation, depression, and more. Based on the data, none of the

participants seem to experience any of these adverse outcomes, even though they do not seem to

prioritize making new connections.

 Table 9 is a snapshot of how the participants use social media for relationship building.

The data, just like social media as a tool for decision-making, is relatively skewed towards the

order of priority of the participants. Due to the personal goals set by the participants, they use

social media to aid those goals. In areas where social media is unnecessary, they only maintain

existing relationships. Thus, the reason why the connection is prevalent for the 17 participants.

Some other reasons for relationship building include relaxation, motivation, and mentorship.

Some participants said they use social media to pass the time when they need to relax by looking

at posts and responding or reacting to whatever catches their attention. Others go on social media

to motivate themselves by checking on the success of others and using those as yardsticks to

motivate themselves to do better. Worthy of mention are those that go on social media to connect

with trailblazers in their career path to whom they can reach out for guidance as they proceed.

Table 9: Participants' social media use for relationship building Skills

Participants	Social Media Platform	Purpose
George	Twitter and WhatsApp	Career advancement - Academic relationship
Melina	Tic Tok	Relaxation
Kioni	Tic Tok; Facebook; Snapchat; WhatsApp; Discord; Telegram; Messenger; Hangout; LinkedIn; Pinterest	Learning

Nnamdi	Twitter; WhatsApp; Instagram; Snapchat; Facebook	Relaxation
Naija	Twitter; YouTube; Instagram	Connection
Nasha	LinkedIn (most preferred), Twitter, Facebook, Instagram	Connection
Niyi	LinkedIn, Instagram, Facebook & Twitter (but not posted anything to date)	Mentorship, Connection
Ndidi	NA	NA
Nasiru	Instagram; Facebook; WhatsApp; Snapchat	Connection
Nimi	LinkedIn; Facebook	Connection- Mentorship, Relationship management
Kean	Tinder	Relationship management
Naden	Instagram; Twitter; Facebook; LinkedIn; WhatsApp	Mentorship, Connection
Nura	Facebook and WhatsApp	Connection
Christine	Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram	Connection, Motivation
Gifty	Facebook	Connection
Ngozi	NA	NA
Nanoma	WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn	Connection, Motivation, Relationship Management

Does it mean African international students do not make new connections while studying in America? Participants who spoke extensively on the matter shared the importance of ensuring that their connections are beneficial to them academically or career-wise. To them, it is a waste of time trying to make new friends, hang out, and play games with them. Instead, they want the friendship connection to be worth their time and investment online and offline. This way, they feel empowered to achieve their academic and non-academic goals.

So, when they make new connections, the participants identify vital factors that attract them to the people. Specifically, 53% of the participants are attracted to people who are "humble," "honest," "kind," "knowledgeable," "good," "friendly," "nice,' and have a "positive attitude." Without these factors in the character of potential friendship connections, the

participants would stay isolated and not engage with the individual(s). This strong stance

suggests their determination to make meaningful connections that would positively influence

their life choices. For example, Nasha said, *"So, one of those things that influenced me meeting*

friends is somebody who is godly, somebody who is determined, focused and friendly, somebody

I know can influence my life when it comes to my career." Similarly, Niyi said, "*I seek a lot of*

career-related relationships because I want to get mentorship on how to best harness my time in

grad school and how to best harness my career path."

Making connections when they are in America is different from the connections that they

may have made prior. Overall, the research outcome shows that using social media as a tool for

relationship-building aids the orders of priority of most of the participants.

In *Table 10* (see also *Appendix I* which includes a description of the app used), Facebook

tops the relationship-building on the CASEL social and emotional competence framework chart.

Next are WhatsApp, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram. These social media applications are

generally known for starting, maintaining, and sustaining relationships, so it is not surprising that

they top the charts by the African international students interviewed during this research.

Gifty is a member of a professional group on Facebook, and the connection there is a

good resource for her to get information she needs. Nura, amongst others, uses WhatsApp

because of his ability to access information shared on that platform almost in real time, which

makes and helps relationship-building sustainable. Naden uses Twitter to stay motivated by

stories shared by her connection. Without the connection, she would have no access to the stories

shared, thus the importance of relationship building through that platform.

As it is generally known, career advancement is one goal for African international

students. This growth comes from either advancing their education or getting a job. As a

platform for professionals, most participants build relationships on LinkedIn to create a network that will be useful when needed.

Instagram had six participants reference it, and the other social media platforms with fewer users use the platforms to learn through connection and information gathered for knowledge acquisition. Relationship building is purposeful, and social media platforms fit right in to create the connection that aids relationships whose outcome comes in different ways that benefit the group under study.

Table 10: Quotes from Participants' social media use for relationship building

Social Media Platform	Frequency of use by participants	Participant	Purpose	Quote from Participants
WhatsApp	7	Nura	Connection	*WhatsApp all the time because I see the message and the information right away.*
Twitter	7	Naden	Mentorship Connection	*I get inspired by people's stories that would trigger me to want to do more.*
Facebook	11	Gifty	Connection	*I am on professional group of historians or scholars who study different aspects of Ghana's history" and there are job opportunities posted in that professional group too.*
Tik Tok	2	Melina	Relaxation	*I see things on TikTok, get ideas from it and try things out.*
LinkedIn	7	Niyi	Connection-Mentorship, Relationship management	*I seek a lot of careers like related relationships because I want to get mentorship on how to best harness my time in graduate school and to best harness my career path*
YouTube	1	Naija	Connection	*I watch a lot of YouTube videos. I watch a lot of Nigerian movies on YouTube. And watch a lot of soccer or sports related activities, too.*
Tinder	1	Kean	Relationship Management	*I rarely seek relationships online unless I'm on Tinder...*
Instagram	6	Christine	Connection, Motivation	*I am a social influencer. So, I use social media as a tool to inform people… I navigate life in the sense of how I can make an impact in someone looking at me?"*

Pinterest	1	Kioni	Learning	*I can say social media is a little bit useful, because you get to learn a little bit of culture from social media.*
Snapchat	3	Nasiru	Connection	*I use Snapchat primarily for my US connection and to get abreast of trends. It's also a way for me to learn about others*
Discord	1	Kioni	Learning	*Connection and information gathering for knowledge acquisition*
Telegram	1	Kioni	Learning	*Connection and information gathering for knowledge acquisition*
Messenger	1	Kioni	Learning	*Connection and information gathering for knowledge acquisition*
Hangout	1	Kioni	Learning	*Connection and information gathering for knowledge acquisition*

Returning to Ito's HOMAGO

The social media engagement of the participants also shows that most of the participants use social media platforms as a social media "hangout" space. As a brief recap of the framework, the goal of "hanging out" is purely social. For this study, the hanging out process is when the student participants spend their time connecting, communicating, and relaxing online. In this study, most African international student participants suggested using one or more social media platforms for friendship-building or maintenance, including Facebook and WhatsApp.

Of the 17 participants, about 14 enjoy watching movies/videos, skits, sports, and comedies online on platforms like YouTube and Instagram. Some also enjoy creating videos online for entertainment purposes. Making connections with friends and family is also something that all 17 participants do, even though the extent of the engagements varies. For instance, Nimi prioritizes maintaining her existing friendship groups by connecting and communicating with her old friends: "*I use Facebook to connect to old friends. I mean, people that we went to primary school together, secondary school, and so on, it's just to connect with them to know how they're*

doing, and I mean, in their lives private lives." Likewise, Nasiru visits WhatsApp to connect with his family and friends in Nigeria. But for his friends in America, he uses Snapchat. Facebook is also used to connect with old friends. Three different platforms to connect and maintain friendships. Additionally, George uses Twitter and WhatsApp for multiple purposes. For example, he said.

> "*I use social media to get away from the public to rest to relax, to connect, I use social media to distress. It doesn't stress me up at all. Whether you engage in arguments, insults, another occasionally, somebody might get on your nerves, so you respond. And also leave the scene. But I use it more therapeutically.*"

Knowledge of African international students' social media platforms and how they use them is essential for higher education administrators. The increasingly diverse student groups on American campuses also make it very important for administrators to understand them. Being aware of the types of platforms and their uses enables them to understand the heartbeat of their student body better. Student diversity requires administrators to understand what social media platforms not to engage with if they want to attract students to their platforms. These students use social platforms to connect and hang out with friends and family.

With that said, only some student participants use social media platforms to pursue academic and career outcomes. On the other hand, some participants use online platforms to mess around. Messing around occurs when hangouts are participated in with a goal in mind because of a shared interest.

Only about three student participants use social media to mess around. For example, Christine's goal is to excel academically. As such, she engages in small study groups in-person and online because of the fear of failure and the need to understand class content. Due to her

limited social capital in America, the small groups created by international students benefited Christine. On such platforms, she can connect with the students on an academic-related subject, and afterward, they can use the same space to "hang out" with each other. The same space can be used as a hangout space and then transformed into a mess-around space, making participation fluid among the social media platform members.

Similarly, Nasiru and Kean are on social media platforms with other students on campus. For instance, Kean connects with his classmates on a WhatsApp group and GroupMe, while Nasiru is on Microsoft Teams groups with his classmates. However, unlike Kean, Nasiru does not engage sporadically and uses Microsoft Teams to connect with his classmates to discuss classwork, and there are no hangouts post-group interactions. On the other hand, there is an opportunity for Kean to "hang out" with the individuals on the shared platform. However, only Kean's faculty members initiated the hangout, which occurred occasionally. Aside from this initiative from faculty, hangouts in this space are seldom for Kean because of pre-existing friendship groups that are typically closed. According to Kean, actively hanging out with his classmates is challenging because "it's *kind of niche. They're like different groups, and like breaking into different social circles have in an event, some clubs, then that's what I would say it's not very friendly."* However, if his classmates were inclusive, the social platforms he shares with them could always be a messing around and hangout space instead of being rarely fluid.

Understanding how these students use social media to mess around is vital for administrators. From the data gathered, messing around is seldom practiced among this study's African international student participants. However, it does occur, suggesting that students build relationships and connections only where they are friends or friendly with each other. Suppose administrators or faculty create a platform for their students; the effectiveness of that platform

may be limited depending on the pre-existing connections between the students on that platform. Therefore, it may not be advisable for administrators and faculty in higher education to create such platforms for students. Instead, administrators can share the existence of such platforms with students. Awareness goes a long way for administrators to easily direct other students with similar backgrounds and interests to such groups or platforms.

With that said, online participations that do not typically transform into hangout spaces may be a space for individuals seeking to geek out. Only two participants, Gifty and George, suggested having such a level of engagement online. For example, Gifty engages in a professional group platform online so that she can have access to connections in her industry. She is in a Facebook "*professional group of historians or scholars who study different aspects of Ghana's history.*" Through these connections, she has conducted conference presentations and is writing research with some of the individuals in the group. The group is also paramount to her for job opportunities posted explicitly in that professional group. She solely interacts with the individuals in this group at a professional level. Her participation is intentional, as she uses the platform strictly for career connections.

Similarly, George uses specific social media platforms to gain more knowledge and understanding of academia. *"I connect more with the academia on Twitter than in any other place."* He does this because he believes that Twitter is the ideal location to "*connect with more serious many people. Connect with professionals. Connect with more ambitious and more successful people in the area of anthropology, politics…progressive thinking people.*"

Unlike Gifty and George, others who participate in online groups or even enroll on the campus listserv typically stay informed. They are passive users, as there are no other fundamental interactions. For example, Niyi uses social media platforms related to his school to

keep abreast of school-related activities: "*I get emails almost every day, I follow the official school handle on Instagram, I follow them on LinkedIn. So I get pretty much daily updates, either via email or, and then my number is put on the emergency like directory.*" Some of the notifications are used to pursue his goals. For instance, through some of these alerts from his campus listserv, he "*got some tax advice. I got some immigration advice. I mean, I always get that every week. Every week, I get immigration emails about like how to remain in legal status OPC and CPT applications. And then yeah, pretty much that.*" These email alerts are essential to his status as a student and nothing more.

What does this mean for higher education institutions? The data shows that platforms like Facebook, LinkedIn, and email listservs help students pursue various interests. The data shows that the student participants prefer to use their social platforms to make connections that would benefit their academic and career choices. Though a handful of participants shared that they use social platforms to connect with the campus, this interaction was mainly one-sided. They typically only use their school platforms to receive news without necessarily engaging with their school. Knowing this will allow administrators to understand that African international students may not actively engage on these platforms. Based on the findings of this study, the African international student participants are more drawn to using social media platforms as a hangout space than for messing around and geeking out. Their goal is to be entertained and to entertain online.

Additionally, the study generally showed a positive outcome from social media use, even though not all the comments about social media were positive. However, the study aimed to see how the participants use social media and how it impacts them. The questions asked were open-ended and did not lead in any direction, nor were their responses controlled by the researcher.

So, the students gave the researcher the benefits of the uses, showing that social media is a valuable tool that African international students benefit from during their study.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the research outcome shows two significant results, namely:

1. The use of social media depends on the participants' personal goals.

2. The use of social media depends on the participants' needs (including academic and professional support).

The participants are very particular about the impact the use of social media will have on them. Communication and connection are vital reasons why most participants use social media, and it is because of the family aspect that is confirmed to be a significant part of the African international student's journey. Fortunately, communication is cheaper through social media, and over 90% of the participants use social media to reach their families.

Another critical topic is the aspect of religion. About 94% of the participants referenced religion and its impact on decision-making, which shows that the background of the participants impacts them as they launch out. Money is another factor of influence. Undoubtedly, research shows that international students spend money on their tuition and, in some cases, need more money to maintain a particular lifestyle in America. However, the socioeconomic background of African international students is only known by the assumption that they are financially poor when they arrive. Further research would be needed to examine their financial capital to understand their wealth and how they define wealth. Perhaps wealth is defined in other ways to include resources like funding, career coaching, and other things to help them achieve their overall goal, which may explain why some claim they are lacking financially.

The study assumed they would make new friends with help from social media. However, the data shows that friendship-making is low on their order of priorities. Instead, they prioritize making new connections *only* where it would help with their academics or career goals. That does not mean that they have no friends at all. Instead, it shows their objective to make new friends in America may differ from their previous friendship-making process or goals. Some participants' responses to social media as a tool to the CASEL framework was NA (Not Applicable) because social media use for the affected participants was of no importance in the hierarchy of priority. Though the affected participants use social media one way or another, using social media as a tool in the instances they responded "NA" was not an area of priority to them; thus, A better coping mechanism such as religion, family, or self-reliance.

A further deep dive into the data received during the research gives an insight into the types of social media platforms that exist, their defined uses by the developer of the platforms, and how they pertain to the social and emotional competence framework that reveals how social media is used as a tool by African international students as they pursue their higher educational qualification in the United States. The breakdown of the data received from the research shows the frequency of use and the purpose of use by the research participants through their respective quotes under the social and emotional competency framework.

Finally, the data shows that social media is a critical platform for hanging out with friends and family. Most of the participants suggest that they use social media sparingly for studying or career development. Instead, the participants primarily use social media to watch movies, soccer, and skits and enjoy other forms of entertainment. On the other hand, some participants' use of social media includes information gathering for career development and knowledge acquisition.

It is therefore worthy to conclude, per the outcome of the data gathered through the interview, that order of priority and background is a significant determinant of how most African international students in American higher education handle their social and emotional competence. Additionally, per the interview's outcome, African international students widely accept social media as a tool in American higher educational institutions and highly rate its value added to their social and emotional competence.

Furthermore, despite the purpose designed by the application developers for the use of the different social media platforms, this research has further shown that the participants use them for different reasons to manage their social and emotional competence. While some people use WhatsApp purely for communication, others use it for stress management by checking status updates posted by their contacts, group messaging, and even video sharing. Some other people also use it for academic purposes by forming study groups and other social groups needed to manage the different desires of the users. The same applies to other social media platforms used by the participants and this research.

Also, Facebook's developers intended the platform to help users maintain and sustain relationships. However, its use has metamorphosed by the different participants for job search, information gathering, connection, and stress management. It is worth noting that social media platforms serve more than one purpose. Moreover, the creativity of its users determines its purpose. This discovery was unexpected.

With that said, there were no noticeable differences relative to the participants' country of origin. For example, with limited participants, the study could not identify any differences in how different students from different countries or regions of Africa use social media (e.g., how Nigerian students use social media versus students from Kenya). Future research is needed to

identify any potential differences. Similarly, there was insufficient data to identify any potential differences gender might have posed among the participants. A more extensive research sample could provide insight into potential differences.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

The central focus of this research seeks to explore three notions about African international students:

1. The homogenous categorization of African international students as "Black" in American higher education institutions.

2. The importance of African international students' experiences and social and emotional competence.

3. Social media's role in helping African international students maintain social and emotional competence in pursuing academic studies in America.

Even though African international students are typically categorized homogeneously as "Black" (Rong & Brown, 2002; Awokoya & Clark, 2008), this research has been able to distinguish them from all colored student groups in American higher education. There is a distinct difference between African international students and other Black students in America. This distinction varies from getting admission, visas, funding, and, most importantly, traveling across the Atlantic to a new location to obtain a higher education degree (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Okusolubo, 2018). Other Black students do not traditionally face all these unique hurdles that African international students must face. Other Black students include African American students and even Black students from American territories like Trinidad and Tobago, Haiti, and Jamaica (Awokoya & Clark, 2008). This research speaks directly to the uniqueness of the African international students in this study and refutes the broad homogeneous categorization given to all Black students in American educational institutions.

The unique class of African international students in American higher education institutions comes with inherent challenges that require social and emotional competence. The

inherent challenges distinguish African international students from other local students (Rong & Brown, 2007). Thus, the need for and importance of social and emotional competence to survive the terrain of their new environment and achieve the goal of academic pursuits to which they came to the United States. Some social and emotional factors that impact the African international student participants in this regard include self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, reasonable decision-making, and relationship-building. These are the five domains of the CASEL social and emotional competence framework.

The research shows that all five domains of the CASEL social and emotional competence (see *Appendix A*) influence the African international student participants in one way or another. This research also shows that these five factors impact the African international student participants in varying capacities and are unique to each student based on the peculiarity of their background. With specific reference to Self-awareness, this research pin-pointed different varying capacities to which African International students display their level of self-awareness. Worthy to note is the impact family and community have on the students. Research shows that family significantly influences students' learning outcomes and educational trajectories (Harju-Luukkainen et al., 2020; Ito et al., 2010). This research further strengthens that a family is also an essential unit of influence because of students' emotional, physical, and financial support while in America.

The research outcome from most of the respondents also shows the presence of self-management. From the research outcome, self-management can be the efficient use of resources to achieve the purpose of their coming to the United States. Research shows self-management motivates students in academic pursuits, leading to academic success and decision-making abilities (Al-Abyadh & Abdel Azeem, 2022). Prevalent among the responses from the

respondents was time management and responsible decision-making, an essential factor prevalent among African international students, as seen in the outcome of this research. For instance, participants like Nanoma remind themselves to "sit tight" and remember what is at stake if they are not performing at their best. Some students have also desired additional campus assistance, including laptops and other resources to aid their navigation in their new environment, including social resources like where to learn how to drive, safe places to live within a budget, and more. They strive to avoid challenges between their goal and success, which includes the relationships they make and maintain. Relationship building caps the social and emotional competence factors. The respondents were quite particular in their relationship building because they focused on building new relationships while sustaining and maintaining old ones based on the impact such relationships will have on them as they pursue their higher education in America. Moreover, research shows positive outcomes relate to the types of relationships students build (Covington, 2000; Wentzel, 1991). Overall, this research affirms the presence of social and emotional competence among the African international students interviewed.

This research also shows that African international students have used social media as a tool to sustain their social and emotional competence. Due to distance from home and a need to acclimatize to their new environment while keeping in touch with their home country and connections, social media has been reliable enough to bridge the gap. Worthy to mention is the unique use of each social media platform for unique needs. Some of the social media platforms prevalent in this study include but are not limited to Facebook, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and many more. According to the research outcome, WhatsApp is the most cost-efficient platform for making both voice and video calls. Once connected to the

internet, one can connect with anyone with the app installed on their phone. This social media

platform has aided communication with loved ones, making it possible to get the emotional

support needed during challenging times while attaining academic success in America. Whereas

YouTube is a social media platform with multi-dimensional benefits. Its benefit ranges from

watching short skits on what is operational in the home country of the African international

students to learning about a topic of choice. Students can subscribe to channels of interest and

get notified about new updates or live programs instituted by channel influencers. YouTube is

also known for knowledge acquisition as many students, per the outcome of this research, utilize

the platforms to showcase to the world many things, mainly educational information, across all

disciplines, be it Information Technology, Accounting, Engineering, and the like. Facebook

helps to connect with both existing relationships and new relationships. However, LinkedIn is a

social media platform used to connect with professionals in different fields of study, preparing

African international students for post-study connections needed for jobs and career progression.

Research shows that social media platforms like Facebook are multi-faceted in usage and can

support student learning outcomes (Rasiah, 2014). This research affirms the importance of social

media as a tool African international students use to sustain and maintain their social and

emotional competence as they study higher education in American educational institutions.

Still, a unique phenomenon was revealed by this research, thereby creating a new subject

matter that is worthy of further research. This phenomenon is religion. Religion is a new

phenomenon that African international students take very seriously. The participants were quite

particular about how religion significantly impacted their career choice, school, and other factors

that added to studying in the United States. Fifteen participants identified as Christian, one

identified as Muslim, and another did not self-identify. Their religious background was not

requested, but its influence and impact became one of the backbones that participants relied on while making decisions. Religion greatly influenced participants' decision-making skills as it impacted their choices in life. However, the outcome of religion is more of a coping strategy and a way of life. For instance, George went on a pilgrimage, studied Islamic Studies, and still practices Islam. Others typically talked about how their faith helps during difficult times and when at a crossroads. Further research is needed to correctly classify its importance and necessity in pursuing higher education in America. Overall, this research justified the notions about African international student participants' experiences in America's higher educational institutions.

Finally, this study shows that the ideas of the CASEL framework were present in each student's ability to navigate their home and academic environments in America. The five domains of the CASEL framework were present in this study and coded individually, as discussed in Chapter 3 of this dissertation. These domains were instrumental in coding the data and treated as categories that helped make sense of the inferences drawn from the participants' experiences in addition to other categories like family, friends, and work, which came from the HOMAGO framework as well as categories like culture influence, entertainment and religion that came purely from the data. The codes from the HOMAGO and raw data worked well together in explaining and defining the experiences of the student participants. Feedback and inferences from the collected data supported all five domains even though a larger sample size will give more information and better classification of things like gender, nation categorizations, and more. However, this study calls for further research to see how African international students describe their social and emotional competence, which was outside the interview protocol for this study.

The conclusion of this study has a variety of ramifications for educators, administrators, and policymakers in the American higher education system. Below is a section on recommendations to administrators, professors, and staff. The recommendations below are suggestions taken from the outcome of the study.

Recommendations

As a result of the research outcome and the data analysis, the following recommendations can be actioned or pursued in further research to enable an inclusive system for African international students pursuing academic degrees in the United States.

First, educators must avoid the conventional thinking that each racial group is one homogenous culture with a single identity. Faculty should avoid simplistic expectations about Black students' attitudes and behaviors, educational aspirations, and academic performance. They need to recognize and respect Black students' wide range of identities and cultural competencies. Even among the white community and the American sovereign state, there are variations among the people across the different forms, so it is with African international students. Africa has many countries, unique cultures, backgrounds, and languages. The only prevalent factor among African nations and students is skin color. Thus, the generalization of African international students as a homogenous culture with a single identity could result in the inability to harvest the unique potential amongst the African international student population.

Secondly, this study shows that students use social media for varied reasons: (1) to achieve personal goals and (2) to achieve academic/professional goals. So, if administrators intend to post information online about career opportunities, they may lose students who only use social media for entertainment purposes and vice versa. Understanding social media platforms will help administrators make sustainable plans for an online presence. It will help

determine what platforms to disengage from, knowing that if they have such platforms, they will lose a growing number of students who only engage on such platforms for entertainment purposes. The study suggests that email and newsletters are sufficient to keep African international student participants engaged with the campus.

However, if administrators insist on using social media platforms, understanding the different uses could also lead to creating multiple accounts on one platform, one for entertainment and another for academic/professional-related topics. So, a school has a Facebook page and intends to attract African international student users. In that case, they may need two accounts for entertainment and academic and career-related information. Awareness of how African international students use social media will also help administrators encourage and support African student groups communicating with them on their preferred platforms.

Knowing that African international students use social media for different reasons will help researchers dig further into understanding the current trends to determine what such platforms could form into and help make projections that higher education institutions could benefit from to aid their targeted student population. These researchers could help developers understand the reasons for the varied use so that developers could create options for higher education institutions to use to meet the needs of their student population. For instance, social media platforms could have add-ons for the students to easily tailor their interests to meet their personal and academic/professional needs.

Thirdly, leaders who support African international students could also benefit from the findings of this dissertation as it relates to developing resources that support these students' needs (i.e., curating specialized news feeds). Though they were not a majority, these students desired specific resources to aid their academic journey. For instance, leaders or higher educational

administrators could investigate different types of resources that their African international students can easily access online and offline. For instance, a resource center could provide them with a free laptop, climate-related clothing, or other items they would need for their studies for free. This online presence could also show where to get groceries from and types of grocery options available in the area, the cost of living, living options, where to get appropriate clothing for the climate, and more, will help these students as they continue to navigate their new home and campus environment. This online presence may be time-consuming, expensive, and complex. However, the data evokes an awareness of the need for resources these students can easily access to help their day-to-day activities. Though the students did not specifically request an online presence containing this information, they generally indicated a need for an easily accessible location for resources that would support their needs while in America. Though this study did not explore the students' socio-economic status, suggestions from the data show participants' concern about finances, particularly their limited income, even as student employees. Having resources available to aid students in the classroom will be meaningful for those who cannot afford to buy some equipment outright. It will also help reduce some students' potential strains, especially if they are remitting money back home to offset any debt owed due to their pursuits to study abroad.

Fifth, when developing new curricula, faculty must reconstruct learning environments to acknowledge and accommodate various conditions and resources. Educators working on intervention programs can focus on established practice patterns to improve the experiences of all African international students in American schools and look for alternative approaches. Administrators and policymakers must be aware of African international students' unique backgrounds and characteristics in their educational institutions to provide them with the

resources needed to address their needs. For instance, slowing the pace of lectures might be helpful to incoming African international students.

Conclusion

The research has been explorative and quite insightful. Discovery from the research has shown how African international students support themselves as they aspire towards attaining their academic goals in American higher educational institutions. Does social media help maintain African international students' social and emotional competence in an American higher education institution? The answer is yes, although the research outcome is relatively more complicated than a Yes or No answer. The advancement of technology has metamorphosed into different spheres. African international students and their other counterparts have devised the means to utilize social media platforms beyond their original use as intended by developers of the various platforms. This creative use of different social media platforms has made it possible for African international students to handle the challenges of relocating to a new location to pursue their academic and personal goals.

Studying in America has also enabled them to experience other challenges they must overcome, including accent issues where their peers could not understand them, nor were they understood because of the speed at which they spoke. In some cases, it also took time to understand lectures at a different pace than back home. Other challenges included navigating the transportation system, food, and housing. These challenges further propelled them to focus on academic success, so they experience timely graduation. Their goal was to finish on time to move to the next phase of their personal goals.

Research shows that the advent of technology has created an avenue for African international students studying in America to remain connected with friends and families back

home while creating and establishing new relationships. However, this study further exhibited the creative uses of social media platforms different from the developer's primary intent. For example, Facebook is predominantly used to make and maintain friendships. In this study, individuals also benefited from creating and sustaining professional groups on Facebook. LinkedIn is a professional platform used to connect with individuals and organizations professionally, seek jobs, and connect with others in a similar field. Some of the discoveries made in this study show that the student participants use LinkedIn to get inspired and motivated by the success of others, not necessarily those in the same career field but with diverse people who share stories of various achievements. At the same time, this research shows that students need to connect with others to excel and not feel isolated, even if the primary mode of connection is online.

With that said, the African international student participants rarely prioritized making new friends and barely engaged in social activities on campus. However, the data suggests they had self-awareness, social awareness, relationship-building, self-management, and responsible decision-making skills. The data result shows that the priority of the participants was to complete their program, graduate, and after that, advance through job pursuits and land a good job, which they see as a return on their investment. Making friends and feeling a sense of belonging happened along the way. However, it was not a top priority—their orders of priority limited African international students' engagement with their campus. The participants felt that their schools were doing their best and needed to prioritize other things to help keep them engaged.

Interestingly, the resources they desired from their school did not include engagement on social media platforms. Many students prioritized other connections, not including their school's

social platform. Nevertheless, for those who joined and those who did not, the data suggests that they limited their connections with their schools to when they were on campus taking classes.

Other areas where African international students desired support include the schools providing them with laptops and other resources to help with their studies because they are from overseas and would need more access. They also felt that schools should improve the process of student employment because money was a significant factor that came up a lot. Not that the students did not have money, but their financial obligations pressured them to the extent that they could not enjoy their campus experiences like their American counterparts did. Every income they made went to paying dues and bills, including sending money back home to offset any debt owed on their behalf to ensure that they could study abroad. Their platform was mainly for connecting with existing friends and families, getting inspired, and connecting for work. Connecting with their schools is not part of this picture.

Overall, hanging out on social media was a means to an end and, in some cases, a way of life. They used it to achieve their goals but were not solely dependent on it. They used it for entertainment and research resources to help them achieve their goals. Their use was also intentional, allowing them to pass away time and maintain their social connections. Social media, at times, also became a tool to mess around. With many of the participants having multiple social media accounts, they could mess around as they pleased. Sometimes, one account is for job searches and another for checking in on friends.

Nevertheless, they controlled and protected their space as they saw a need. So, in this regard, social media helped maintain their social and emotional competence. At the same time, the data also suggests that their social and emotional competence was grounded, and their

determination and goals helped maintain their social and emotional competence in addition to social media use.

The African international student participants essentially use social media as a core part of their social and emotional lives. Social media is used for social support to solidify and confirm social networks. They do not necessarily expand their social networks but maintain existing social communities. Also, their engagement on social media could be more play- and exploration-based. There needed to be more opportunities to grow social interaction through geeking out.

Connecting with family and friends back home remains vital for African international student participants' social and emotional competence. The study also shows that no matter their challenges in their new home and school environment, the students could self-entertain online with YouTube videos from back home, Instagram skits, and WhatsApp video chats. They tapped into all available resources, connecting them to their people back home. For the most part, they were in control of their usage. They understood the social platform and used it to their advantage, barring what the platform may have been traditionally intended for by the developers. They prevented themselves from being carried away by their usage or the contents they observed online for it to be detrimental. They even had ways to manage themselves when they determined they were overusing a platform, which led to completely stopping their usage or even seeing a therapist, in one case. Understanding why and how they use social media gave them a sense of self-worth and determination to overcome challenges.

Finally, it is worth noting that family is a vital factor in the life of an average African international student studying in an American educational institution, and the support system and sense of responsibility towards their family keep them going towards attaining their academic

goals. The presence of social media has made family connections possible and, most importantly, accessible, thereby drastically limiting the impact of other challenges they face in the pursuit of their academic goals.

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Appendix A

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL) COMPETENCIES

SELF-AWARENESS

The ability to accurately recognize one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior. The ability to accurately assess one's strengths and limitations, with a well-grounded sense of confidence, optimism, and a "growth mindset."

- ⊃ IDENTIFYING EMOTIONS
- ⊃ ACCURATE SELF-PERCEPTION
- ⊃ RECOGNIZING STRENGTHS
- ⊃ SELF-CONFIDENCE
- ⊃ SELF-EFFICACY

SELF-MANAGEMENT

The ability to successfully regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations — effectively managing stress, controlling impulses, and motivating oneself. The ability to set and work toward personal and academic goals.

- ⊃ IMPULSE CONTROL
- ⊃ STRESS MANAGEMENT
- ⊃ SELF-DISCIPLINE
- ⊃ SELF-MOTIVATION
- ⊃ GOAL SETTING
- ⊃ ORGANIZATIONAL SKILLS

SOCIAL AWARENESS

The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures. The ability to understand social and ethical norms for behavior and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.

- ⊃ PERSPECTIVE-TAKING
- ⊃ EMPATHY
- ⊃ APPRECIATING DIVERSITY
- ⊃ RESPECT FOR OTHERS

RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. The ability to communicate clearly, listen well, cooperate with others, resist inappropriate social pressure, negotiate conflict constructively, and seek and offer help when needed.

- ⊃ COMMUNICATION
- ⊃ SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT
- ⊃ RELATIONSHIP BUILDING
- ⊃ TEAMWORK

RESPONSIBLE DECISION-MAKING

The ability to make constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on ethical standards, safety concerns, and social norms. The realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and a consideration of the well-being of oneself and others.

- ⊃ IDENTIFYING PROBLEMS
- ⊃ ANALYZING SITUATIONS
- ⊃ SOLVING PROBLEMS
- ⊃ EVALUATING
- ⊃ REFLECTING
- ⊃ ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY

Appendix B

Participants breakdown by location, how they were contacted, institutions, level of education

and course of study.

Participant Name	Country	African Region	Contact via	Location of academic institution (state)	Level of Education	Course of Study
Christine	Cameroon	West	Personal network	Wisconsin	Bachelors	Community Nonprofit Leadership
George	Ghana	West	ISS	California	PhD	Anthropology
Gifty	Ghana	West	Personal network	Washington, D.C.	PhD	Mathematics
Kioni	Kenya	East	ISS	Wisconsin	Bachelors Bachelors	Psychology & Theater
Kean	Kenya	East	ISS	Illinois	Bachelors	Computer Science
Melina	Malawi	East	Personal network	Wisconsin	Bachelors	Psychology
Nnamdi	Nigeria	West	Personal network	Washington	Masters	Electrical Engineering
Naija	Nigeria	West	Personal network	Wisconsin	Masters PhD	African American Studies English
Nasha	Nigeria	West	Personal network	Washington	PhD	Mathematics
Niyi	Nigeria	West	Personal network	Washington	PhD	Material Science
Ndidi	Nigeria	West	Personal network	Washington	Masters	Economics
Nura	Nigeria	West	Personal network	Ohio	Masters	International Development
Nasiru	Nigeria	West	Personal network	Wisconsin	Bachelors	Computer Science
Nimi	Nigeria	West	Personal network	Georgia	PhD	Engineering
Naden	Nigeria	West	Personal network	Washington	PhD	Biological Science
Nanoma	Nigeria	West	Personal network	Georgia	PhD	Electrical & Computer Engineering
Ngozi	Nigeria	West	Personal network	Wisconsin	PhD	Health Service Research

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

Start

Hello. Thanks again for meeting with me today. As you may already know, my name is Victoria Obatusin. I am a doctoral candidate at the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis (ELPA) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I am honored to have you partake as a research participant in my study on how social media impacts the social and emotional awareness of African international students during their course of study in the United States of America. I want to hear about your experiences since you arrived in the United States and see what strategies you use to excel.

This interview process will take between 60-120 minutes. If, this allotted time is interrupted due to network issues or technological defects, we can always reschedule to another day and time of your convenience and we can always change the mode of interview to another online platform of your choice.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your personal identity information (like your name) will not be included in the presentation or publication of the study results. I also want you to be comfortable during this interview process. If at any time you wish to no longer participate, please let me know immediately so that I can stop the recording and interview process.
I also want to remind you that this interview will be recorded and recordings will be stored in a safe location during data collection and analysis.
Additionally, this interview process is divided into the following sections:

1. Your demographics

2. General educational background (home and abroad)

3. Current Educational experiences

4. Evaluation of your Social and Emotional awareness using social media platforms

Now, we will begin the interview protocol.

{*Start recording and proceed with questions, if permitted*}

Interview Questions

Section 1: Demographics

1. Where were you born and raised? (*What languages do you speak? How would you define your race and ethnicity? Have you lived in other countries, if so, where?*)

2. What year were you born?

3. How would you describe your gender? (*i.e., male, female, etc.*)

Section 2: General educational background (home and abroad)

4. Please describe your educational experiences before coming to the United States. (*What were your academic strengths and challenges? Did you attend private or public schools?*)

5. How long have you been in the United States?

6. What degree program are you currently pursuing? (*i.e., undergraduate, Master's, PhD*)

7. Kindly describe your educational experiences in the United States.

8. Please share your personal experiences in the United States. (*What experiences shocked you? What differences and similarities have you observed between your experiences when growing up and the current ones in the US?*)

9. Why did you choose to study in the US *verses* another country?

10. If given another opportunity, would you choose to study in the US again? (*Why? / Why not?*)

Section 3: Current educational experiences

1. Do you currently reside in school dorms or a privately rented apartment? (*i.e., What factors are responsible for your decisions?*)

2. What factors determine where you choose to reside (*i.e., current location – east side, west side, downtime*)

3. How friendly would you consider your immediate community? (*very friendly, friendly, somewhat unfriendly, not very friendly*) And why?

4. How helpful or supportive would you consider the international student department in your school? (*very supportive, supportive, somewhat supportive, not very supportive*) And why?

5. How would you describe your faculty/lecturers/professors? (*very helpful, helpful, somewhat unhelpful, very unhelpful*) And why?

6. What were your expectations about your faculty? (*Were they met? What would you like to see improved?*)

7. Are there any factors that would have made you perform better in your academics?

8. How have you handled your nostalgic (*homesick*) feelings since you got to the United States?

9. What resources would you like to be made available for you to succeed?

Section 4: Evaluation of your Social and Emotional awareness using social media platforms

{*The following questions are based on the social and emotional framework designed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning – CASEL*}

Competence (1): Self-awareness

10. To what extent does your family influence how you view yourself? (*What about your culture? What about your community? What about your environment*)

11. How do you handle difficult situations?

12. What motivates you to make progress?

   Competence (1a): Self-awareness & Social Media

13. What social media platforms are you presently on (i.e., *Facebook, Instagram, etc.*)?

   a.   *Which is your most preferred social media platform and why?*

14. How often do you visit your most preferred social media platform (If frequently, ask: *daily, weekly, monthly if not, then ask: Always, very often, sometimes, rarely, never*)?

15. To what extent does social media influence how you view yourself? (*Would you consider social media as part of your activities of self-care?*)

Competence (2): Self-management

16. What propels you during challenging situations?

17. How many credits are you taking and why? (*How many credits would you have loved to take and why?*)

18. What has been your major struggles during your program and how have you been able to manage or handle it?

   Competence (2a): Self-management & Social Media.

19. To what extent do you depend on social media to manage stress?

Competence (3): Social Awareness

20. How would you describe your relationship with your campus? (*How do you catchup with recent news on campus?*)

21. What assistance do you currently get from your international student services department/program?

    a. *And what additional assistance would you require from the international services department to make your program less stressful or more engaging?*

    b. *How often does the international services department organize events for international students on your campus?*

22. How does your university bridge the cultural gap among students?

    Competence (3a): Social Awareness & Social Media

23. What social media platforms do you use to acclimatize to your campus and residential environment?

24. To what extent does social media impact the way you view the people and the world around you?

Competence (4): Responsible Decision-making

25. What are your orders of priority as an international student?

    a. What factors do you consider before making a decision?

26. What resources (*or counseling sessions*) are you aware of that will help you in making a good decision?

    Competence (4a): Responsible Decision-making & Social Media

27. In what ways does social media impact your decision-making process? (*What online platforms do you utilize for strategic planning?*)

Competence (5): Relationship-building

28. What key factors attract you to people?

29. How do you resolve conflict with your peers?

Competence (5a): Relationship-building & Social Media

30. What types of relationships do you seek online and why?

End Of Interview Questions

- We have reached the end of this interview session.

- Do you have any additional questions?

Thank you so much for your time and contribution to this research.

{*STOP audio/video recording.*}

Appendix D

Participant Coded Names

Country of Origin	Codes	Names
Cameroon	CAMPART001	Christine
Ghana	GHAPART001	George
	GHAPART002	Gifty
Kenya	KENPART001	Kioni
	KENPART002	Kean
Malawi	MALPART001	Melina
Nigeria	NIGPART001	Nnamdi
	NIGPART002	Naija
	NIGPART003	Nasha
	NIGPART004	Niyi
	NIGPART005	Ndidi
	NIGPART007	Nura
	NIGPART008	Nasiru
	NIGPART009	Nimi
	NIGPART0010	Naden
	NIGPART0011	Nanoma
	NIGPART0012	Ngozi

Appendix E

Self-Awareness (Samples from Data)

Social Media Platform	Frequency	Participants	Purpose from research	App defined use	Quote from Participants
WhatsApp	13	Ngozi	Communication	According to the website, WhatsApp is an instant messaging platform to be used for text, photos, videos, video calls, documents, and location.	*I use [WhatsApp] every day because I speak with my family every day.*
Twitter	10	Nanoma	Communication, Connection, News	According to the website, Twitter is an social platform to be used to communicate and connect through quick messages known as Tweets. Tweets may contain text, GIFs, photos, and videos.	*I will say sports, soccer News comes first*
Facebook	13	Christine	Connection, news and followership	The purpose of Facebook is to allow users share texts, pictures, and videos.	*Facebook is only for streaming and see what people are up to.*
Tik Tok	2	Ndidi	Motivation, communication and Connection	TikTok is a platform for users to create, share, and explore short videos.	*Nothing Specific, just a user and I use social media generally to compare my progress with other people online*
Telegram	1	Kioni	Knowledge gathering, learning more about other culture and creating a sense of awareness	Telegram is an app that is designed to allow users send secure messages and conduct audio calling. Messages include documents, photos, and videos.	*Connection and information gathering for knowledge acquisition*
Pinterest	1	Kioni	Knowledge gathering, learning more about other culture and creating a sense of awareness	Pinterest is a platform for users to share, post, and shop pins. According to the website, "Pins are bookmarks that people use to save content they love on Pinterest" add comments and send messages. "Pins can be images, videos or products"	*Connection and information gathering for acquiring knowledge*

LinkedIn	6	Naden	Communication, Connection, Motivation and News	LinkedIn is a professional online network platform that can be used to connect with professionals, search and apply for jobs, and learn career-related skills.	*I am selective on who to follow on social media and thus get inspired by the posts of those I follow. I am also motivated when I am messaged about my achievements.*
Hangout	1	Kioni	Knowledge gathering, learning more about other culture and creating a sense of awareness	Google Hangouts is a platform that allows members to initiate and communicate using text, as well as audio and video chats.	*Connection and information gathering for acquiring knowledge*
Snapchat	4	Melina	Self-reflection through comment from followers, making calls; maintaining existing relationship	Snapchat is a social media platform that allows its users to take and share pictures and videos that disappear after a short period of time.	*I create content about my day to make people happy and I am motivated to keep doing that because of the feedback I receive that I am funny, and that people love my post.*
YouTube	3	Naija	Socio-political news, sports news, watching movies	YouTube is a platform that allows users upload and share videos and comment on others' videos.	*Enjoy watching Nigerian movies on YouTube.*
Reddit	1	Kean	Knowledge gathering, learning more about other culture and creating a sense of awareness	Reddit is a website that allows users to promote social news content by voting at will.	*Information gathering on topics I didn't understand in class.*
GroupMe	1	Kean	Communication, Connection, Relaxation, News and Followership	GroupMe is a group messaging app. It does not require users to have smartphones.	*General connection on messages received from friends.*
Instagram	9	Gifty	Connection, News, Communication	Instagram is a picture and video sharing app that users can upload, view, and comment.	*I use Instagram as my professional page.*
Discord	1	Kioni	Knowledge gathering, learning more about other culture and creating a sense of awareness	Discord allows its PC gamers to create communication servers that they can use to text and speak to with each other	*Connection and information gathering for acquiring knowledge.*

Self-Management (Samples from Data)

Social Media Platform	Frequency	Participant	Purpose	App defined use	Quote from Participants
WhatsApp	7	Nura	Stress Management (relaxation), refreshment	According to the website, WhatsApp is an instant messaging platform to be used for text, photos, videos, video calls, documents, and location.	*I am a part of the African Student Union on campus and our primary mode of communication is WhatsApp where we exchange ideas, thoughts, questions, and get feedback.*
Twitter	3	Nnamdi	Stress Management	According to the website, Twitter is a social platform to be used to communicate and connect through quick messages known as Tweets. Tweets may contain text, GIFs, photos, and videos.	*So, I look for comedies like structured comedies from Nigeria and just watch a bit of their videos to distress and feel after.*
Facebook	4	Nimi	Stress Management and News	The purpose of Facebook is to allow users share texts, pictures, and videos.	*I sometimes go to Facebook whenever I am tired and feel like he is not making progress. It helps me to relax and use the time to check what's going on in the world.*
Tik Tok	1	Kioni	Communication and Learning	TikTok is a platform for users to create, share, and explore short videos.	*I go to TikTok to see messages and also see videos created to counteract racism and what we think of other people.*
Telegram	1	Kioni	Communication and Learning	Telegram is an app that is designed to allow users to send secure messages and conduct audio calling. Messages include documents, photos, and videos.	*Connection and information gathering for knowledge acquisition.*
Pinterest	1	Kioni	Communication and Learning	Pinterest is a platform for users to share, post, and shop pins. According to the website, "Pins are bookmarks that people use to save content they love on Pinterest" add comments and send messages. "Pins can be images, videos or products"	*Connection and information gathering for acquiring knowledge.*
LinkedIn	4	Christine	Stress Management and learning/motivation	LinkedIn is a professional online network platform that can be used to connect with professionals, search and apply for jobs, and learn career-related skills.	*I maintain more than one account; One is personal, and another is professional.*
Hangout	1	Kioni	Communication and Learning	Google Hangouts is a platform that allows members to initiate and communicate using text, as well as audio and video chats.	*Connection and information gathering for acquiring knowledge.*

Snapchat	2	Nnamdi	Stress Management	Snapchat is a social media platform that allows its users to take and share pictures and videos that disappear after a short period of time.	*So I look for comedies like structured comedies from Nigeria and just watch a bit of their videos to distress and feel after.*
YouTube	5	George	Stress Management	YouTube is a platform that allows users upload and share videos and comment on others' videos.	*Social media impacts strongly on how what I do and how I do them.*
Reddit	1	Kean	Memories and fun	Reddit is a website that allows users to promote social news content by voting at will.	*Information gathering on topics I didn't understand in class.*
GroupMe	1	Kean	Memories and fun	GroupMe is a group messaging app. It does not require users to have smartphones.	*I use GroupMe for school activities.*
Instagram	5	Gifty	Connection, Learning	Instagram is a picture and video sharing app that users can upload, view, and comment.	*I love cooking and I use Instagram to gather recipe and follow short videos to learn how to cook new food.*
Discord	1	Kioni	Communication and Learning	Discord allows its PC gamers to create communication servers that they can use to text and speak to with each other.	*Connection and information gathering for acquiring knowledge.*

Appendix G

Social Awareness (Samples from Data)

Social Media Platform	Frequency	Participant	Purpose	App defined use	Quote from Participants
WhatsApp	2	Ngozi	Information, Communication and Connection	According to the website, WhatsApp is an instant messaging platform to be used for text, photos, videos, video calls, documents, and location.	*I use [WhatsApp] every day, because I speak with my family every day.*
Twitter	3	Nanoma	Stress management, connection	According to the website, Twitter is an social platform to be used to communicate and connect through quick messages known as Tweets. Tweets may contain text, GIFs, photos, and videos.	*I just look at videos, and I laugh.*
Facebook	4	Gifty	Connection and Job Search	The purpose of Facebook is to allow users share texts, pictures, and videos.	*I am on professional group of historians or scholars who study different aspects of Ghana's history" and there are job opportunities posted in that professional group too.*
Tik Tok	1	Kioni	Connection - its importance since Pandemic	TikTok is a platform for users to create, share, and explore short videos.	*"...before the pandemic, I thought social media was horrible, before the pandemic, but during the pandemic, and after the pandemic, I realized that people are more human, and that we all just need to understand that different cultures, different colors, different languages, we can all come together and, and just exist peacefully thus using the platform for connection.*
LinkedIn	5	Naden	News and Motivation	LinkedIn is a professional online network platform that can be used to connect with professionals, search and apply for jobs, and learn career-related skills.	*I get inspired by people's stories that would trigger me to want to do more.*
YouTube	2	Naija	News	YouTube is a platform that allows users upload and share videos and comment on others' videos.	*I am a compassionate conservative "So, I like to get a balanced view of the political spectrum through videos uploaded by different group.*
Reddit	1	Kean	News, Information and Connection	Reddit is a website that allows users to promote social news content by voting at will.	*I use the platform for news gathering.*

GroupMe	1	Kean	News, Information and Connection	GroupMe is a group messaging app. It does not require users to have smartphones.	*General connection on messages received from friends also for information gathering and news on events.*
Instagram	5	Niyi	Information, News and learning	Instagram is a picture and video sharing app that users can upload, view, and comment.	*I follow the official school handle on Instagram.*
Email	9	Christine	News and views	Email is the platform users send messages over the internet.	*I don't think social media impacts how I view people because I know that people just share their 5 seconds on Facebook.*
Campus News	1	George	Data Gathering- News	Campus news is created by higher education institutions to share information to users.	*I use Twitter to catchup on campus news 24/7.*
Zoom	1	Nanoma	Stress management, connection	Zoom is a platform that enables users connect through video chat.	*Well, I feel I miss my home. I miss Nigeria all the time. I just try to stay in touch in touch with my family via zoom calls, like video calls. So that really helps just staying in touch with what's happening in their life. Getting to hear what's happening in the country.*
Microsoft Teams	1	Nasiru	Class activities	Microsoft Teams is an online platform designed for team collaborations,	*Uses Microsoft Teams to connect with classmates.*
School Portal	1	Nnamdi	Information gathering	School portals are designated platforms for educational institutions to communicate to various contents including classroom material to their students.	*I use the portal to gather information relating to school programs, events, and news.*

Appendix H

Responsible Decision-Making (Samples from Data)

Social Media Platform	Frequency of use by participants	Participant	Purpose	App defined Use	Quote from Participants
WhatsApp	1	Nasiru	Trend, Information gathering and learning	According to the website, WhatsApp is an instant messaging platform to be used for text, photos, videos, video calls, documents, and location.	*I use social media to understand growing social norms like sexual orientations by following conversations online.*
Twitter	3	Nnamdi	Motivation	According to the website, Twitter is a social platform to be used to communicate and connect through quick messages known as Tweets. Tweets may contain text, GIFs, photos, and videos.	*I think I was really motivated to come here through Twitter. There's this trend where you take a picture of your passport, then you take a picture of the airport and take a picture of a class in a college. Then you write something like "we move" or something like that. That means that they left Nigeria, to come and school here. I saw that a lot before I came. So, I don't know maybe subconsciously it affected me....so a lot of people doing that then and I just wanted to also snap my passport and post my transition as well.*
Facebook	2	Niyi	Perspective, information gathering	The purpose of Facebook is to allow users share texts, pictures, and videos.	*I see a lot of people that show off their lifestyle on Instagram and have a lot of money. And sometimes you just want to have that kind of money...*
Tik Tok	1	Melina	Idea generation and Research	TikTok is a platform for users to create, share, and explore short videos.	*I see things on TikTok, get ideas from it and try things out.*
LinkedIn	2	Nasha	Learning and Awareness	LinkedIn is a professional online network platform that can be used to connect with professionals, search and apply for jobs, and learn career-related skills.	*LinkedIn helps me to think about present and future research ideas and motivates me to achieve more*
YouTube	3	George	Research and learning	YouTube is a platform that allows users upload and share videos and comment on others' videos.	*I connect more with the academia on Twitter more than in any other place.*
Reddit	1	Kean	Information gathering	Reddit is a website that allows users to promote social news content by voting at will.	*N/A*

Instagram	3	Ndidi	Information gathering, learning other culture and Connection	Instagram is a picture and video sharing app that users can upload, view, and comment.	*I use the platform to compare my progress with other people online and to learn about other people's cultures.*
Google	4	Nura	Information Gathering	Google is an online web server that allows users search content of choice.	*I use the platform to gather information on how to maintain my status and US regulations. This information is also shared by the international student services.*
Pinterest	1	Melina	Idea generation and Research	Pinterest is a platform for users to share, post, and shop pins. According to the website, "Pins are bookmarks that people use to save content they love on Pinterest" add comments and send messages. "Pins can be images, videos or products"	*It exposes me to a lot of things, and I sometime see something that interests me which potentially spurs my decision-making process.*
Quora	1	Kean	Information gathering		*I use Quora for next steps and career search.*
Snapchat	1	Nasiru	Trend, Information gathering and learning	Snapchat is a social media platform that allows it's users to take and share pictures and videos that disappear after a short period of time.	*I use Snapchat primarily for my US connection and to get abreast of trends. It's also a way for me to learn about others.*

Appendix I

Relationship-Building (Samples from Data)

Social Media Platform	Frequency of use by participants	Participant	Purpose	App defined use	Quote from Participants
WhatsApp	7	Nura	Connection	According to the website, WhatsApp is an instant messaging platform to be used for text, photos, videos, video calls, documents, and location.	*WhatsApp all the time because I see the message and the information right away.*
Twitter	7	Naden	Mentorship Connection	According to the website, Twitter is a social platform to be used to communicate and connect through quick messages known as Tweets. Tweets may contain text, GIFs, photos, and videos.	*I get inspired by people's stories that would trigger me to want to do more.*
Facebook	11	Gifty	Connection	The purpose of Facebook is to allow users share texts, pictures, and videos.	*I am on professional group of historians or scholars who study different aspects of Ghana's history" and there are job opportunities posted in that professional group too.*
Tik Tok	2	Melina	Relaxation	TikTok is a platform for users to create, share, and explore short videos.	*I see things on TikTok, get ideas from it and try things out.*
LinkedIn	7	Niyi	Connection-Mentorship, Relationship management	LinkedIn is a professional online network platform that can be used to connect with professionals, search and apply for jobs, and learn career-related skills.	*I seek a lot of careers like related relationships because I want to get mentorship on how to best harness my time in graduate school and to best harness my career path*
YouTube	1	Naija	Connection	YouTube is a platform that allows users upload and share videos and comment on others' videos.	*I watch a lot of YouTube videos. I watch a lot of Nigerian movies on YouTube. And watch a lot of soccer or sports related activities, too.*
Tinder	1	Kean	Relationship Management	Tinder is an online dating app that allows people connect through messaging on an intimate level.	*I rarely seek relationships online unless I'm on Tinder...*

Instagram	6	Christine	Connection, Motivation	Instagram is a picture and video sharing app that users can upload, view, and comment.	*I am a social influencer. So, I use social media as a tool to inform people… I navigate life in the sense of how I can make an impact in someone looking at me?"*
Pinterest	1	Kioni	Learning	Pinterest is a platform for users to share, post, and shop pins. According to the website, "Pins are bookmarks that people use to save content they love on Pinterest" add comments and send messages. "Pins can be images, videos or products"	*I can say social media is a little bit useful, because you get to learn a little bit of culture from social media.*
Snapchat	3	Nasiru	Connection	Snapchat is a social media platform that allows its users to take and share pictures and videos that disappear after a short period of time.	*I use Snapchat primarily for my US connection and to get abreast of trends. It's also a way for me to learn about others*
Discord	1	Kioni	Learning	Discord allows its PC gamers to create communication servers that they can use to text and speak to with each other	*Connection and information gathering for knowledge acquisition*
Telegram	1	Kioni	Learning	Telegram is an app that is designed to allow users to send secure messages and conduct audio calling. Messages include documents, photos, and videos.	*Connection and information gathering for knowledge acquisition*
Messenger	1	Kioni	Learning	Messenger is a messaging app that users can send pictures, text, videos, and audio to contacts.	*Connection and information gathering for knowledge acquisition*
Hangout	1	Kioni	Learning	Google Hangouts is a platform that allows members to initiate and communicate using text, as well as audio and video chats.	*Connection and information gathering for knowledge acquisition*