

**Settling in: Investigating the experiences of social media use of a group of international students in their integration into the Rhodes University environment**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Master of Arts Degree  
in Journalism and Media Studies

**Rhodes University**

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February 2022

## **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to my parents, Angel and Xiomara who paved the way for my success. Both their financial and emotional support has allowed me to complete this paper. I'd like to thank my older sister, Keyla, for her guidance, advice, proofing and endless encouragement. Finally, I must thank my wonderful supervisor, Brian Garman, for his patience and enthusiasm along this journey.

## **Abstract**

The South African government and its institutions of higher education take deliberate measures to attract international students to this country which is marketed as an appealing option for international study because it is cheaper than in European countries and the US, courses that may be unavailable or difficult to get into in their home countries are available in South Africa, there is a high quality of education, a greater variety of qualifications, technologically advanced facilities and a geographical proximity of South Africa to international students' home countries in the SADC region. While many international students find living in a new country exciting, fulfilling and stimulating, it may at the same time be frustrating and confusing. Students may find it difficult to adjust to their general living arrangements, new housing and transportation environments and dealing with financial and health care concerns. Also, there may be academic challenges and socio-cultural difficulties to navigate. Problems of adjustment may force international students into isolation, creating feelings of alienation and so they develop mechanisms to adjust, to feel better integrated and cope with situations that they might find difficult and alienating. One of the most important of these is to find social support which can come from friends, family, academic staff, classmates or colleagues. Social networking through social media is also important as it can ameliorate feelings of alienation and contribute significantly to the creation of an active social network and its use is therefore associated with social support for, and social adjustment of international students. This study investigates the positive and negative impacts of social media on the integration of international students into the Rhodes University environment. The study uses an exploratory survey, focus groups and semi-structured interviews to gather data which was analysed using a thematic analysis. This analysis shows that international students make use of a variety social media platforms, each with its own specific purpose – WhatsApp to communicate with friends and family, Twitter for news, Instagram for entertainment and Facebook for information and entertainment, etc. Interestingly, while social media is used in the maintenance of strong social connections it is not used to create those relationships. Rather, meeting new people and the initiation and building of relationships was done through meeting at parties and pubs and in university organised social events, clubs and societies. While social media reporting of issues like xenophobic attacks made international students anxious, none of those involved in the study were subjected to such attacks through social media.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

In 2015 I began my studies at Rhodes University, a small liberal arts university in the town of Makhanda (formerly Grahamstown), located in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. I was and remain an international student on a study visa. However, I have been living in South Africa since 1999. I decided to pursue a university career in South Africa in 2014 where I applied to several tertiary education institutions in the country, including Rhodes University. This seemed to be a very natural step for me, to further my education in the country where I was raised. I had varying degrees of assimilation into different South African cultures. It was not until university that I was exposed to a large group of international students that had similar concerns, similar experiences of alienation, of attempting to fit in, and of navigating South African culture. Having met more international students, some of whom had just arrived in the country several weeks prior, but also some that had attended a South African secondary institution, I had a community to engage with intellectually about the challenges international students face and how we can overcome these challenges.

The internationalisation of higher education is the result of the 21st century's globalised and knowledge-based economy (Altbach and Teichler 2001: 6) and has become a strategic priority for many countries, governments, and higher education institutions (Halye and Bond 2008:5). Internationalisation at a higher education level is about the policies and practices that institutions implement in order to cope with the ever-growing global academic environment (Altbach and Knight 2007: 293). The internationalisation of higher education is defined by Knight as “*the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions (primarily teaching/learning, research, service) or delivery of higher education*” (2003: 2:). By this definition, it is rather, institutions’ approach to internationalisation and the implications of their management and strategies that are important. By extension, it is how these strategies impact international students that warrants further examination.

The African continent in particular approaches internationalisation in a way that reflects its

history, culture, and context (Oyewole 2009: 320). It has experienced colonialism and its education systems are increasingly affected by globalisation and internationalisation (Sehoole 2006). For the continent, internationalisation creates beneficial policies that are consistent with its current needs, priorities, and circumstances (Oyewole 2009: 320).

Internationalisation of the higher education sector across the world has become the norm, and this is also true for South African universities (Botha 2014: 203). Since the end of the apartheid era in South Africa, the internationalisation of higher education has been a popular theme as the country takes its place as a regional leader in education and research in sub-Saharan Africa (Dunn and Nilan 2007: 266). The process of internationalising higher education in South Africa has been affected by under-funding of its institutions as well as overcrowding of universities, colleges and technikons around the country (Dunn and Nilan 2007: 266). Regardless, there has been a significant increase in the number of international students at South African universities over the last ten years; especially from other African countries (Aloyo and Wenzel 2011: 336). International students have become an increasingly important part of South Africa's higher education system (Mpinganjira 2011: 2081). Competition for attracting international students has driven South Africa to implement different strategies to promote international education (Du Plessis and Fourie 2011: 462). Both the South African government and institutions of higher education establish deliberate policies that will attract international students. (Mpinganjira 2011: 2081).

Through international trade, countries that market themselves as wanting international students can significantly improve their economy (Mpinganjira 2011: 2080). The ability of the country to attract more students, and the quality of students it requires, will depend on how well it can compete on the international market against countries that also work to attract international students. South Africa's major competitors are mainly developed countries such as the USA, UK, Canada, and Australia (Mpinganjira 2012: 262). However, South Africa is an attractive option because even though studying outside of one's country is generally expensive it is still a more economical option than sojourning to western countries such as the UK, US and Australia.

According to The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) economic incentives play a large role in driving host countries like South Africa and its institutions to actively recruit international students (2008). Although there is an increasing emphasis on the economic motivations for internationalisation systems in the higher education sector, there are several other benefits to the student and/or to the institution (Halve and Bond 2008:5). For example, gaining knowledge and understanding of other nations, cultures, and global issues can benefit international students. Networking and the development of social and emotional skills also benefit individuals. For institutions, there are monetary and academic benefits in the contribution reproduction of knowledge (Halve and Bond 2008:6).

South Africa has long been a preferred destination for students from Southern Africa (Chimucheka 2012: 223). 71% of international students are from neighbouring nations (Du Plessis and Fourie 2011: 463). Students from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) are attracted to South Africa because it offers qualifications that are respected in their home countries as well as internationally. South Africa's technologically advanced facilities enable its institutions to provide high-quality education that may not be offered by institutions in the international student's home country (Mpinganjira 2011: 2185).

By the start of the academic year in 2020, 20% of students registered at Rhodes University in South Africa were international students. The majority of these students are from SADC countries (International Office student forum 2019). The university also has several international students from Germany, Netherlands, France, and other European countries (International Office First-year orientation 2020).

There are also drawbacks to studying in a different country than one's own. Studies around this topic take into consideration the circumstances in which international students will live in such that the costs of studying in South Africa to international students are both financial and social in nature (Chimucheka 2010: 227). While many international students may find living in a new environment and a new country exciting and fulfilling due to their exposure to new cultures and variety of worldviews, these same attracting factors can cause frustration and confusion for others (Mudhovozi 2011: 294). For instance, before the journey to the host country begins, international students face administrative issues involving study permits, medical aid

insurance, and travel. Once international students arrive in the host country, there is a further myriad of challenges that they face. A significant challenge is that of adjusting to a new environment. These problems of adjustment often force international students into isolation, creating feelings of alienation (Klomegah 2006: 303). Positive social and academic adjustment and the integration of international students to a new environment alleviate feelings of alienation. Correspondingly, there is a clear link between successful integration and positive academic performance in the host country (Mehdizadeh and Scott, 2005:485) such that, students who feel integrated into their environment are more likely to graduate (Rienties, Beusaert, Grohnert, Niemantsverdriet, Kommers 2011: 686).

International students develop mechanisms to adjust to a different country, to feel better integrated, and cope with situations that they might find difficult and alienating (Zhang and Goodson 2010: 4). One of the most important mechanisms of adjustment is to find social support (Zhang and Goodson 2010: 4). It is generally believed that international students have more difficulty than local students in dealing with a wide range of social and academic situations and that having a local friend from the host country for support makes a positive difference (Barker, Child, Gallois, Jones and Callan 1991: 83). International students will approach their friends or family, academic advisers, classmates, colleagues, or the offices designated for issues pertaining to international students specifically, for advice regarding their personal and academic problems (Zhai 2002:11). Social networking enables new students to successfully adjust to academic study in a foreign country (Saw, Abbott, Donaghey and McDonald 2012: 128).

International students often feel disconnected from their home country while living abroad and social media has become a method of addressing this issue (Hall and Sivakumaran 2014: 4). International students use social media to help them adjust to living in a foreign country (Hall and Sivakumaran 2014: 4). Increasingly, social media platforms are used by students from around the world. These platforms can not only assist international students to establish relationships when they arrive in the host country, but to maintain connections with home from before their travel experience, as well as to maintain contact with their established connections after they return home (Hall and Sivakumaran 2014: 4). Without establishing relationships,

living and studying in a different country can be an isolating experience for students (Hall and Sivakumaran 2014: 4). International students use social media platforms such as Whatsapp, Facebook, email, Twitter and Instagram to stay in touch with family and friends back home (Hall and Sivakumaran 2014:5).

The last few decades have seen the development of numerous Social Networking Sites (SNS) which allow its users to communicate online with immediacy and in ways that would have been impossible with traditional media (McDougall, Walsh, Watter, Miller, Stevermer and Fogas 2016: 10). In traditional media, content is generated for users (Highfield 2019: 1). However, on social media platforms, users are responsible for generating and distributing content (McDougall *et al.* 2016: 10). This means that the use of social media can contribute to the creation of an active social network and its use is therefore associated with social support and social adjustment of international students (Hall and Sivakumaran 2014: 3). SNS also provide low-energy relationship maintenance (Ellison, Vitak, Gray, and Lampe 2014:1105). People may be instantly “friended” or “followed”, two concepts often associated with social media, even without prior meeting. Further, SNS users may notify a significant portion of their network of what they are doing by “posting a story” or “status”, an in-built broadcasting tool developed into most of the frequently used SNS (Hayes, Carr and Wohn 2016: 173). Consequently, relationships facilitated through social media can help international students adjust to new environments and thus cope with challenges of alienation and integration (Seo, Harn, Ebrahim, and Aldana 2016: 13).

Motivations for using social media among international students differ (Hall and Sivakumaran 2014: 5). In Australia, it was found that students were communicating with friends and staying in touch with family. In South Korea, however, students coming from other Asian countries were found to have small social networks and less motivation to reach out and cultivate relationships during their international studies. Instead, the students felt that cultivating new relationships would take too much time and effort and thus preferred to focus on their chosen study program (Hall and Sivakumaran 2014: 5). The online relationships they did entertain focused on getting information for daily life such as where to eat, what to do with free time and exploring cheaper ways to call home (Hall and Sivakumaran 2014: 5). In terms of using

social media for educational purposes: the study showed that their use of the internet was geared more toward gathering information to complete class assignments (Hall and Sivakumaran 2014: 5). However, engagement through social media between students and academic institutions often leads to enhanced acclimatization and a greater level of commitment to the university (Hall and Sivakumaran, 2014: 5). Overall, students who use social media to communicate with other students and people who live in the same community of the host country tend to be more satisfied with university life (Hall and Sivakumaran, 2014: 5).

At the same time, there may be risks that arise from these online interactions (Hall and Sivakumaran 2014: 3) and there is a growing concern about the potentially negative associations between social media use and mental health among university students (Viner, Gireesh, Stiglic, Hudson, Goddings, Ward and Nicholls 2019: 685). A growing health concern is the contribution of social media to depression and anxiety among international students in particular (Bagroy, Kumaraguru, and De Choudhury 2017: 1635; Hardy and Castonguay 2018: 285).

The relationship between using social networking sites and mental health is a thriving area of research that has produced mixed results (Hardy and Castonguay 2018: 285). People suffering with mental illnesses turn to popular social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter or YouTube, to share their experiences or seek advice from others with similar health conditions. These opportunities to support and empower people that are struggling to cope, through online peer networks, have been explored. The potential risks while risks that may arise from online peer-to peer interactions should be carefully considered (Naslund, Aschbrenner, Marsch and Bartels 2016: 114). The opportunities afforded by social media are important to students struggling to cope (Naslund *et al.* 2016: 114) because social media and discussion forums can allow participants to learn from the experiences of others and use that knowledge to understand their own situation (Stawarz, Preist and Coyle: 2019).

The context of this research identifies an area of study which is rich in information that can be of further use to South African universities. Universities need to capitalise on current research to help international students feel more welcome, to feel better integrated into the community,

and to continue the connection with students after the study abroad experience ends. My survey of the literature indicates that while a substantial amount of research has been conducted on the relationship between social media use and the adjustment of international students, these studies have taken place primarily among students in the US, UK, and Australia. The use of social media as a mechanism of adjustment in the face of challenges and feelings of alienation experienced by international students has not been widely researched in South Africa, and not at all among international students at Rhodes University. This leads us to the question: how does the social media use of international students at Rhodes University influence their perception of integration into their new environment?

The following chapter establishes the literature this study follows. It will explore internationalisation as a concept as well as the consequences of the phenomenon. Further, it shall depict opposing theories of integration and alienation in the context of international students. Issues surrounding the challenges that international students face as well as the mechanisms used to face these challenges are included. A particular mechanism that is explored in depth is the use of social media as a form of social support. Following, the theory around social media and how it influences international students' perceptions and experiences, based on the current research available, is set out.

Following the literature review is a methodology chapter. This will outline the rationale for the use of the particular methods and methodology and illustrate how each was used. A thematic analysis of the data will then enable me to analyse the patterns of social media use on the integration of the international students into their new environment.

A description of the results then follows whereby the findings and discussion of the research is described. In this study, the focus is on the experiences of integration of international students through their social media use, in the hopes that individuals and institutions alike can benefit from the use of SNS in assisting with the adjustment of sojourners in South Africa.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, I review the literature which informs my study on how social media use influences experiences of integration of a group of international students at Rhodes University. I begin by setting out internationalisation in more detail, followed by the overarching theory around social integration and alienation, thereafter I delve deeper into social media and the existing studies on its uses and effects.

According to Blau, social integration will “*prevail in a group if bonds of attraction that unite its members*” (1960:545). This study looks at the social integration of International Students and is in line with Blau’s definition: how they use social media to ensure their bonds of attraction unite them to host country members, and other international students, thus achieving successful social integration. Much literature exists on the matter, predominantly studies conducted on eastern students’ experiences from China, Russia and India sojourning western countries such as Canada, United States and United Kingdom. The gap in South African studies offers an opportunity to provide literature a little closer to home. With an established

theory surrounding the integration of immigrants, the study further localizes the subject matter to look specifically at the integration of international students at Rhodes University.

My review of the literature is set out in several layers. Firstly, theories surrounding internationalisation: why it exists and how it affects global dynamics. Secondly, the reasons by which international students choose to study abroad. Thirdly, understanding what challenges international students may be faced with once they arrive in the host country (Titrek, Hashimi, Aliand Nguluma 2016:149). These challenges present in the form of culture shock, homesickness, discrimination and xenophobia. Fourthly, social support as a coping mechanism for overcoming these challenges (Zhai, 2002:6). Social support presents in the form of making and maintaining friends, communicating with lecturers, having healthy communication with home, and being a part of the social environment such as going to events, concerts and meetings (Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie- Gauld 2005: 709). These topics then fall into two larger, contrasting theoretical frameworks: the integration and alienation of international students (Schram and Lauver 1988).

The overarching literature that govern social media are immersed throughout this study. This study predominantly focuses on how social media both negatively and positively influences the perception of integration of several international students in a particular environment. In this literature review, I set out what social media is in the context of this study, and what parameters have been set for its definition given the vastness of the term. Once this has been established, I review similar research on how social media platforms are used as well as other studies on the ways social media has aided or inhibited international students' assimilation.

## **2.2 Internationalisation**

International student programmes are used in higher education institutions in order to develop understanding and tolerance between students of different cultures. (Doyle, Gendall and Meyer *et al* 2010: 473). On a personal, individual basis, international students and host country nationals are given the opportunity to form life-long bonds (Doyle *et al* 2010: 473). On an institutional level, by encouraging internationalisation, future global leaders that are tolerant,

respectful and knowledgeable are created (Dwyer and Peters 2014: 56). These individuals consequently become more willing to take a stand for the world's welfare, not just what benefits a specific country (Dwyer and Peters 2014: 56). The choice to study outside of one's country influences one's career path, worldview, and even self-confidence (Doyle *et al* 2010: 473). Regardless of where the student chooses to study, or what institution they attend, or even the length of study, the experience becomes a defining moment in the student's life, be it a positive or negative outcome (Doyle *et al* 2010: 473).

The choice to study abroad is based on whether there are opportunities to stay in the country after students graduate, what language the country speaks, and reviews from friends and family (Mpinginjira 2012:263). Once the student has decided where to go, they have to assess the costs against the benefits (Mpinginjira 2012:263). Financial costs are taken into consideration, including the cost of air travel to the host country, and any travel between countries during the holidays (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002: 18). The level of crime in the host country is also taken into consideration as well as whether there is racial discrimination or xenophobia present. Whether the host institution accepts existing qualifications for entry into study programmes is an important issue to address early on in the decision-making process (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002: 18). The existence of an established population of international students within a host country is also part of this cost assessment because there is an assumption that an already existing community of international students means the host country is accepting toward foreigners (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002: 18).

Many African countries' lack of access to higher education has been a major driver for most of the student migration that has occurred in the second half of the twentieth century (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002: 2). Every year, more people choose to study in South Africa, demonstrating the quality of the country's universities and the international reputation of their academics and degrees (Du Plessis and Fourie 2011: 466). It also displays the demand for higher education in developing countries and explains why more students are choosing to study outside of their own country (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002:2).

In relation to the United States, United Kingdom and Australia, South Africa is considered close geographically to most African Countries. International students would prefer being

closer to their home country (Mpinganjira, 2010: 2186). Some international students study in South Africa mainly because of strong historical connections and agreements between Southern African Development Community countries (Chimucheka 2012: 264). Botswana, Lesotho, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe are among the eleven SADC countries (Kotecha 2008: 127).

There is an economic attraction to South Africa in particular. Studying and living abroad in South Africa is less expensive, especially for students from the SADC region, than it is in European or North American universities (Mpinganjira, 2010: 2185). While international student fees will still be required in South Africa, for SADC citizens these fees are far lower than in other nations (Mpinganjira 2012: 262).

The country's use of English as a medium of instruction (Mpinganjira, 2010: 2185) is considered a particular distinction when looking for employment internationally (Arkoudis, Baik, Bexley, and Doughney 2014: 9). Students can easily find work at the end of their studies or continue their education to be accepted wherever they apply with well-recognised qualifications and language distinction (Mpinganjira 2010: 2185).

However, a major issue linked with crossing borders in Africa, particularly in the SADC regions, is xenophobia (Mhlambo 2017: 48). Although xenophobia is not unique to South Africa, it is a cause for concern as the country has had more than six outbreaks of xenophobic violence directed at foreign nationals in the last five years. Serious injuries and deaths have frequently occurred from these attacks (Mhlambo 2017: 48). Xenophobia obstructs South Africa's capacity to recruit skills, tourists, and investment from the region, tarnishing the country's image (Mhlambo 2017: 48). The fear of being a victim of xenophobia might not only influence international students' decision to study in South Africa but also affect the experience when they arrive (Mhlambo 2017: 48).

### **2.3 Case Studies from Africa and the Global South**

Research on international students conducted by Lee & Schoole (2020), found that

international students in South Africa face a variety of discriminatory difficulties, including having to deal with unfavourable stereotypes and threats to their physical safety (2020:312). Their research found that African students in comparison to students from Europe and North America, in particular, felt prejudice was more severe (Lee & Schoole 2020:312).

In other research about how foreign students see and feel the idea of belonging as a result of attending a rural institution in South Africa's Eastern Cape province Chinyamurindi, (2018:215) found that international students saw themselves as belonging to an in-group that was distinct from other groups which were mostly composed of domestic students. As a result, these two groups were frequently spoken in terms of “them” and “us”. This frequently led to situations where labels and stereotypes were applied. Participants of this study described how, despite personal and academic efforts, they continued to experience a “feeling of elsewhere — a psychological state of present-day alienation characterized by a strong yearning for home” (Chinyamurindi, 2018:215). This was accompanied by a craving to be with a group of people from their home nations as well as a desire for artefacts like cuisine and music (Chinyamurindi, 2018:215).

## **2.4 Social Integration**

Integration is the process of bringing together several sub-groups or sections of a social system to form a whole (Thomas 1992: 215). The acceptance of similar cultural norms and widespread adherence to similar values in behaviour describe integrated communities. Integration also entails the use of shared communication networks as well as a functional dependency (Thomas 1992: 215).

Social integration in the context of immigration entails building a sense of belonging in the host community (Laurentsyevea and Venturini, 2017: 285). This means embracing and acting in accordance with that particular society's values and conventions. As an extension, it also manifests through developing the social capital required by the host country's institutions (Laurentsyevea and Venturini, 2017: 285). The host population plays a vital role in the social integration process as scholars believe that social integration is only possible once immigrants

are acknowledged as members of a given community (Laurentsyeva and Venturini, 2017:285). A healthy social society is characterised by reciprocal recognition of membership (Laurentsyeva and Venturini, 2017: 285).

People who want to join a group are under pressure to prove to the other members that they would make a desirable component of a community (Blau 1960:5 45). A member who can provide value to the community helps other members abandon preconceived ideas of 'us' versus 'them' and allows bonds to form (Blau 1960: 545). Alternatively, demonstrating one's approachability and friendliness eliminates the necessity for members' defensiveness against unknown cultural norms, allowing others to connect and interact with new members of a group (Blau 1960:545).

Assimilation is the process of a sojourner becoming fully integrated into the host culture (Thomas 1992: 215). Behavioural assimilation occurs when all groups agree on the majority's ideals and act accordingly. According to structural assimilation, all groups have access to and utilise the same institutions and social structures (Thomas 1992: 216).

Much like the social integration of any given individual to a new environment is important (Blau 1960: 545), so too is the integration of international students into a new community (Mehdizadeh and Scott 2005: 485). Positive social and academic adjustment in the integration of international students to a new environment is vital. There is a clear link between integration and successful academic performance in the host country (Mehdizadeh and Scott 2005: 485). For international students to successfully integrate into a new culture, with the aim of achieving the best academic performance, there is a need to access mechanisms of facing certain assimilation challenges (Mehdizadeh and Scott 2005:485). International students, therefore, have mechanisms of adjustment to feel better integrated and cope with the alienated situation that they might find themselves in.

Students who feel at ease in their host countries, have strong bonds with their classmates and professors, and participate in extracurricular activities, are more likely to graduate (Rienties, Beausaert, Grohnert, Niemantsverdriet, Kommers 2011: 686). Friendships, shared housing with other students, and informal interactions with university employees all contribute to

social integration (Rienties *et al.* 2011: 687). International students' psychological and intellectual adjustment is dependent on supporting social interactions (Mudhovozi 2011: 296). Social support from family and friends, as well as social networks of students and peers, has a positive impact on international students' academic success (Rienties *et al.* 2011: 686).

Institutional policies have the capacity to impact the social integration process (Laurentsyeva and Venturini 2017: 291). Immigrant integration is a major concern among policymakers both at national and institutional level (Entzinger and Biezeveld 2003: 6). Institutions should work to improve the well-being and social involvement of overseas students in the hopes of assisting them in achieving academic success (Rienties, Luchoomun, and Tempelaar 2012: 134). However, it is not only the institutions' responsibility. According to Tinto, students must not only persevere in their studies in order to graduate, thus having successful academic integration, but they must also participate in student culture both inside and outside of the classroom in order to thrive in a new environment thus achieving social integration (1975: 91). Individuals must also be prepared to participate in socialisation procedures involving peer interaction, which are often organised by institutions in the form of meet-and-greets, orientation periods, and social events (Rienties *et al.* 2012: 134). The period of time in which the sojourn spends in the host country is an important consideration in their adjustment as their social integration increases as they spend more time in the host country (Laurentsyeva and Venturini 2017: 291).

## **2.5 Alienation and socio-cultural difficulties**

Studying at university level is stressful and challenging (Sullivan and Kashubeck-West 2015:1). Moving away from home to a tertiary institution is the beginning of a series of significant changes for many students. For example, it may be the first time that students are living away from the security of home and family (Sullivan and Kashubeck-West 2015:1). Students are experiencing increased independence and responsibility (Sullivan and Kashubeck-West 2015:1). Particularly for post-graduates, an even greater time management skill is needed. In addition to increased academic demands and pressure, there are also social

issues to battle (Sullivan and Kashubeck

West 2015:1). For international students, the normal tensions and obstacles connected with university studies are significantly heightened (Sullivan and Kashubeck-West 2015:1).

Evidence suggests that international students may be forced into a state of isolation due to pressure and stress which all contribute to not adjusting to a new environment (Klomegah 2006: 303). International students may be rejected by host students, which further deepens feelings of alienation (Klomegah 2006: 303). This feeling of alienation and lack of a community results in international students realising they are othered as minorities in a foreign country (Malcolm and Mendoza 2014: 603). Alienation can be described as what happens to people when they are removed from their known world through knowledge and placed in an unknown world with various knowledge-based differences (Klomegah 2006: 303).

According to Seeman who first wrote of the phenomenon,

*"Alienation denotes the estrangement of the individual from key aspects of his or her social existence ... alienation is a feeling on the part of the individual that he cannot influence the situations in which he interacts."*

(1959: 305)

It was Burbach who then developed a way to measure the phenomenon (1972: 225). He defined alienation in three ways: powerlessness, meaninglessness, and social estrangement (1972: 225). Powerlessness is defined as an individual's expectation or potential that their own efforts will not result in the occurrence of the outcomes, or reinforcements, that their wishes desire. It has to do with one's belief in one's ability to control outcomes (Huang 1991: 11). Meaninglessness shows that the person is undecided on what to believe. It has to do with a person's view of their ability to predict a person's behaviour (Huang 1991: 11). Social estrangement is defined as a feeling of separation from the group or isolation from group norms (Huang 1991: 11).

Valenta depicts places of alienation and integration as 'arenas' (Valenta 2008: 12). Within a community, there are spaces where international students will experience inclusivity and other

spaces where there is non-belonging, exclusion and stigma (Valenta 2008: 12).

Many universities host a substantial number of international students. These students bring a range of benefits to the host country and in return, the students gain higher education (Andrade 2006: 132). However, the choice to study outside of one's home country may present many challenges for the international student including experiencing acculturative stress and difficulties with adjustment to the environment of the host country (Andrade 2006: 132).

Deciding to study abroad is only a small part of the journey international students will go on. While many international students find living in a new country and being exposed to new cultures exciting, fulfilling and stimulating, it may be frustrating and confusing for others (Mudhovozi, 2011: 294). International students coming into a new environment experience several challenges that can be categorised into four sections (Tabeloo and Bin Raki 2013: 139).

Firstly, students may experience challenges with adjusting to their general living arrangements. That is, adjusting to food in a new country, a new housing environment, transportation, dealing with financial problems as well as health care concerns (Tabeloo and Bin Raki 2013: 139).

Secondly, there are academic challenges, such as lack of proficiency in the English language or adjusting to the change in academic structure (Tabeloo and Bin Raki 2013: 139). Language is considered one of the biggest challenges in a migrant's journey (Mori 2002: 138). Language has always played a role in the alienation or assimilation of international students and immigrant workers (Yeh and Inose 2003: 16). Many studies have established that learning the language of the host country can help integration, while not understanding the language and therefore being unable to communicate with host country members results in senses of non-belonging and 'otherness' (Hayes and Ling 1994: 8). From an academic point of view, a lack of English abilities is likely to have an impact on international students' academic performance, and academic challenges, in turn, will have an impact on their psychological adjustment (Lin and Yi 1997: 475). However, knowing and learning the language is associated with a higher level of assimilation (Hayes and Ling 1994: 8).

Thirdly, personal psychological adjustment, such as experiencing homesickness, loneliness,

depression, alienation generally pertains to the mental wellbeing of the international student (Tabeloo and Bin Raki 2013: 139). International students face socio-cultural difficulties. This includes recreational social problems such as peer pressure as well as culture shock. Studying in a foreign country can guarantee a longer distance from family members. This also comes with the cost associated with communicating with people outside the country. To many students, being far from family is a costly decision to make (Chimucheka 2015: 228).

And lastly, in the context of South Africa, with its xenophobic history, one must include this form of discrimination as difficulty faced by international students (Sing 2015: 84). Xenophobic sentiments in South Africa are widespread and continue to be cause for much concern. Xenophobia and discrimination within Higher Education institutions and its impact on international students can be seen as embedded in broader economic and social issues (Chimucheka 2012: 227).

Intercultural adaptation is a process in which people shift their lifestyles and communication habits to fit into a new culture. (Sawyer and Chen 2012: 154). There are four stages of intercultural adaptation: honeymoon, crisis, adjustment, and biculturalism. International students experience initial happiness when they are in a different country during the honeymoon stage (Sawyer and Chen 2012: 155). Hostility and frustration arise with living in a confusing and different culture. Then there's incremental adjustment and recuperation, and the final stage is full adjustment and adaptation, which is known as biculturalism (Sawyer and Chen 2012: 155).

In the hostility phase, culture shock is often experienced which can hinder assimilation (Sawyer and Chen 2012: 155). Culture shock is *the "psychological disorientation most people suffer when they move for an extended period of time into a culture strikingly different from their own,"* according to Kohls (1984). Culture shock is a difficulty that everyone experiences when adjusting to a new culture (Sawyer and Chen 2012: 155). It implies a variety of different feelings and reactions to an unknown environment. It is strained due to the effort required to make necessary psychological adaptations (Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, and Todman 2008: 73). It is a sense of loss and feelings of deprivation regarding friends, status, profession, and possessions (Zhou *et al.* 2008: 73). It describes feelings of being rejected by, or rejecting,

members of the new culture. It can manifest in the confusion of one's role, role expectations, and values (Zhou *et al.* 2008: 73). Culture shock can also manifest in surprise, anxiety, even rejection and resentment after becoming aware of cultural differences and finally, can bring up feelings of helplessness due to not being able to cope with the new environment (Zhou *et al.* 2008: 73). However, there are various ways to alleviate culture shock and assist in adjustment. Sufficient and supportive communication is one of these (Sawyer and Chen 2012: 155).

An individual's social network is a critical component in combating alienation and assisting in assimilation (Sullivan and Kashubeck-West, 2015:2). People who have a positive social network find it easier to cope with the difficult situations that come with living in a new country (Sullivan and Kashubeck-West, 2015:2). The presence of social support and coping techniques on acculturative stress among international students, as well as their psychological and sociocultural adaptability, is vital. In common acculturation models, the host society is portrayed as a crucial factor influencing the acculturation of international students (Smith and Khawaja 2011: 703). The host national and co-national social networks of international students have been studied, and it has been discovered that host nationals are more helpful in lowering acculturative stress by offering information and assistance on local cultural expectations and norms (Hayes and Ling 1994: 9). The student's life satisfaction is influenced by the number of friends, financial comfort, discriminating perceptions, and information gathered before to the journey (Smith and Khawaja 2011: 703). As a result, social networking is a critical tool for assisting new students in effectively adjusting to academic studies in a foreign nation (Saw *et al.* 2012: 128). International students may approach their friends or family, academic advisers, classmates, colleagues, or the offices designated for issues pertaining to international students specifically, for advice regarding their personal and academic problems (Zhai 2002:11).

## **2.6 Social Support**

There is a direct link between mechanisms of mediating social interactions and social connectedness of international students and host students, and psychosocial adjustment (Zhang and Goodson 2010: 4).

Social support has been defined as “*an interpersonal transaction involving one or more of the following: (1) emotional concern (liking, love, empathy), (2) instrumental aid (goods or services), (3) information (about the environment), or (4) appraisal (information relevant to self evaluation)*”

(House 1981: 39).

On the one hand, forming networks of same-culture and/or same country communities constitutes positive social capital (Valenta 2008: 12). By being able to communicate with friends and family from similar backgrounds, immigrants are able to navigate a new environment better (Valenta 2008: 12). Further, these communities can become a source of information that can assist in adjusting to economic and cultural differences (Valenta 2008:12). Interacting with students from the same culture or country can facilitate the adjustment process by providing a social network of known culture and norms (Mudhovozi 2011: 296).

On the other hand, these same networks can be seen as negative social capital (Valenta 2008: 12). This view argues that relying on connections made within an immigrant community that share worldviews and cultures limit the options available to a sojourner (Valenta 2008: 12). Using this argument, the social and economic mobility of individual immigrants is hindered by the dependency of immigrant communities and thus acts as a barrier to successful assimilation (Valenta 2008: 12)

Valenta describes functional and structural elements of social support. The contrast between perceived versus received social support, as well as other sorts of social support, such as psychological, cognitive, or esteem support, are all functional elements (Valenta 2008: 14). While the size and structure of a person's network, such as the number of strong versus weak relationships, are important structural elements (Valenta 2008: 14).

The network composition described by social capital is the main feature of the structural elements of social support. Social capital describes a person's benefits of having relationships with other people (Lin, Peng, Kim, Kim and LaRose 2011: 422). For example, providing social support, sharing useful information or financial assistance increases one's social capital (Lin *et al.* 2011: 422). There are two types of social capital discussed in Literature namely

‘bridging’, which consists of loose relationships or ‘weak bonds’, and ‘bonding’ which provides ‘strong ties’ (Lin *et al.* 2011: 422). While strong ties are usually close friends and family that influence people’s interests and behaviours, weaker ties act as bridges to new interests and new information (Lin *et al.* 2011: 422).

For students struggling with severe life changes, having both strong and weak links is a valuable coping resource. International students' psychological, intellectual and intercultural adaptation is dependent on supporting social interactions from both other international students and host nationals by establishing both weak and strong links (Valenta 2008: 14).

Relationships facilitated through social media can help people adjust to new environments and cope with challenging issues especially when they enter a new country (Saw *et al.* 2012: 128). Social media use is thus associated with social support and social adjustment of international students (Hall and Sivakumaran 2014: 3).

## **2.7 Social Media**

Hayes and Carr defined social media as

*“Social media are Internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others”*

(2015: 8).

Social media platforms, commonly known in the literature as Social Network Sites (SNS) are web based platforms that people use for a variety of different reasons (Utz and Breuer 2017: 158). They have three major identifying factors. Firstly, the material or content on these platforms is created by the users of the network itself (Utz and Breuer 2017: 158). Secondly, relationships between users can be openly expressed and navigated through on such platforms (Utz and Breuer 2017: 158). Lastly, people use these sites to consume, produce and engage with content that is created by fellow users (Utz and Breuer 2017: 158).

People can communicate with others and belong to multiple networks via virtual communities

(Sawyer and Chen 2012: 152). Social media allows users to interact with peers by adding them to friend networks, which makes communication easier, especially within peer groups (Wang, Yu and Wei 2012: 198). The introduction of social media has had a tremendous influence on how individuals stay connected in their daily lives (Kim, Sin, Yoo-Lee 2014: 443). The capacity to share content with others is at the heart of social media (Osterrieder 2013:2). Users typically register and create a profile before uploading anything. Users can choose whether their whole profile or chosen material is publicly available or exclusively viewable to certain audiences, depending on the platform and purpose (Osterrieder 2013:2). Short status updates, larger text pieces, links, photographs, audio or video files, publications, or CV-related material are examples of content types (Osterrieder 2013:2).

Information-sharing activities on social media platforms can bring together a group of individuals, who are engaged in a certain problem, to build a community and foster community identity (Shang, Wu, and Li 2017: 241). People use social media to obtain knowledge and learn about diverse thoughts and perspectives on issues, topics, and events when connecting with others online (Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane and Azad 2013: 39). People are also able to share knowledge and information regardless of the physical distance between them (Sawyer and Chen 2012: 151). Most notably, social media is used for socialising; it is a type of media that allows individuals to engage in online dialogues without having to meet face to face (Sawyer and Chen 2012: 152). One of the most important reasons why people use social media is because it allows them to be socially connected and involved (Barker 2009: 210).

Sharing knowledge on social media is a practice as old as these networks are (Oh and Syn 2015:2052). Eyewitness information shared on social media is a vital source of information (Fohringer, Dransch, Kreibich, and Schröter 2015: 2725). Users of social media share information for the purpose of entertainment, amusement, or simply passing the time (Whiting and Williams 2013: 365). People use social media platforms for enjoyment as well as information. In social interactions, people in communities exchange knowledge because they enjoy discussing information with others (Whiting and Williams 2013: 365).

Different sorts of social media users have varied reasons for sharing information. Although both Facebook and Twitter are social networking services, they may be targeted to distinct

audiences (Oh and Syn 2015:2052). Different types of social media are used for different purposes (Kim, Yoo-Lee and Sin 2011: 2). While there are a variety of ways to categorise social media, its typology is frequently based on the primary function and purpose of use, such as blogging, microblogging on Twitter or social networking on Facebook (Kim, Sin, Yoo-Lee 2014: 443).

Facebook is used mainly for keeping in touch with others, for getting updates, news and for getting others' opinions (Kim, Yoo-Lee and Sin 2011: 2). Facebook is one of the most widely used social networking sites (Alhabash and Ma 2017: 2). "*Facebook's aim is to offer people the ability to share and make the world more open and connected,*" according to the company's website (Facebook, 2016). People may use Facebook to interact with friends, family members, and acquaintances, as well as upload and share information such as images and status updates (Alhabash and Ma 2017: 2).

Another major social media platform to note is Twitter. According to the most recent data available, Twitter had 330 million monthly active users in the first quarter of 2019 (Finances Online). Twitter is a microblogging service where users communicate in "real time" with their followers by sending 140-character tweets (Alhabash and Ma 2017: 2). The final main social media platform discussed is Instagram. Instagram is a photo-sharing smartphone app that allows users to capture photos, apply filters to them, and publish them on Instagram as well as other social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Alhabash and Ma 2017: 2).

Information may be transferred very instantaneously via social networks, thanks to the convenience of sending messages with a single click (Kim, Sin, Yoo-Lee 2014: 443). However, one of the most pressing concerns about using social media as a source of information is how individuals evaluate the material's source reliability (Westernman *et al.* 2014: 172). As the gatekeeping function shifts from producers to consumers of information for emerging technologies, this topic becomes even more critical to address for users of social media (Westernman *et al.* 2014: 172).

Social media interlinks with the idea of social capital (Lin *et al.* 2011: 422). In the world of social media, as the trend moves toward increased online interaction, relationships created and

nurtured through interfaces such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram also exhibit characteristics of strong and weak ties (Lin *et al* 2011: 422). Social networking sites can sustain both types of social capital: weak ties that rely on new information as well as strong ties that rely on social support (Lin *et al* 2011: 422). While it has been argued that SNS can only produce weak ties, these arguments do not account for the strong social support that is mediated through social media platforms (Rozell, Piercy, Carr, King, Lane, Tornes, Johnson and Wright: 2014: 272). Strong links have been seen to be more effective than weak ones when it comes to emotional support (Utz and Breuer, 2017: 117). Lin *et al.* argue that through gaining social capital of various forms, the internet enables students to maintain previously established connections and build new relationships as they assimilate into a new community (Lin *et al* 2011: 423). SNS can be a powerful tool to establish social capital in a new environment (Lin *et al* 2011: 423).

One's social capital is also associated with extraversion and introversion (Lin *et al* 2011: 426). Much like in the real world, in the online context, personality traits influence interactions. On the one hand, SNS allow more introverted people to connect with others in a low-pressure environment thus increasing their social capital. On the other, extroverts would prefer to interact offline more often regardless of the social nature of these platforms (Lin *et al* 2011: 426). Further, online social capital can be transferred into face-to-face situations. For example, if students form a connection online, they are more likely to meet face to face, suggesting that SNS facilitates relationships from online to offline (Lin *et al.* 2011: 426).

The social adjustment and psychological well-being of international students have long been a topic of research. Research shows that people in new environments, from different countries than their own, use social media to integrate into their host countries and to maintain connections back home (Sawyer and Chen 2012: 151). Studies have shown that sojourners who received online support from members of the community as well as from similar international groups had fewer social adjustment difficulties (Lin *et al.* 2011: 422).

The use of SNS allows international students to communicate with their home countries, follow trends, and keep up with the social networks that they left behind (Lin *et al* 2011: 422). It also allows them to familiarise themselves with a new community and be more prepared to

experience cultural differences (Lin *et al* 2011: 422). SNS provide a platform for users to keep in touch with family and friends in an easy and convenient way, providing there is access (Quan-Haase and Young 2010: 352).

These sites have not only grown exponentially due to an increase in users but also act as very easily available forms of communication and entertainment to younger people (Bashir and Bhat 2017: 2). Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram facilitate users to exchange ideas, feelings, images, personal information and essentially any content a user so wishes in a way that has not existed before (Bashir and Bhat 2017: 2). This accessibility has allowed SNS to become a part of everyday life (Bashir and Bhat 2017: 2). As a part of their everyday lives, young people now have more information at their fingertips than no generation has had before (Bashir and Bhat 2017: 2). Social networking sites have received growing attention regarding their effects on social capital and psychological well-being (Lin *et al.* 2011: 422). SNS also have a negative effect on the well being of young people. As social media becomes more influential on people's lives, from their politics to their education and their physical health, there exists a real concern that individuals are becoming too wrapped up in a virtual realm of Social media (Bashir and Bhat 2017: 1).

Studies have shown that there is a link between anxiety and social media use (Bashir and Bhat 2017: 3). Things like being away from their devices, not receiving messages or experiencing phantom vibrations all contribute to the anxiety caused by using social media (Bashir and Bhat 2017:3). As part of the nature of social media, there exist ways to comment and like on these platforms which can cause stress to frequent users (Bashir and Bhat 2017: 4). Comments and likes act as positive reinforcement and can allow for enjoyment. However, the lack thereof leaves individuals feeling stressed (Bashir and Bhat 2017: 4). Both the positive and negative influences of SNS on young people have been studied. On the one hand: these platforms have the potential to increase socialisation, enhance communication, help develop interests, explore more learning opportunities and like never before people have access to a wealth of information (Bashir and Bhat 2017: 4). However, these platforms also open people up to harassment, cyber-bullying, discrimination, stress, suppression of emotions and depression (Bashir and Bhat 2017: 4).

Those who spend a lot of time on social media sites tend to over-manage their self-image which, in turn, affects their self-esteem. They also experience enhanced loneliness and hinder instances of adjustment (Bashir and Bhat 2017: 4). Although social media platforms are designed to, as their name suggests, create a social atmosphere, researchers have found that the opposite occurs quite regularly. Loneliness can easily be experienced regardless of having access to SNS (Bashir and Bhat 2017: 5). Loneliness can be described as the discrepancy between the level of social interaction required and desired by an individual and the actual level of interaction (Bashir and Bhat 2017: 5).

The lack of social support in this matter is what affects young people's mental health. The lack of friendships, which is often linked to positive physical health, happiness and satisfaction, can greatly affect how a person feels as a user of social media platforms (Bashir and Bhat 2017: 5). Loneliness is a common feeling among international students (Rienties *et al* 2011: 686). Therefore, it must be taken into consideration that social media may increase feelings of loneliness in international students due to the isolating nature of these platforms (Bashir and Bhat 2017: 5). The distance that exists between the users, both physically and on the virtual platform itself can influence feelings of alienation among international students.

Much like mental health problems such as anxiety and depression, international students can also develop feelings of being 'othered' by experiencing discrimination on online platforms. Social media has been widely criticised for being a platform to express xenophobia and hate speech (Burszty, Egorov, Enikolopov and Petrova 2019: 3). Social media can only become an echo chamber for hate but can influence people's perceptions of those intolerant views (Burszty *et al.* 2019: 3). Because of the distance that SNS provide users perceive online discrimination as acceptable because the consequences are not as severe as expressing views openly in front of people (Burszty *et al.* 2019: 3). Accountability, therefore, decreases due to the anonymous nature of these platforms (Burszty *et al* 2019: 3).

## **2.8 Social Media in Relation to Diaspora Studies**

Miconi's study on how Syrian immigrants and refugees used social media in the diaspora (2020: 10), found three different applications of social media. Firstly, it was used in gathering

information about the Syrian conflict; re-establishing connections after dispersion into the diaspora; and, lastly, in the resettlement or planning a new life in their host nations (Miconi, 2020:10).

Social media also offers opportunities for deliberate interventions into the resettlement of immigrants into their new environments. It offers discursive venues for the creation of grassroots storytelling and activity to assist communities in distress (Boichak, 2019). Joyee (2021) believes that Social media platforms in general and Facebook groups in particular, have emerged during immigrants' journeys as essential components of social networks and diasporas in terms of communication (2021).

## **2.9 Conclusion**

International students in institutions of higher education make valuable educational and economic contributions to host countries (Andrade 2006: 132). For these benefits to continue, universities must become more knowledgeable about the adjustment issues these students face and implement appropriate support systems. (Andrade 2006: 132).

Positive social and academic adjustment in the integration of international students to a new environment is vital. There is a clear link between integration and successful academic performance in the host country. For international students to successfully integrate into a new culture, with the aim of achieving optimal academic performance there is a need to access mechanisms of facing these challenges (Mehdizadeh and Scott, 2005:485). International students, therefore, develop mechanisms of adjustment to feel better integrated and cope with the alienated situation that they might find themselves in.

Studies also suggest that students who feel at home in their host countries, who are well connected to fellow students and teachers and who take part in extracurricular activities are more likely to graduate (Rienties *et al.* 2011: 686). Having friends, sharing accommodation with other students as well as (informal) contacts with the university staff positively influences

social integration (Rienties *et al.* 2011: 687). The supportive social relationships are critical to the psychological and academic adaptation of international students (Mudhovozi, 2011: 296). Social support by family and friends (that is, social networks of students) has a positive influence on the study success of international students (Rienties *et al.* 2011: 686). Previous study has found that foreign students with active social or professional relationships with host nationals, as well as a solid local social network, acclimatize better to life in the host country (Zhang and Goodson 2010: 4). International students can benefit from social media by gaining suitable social support and collecting information for transitioning to college life in a foreign country. Young adults all around the world are increasingly using popular social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram to manage their social relationships.

Understanding social media, as well as having the expertise and confidence to utilise it correctly and efficiently for professional purposes, will become crucial abilities for future researchers to have (Osterrieder 2013:2). Social media has been known to support students to invest time and energy in building relationships around shared interests and knowledge communities, promote critical thinking in learners, offer educators a forum for easy networking and positive networking with students and will change the educational system to better motivate students (Hrastinski and Aghaee, 2011). Universities should capitalise on research conducted to help international students feel more welcome, to help them integrate into the community and to continue the connection with students after the study abroad experience ends.

## **2.10 Thesis overview and purpose of the study**

The context of the research identifies an area of study which is rich in information for further use. Universities should capitalize on current research to help international students feel more welcome, to feel better integrated into the community, and to continue the connection with students after the study abroad experience ends. The use of social media as a mechanism of adjustment in the face of the established challenges and feelings of alienation has not been widely researched in South Africa, and not at all among international students at Rhodes University. This assessment of the literature led me to ask the question: how does the social

media use of international students at Rhodes University influence their experiences of integration into their new environment?

### ***Research Aims and Goals***

The primary goal of this research is to establish the positive and negative experiences that international students have had through social media use has on their social and academic integration into the Rhodes University environment. In order to achieve this, I will need to establish the following:

What social media do international students use and what do they use it for. For example, do they use specific social media platforms when communicating with friends and family as opposed to when they are communicating with local peers and/or university staff?

Do they use social media as a purely social tool or is it used for different purposes like academic communication, and access to news as well?

How does social media use easy communication with friends and family at home and does this facilitate integration into the Rhodes University community or does it hinder it?

Does their social media use enable international students to develop relationships with South Africans or does it encourage limiting the development of relationships to those with people from their home countries or regions?

To what extent do international students experience things like bullying, trolling, and hate speech in their social media use, and how does this influence their experiences of integration?

With a literature review that has developed these themes and placed the study in context , the manner in which these questions are answered is set out in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology and Research Design**

### **3.1 Introduction**

An important element to introduce in this next chapter of the thesis is a framework of conducting the study. The methodology guides the development of the research and how the study is conducted. The first thing to set out immediately is what study design was chosen for this particular study and why. While there are elements of quantitative studies in the manner in which this study is set up, it is mainly qualitative in nature. The study design then leads to how the data is collected: what sample was used and what strategy of sampling was chosen. The data collected from this sample must then be analysed and thus the benefits and limitations of Thematic Analysis are set out to explain the rationale behind using this particular method of analysing data. In the penultimate section, I lay out the procedure by which this study took place, before expressing the limitations within my research and the ethics involved in collecting information from the research participants.

### **3.2 Study Design and Focus**

This research lies within the field of cultural studies in which theories are seen as different

frameworks rather than universal theories about social mechanisms (Alasuutari 1996: 372). It is predominantly qualitative in nature with elements of quantitative data collection as outlined by (Babbie and Mouton 2001:28). The qualitative research paradigm, which is interpretative and ethnographic in nature and requires detailed observation and explanation (Ochieng 2009: 14), contends that all participants within the social world are constantly constructing and changing how they interpret that world (Neuman 2007: 85). This approach enables the evaluation of complexities and ensures that any conclusions take into account both unique and general factors (Babbie and Mouton 2001:11).

A qualitative approach to research aims to understand how individuals make meaning of their social world. A primary method of a qualitative approach involves values, reflection and listening with the goal of empowering and giving voice to participants' experiences (Hesse-Biber 2010: 455). Qualitative methods address the development of themes supported by data concerning people. The understanding of quality inquiry begins with knowing precisely what one aims to investigate, interpret and describe (Lindlof 1995: 3).

I chose a small-scale set of research participants because the individual perspectives of interviewees on the problem being explored was more valuable in this case than a larger set of data collected from responses to the same question (Turner 2010:755). Qualitative research was chosen for its appropriateness for conducting the study. It has many benefits suited for the research, mainly its flexibility as the data collection and analysis process can be adapted as new ideas or patterns emerge (Moser and Korstjens 2018:12). They are not rigidly decided beforehand. Its meaningfulness is also a benefit as detailed descriptions of people's experiences, feelings and perceptions can be used in designing, testing or improving systems or products (Smart 2009: 300). Open-ended responses also mean that researchers can uncover novel problems or opportunities that they would not have thought of otherwise.

However, the approach does not exist without its limitations (Queirós, Faria and Almeida 2017: 372). These are usually in the form of unreliability, subjectivity and limited generalisation. The real-world setting often makes qualitative research unreliable because of uncontrolled factors that affect the data (Schonfeld and Mazzola 2013: 277). Due to the researcher's primary role in analysing and interpreting data, qualitative research cannot be

replicated. The researcher decides what is important and what is irrelevant in data analysis, so interpretations of the same data can vary greatly (Katz 2015: 132). Lastly, small samples are often used to gather detailed data about specific contexts. Despite rigorous analysis procedures, it is difficult to draw general conclusions because the data may be biased and unrepresentative of the wider population. Further, voluntary response samples are always at least somewhat biased, as some people are inherently more likely to volunteer than others (Katz 2015: 133). Qualitative studies may be guided and evaluated for their power to warrant generalisation, their success in transforming researcher-subject interactions into resources for improving substantive explanations, the constraint they place on bias and arbitrariness in data interpretation, and their promotion of the re-testing of findings (Katz 2015: 133).

Qualitative research acknowledges the implications of the researcher's presuppositions which have the potential to both hinder and enrich the interpretation of another's lived experience. The researcher-participant interaction is described as "*a double hermeneutic where the participants are trying to make sense of their world while the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world*"

(Smith and Osborn 2008: 53).

I found that many of the interviews elicited sensitive information which is at times hard for the participants to share. The questions at times truly required participants to be vulnerable. This, I felt, is a challenge in itself for participants who are asked to honestly reflect on their journey and revisit difficult and overwhelming experiences that they had put behind them. This made me nervous initially, as I was aware that participants may not respond favourably or be open to sharing such personal experiences. However, I found that getting in touch with my own experiences and past difficulties helped participants to feel more comfortable, accepted and understood.

Qualitative research denotes a systematic, subjective approach used to describe life experiences and give them meaning with the aims to gain insight and explore the depth, richness, and complexity inherent in the phenomenon (Creswell 2009: 98 ). The phenomenon in question is the impact that social media has on the integration of international students into

the life of a South African university: Rhodes University. This study explores the realities of international students at Rhodes University and their experiences in settling in within the university and the greater Makhanda community. The study concerns their experience of social media usage in their process of integration. In order to achieve this, the study needed individuals who understood the themes in question and were willing to express their experiences. For the purpose of this study research participants were asked to describe their experiences as they see them through the use of focus groups and semi-structured interviews.

A sample of 18 international students took part in an online survey. Five international students form part of a focus group to identify themes and research parameters and three international students participate in a semi-structured interview. Semi-structured interviews were used in order to collect the data necessary to answer the research questions. These interviews were voice recorded and transcribed and a thematic analysis is used to analyse the data and interpret the results.

### **3.3 Data collection**

The data was collected by means of three data collection methods. An initial exploratory survey was used to merely explore the bases of the research and suggest the uses of social media as found in the sample group (Convers 1945: 14). This particular exploration consists of questions regarding the participants' use of social media is included in *Appendix A*. The information gathered from the exploratory survey is important as it can be used to make a holistic interpretation of the results of the semi structured interview as well as to inform the nature of the questions asked. The purpose of the survey is to indicate what social media platforms are used by international students at Rhodes University (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp) and what their consumption is used for (social, academic, therapeutic).

The exploratory survey (McGrath and Johnson 2003: 41) was distributed via Google Forms. It intended to explore whether Social Media platforms were used by international students at Rhodes University and what these platforms were used for. The survey was filled in by 18 international students. This data set allowed me to assess what social media platforms are being used by international students at Rhodes University and provides an initial indication of what their use is directed towards. The information gathered from the exploratory survey was used to generate discussion within the focus group and the semi-structured interviews.

Following the survey, a focus group session was conducted which includes five participants (Wilkinson 1998:182). Points of discussion for the focus group are shown in *Appendix B*. The optimum number of participants for a focus group may vary. The number generally suggested as being manageable is between six and ten participants. This is large enough to gain a variety of perspectives and small enough not to become disorderly or fragmented (Rabiee 2004: 656). The purpose of the focus group is to determine salient themes with regards to the integration and alienation of international students. Focus groups provide information about a range of ideas and feelings that individuals have about certain issues, as well as illuminating the differences in perspective between groups of individuals (Rabiee 2004: 656). These ideas and themes supplement the semi-structured interviews. A focus group, framed by Wilkinson (1998: 182) and Tonkiss (2004: 194) is an informal discussion among selected individuals about specific topics guided by fixed questions and themes to focus the interactions, aim to generate data about international students' social media use and the consequent degree of integration and/or alienation. The discussions provided information about communication habits and experiences on social media platforms, as well as a range of ideas and feelings (Rabiee 2004: 656) that individual students have about the impacts of their social media use on how successful their integrating into the Rhodes community has been. Focus groups allow researchers to uncover how participants engage in the process of collective sense-making (how views are constructed, expressed, defended and modified) of the impacts of their social media use (Wilkinson 1998: 186).

With regards to limitations experienced in the process of data collection itself, these are predominately circumstantial and although important to note, are not believed to have impeded

the integrity of the study in a meaningful manner. There were two major impediments when conducting the focus group session in particular,

- 1) The COVID-19 pandemic did not allow face-to-face interviews or focus group sessions to take place. Most international students returned home during hard lock down when the data collection portion of this study was conducted in 2020.
- 2) The use of zoom required internet and electricity. In the midst of the pandemic, load shedding schedules began in both South Africa and Zimbabwe, with several power outages occurring in Botswana as well. The erratic and unpredictable nature of the power outages meant that the focus group session did not have as many participants as planned. However, this turned out to be for the best, as it was a smaller group, and with the nature of Zoom being hard to handle with a large number of people, in the long run it benefitted the study. It was arguably more efficient and informative.

In order to explore the influence of social media on the integration of a small group of international students, in-depth interviews were conducted in this study. Qualitative research interviews obtain insight through conversation, therefore, not only is the content level of meaning portrayed but the relationship level is conveyed as well. This methodology is useful in understanding participants' experiences, allowing the interviewer to obtain in-depth responses to questions (Sawyer and Chen 2012:156). The qualitative method of conducting in-depth interviews provided the study with detailed information about the participants' thoughts and perspectives of the way integration is influenced by their social media use. Semi-structured questions were used in the interviews in order to provide the study with a format to direct the interviews responses while leaving room for the participants to elaborate.

The ideas and themes generated from the survey and the focus groups inform and supplement the in-depth, semi structured interviews (Deacon 1999: 65). The interview was designed to gain insight, through more in-depth conversation, into individual participants' experiences, thoughts and perspectives (Sawyer and Chen 2012:156) into how their social media use has influenced their ability to integrate into the Rhodes University community. Semi-structured

interviews are loosely structured around an interview guide but allow for interjections and follow-up questions by the interviewer (Deacon 1999: 65). The interviewer can clarify responses and the interviewee can clarify questions, which would not have been possible with a questionnaire or a very structured interview (Creswell 2009: 100). The majority of the questions are open-ended questions which enabled the interviewer to gain insight into the subjective experience of the participants. This allows the researcher to probe the questions raised by the theoretical literature around social media usage, adjustment, alienation and integration. Questions were also added in accordance to the results of the exploratory questionnaire as well as the themes that arise from the focus groups. Preliminary questions selected for the semi structured interview are included in *Appendix C*.

According to Malteru, the background and position of the researcher has a consequential effect on what the researcher selects to explore, how the researcher approaches the enquiry, what methodology the researcher determines to be most adequate for the purpose of the enquiry and how the researcher frames and communicates the conclusions of the enquiry (2001: 485). It is therefore important that researchers reflect on personal cultural factors as these could have an impact on researcher-participant interactions as well as meanings interpreted from the findings (Maletrud 2001: 485). In practice, I had to be aware of the ways in which being an international student impacts on the research process (Maletrud 2001: 485). As an international student, I was able to relate to many of the experiences which the participants are voicing, therefore an identification with the research may have been formed which in turn may have impacted on the interview process (Maletrud 2001: 485). Being passionate about the topic and given my own experiences with acculturation, acknowledgement of how these factors may have impacted on the way in which I gave meaning to the interview process and the findings which emerged, has to be noted. The challenge of reflexivity for me was to identify such fore-understandings and their roots in order to make sure that they did not degrade the research process, in terms of the semi-structured interview context or the thematic analysis process (Maletrud 2001: 485).

There is an assumption among researchers that bias in a research study is undesirable, however

Malterud believes that "*preconceptions are not the same as bias, unless the researcher fails to mention them.*" (2001: 484). Even though each researcher has their own perspectives in approaching a study, these perspectives may be developed into equally valid conceptualisations of the phenomenon being studied. Some may see these differences as impacting on the reliability of a study however many researchers believe that different perspectives to approach a phenomena may offer enhanced understandings (Maletrud 2001: 484). Being an international student, researching other international students is a strength during the research process. However, participants originated from very different cultures than mine and therefore I had to constantly be aware of personal worldviews which may have potentially impacted the process. Reflexivity in this study thus involved examining my relationship with the participants and how the relationship dynamics affected not only responses to questions but also the research process in its entirety (Maletrud 2001: 48).

### **3.3.1 Sampling**

The study makes use of non-probability convenience sampling (Acharya, Prakash, Saxena, and Nigam 2013:330). This method is used where the participants are chosen based on convenience as they were pulled from a small population such as international students specifically Rhodes University. However, the study suffers from selection bias because of how small the sample pool is. I knew many of these international students prior to their participation in the study. Although selection bias does not automatically mean the results will be unfairly shifted, it is important to consider (Berk 1983: 387).

The research participants were 18 international students from African countries who are or were previously registered (at the time the study took place) at Rhodes University. The voluntary participation strategy was chosen for this particular study because it is easier to gain respondents if the participation in the study is presented to them as being voluntary (Hoerger 2010: 699). It is not only more likely that respondents are more committed which decreases participant dropout, particularly because the entire process is facilitated online (Hoerger 2010: 699). The participants are students that have been enrolled in the university for more than one

academic year and have graduated or left Rhodes University in the past two years. This decision is to ensure that the students have had some experience in a new environment so as to reflect on their process of integration, as well as to ensure the experience has remained fresh in the students' minds.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

When conducting data analysis, the researcher becomes the instrument for analysis, making judgments about coding, theming, decontextualizing, and recontextualising the data (Starks and Trinidad 2007: 1375). Each qualitative research approach has specific techniques for conducting, documenting, and evaluating data analysis processes, but it is the individual researcher's responsibility to ensure the process of analysing data is done correctly. Qualitative researchers show how data analysis has been conducted through recording, systematizing, and disclosing the methods of analysis with enough detail to enable the reader to determine whether the process is credible (Coughlan, and Cronin 2007: 739).

Once the information is collected, the data has to be analysed in order to produce coherent results in order to answer the research question. There are a number of approaches to the analysis of qualitative data. The process of data analysis begins during the data collection by facilitating the discussion, followed by familiarisation with the data. This can be achieved by watching interview videos, transcribing and taking notes (Rabiee, 2004: 657). The aim is to immerse in the details and get a sense of the data collected as a whole before breaking it into parts. During this process the major themes can be identified. Data can be indexed, sifted highlighted, sorted, compared and placed into context of the research question by rearranging them under a newly-developed understanding (Rabiee, 2004: 658). The method of data collection is a thematic analysis.

#### **3.4.1 Thematic Analysis**

A thematic analysis allows themes to develop both from the research questions and from the

narratives of research participants (Rabiee 2004: 657). Thematic analysis is a qualitative analytic method for the identification, analysis and report of patterns (themes) within data.

Braun and Clarke argued that thematic analysis should be a foundational method for qualitative analysis, as it provides core skills for conducting many other forms of qualitative analysis (2006: 80). A thematic analysis (used for identifying, analysing, organising, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set) of this data is used to categorise it into themes (Braun and Clarke 2006: 80) which can be sorted, compared and placed into context of the research question (Rabiee 2004: 658).

Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that can be widely used across a range of epistemologies and research questions. It is a method for identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set (Braun and Clarke 2006: 80). Thematic analysis can be described as a translator for those speaking the languages of qualitative and quantitative analysis, enabling researchers who use different research methods to communicate with each other (Braun and Clarke 2006: 80).

A rigorous thematic analysis can produce trustworthy and insightful findings (Braun and Clarke 2006:81). I have used literature relating to social media use and integration/alienation to reflect on these themes by constructing a “thick description” of international students’ experiences of the ways in which their social media use has positively or negatively affected their ability to integrate into the Rhodes University community (Braun and Clarke 2006: 97; Attride-Stirling 2001: 388).

### **3.4.2 Thematic Analysis procedure**

Thematic analysis allows for the organisation and description of a data set in rich detail. A six-step process to thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clark can be used to analyse the

data gathered (2006: 79). These steps are constructed as followed; the first step constitutes becoming familiar with the data. The second step requires generating initial codes, then follows the third step which proposes searching for themes, which leads to the fourth step; reviewing themes. The two final steps are then; defining and naming themes and producing the report (Braun and Clark 2006: 79). These six steps were followed when analysing the themes uncovered when conducting the focus group and the interviews. A summary of how I followed Braun and Clarke's steps is provided.

#### *Phase 1: Familiarising yourself with your data*

The data collected from all the twelve interviews were transcribed into a table format and read several times in order to become familiarised with it. During this process, initial thoughts and ideas which emerged are noted.

#### *Phase 2: Generating initial codes*

In this phase, codes that consisted of features of the data that appeared interesting to the researcher are identified. The whole data set was given equal attention so that full consideration was given to repeated patterns within the data. Examples of codes are: UCKAR page use, Forming friendships and communication with home.

#### *Phase 3: Searching for themes*

At this stage all codes were collated into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme. The coded material was then divided into sections falling under general themes, such as experiences of discrimination on social media, or positive uses for different apps.

#### *Phase 4: Reviewing themes*

During this stage, I checked the themes in relation to the coded extracts as well as to the entire data set in order to generate a thematic 'map' of the analysis. This provides the researcher with a visual representation from which links and relationships between themes could be made. During this stage, the researcher is able to discard any themes which do not have enough data to support them. The research supervisor can also check that the themes which emerged are

consistent with the themes that the researcher found. The themes are then reviewed and reworked until a clear idea of how they fit together emerges.

#### *Phase 5: Defining and naming themes*

During this stage, the researcher clearly defines and names the themes providing a detailed analysis of each theme. Here, it is important to develop short but effective names which appropriately encapsulated the essence of each theme.

#### *Phase 6: Producing the report*

During this final stage, the researcher should select quotations from the transcripts to illustrate elements of the themes and link these to existing literature while drawing conclusions. The results and discussion chapters are then produced in order to address the research questions.

### **3.4.3 Advantages of Thematic Analysis**

Through its theoretical freedom, thematic analysis provides a highly flexible approach that can be modified for the needs of many studies, providing a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data (Braun and Clarke 2006: 97). As thematic analysis does not require the detailed theoretical and technological knowledge of other qualitative approaches, it offers a more accessible form of analysis, particularly for those early in their research career (Braun and Clarke 2006: 97).

Thematic analysis is a useful method for examining the perspectives of different research participants, highlighting similarities and differences, and generating unanticipated insights. Thematic analysis is also useful for summarizing key features of a large data set, as it forces the researcher to take a well-structured approach to handling data, helping to produce a clear and organized final report. Although there are many advantages to using thematic analysis, it is important to also acknowledge the disadvantages of this method (Braun and Clarke 2006: 97).

#### **3.4.4 Disadvantages of Thematic Analysis**

A simple thematic analysis is disadvantaged when compared to other methods, as it does not allow researchers to make claims about language use (Braun and Clarke 2006: 98). While thematic analysis is flexible, this flexibility can lead to inconsistency and a lack of coherence when developing themes derived from the research data. Consistency and cohesion can be promoted by applying and making explicit an epistemological position that can coherently underpin the study's empirical claims (Braun and Clarke 2006: 98).

#### **3.5 Procedure**

In order to answer the research question, a procedure needs to be followed.

##### *Recruitment*

The procedure begins with the recruitment of the sample group. I initially posted on the UCKAR Facebook page as well as my personal page, and Instagram Story. The use of social media to recruit research participants seemed appropriate for the particular research subject. I emailed several international students with a breakdown of the requirements, the commitment information, and an outline of the study.

##### *Exploratory Survey*

Following this step, the exploratory survey link was sent out via email. The initial number of international students that filled in the survey was not high enough, and therefore I posted the link on several Facebook groups associated with Rhodes University. The survey outlined the requirements, the commitment information, and the outline of the study as well as a consent clause. Upon the second round of survey requests, I received 18 replies in total. The replies are recorded by the program *Google Forms* on which the survey was conducted.

### *Consent Forms*

The potential research participants are sent consent forms, which they signed and returned to me via email. Electronic signatures are accepted in this particular research project for 2 reasons: 1) Research procedure took place during the December/January Holidays and therefore international students are in their home countries. 2) The COVID-19 pandemic impeded many students to return to the country and/or the university. The consent forms have been saved and stored in a secure folder on my personal computer.

### *Focus group session*

The focus group session was scheduled in accordance with the research participants' availability.

- Eight International students are expected to attend. The session was conducted over the video calling program "Zoom", popularized during the COVID-19 Pandemic in order to increase social distance.
- Five international students took part in the focus group session. This was less than initially ideal. Literature on focus group sessions recommends more than six participants for a successful focus group. The information given could admittedly have been more rounded with a larger group of participants. However, given the nature of the platform on which the focus group took place, being that it was online, and it was more difficult to mediate a larger group, five members on such a platform was easier to manage.
- The focus group was successful in that the conversation fell right into the parameters of the study, and spoke directly to the literature surrounding the topic. The session revealed salient themes surrounding social media and the usage thereof, of integration and alienation and the experience of international students socially and academically. The session was recorded using the program's recording feature. This recording was put through a transcribing program called Otter.ai.

### *In-depth interviews.*

Three in-depth semi-structured interviews are conducted with the research participants. A separate consent form was sent out to three participants which are saved and stored with the other participants' consent forms. These interviews are conducted via voice call and the audio was saved, transcribed and stored in a secure location.

Zoom, an online video and voice conferencing application that was used for the focus group discussions and individual interviews, allows for group discussions that can accommodate the current social distancing regulations required by the COVID-19 response. These video conferences can be recorded and transcribed. They are only accessed by my supervisor and myself through the use of a password in order to protect the confidentiality of the research participants.

### **3.6 Ethics**

According to McMillan and Schumacher the researcher of a particular study needs to be sensitive to ethical principles because of the nature of the research topic and face-to-face interactive data collection (2001:462). In order to render this study ethical, the rights to confidentiality, anonymity, autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and informed consent are adhered to. Furthermore, ethical clearance to conduct the research was obtained from the university before data was collected and can be found in *Appendix D*.

#### *Informed consent*

Obtaining consent from participants was more complex than the mere act of obtaining a signature from a participant (Creswell 2009: 99). Consent should be voluntary and informed which means that participants receive a full, non-technical and clear explanation of what was expected of them so they have the ability to make an informed choice to participate voluntarily in the research.

In this study, informed consent was obtained from the participants once the study had been thoroughly explained to them and their rights stated, in order to conduct the interviews. The

informed consent form can be found in *Appendix E*. Participation was voluntary and participants are at liberty to withdraw at any point or to refuse to answer any uncomfortable questions.

#### *Bona fide party & Beneficence*

This study is a purely academic one, with the principles to promote awareness of the experiences of international students as they adjust to a new culture and learning environment. This research stands with the principle of beneficence which encompasses a normative statement of a moral obligation to act for the benefit of others (Harriet and Glossof 2002: 22). Furthermore, the principle of non-maleficence must also be addressed. This study proposed no harm to any of its participants or the institution it is administered in, however, the subject in this study is of a sensitive nature and is thus treated sensitively.

#### *Confidentiality*

The participants of the survey remained anonymous. While they had the option to have their names changed, none of the focus group members nor the interviewees requested to stay anonymous, and thus their names have been used in this study.

The following chapter establishes the results procured from the procedure and method set above. The results of this study do not exist in isolation. Rather, the context of the study must be considered throughout. Further, a discussion underpins these results as I aim to answer the research questions that I set out to answer.

## Chapter 4: Results and Discussion

The following chapter sets out the results of this study as well as the discussion around these findings. In order to achieve these results three data collection techniques were used: an exploratory survey which asked international students various questions about their social media use, a focus group session where various scenarios pertaining to the link between social media use and the integration of the participants were discussed as well as in-depth interviews where individual experiences of social media use were expanded on. I drew from these data sources re-emerging themes and compiled a chapter that explains the findings in relation to the literature in Chapter 2. The results of this study not only show the various ways in which international students use social media but how this use influences their perceptions of integration into the Rhodes University community. The primary goal of this research is to establish the positive and negative experiences that International students have had, through social media use, on their social and academic integration of international students into the Rhodes University environment. In order to achieve this, I had to establish the following:

What social media do international students use and what do they use it for. For example, do they use specific social media platforms when communicating with friends and family as opposed to when they are communicating with local peers and/or university staff?

Do they use social media as a purely social tool or is it used for different purposes like academic communication, and access to news as well?

How does social media use easy communication with friends and family at home and does this facilitate integration into the Rhodes University community or does it hinder it?

Does their social media use enable international students to develop relationships with South Africans or does it encourage limiting the development of relationships to those with people from their home countries or regions?

To what extent do international students experience things like bullying, trolling, and hate speech in their social media use, and how does this influence their experiences of integration?

Keeping the above research questions in mind, the findings of the study will be discussed accordingly.

The outcome from the thematic analysis conducted resulted in the emergence of two major themes each consisting of subthemes. The first major theme was named; Social Media assisting in the integration of International Students, and the second was named; Social Media contributing to the alienation of the international student. The first theme encompassed four subthemes: Using Social Media as an information base before arrival to a foreign country; using social media to communicate with home whilst living in a foreign country; Using Social Media to maintain friendships made in a foreign country and, lastly; Using Social Media to navigate a particular community within that foreign country. The second theme encompasses two subthemes: The nature of Social Media as a catalyst for discrimination against international students and secondly; the isolating nature of social media for an international student in a foreign country. The experiences of the research participants will be used as examples to explore these major themes and subthemes.

#### **4.1 Making the Decision to Study Abroad**

The focus group session began with a conversation surrounding the reasons why international students choose to study outside of their home countries. An interesting finding of this initial section of the study is that gaining independence is a contributing factor to making this decision.

*I wanted to be more independent. I just want to be away from home and just experience things. I didn't want to be in a situation where things just got laid on me. I wanted to experience the world and it's not easy to experience the world when you're living with your parents. I challenged myself.*

*–Audrey*

Audrey was (at the time of the study) an international student at Rhodes University. She was born and raised in Zimbabwe, South Africa's northern neighbour. To her, becoming

independent was an important aspect of moving to South Africa to study. The results of this study show that students like Audrey, who would prefer to make her own decisions as opposed to “things being laid on”, inferred to as having less control over one’s own experiences or having to rely on parental figures, would choose to study in another country to gain independence.

According to a case study by Farrel and Suvedi, students who study abroad believe the world is “more reachable” and feel more independent (2003: 183). Independence is defined as “A trait of maturity, independence entails not merely to do as one pleases, but to take responsibility for one’s actions rather than relying on other adults to make decisions for oneself” (Hadis 2005:62). Farrel and Suvedi’s study could not compare the existing level of independence before the journey, but it concluded that participating in a study abroad programme allowed international students to make their own decisions and become more open to new ideas as a result of their having studied abroad (Hadis 2005: 67).

A major contributing factor to studying in a particular country once the decision to study abroad has been made is the financial consequences of studying abroad. The results showed that it is more financially viable to study in South Africa. South Africa is an appealing option to international students that come from SADC countries due to the lower costs and benefits given to nationals of SADC. Audrey, being Zimbabwean, had to take this into consideration when deciding where she was going to study. She initially wanted to go to Australia or Asia but ultimately chose South Africa for financial reasons.

*We applied to South Africa at the last minute because I was just keen to leave. My mom thought it worked financially so she said let's do that for now, then we'll do the other options later.*

*–Audrey*

In terms of choice of programme, this study showed that international students come to South Africa for specific programmes that may not necessarily be offered in their home countries. Eric was (at the time the study was conducted) doing his PhD in astronomy. He’s a Kenyan-born international student and had been at university for two years prior to the start of

the study.

*I came to South Africa specifically because it has the programme I'm interested in: the astronomy programme.*

*-Eric*

In Mpinganjira's study, a significant motivation to study abroad was the desire to widen one's own experience, the high level of education available overseas, the fact that studying abroad can improve one's future work chances, the desire to try new things, and the lack of courses available at home (2009: 261). The highly competitive admission criteria in the home country and the inability to acquire a spot in a degree one intended to study at home were two considerations taken (Mpinganjira, 2009: 361).

## **4.2 Social Media and the management of culture shock**

### **4.2.1 Social media as a tool for gathering information before arriving in a foreign country**

This study showed that international students use social media to integrate into a new community. A part of this integration informs one of the structures of the new environment prior to arrival. Anxieties that lead to culture shock may be minimised by gathering as much information about the place you are going to live and study in. Using social media platforms is an easy, accessible and convenient way to acquire information about a particular place.

*I used mostly Facebook. Instagram is difficult. To get information about the school. So, with Facebook it was out there. That's where I read most of it. Then obviously people just putting stuff about Rhodes and what happens at Rhodes.*

*-Audrey*

For Audrey, the experience of using social media to navigate her environment before arrival relieve her stress and made her feel more prepared to face the unknown because she was well informed. She took the opportunity to meet her future residence mates through Facebook.

*Before I arrived: that's when I used social media, because on the first year group [on Facebook] people were posting [about residences]. Who's going to this residence or that one? Come post if you get into it that one and let's follow each other or something like that. So, when I got my residency placement I immediately went to the first year page and there were people posting that were going to be living in our res so I went and I commented and said I'm also in, just to start making friends before I got there.*

–Audrey

Leslie didn't use it personally, but he made a suggestion for a Facebook group much like the one that exists for first years, to be implemented to interact with students trying to find their way around not simply in a new town, but a new country with its own set of customs.

*I didn't use it personally. But I know on first year group, quite a lot of my friends were on it before they arrived at Rhodes. That allowed them to make some connections before they arrived that made integration a bit easier, as opposed to arriving blind. And you know you're trying to figure your way around. And I think a more beefed-up version of the Rhodes first year group would be very helpful.*

–Leslie

Studies have shown that in order to fulfil migratory goals, international students use the internet to travel throughout the world, looking for opportunities, knowledge, contacts, and new ideas. The usage of the internet for these exploratory activities highlighted how information and communication technologies (ICTs) are relevant to the migrant experience beyond attempts to retain a connection with home (Burrell and Anderson, 2008: 203). With this study in mind, internet searches, while still used, have evolved to 'following' whether this is following Facebook pages or Instagram accounts.

Interestingly, the participants in this study may not have had many expectations of their new environment.

*I actually didn't have expectations I was more of like, let's see what South Africa is like. I was like, kind of like a blank canvas and just waiting to see what I'd find here.*

–Eric

This may have influenced the level of social media research they did prior to arrival.

*I used Facebook a little since I didn't know my way around. Even when the names of the residence were mentioned, because I didn't know anyone on the ground so I had a quick look and that's it. It didn't bother me much.*

*–Eric*

*So for me, I didn't even check on social media pages. Because you know, also Rhodes has these names for their pages, like something like UCKAR. You only know about that when you come to Rhodes like what that can mean and stuff like that. So I didn't join any of the other first year pages. I think the only thing I did was just Google Grahamstown and stuff like that, and boom, I just arrived and found my way. I think I'm one of the few people who just hit the ground running. I didn't even go through any like groups or stuff like that.*

*–Chichi*

Pre-departure expectations as described by Wang are the “perception and hope for their study and life abroad before leaving [home country]” (2019: 5). International students' expectations of studying and living in a foreign country will be impacted by the media and international education agencies, which may or may not accurately represent the reality of studying and living in a foreign country. Some universities offer pre-departure orientations to international students, which have proven to be beneficial to adjust to a new study environment (Wang, 2019: 9).

This result then shows that while for some, researching and reaching out to people within the new community prior to arrival might be beneficial, it also doesn't necessarily hinder the integration of the individual if prior research was not performed.

#### **4.2.2 Immersion into the host culture**

*Okay so initially I was just here to study, but also like interact with people and make friends and maybe to whatever and then with time I started actually learning the culture so yeah I actually liked it with time.*

*–Eric*

This is mirrored by Audrey's apprehensiveness in surrounding herself with only friends from Zimbabwe as she slowly introduced herself into the Rhodes University environment.

*Most of my friends were South African. I was interested in learning about the place I am in that's why I did not make any Zimbabwean friends, or join Zim soc. People encouraged me to do so. But I just felt like I already have Zimbabwe within me. Why should I just try and be comfortable when I could go learn something new?*

–Audrey

The creation of cultural silos that exclusively include co-nationals is also exacerbated by social media communication. Positively, international students utilise the internet as an integration tool to learn more about the host country's attitudes toward outsiders, preparing them for interactions with locals. Migrant students must find a balance between researching host cultures and using mediated communication linkages to their home identities (Lim and Pham 2016: 2172).

*We were only two Zimbabweans in my residence. And the other Zimbabwean hadn't been in Zimbabwe since she was eight. So, she didn't really count. Being there for first year it was overwhelming for me. And the relationships were- because I'm not like a going into relationships type of person. I wait and observe people from a distance and actually get into it. So, it was overwhelming but after like the first week. It was amazing. I found people I could relate to people were really supportive, loving, so the first months were really great I belong to the tight knit group.*

–Audrey

Eric explains how his social landscape is made up of people from all over the world.

*Most of my friends are students from different universities across Africa. A good fraction of them are international students, and also have South African students, but very few students who are my friends from my own country. So I will say that of all my friends combined I think I have more. I have more South Africans than international students or rather they are roughly almost 50/50.*

–Eric

Some experiences, however, as Fan and Maliborska pointed out, are not as positive.

*You are really a foreigner on your own and you have to find your way around. I feel we didn't get support. There was one time that I really felt super alienated. It has to be this year.*

*–Chichi*

*If I felt like I needed to be with my Zimbabwean friends because I miss home- I could go to my Zimbabwean friends. It's all about where I am. I will find my South African friends [depending on the moment]. At the end of it all, I'm familiar with and comfortable in that space [that I am in].*

*-Audrey*

Communication with left-behind relatives and friends can help international students cope with the obstacles of relocation, while contact with co-nationals and local students can aid their integration to the host country (Lim and Pham, 2016: 2172). Lim and Pham's study showed that communication with left-behind relatives and friends provides comfort, but it might monopolize students' leisure time and obstruct their engagement with locals, according to a media-deprivation experiment (2016: 2172).

Finding common ground is often the foundation of any friendship. It would then make sense for international students from similar- if not the same- parts of the world to find one another. The fact that international students from a certain area might have similar cultures, speak similar languages and share the same experience of choosing to study abroad, travelling for the first time etc. might encourage the building of a community made up of only international students from Zimbabwe or Botswana respectively. These communities are evident in Rhodes University's societies on campus, where cultural society is formed to celebrate a country's particular culture, language and customs. However, this decision may not be entirely up to the international students themselves.

Fan and Maliborska's findings reveal how degrees of language skill and familiarity with the target culture hamper attempts to integrate into a group (2019: 44). Despite what most language learners believe, having access to a larger community does not automatically imply

effective integration. International students' motivation to engage in the target language and integration into the local society might be greatly reduced if they feel marginalized due to a lack of cultural and sociolinguistic capital (Fan and Maliborska, 2019: 44). They concluded that linguistic, cultural, and social assistance for overseas students would promote their socialization.

#### **4.3 Integration through communication with friends and family**

The emergence of a plethora of inexpensive and accessible ways of communication, such as email, texting, Skype, Facetime, Facebook, and WhatsApp, has enabled university students to communicate with folks back home on a regular basis that would have been unthinkable only a decade ago.

For Audrey, this was a positive experience that provided her with support.

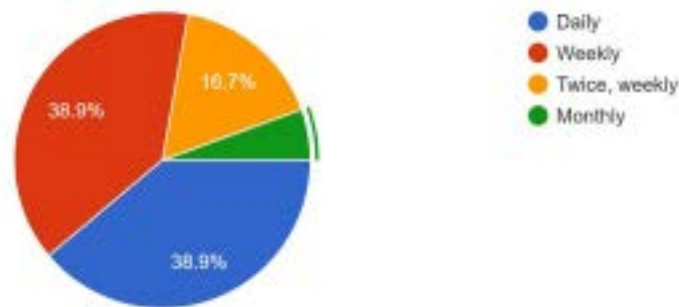
*I spoke to my mom at least three times a week, on the phone and we texted every day. Both my sister as well. We kept in contact all the time because they knew that I was alone in a country for the first time. So communication was happening all the time.*

*–Audrey*

The graph below is sourced from the exploratory survey, where international students were asked to answer various questions pertaining to their social media use. It illustrates how often communication with home takes place. Accessibility of communicational means such as social media has allowed international students to talk to family members on a weekly and monthly basis.

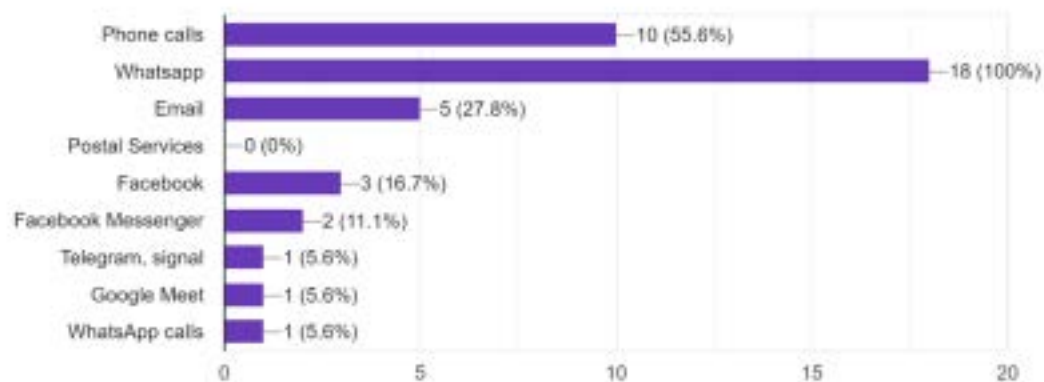
How often do you communicate with home?

18 responses



What do you use to communicate with home?

18 responses



According to the survey conducted, the two graphs above show that a) communication with home by the respondents happens often: at least every month (5.6%) and mostly daily or weekly (38.9% each) and, b) that WhatsApp is used as the main form of communication. 100% of the respondents said they used WhatsApp to communicate with home. WhatsApp is an accessible and easy-to-use communication tool which would account for why the participants prefer the platform over phone calls which is just 55.5%.

Social media as a facilitator of integration is discussed as the participants speak about their communication with home. Until recently, foreign students' communication with their families abruptly dropped when they departed home due to lack of means of easily accessible

communication (Hofer, Thebodo, Kaslow, Meredith and Sauders, 2016: 24). Writing letters and making long-distance calls which took time and money were primary forms of communicating with home (Hofer *et al* 2016: 24). International students learnt to make a growing number of crucial decisions without consulting their parents, and they progressed in predictable ways toward becoming independent, self-regulating adults (Hofer *et al*, 2016: 24). The distance from home and the high cost of communication meant that international students had even less contact with friends and family, and they were expected to benefit from both the cultural immersion and the growing independence that such experiences provided (Hofer *et al*, 2016: 24). However, this is no longer the case thanks to the accessibility of social media.

The results show that the participants communicate with home regularly using social media. This leads to our discussion regarding the accessibility of support. As discussed in Chapter 3, in order for international students to integrate into a society, the sojourn requires a solid foundation of support both from the host institution and its community, and from family and friends from home.

*I think I'm constantly in contact with people at home. My friends back home: we have running conversations going and it makes me feel happier especially when I'm alone and feeling a bit lonely or homesick. I mean, I chat to my parents at least once a week, and it's quite comforting.*

– Hannah

The result of this study depicts how Social Media has become a virtual “transnational bridge” that provides care-giving to family and friends living abroad (Plaza and Plaza, 2019:15). This can be beneficial in a number of ways, particularly with dealing with homesickness. While homesickness inhibits integration for various reasons: mainly that international students cannot immerse themselves into a new environment if they are unhappy and wish to be back home where things are familiar, through the use of social media, international students can keep up with family and friends. This does not only apply to WhatsApp calls and ‘chatting’ online, but to following each other on Instagram whereby the international student can see and interact with friends from home on this platform, and WhatsApp groups where several people

can communicate and share their hopes, fears and ask for support.

*I still have them on Instagram and if they have a nice photo, I like it. My other friends from home: we still have the WhatsApp group that we made immediately after I finished high school. And we actually talked yesterday and this morning. We keep in contact. Whenever there's something to talk about people just say something.*

–Audrey

The results also showed that both parties have working internet in order for this transnational care to occur. With growing technological advancements and the development of countries in Africa, social media is a dynamic tool that people from all parts of the world can use.

*With my mom its more frequent, like say once a week or twice or thrice a week, but right now it's more frequently with my sister and my mom, mostly because now they have proper internet, so we can communicate better also on WhatsApp.*

–Eric

#### **4.3.1 Maintaining friendships created within the host country**

A major factor of integration is making and maintaining friendships in the host country. By surrounding themselves with members of the host community, international students will feel more comfortable in a different environment (Li and Peng 2019: 70). The results of this study show that social media plays a big part in maintaining these relationships. They do not, however, play a big role in creating these connections. Rather, it is the international students themselves that need to “put themselves out there” to create friendships. Thanks to these results it is concluded that Social media on its own doesn't create integration, but is rather a catalyst for socialisation and integration.

*I usually check for events or to stuff or to see what's happening and then I get off. So it's more of a starting point and then you need to go and do those things in order to be a part of the environment.*

–Eric

While relationships between host country nationals and international students begin outside the online sphere, social media is often used to filter potential friendships (Standlee 2019:771). Young adults get information through social media and frequently use this information to screen possible acquaintances in offline social networks. Online manifestations of social and political views act as a filter, allowing individuals to form social and political networks that are considered desirable and even necessary (Standlee 2019: 771).

This has more to do with the individual's personality, whether they are extroverted and want to go out and meet people; make friends; explore, or whether they prefer to keep their circle close.

*I have never used social media as my mechanism for meeting people. I prefer to meet people face to face and also it wasn't that common when I was starting at Rhodes.*

–Hannah

*For me, they were actually quite welcoming, because the first time when I came, I was taken to Postgrad village. The people there, they were friendly. They were accommodating. It was a nice sort of like a community with a central area where you can actually meet up and have fun, talk and whatever.*

–Eric

The process of making friends and maintain those friendships is often a physical one. Social Media may allow the facilitation of these relationships through communication on WhatsApp or Facebook, but these relationships need to first be established. When asked about the deliberate steps he took to involve himself in his environment Eric said he took physical deliberate steps to make friends.

*Let me start with the first thing in Post Grad Village. I had to actually had to go and like sit in the common room, and try to talk to people, to new people that I see. So, I guess. I guess that seemed that seemed to have worked basically: me going out of my way to meet new people:*

*that really helped.*

*–Eric*

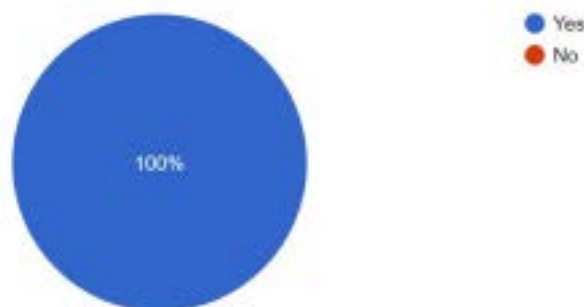
The form and structure of social support found by international students vary. It may not look the same. Therefore, some international students will surround themselves with lots of people for support while others prefer smaller groups or certain individuals to form close bonds with.

*I think the issue of like, support, social connection and stuff, I think, just depends, I think from one person to the other. Some people, you know, are outgoing, so you know, they would love these kind of things. Let's have a party. Let's do this and that but some people are more introverted and prefer to be by themselves. From where I stand now, I think a more like, listen, I could just say one meaningful friendship as an international student. I don't have to be in a group of people.*

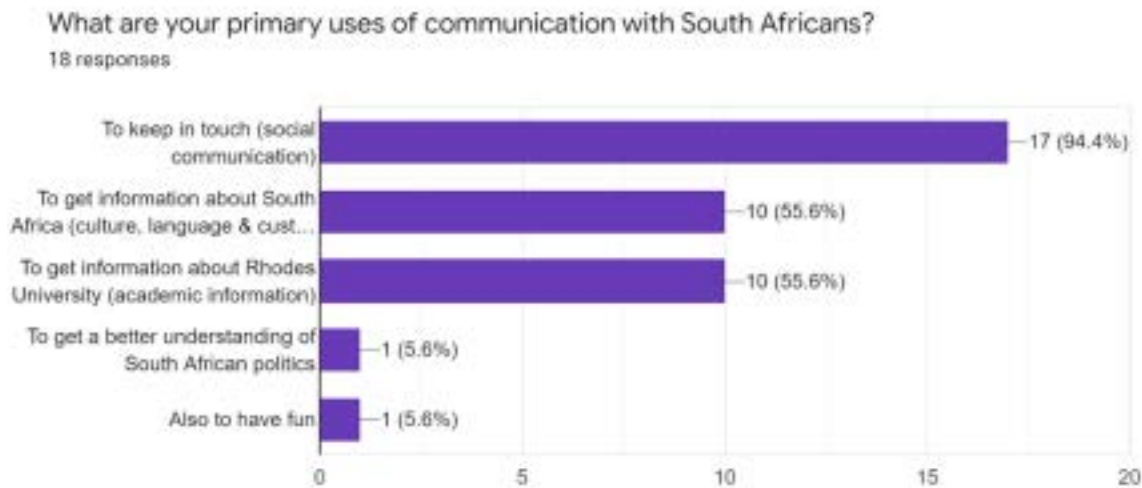
*–Tatenda*

The final section of the survey explored one of the research questions in depth. It primarily focused on the relationships between international students and their South African friends. Much of the literature discusses how sojourns making host country relationships is an integral part of integration into a new environment. The questions posed were whether social media influences this particular relationship between host and sojourner and if there was an effect on the integration of an international student through this interaction. 100% of the respondents said they used social media to communicate with South African friends and peers and 50% of the respondents said they communicated with South African friends every day.

Do you use social media to communicate with South African friends and peers?  
18 responses



Besides keeping in touch (social communication) with South Africans, the respondents also communicate with South Africans to get information about South African culture, language and customs (55.6%) and to get information about Rhodes University (55.6%).



#### 4.4 Using Social Media to navigate an unknown environment

International students will benefit from the institution's deliberate help with the integration process throughout the early stages of their transition to a new culture and environment (Rivas, Hale and Burke 2019: 698). Educating international students on cultural norms to help them adjust; pairing them with a designated member of an orientation programme to assist them to navigate the campus, local community, and local culture; and providing a safe space for international students to express their concerns and address any issues are just a few examples of such initiatives. Furthermore, when institutions establish activities and strategies for student assistance, it is vital that they acquire information regarding foreign students' experiences and needs (Rivas *et al.* 2019: 698).

Rivas *et al.* results emphasize the importance of social connectivity and belonging to overseas students (2019:690). It also highlights several areas where higher education professionals can work to improve students' sense of belonging and connection with domestic students, as well as assist them in their efforts to intentionally improve a support network and build a solid infrastructure to better meet the needs of international students (Rivas *et al.* 2019: 690).

*When I got there I just wanted to have a sense of belonging. So I was still looking for people who*

*just accepted who I am. Being a foreigner is that fear they sure might be outcasted. So I just wanted that. And mostly that you're in an academic school get like support and find out all those things [academic information]. That's basically what it is. [I just wanted] a smoother ride.*

–Audrey

For students and the campus community, many institutions of higher education provide a "diverse range of functional areas that provide student services and academic support" (Long, 2012: 15 and 16). Although university resources are available and supplied to all students, Abe, Talbot, and Geelhoed claimed that overseas students utilised them the least. As a result, the majority of research participants claimed to not use these services (1998: 540). Instead, they turned to other sources for help, such as the internet, professors, and other foreign students (Rivas *et al.* 2019: 697). Social assistance programmes might be implemented in tandem with academic support to give possibilities for contact with other overseas students (Trice 2004: 671).

According to Tulgar's study, WhatsApp was found to be an excellent tool for promoting the maintenance of local cultural contact among users (2018: 18). The participants of the study were able to share ideas and broaden their perspectives and knowledge as global citizens while still maintaining their cultural and national identities as local citizens. From a perspective, their WhatsApp interactional experiences may be considered to have aided the participants in increasing their awareness and expanding their intercultural knowledge (Tulgar, 2018: 18).

As social media becomes more popular as a source of information, it's crucial to know which social media platforms are being utilised to suit different types of information demands (Kim, Sin and Yoo-Lee, 2014: 442) Students utilise social media for a variety of reasons, according to the report. Receiving background knowledge, getting other people's viewpoints, and discovering answers or how-to instructions are all typical causes. Although social media cannot replace some of the high-quality, rigorously managed conventional information resources, they can be utilized to enhance those (Kim *et al.* 2014: 453).

This particular graph shows the local news consumption of 18 international students living in the Makhanda community. A large portion of the group (45.5%) makes use of Grocott's Mail, a Grahamstown-based community newspaper. 27.3% of the responders use RMR, the local radio station. A further 27.3% of the respondents read Oppidan Press, a student newspaper, while 36.4% of the respondents use the rival student newspaper, Activate. What these figures show is how

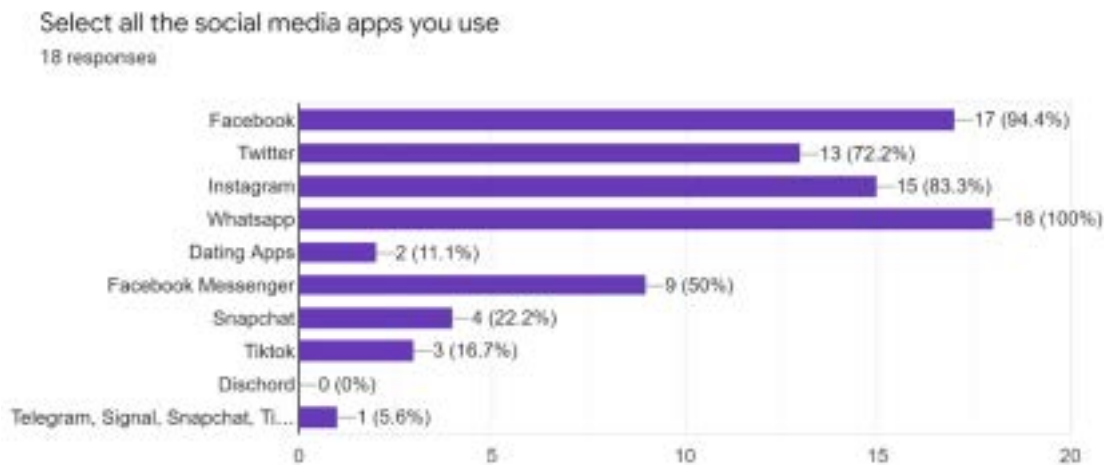
these media platforms can keep international students informed about their current environment. By firstly, wanting to stay informed, and secondly, having the opportunities and platforms to do so, international students can be made to feel an integral part of the community they live in.

#### 4.4.1 Uses of social media platforms

The results of the survey show that each main social media platform has a specific use. WhatsApp is predominantly used for communicating with friends and family as is Facebook (61.1%). Instagram is used by the majority for entertainment (75%) and finally, Twitter, is used for news (73.3%). These three categories directly correlate with the themes that emerged in the findings of both the interviews and the focus group.

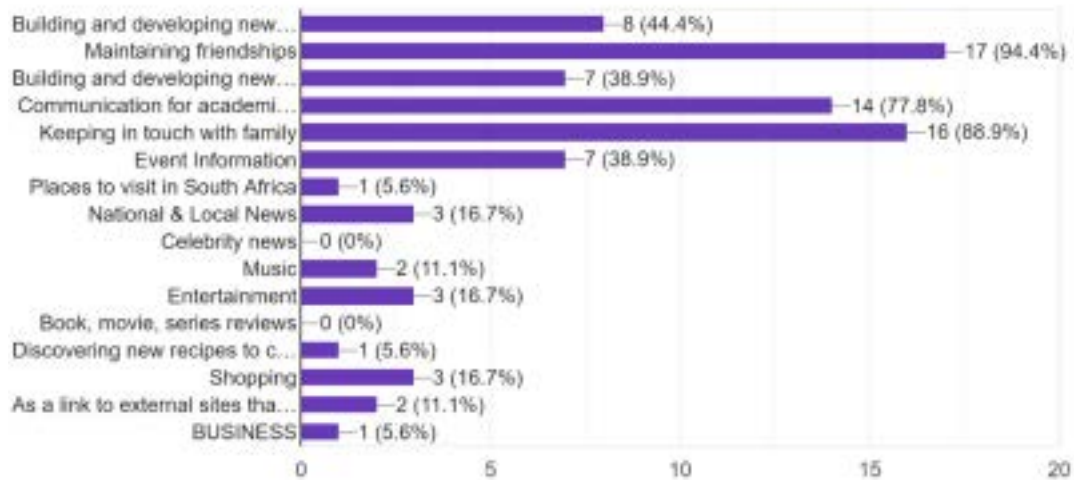
According to the graph below 100% of the respondents use WhatsApp. An overwhelming majority of the respondents use Facebook (94.4%) and Instagram (83.3). 72.2 % of the respondents use

Twitter and 50% make use of Facebook Messenger. What these figures indicate is that social media is an integrated part of the lives of these respondents.



### What do use Whatsapp for?

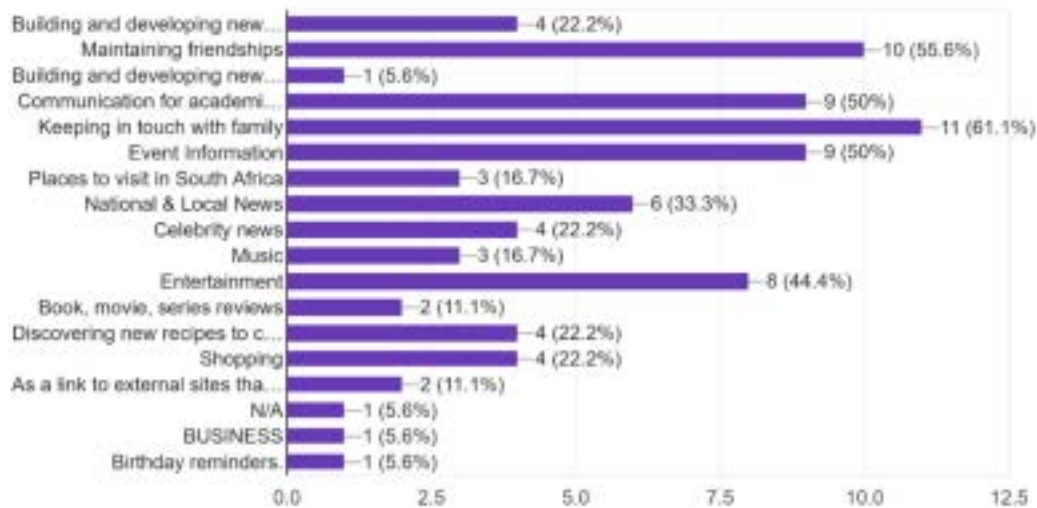
18 responses



The graph above depicts that 94.4% of the respondents said they use WhatsApp for maintaining friendships. 88% of the respondents use the communication platform for keeping in touch with family. A lesser but still noteworthy amount 44.4% of respondents use the platform for building and developing new friendships. These results show how accessible and easy-to-use WhatsApp is.

### What do you use Facebook for?

18 responses



The graph above depicts the respondents' use of Facebook. Noteworthy replies include 61.1% for keeping in touch with family, 55.6 % for maintaining friendships and 50% for both academic communication and event information. Facebook is a major topic of conversation among the results in both the interviews and the focus group. Facebook as a platform on campus is often used to create informational pages such as UCKAR Student Page and the International Students page for both national and international students. Facebook pages are also created to assist with moving, finding digs-mates, buying second hand furniture, clothing, textbooks etc. and general community queries. Other pages such as Rhodes Crushes are used for entertainment. The platform has also been used as a platform for cyberbullying and xenophobia. Online discrimination has taken the form of memes, comments, statuses and videos. Facebook as a platform itself has the potential to both negatively and positively affect international students.

The participants actively take part in several community spaces on Facebook:

- a) The UCKAR student page (University Currently known as Rhodes) is an open-based platform where anyone can post.
- b) The Rhodes Crushes Page, where one can anonymously send out an affectionate message to a person/group.
- c) The First Year Group comprises prospective students and current first-year students.
- d) The Digs-mates group, where students post advertisements were roommates and rentals.
- e) The Second-hand Grahamstown group, where members of the community buy and sell goods and services.

Some of these groups have informational benefits that would otherwise be difficult to acquire:

*It depends, like for instance when I was looking for accommodation so friends suggested I should check the Facebook page, Digs-mates, when I want to buy something I was told about Second Hand Grahamstown and then with time I came to actually find more and more of these groups on my own you know this whole thing about Facebook suggesting for you similar groups that you join, so that also helped.*

*–Eric*

On the one hand, Facebook groups and community chats were helpful, informative and made international students feel a part of something, while on the other it lacked depth and meaning, and was solely for entertainment purposes.

*Last year with the Zim Lives Matter. A couple of people who posted about it, it was quite nice to feel like someone can see us and post about what's going on in the international students country and see them stand up with that was quite nice. I felt like I was part of something. –Audrey*

Leslie, too, felt there was merit to these pages in other forms, particularly as a source of information in times of turmoil in a new environment.

*These random page pages, especially the UCKAR page. Like, I don't know, how many of you were there during the protests but they were very helpful in keeping the student body updated on what was happening across campus. And without them, it would have been a little bit different to living up the hill. We got most of our information through WhatsApp and the UCKAR page. –Leslie*

Their main purpose is to create a space for the community to use and interact. By being a part of these interactions, international students like Hannah can feel a better part of the community.

*It was quite fun seeing posts about your friends or even yourself. It makes you feel like you're part of the community.*

*–Hannah*

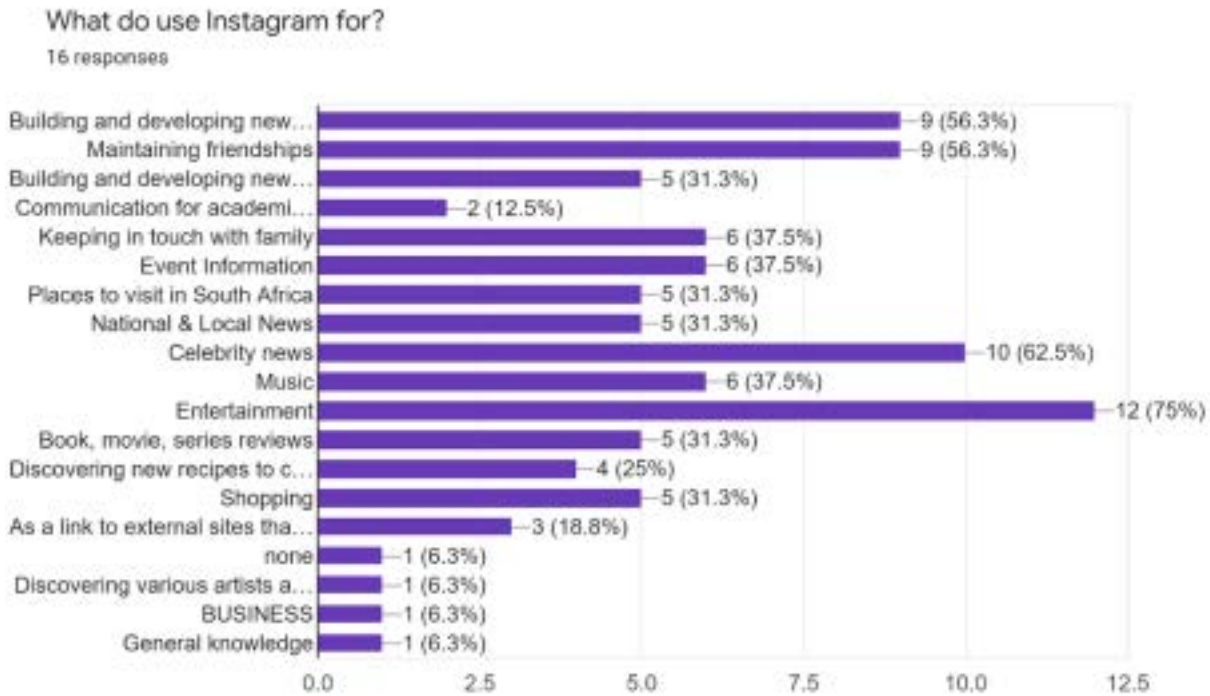
On the other hand, the results also showed that these pages aren't to everyone's taste as they cater to a particularly younger demographic. While these platforms may be fun and informative to younger versions of themselves, the older students currently found them to be solely for entertainment purposes. These spaces catered to younger audiences.

*Pages like Rhodes crushes, for example, I don't even know anyone on there anymore because I'm a post-grad. You only know a few people that are in you class. And you're reading all these stories about this house or this girl from and just like, you know what I mean. For me it's about having deep intentional friendships. I found it like it's [these Facebook pages] are just good for stress relief you go to them and you laugh but when it comes to like, real deep stuff and stuff like that, I found that to be to be missing.*

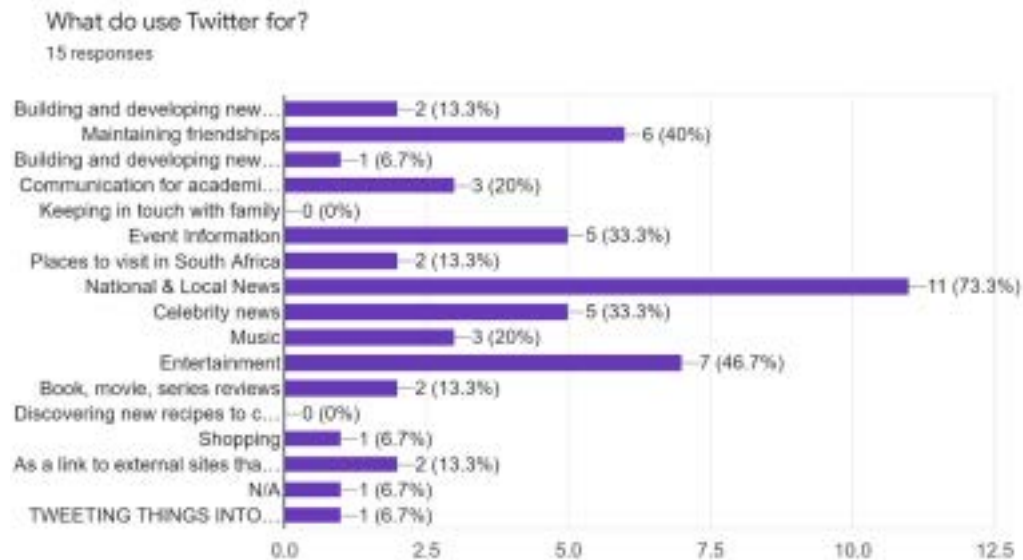
*–Chichi*

In a collaborative environment (such as on a Facebook group), members of an online community communicate with one another (Zhou 2011: 19). Their engagement will be influenced by social dynamics as well as their individual incentives. Using the social influence theory, we looked at the impacts of three social processes on online community user participation: compliance,

identification, and internalization (Zhou 2011: 19). Subjective norm, social identity, and group norm, respectively, indicate compliance, identification, and internalization. As a result, online community administrators should take effective steps to encourage user engagement by facilitating the identification and internalization processes (Zhou 2011: 19)



A large portion of people (75%) use Instagram for entertainment. This is mostly due to its easy user experience, meme and video-centered model and high content production (Hu Manikonda and Kambhampati 2014: 595). 56% of respondents use Instagram to build and develop new friendships as well as maintain friendships. Instagram is used by the respondents to follow the lives of both old and new friends.



Twitter allows people to connect on a wide scale, and to get information out quickly and efficiently. (Tang and Hew 2017: 98). This makes it the perfect news outlet (Armstrong and Gao 2010: 218). It is therefore not surprising that 73.3% of the respondents use Twitter for news intake on a national and local level. Even Activate and Oppidan press, the local student newspapers have their own Twitter profiles to share news and information with the Rhodes community.

By using several social media platforms to inform, entertain and communicate, international students can immerse themselves into the online atmosphere of a community. It has practical applications, such as finding events to actively participate in.

*When I see events happening, let's say for instance I see there's an event happening at Triple S. I just go have a look, see if I can see anyone I know, or try meet new people. – Eric*

#### 4.5 Discrimination on social media platforms

As described by Valenta's 'arenas', within an online community, there are spaces where

international students will experience togetherness and other spaces where there is non-belonging, exclusion and stigma (2008:12). Social media platforms can present as xenophobic spaces. These spaces contribute to the alienation of international students. The results of the focus group show Facebook pages go beyond just shallow entertainment and have harmful consequences.

*I think when I came to Rhodes, and I joined all these pages, I even regretted joining the pages. So for me, my perspective is very different. I found other people were just super mean to others, belittling Africans and whatnot. I think that put me off. Of course, sometimes it helped. Maybe someone will chip in to answer a question and stuff like that, and you picked up from there. But sometimes I would see somebody genuinely asking something. And people just been bluntly, like, rude to them and stuff like that. I think the first things I did was leave the pages. I was like, why was I even in these pages? So I don't think they served the purpose for me, honestly.*

–Chichi

Xenophobia has long been a matter of debate and research in South Africa. Social media has recently been identified as a facilitator of online xenophobic attacks (Chenzi 2020: 16). By its very nature, social media establishes a barrier between users, allowing prejudice to take place with little to no pushback. Furthermore, bogus social media posts concerning South Africa's xenophobic violence have been identified as one of the catalysts for retaliation assaults against South African individuals and South African-owned businesses in other areas of the continent (Chenzi, 2020: 3). This is due to the fact that South Africa is home to Africans from all across the continent, as well as having corporate interests in a variety of places. International students studying in South Africa utilise social media sites to share information about their xenophobic experiences with relatives who live outside of the country (Chenzi, 2020: 3). However, the social media content that they regularly spread, particularly after xenophobic incidents in South Africa, might occasionally be fake news, leading to retribution assaults (Chenzi, 2020: 3). In theory, social media can influence hate speech, and hate crimes in particular, through a variety of routes (Bursztyn, Egorov, Enikolopov and Petrova, 2019: 1). For starters, social media may help with coordination and collective action, such as when it comes to online prejudice against international students. Second, social media may have an impact on individual opinions: previously tolerant people may be exposed to intolerant viewpoints, which may cause their views to become even more extreme (Bursztyn *et al.* 2019: 1). Finally, in addition to changing attitudes, social media may have an impact on people's beliefs of the appropriateness of expressing hatred, and hence their readiness to do so if they have a given viewpoint (Bursztyn *et al.* 2019: 1).

While the online community at Rhodes University and Makhanda at large have its benefits. It also becomes a breeding ground for intolerance and discrimination.

*It was supposed to be a funny thing. Somebody had posted like how to Trump is Zimbabwean and that put cooking oil on him and stuff like that. But I thought that was very insulting like I'm not even from Zim but I found I found that to be very, like super offensive. Even if it was a meme and we're supposed to laugh about it, there's no way [that's okay]. There are admins who approved this before it goes on the page. And this is just a page where anybody can post. But there should be some community standards on what is considered to be fine or funny or something like that. So I think that's one thing that I saw that I was like this, this page is childish, and I just read it out. I'm sure it has had other good stuff that has come out of it. But for me, it was that one incident. I was like, No, this is not for me. This is childish.*

–Chichi

Leslie believes that while these spaces have good intentions and they foster good communication and community-based interaction, they are also toxic:

*During that period, [Zim Lives Matter] we had a hashtag, and social media did provide a lot of information about it, but it was also a very toxic place with people. There were uninformed people saying a lot of uninformed things about Zimbabwe in general and about what was going on, on the ground [in Zimbabwe]. As an international student, it's difficult to filter through, what's the true stuff that's going on back home, and what's actually what's just someone saying something because they feel like they have an opinion.*

-Leslie

International students face discrimination and prejudice which has an impact on their social connectivity (Rivas 2019 *et al.* : 697). Prejudice and discrimination by members of the host culture can, however, cause stress among international students, obstructing their acculturation and severely compromising their scholastic happiness.

In line with Lee & Schoole's study, Hannah, on the other hand, found xenophobic comments on social media not to affect her, or not be directed at her. Rather, social media as concept was isolating to her in certain circumstances.

*Fortunately, I am quite privileged as a white woman. I've never really experienced or felt experience of being discriminated against or othered or feeling left out. I don't think. Like apart from intentional posts by others but obviously due to the nature of social media, and I found the*

*comparisons by Instagram, especially when people are having a really fun night and you're staying at home studying. That could have a negative effect on my emotions.*

*-Hannah*

#### **4.5.1 Social media can be isolating**

Social media use can be a lonely process (Yavich, Davidovitch, Frenkel, 2019: 10). Eric found that staying at home and communicating on his phone was not always the best for him.

*I feel disconnected, per se, with social media on its own as an entity. I do have to like go outside and actually be there physically.*

*-Eric*

And although there are a wide variety of community spaces mentioned above, the argument made by the participants is whether or not these spaces were made for international students.

*As an international student, I feel like these platforms are for Rhodes University Students but I don't feel like they are for us International Students. I feel like a platform that's for me I can express what I want to express [and I cannot here]. There are few things that I see said about international students on the pages. Because we are in minority. So it's understandable that the bulk of the student body on the platform are not international students.*

#### **4.5.2 Overcoming loneliness**

The results further showed that to counteract the isolating nature of social media, international students would have to actively integrate themselves into physical spaces. This does not, however, necessarily mean having many host-country relationships. Instead, the participants agreed that having deeper, meaningful relationships that provide support to international students is what contributes to social integration.

*It's more important to have meaningful friendships and deep friendships, not just surface level, let's go out have a drink and stuff like that, but actually people that you can rely on, and you can actually tell your issues and things that you are facing or you're encountering, or even a personal*

*issue. So I think it also depends with that where you are in those in that kinds of spaces [on social media]. I think what's been important is to establish those connections, they don't have to be a lot established two or three connections that you have with people.*

*–Tatenda*

It is ultimately the relationships made with host country nationals that provide the most support. Not necessarily the university structures and organizations, nor the online community created for the Rhodes University student body. Instead, it's the meaningful, deep bonds created through and facilitated by these platforms, by the community, by the residences, the social events, and indeed by social media that truly bridge the gap between alienation and integration in the experience of an international student studying at Rhodes University.

*And obviously, yes, it is important to be involved with what's happening, what's happening around the UCKAR page and with things like the international parade. But I think those are more like events. But I don't see that actually sustaining or helping you when you're having a meltdown. I don't know how that would actually be quite helpful. So I think just having establishing personal friendships is important. And another thing is, I think just taking charge of whatever that is needs to be done. Because sometimes relying on people or structures like SRC, yes they serve a purpose, but I don't see actually those structures actually helping international students.*

*–Tatenda*

In this chapter, the findings of the study were discussed. The research questions guided the discussion in order to successfully address them. The research questions asked what the experiences of international students' social media use were as they were presented with the task of adjusting to a South African university. The study also sought to seek the uses of social media and how people use them to interact within social media spaces. The results showed that international students used social media for a variety of different purposes such as for information, entertainment and communication. These uses contribute to their social integration. The following chapter concludes the study and establishes the claims this study wishes to make, as well as establishes recommendations for future study.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

The primary goal of this research was to establish the positive and negative experiences that social media use can exert on international students as they try to integrate academically and socially into the Rhodes University. To do this, I analysed the relationship between international students and their social media use through a survey, focus groups and individual interviews.

Several studies have shown that social media can assist in the integration of international students by, among others, providing social support, alleviating homesickness through extended communication with family members, and easy access to information from home (Lin *et al* 2011: 422). However, it can also contribute to the alienation of international students due to the isolating nature of social media, and the xenophobia found in online spaces (Bursztyet *al* 2019: 3). My survey of the literature indicates that while a substantial amount of research has been conducted on the relationship between social media use and the adjustment of international students, these studies have taken place primarily among students in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia. The use of social media as a mechanism of adjustment in the face of the established challenges and feelings of alienation has not been widely researched in South Africa, and not at all among international students at Rhodes University. This lead me to ask question: “how does the use of social media by international students at Rhodes University change their perceptions of integration into their new environment?”

While my research produced results that showed that international students at Rhodes use social media in much the same way as their counterparts in the UK, US and Australia, there were some limitations which may have influenced the results. Firstly, as an international student myself, there were many experiences that the participants expressed, that I could relate to in this study. This however, could have resulted in personal bias impacting on the results of the research. Secondly, students spoke vociferously about some of the issues that were raised, like xenophobia, but none of them had personally been impacted by it which meant that they were either relating experiences of friends or speculating about the topic. The discussions would have produced far richer conversations if participants could speak directly about their own experiences as opposed to speculating. Thirdly, in group discussions, there was also an imbalance of power within the group where, for example some speakers were very vocal and tended to dominate. I worked hard to moderate the discussions and while the debate was healthy, there were still some evident leaders.

The consequence of this is that they sometimes led the discussion into areas which were not

always substantial or relevant. To a certain extent, this was alleviated in the individual interviews which were easier to control and so produced rich data for analysis. A further issue, is that the participants were all older and established students who had been at Rhodes for two or more years, and so for them, the conversations were retrospective – thinking back to what they did, how they behaved, how they used social media, and what would have been useful to understand in their journey to integration when they first arrived into a new environment. Also, the participants (barring one perhaps) considered themselves integrated into the Rhodes University society and so the emotions that come with arriving in a new and unfamiliar place were no longer there for them. While having a retrospective discussion still produced excellent results, it would be profitable to repeat the study with newly arrived students who are in the midst of the process of integration.

Despite these issues, my research confirmed that social media can contribute both positively and negatively to the experiences of international students in a foreign country but also found some interesting details about how that works. Firstly, there is a differential use of platforms for different purposes. Secondly, while the issue of xenophobia is not uniquely South African, it is current and while none of the participants had personally been subjected to xenophobic attacks on social media, they are aware of it and it worried them. And thirdly I found that the use of social media doesn't encourage "flocking" where foreign students tend to group together to the exclusion of host country students.

While the literature says that international students from similar regions tend to "flock together" as they share similar worldviews and norms (Peacock and Harrison, 2009: 494), it also says that that making friendships and connections with host culture is vital for social integration (Laurentsyevea and Venturini, 2017:285). Social media encouraged international students to communicate with host country nationals. The ease of access to community platforms such as those on Facebook meant that international students were actively communicating with both other international students and host country nationals of the Rhodes University community. Through this interaction they were able to find out information about their new environment, get invited to local parties, and gain knowledge about the host culture and behaviours. Social media therefore acts as a facilitator into host culture spaces which can in turn assist in the social integration of international students.

By using an exploratory survey, the study could produce numerical or quantitative results in

relation to the social media use of international students at Rhodes University. It was imperative that there was a baseline for the claim that social media was somehow affecting the integration of international students at Rhodes University. However, discovering the uses and frequency of use of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and WhatsApp only answered the first part of the research question. The study further looked at what the relationship between social media and international students in the Rhodes University environment was like. It established the reasons international students use social media. International students use apps like Instagram for entertainment, WhatsApp for communication and Facebook for news intake, for example.

This study supported the literature with regard to the different uses of social media. Different platforms are used for different reasons. For international students arriving in South Africa for the first time, social media can be fun and informative. Instagram is used to keep up with the latest social news on campus and is also used to stay in touch with old friends, and maintain new friendships. WhatsApp is the main means of communication for international students. This app is used to easily communicate with friends and family back home, as well as with peers and new friends. Using WhatsApp or Instagram to communicate with home had several benefits: It was cheaper, communication was readily available, family members could text each other whenever and as often as they wished. Facebook pages are used for different things. For example, the UCKAR Student Page is used as a source of information, while the Rhodes Crushes page is used more for entertainment and fun. It is not used extensively for communication. Twitter is used to follow news on campus, especially during times of turmoil like student protests.

Social media use allows international students to gain social capital (Valenta 2008: 12) by forming both strong and weak links online (Lin *et al.* 2011: 422). While social media platforms can be used as a tool for social support, it is mainly used to interact casually. Strong bonds are only facilitated, not created through social media platforms such as these. Strong bonds originate organically on campus outside of the social media space, in the common rooms of residencies, in clubs, at campus events or in cultural societies or sports groups (of which Rhodes University has 80). Social media is more useful as a mechanism to maintain these friendships than it is to establish these strong links. Weaker links are predominantly formed online.

The literature shows that an important part of the integration process is communicating with host country members and that remaining within your own space of comfort, culture, nationality and social circle inhibits integration. On one hand, having friends from the same country as you can

help you feel at home and it can alleviate homesickness, but on the other side it inhibits your communication with host country members. Potentially, this inhibition can affect integration. By creating a knowledge base around the people of the host country, culture shock can lessen. Forming a community of people around the student, expanding knowledge, creating new experiences can support integration. Some international students will seek to move away from their comfort space and want to make new connections.

Within any community, including online spaces, there are 'arenas' where international students will experience community and other spaces where there is non-belonging, exclusion and stigma (Valenta 2008:12). The use of social media platforms can affect international students' mental health and make them feel alienated, isolated, othered and discriminated against. Firstly, social media can exuberate feelings of missing out on fun activities that one's friends from one's home country partake in. What was evident is that using social media to keep in touch with friends and communicate from home while everyone took their own paths was a good experience. Interestingly, being able to look at posts, images and information that get published by friends from home can also make international students feel better connected with their old friends. This interaction assists in homesickness, which in turn ameliorates feelings of isolation. Secondly, social media platforms have the potential to be offensive and intolerant. During a period of time where xenophobic attacks were on the rise, members of the Rhodes University community on certain platforms like Facebook and Twitter made inappropriate comments.

The findings showed that social media does indeed facilitate integration. A major part of integration is communicating with the people around you. Social media was not necessarily used by the participants to meet new people, but it was a strong tool in maintaining friendships, making plans, and finding out about events they could attend in order to meet people for the first time in order to maintain existing friendships. As a tool, it works to positively integrate international students.

My initial expectation based on the literature I had explored was that there would be a massive divide in the discussion, where one group adamantly expressed the positive effects of social media on their integration, while others expressed how using social media as an international student resulted in feeling alienated and discriminated against. However, social media has both positive effects and negative effects. It is both useful for long-distance, accessible communication, as well as for entertainment and information but its platforms can also be offensive.

## **Recommendations for future study**

Ultimately, the aim of the research was to discuss both the positive and negative influence of social media on the integration of international students into the Rhodes University environment. The results spoke directly to the discourse around positive effects such as information intake, entertainment, and communication which make international students feel a part of the community, while the results also showed that social media has a dark side and it can be a platform for discrimination and xenophobia and cyberbullying which can negatively impact the integration process. However, whose responsibility is it to facilitate integration? An amalgamation of the institute, the international students and the host country's community members are responsible. What this study shows is that Social Media can continue to facilitate integration, through strong and weak links. Using this knowledge base, practical applications can come into effect. An app can be developed to get international students paired with like-minded host country students. Societies can do international students' social media campaigns more often than the annual international parade. Recommendations for solutions are using social media to create an information hub, maps, event calendars, how-tos and academic guides. Answers to the questions that arise from this study can help benefit the experience of international students, which is ultimately what this study hopes to achieve. Taking into account the simultaneous positive and negative effects of social media use by university students, it is a rich area for study. The generation of such knowledge could afford universities opportunities to capitalise on emerging insights by making international students feel more welcome and better help them integrate into the community.

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## **Appendix A-Exploratory survey**

International Students Survey: Social Media use

Section 1 of 7

International Students Survey: Social Media use

You are invited to participate in a research study regarding social media use among international students registered at Rhodes University.

The goal of this research study is to investigate the positive and negative impact social media has on international students at Rhodes University. This study is being conducted by Kelia Losa Reinoso in the School of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University.

There are 3 qualifications to participate in this study:

- (1) You must be an International student
- (2) You must be from SADC country
- (3) You must be currently registered at Rhodes University.

Participation in this study is voluntary.

Your participation will be completely anonymous.

If you agree to participate in this study, you would be asked about your personal, social and academic use of social media.

Participating in this study may not benefit you directly, but it will help us learn how we can use social media to help international students feel better integrated into the university.

The information you will share with us if you participate in this study will be kept completely confidential.

Google Form responses are stored in a worksheet that can only be accessed through a Google account login. The transmission of data is encrypted.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact me at [keyla.losa@gmail.com](mailto:keyla.losa@gmail.com)

---

By completing this survey, I am consenting to participate in this study.

After section 1

Section 2 of 7

Personal information

What country are you from?

What year of study are you in?

How long have you been at Rhodes?

Question Type

What faculty are you registered in?

What is your racial group?

Black

White

Coloured

Asian

Mixed-race

Other...

After section 2

Section 3 of 7

Traditional Media Use

Tick off the traditional media you use

TV

Radio

Newspapers

Magazines

News websites

Other...

What Daily National Newspaper do you read?

What Weekly National Newspaper do you read?

Tick off the local media you use

Grocotts Mail

RMR

Activate

Oppidan Press

Other...

After section 3

Section 4 of 7

Social Media Use

Leave out sections for social media apps you do not use

Tick off the social media apps you use

\*

Facebook

Twitter

Instagram

Whatsapp

Dating Apps

Other...

How often do you use Facebook?

Hourly

Daily

Weekly

Other...

What do you use Facebook for?

Event Information

National & Local News

Communication for academic purpose

Keeping in touch with family

Maintaining relationships

Building and developing new relationships

Celebrity news

Music

Places to visit in South Africa

Comedy shows, memes and funny videos

Book, movie, series reviews

Discovering new recipes to cook

As a link to external sites that you find entertaining

Other...

How often do you use Instagram?

Hourly

Daily

Weekly

Other...

What do you use Instagram for?

Event Information

National & Local News

Communication for academic purpose

Keeping in touch with family

Maintaining relationships

Building and developing new relationships

Celebrity news

Music

Places to visit in South Africa

Comedy shows, memes and funny videos

Book, movie, series reviews

Discovering new recipes to cook

As a link to external sites that you find entertaining

Other...

How often do you use Twitter?

Hourly

Daily

Weekly

Other...

What do you use Twitter for?

Event Information

National & Local News

Communication for academic purpose

Keeping in touch with family

Maintaining relationships

Building and developing new relationships

Celebrity news

Music

Places to visit in South Africa

Comedy shows, memes and funny videos

Book, movie, series reviews

Discovering new recipes to cook

As a link to external sites that you find entertaining

Other...

How often do you use Whatsapp?

Hourly

Daily

Weekly

Other...

What do you use Whatsapp for?

Event Information

National & Local News

Communication for academic purpose

Keeping in touch with family

Maintaining relationships

Building and developing new relationships

Celebrity news

Music

Places to visit in South Africa

Comedy shows, memes and funny videos

Book, movie, series reviews

Discovering new recipes to cook

As a link to external sites that you find entertaining

Other...

How often do you use dating apps?

Hourly

Daily

Weekly

Other...

What do you use dating apps for?

Event Information

National & Local News

Communication for academic purpose

Keeping in touch with family

Maintaining relationships

Building and developing new relationships

Celebrity news

Music

Places to visit in South Africa

Comedy shows, memes and funny videos

Book, movie, series reviews

Discovering new recipes to cook

As a link to external sites that you find entertaining

Other...

After section 4

Section 5 of 7

Official Communication

with lecturers, the university, team members, the international office

What do you use for official communication?

Email

Whatsapp

Facebook

Twitter

the post

Other...

After section 5

Section 6 of 7

Communicating with home

How often do you communicate with home?

Daily

Weekly

Bi-weekly

Monthly

Other...

How do you communicate with home?

Phone calls

Whatsapp

Email

Postal Services

Do You find it difficult to communicate with home? Please provide a reason to your answer.

Is your communication with home purely about staying in touch with your family, or do you also find out news about your home country? Please expand on your answer.

Do you exchange local & national news with friends or family members in your home country? If so, what kind of news do you exchange?

After section 6

Section 7 of 7

Communication in South Africa

Do you use social media to communicate with South African friends and peers?

Yes

No

Who do you communicate with in South Africa?

People from your home country

South Africans

People from other countries

How often do you communicate with friends from your home country that are currently living in South Africa?

Daily

Weekly

Bi-weekly

Monthly

Other...

How often do you communicate with friends that you have met in South Africa but are not South African nor from your home country?

Daily

Weekly

Bi-weekly

Monthly

Other...

How often do you communicate with South African friends and peers?

Daily

Weekly

Bi-weekly

Monthly

Other...

What are your primary uses of communication with South Africans?

To keep in touch (social communication)

To get information about South Africa (culture, language & customs)

To get information about Rhodes University (academic information)

Other...

## **Appendix B-Focus group**

The focus group is necessary to establish themes

Having the information from the questionnaire, I can move on to answer more personal and thematic questions. Once we establish what media is being used, we can establish a relationship between the media used and the personal feelings of the international student.

### **PART ONE:**

The focus of the first part is to establish the overall feelings of the group. This is the introduction of the integration and alienation concepts.

What are some the challenges you faced coming into university in another country?

How do you feel you have grappled with these challenges?

What does integration mean to you?

Why is integration important to you?

What does alienation mean to you?

On a scale of 1 to 10, [I] being 10 and [A] being 1, where would you put yourself?

Why would you put yourself there?

What can be done to ensure integration of international students?

From

a) The perspective of the individual

b) The social climate

c) The institution

### **PART TWO**

The focus of the second part is to establish how social media effects integration or influences alienation.

Have social media platforms ever helped you receive information about the university?

Do you think social media has a part to play in your integration into the university?

Does social media make you feel connected to those around you?

Does social media make you feel disconnected from those around you?

Does social media make you feel connected to those at home?

Does social media make you feel disconnected from those at home?

Does social media inhibit your relationships in South Africa?

Do you feel that because you can communicate with friends from home easily, you feel socially satisfied and therefore less inclined to communicate with people at university?

Have you ever seen or experienced negativity, trolling, bullying, and xenophobia on social media?

Does this experience make you feel disconnected to those around you?

### **Appendix C- Semi-structured interviews**

The following interview schedule is based on possible themes that may arise from the focus group session. These points will be discussed with three participants from the focus group session that will be chosen based on their experiences with using social media as part of a strategy to adjust to university life at Rhodes. The interview will be one-one-one and should last between one hour to one hour and a half depending on the amount of information the research participant gives. Interviews will be conducted over Zoom and will be recorded with the participant's consent.

#### **The introduction section of the interview is as follows:**

- 1) Greetings
- 2) Explanation of the research topic, expectations and possible outcomes of the interview.
- 3) Assurance of confidentiality and obtaining consent to record the session and use the material from the interview in the thesis.

#### **Getting to know the participant**

1. Could you tell me about your decision to travel to South Africa?
2. Was it the first time you travelled abroad?
3. Did you travel alone or did someone accompany you [family, friend?]
4. Do you have family in South Africa, do you communicate with them?

#### **Social and academic landscape**

1. Tell me about your social landscape. What does it look like?
2. Tell me about your academic landscape, what does that look like?
3. What deliberate steps [if any] did you take to feel part of the Rhodes community?
4. Were any of these effective?
5. In what ways do you/don't you feel integrated into the community?

### **Social media use**

1. When you first arrived in SA, did you use social media as a way of communicating with new acquaintances, if so, how, or why not?
2. Did being able to communicate with home make things easier?
3. Have you used social media as a deliberate mechanism for meeting people?
4. How did that work? If at all?
6. How much are you in contact with people at home – how does that make you feel when you have chatted to them?

### **Experience stories**

1. Can you tell me about a positive experience where you can describe the benefits of social media specific to your life? Is there a moment/moments where social media have contributed to feeling a part of the Rhodes university environment.
2. Can you tell me about a negative experience or challenging experience where social media has resulted in feelings of alienation/loneliness/ feeling left out/ bullied/ being discriminated against/othered?

### **Closing and goodbye**

Closing will then take place. The participant will be thanked, and I shall explain what will happen next in the process of data analysis. I will then assure the participant that should they have any questions, they are able to email me.



DIVISION OF STUDENT AFFAIRS - - studentaffairs@ru.ac.za

**CONFIDENTIAL**

14 December 2020

Ms Kelia Losa Reinoso, g1511925  
School of Journalism and Media Studies  
Humanities Department  
Rhodes University  
Grahamstown

Dear Ms Kelia Losa Reinoso,

**Permission to conduct research**

Research topic: "SETTLING IN: THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON THE INTEGRATION OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT RHODES UNIVERSITY."

This letter confirms that the above research proposal has been reviewed by the Rhodes University – Director of Student Affairs and been APPROVED.

Yours sincerely



Ms Nomangwane Mrweryana  
Director of Student Affairs

## Appendix E

### PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT

#### INFORMED CONSENT DECLARATION

##### (Participant)

Project Title: Settling In: Investigating the positive and negative impact social media has on international students at Rhodes University

Kelia Losa Reinosofrom the School of Journalism & Media Studies, Rhodes University has requested my permission to participate in the above-mentioned research project.

The nature and the purpose of the research project and of this informed consent declaration have been explained to me in a language that I understand.

I am aware that:

1. The purpose of the research project is to establish the positive and negative impact that social media has on international students studying at Rhodes University.
2. The Rhodes University has given ethical clearance to this research project and I have seen/ may request to see the clearance certificate.
3. By participating in this research project I will be contributing towards helping to learn how we can use social media to help international students feel better integrated into the university.
4. I will participate in the project by filling in a survey and attending a focus group session. I may be asked to participate in a one on one interview.

5. I understand that all interactions will take place online so as to adhere to Covid-19 rules of social distancing.
6. I understand that all video interviews will be recorded and stored safely.
7. My participation is entirely voluntary and should I at any stage wish to withdraw from participating further, I may do so without any negative consequences.
8. I will not be compensated for participating in the research, but my out-of-pocket expenses will be reimbursed.
9. There may be risks associated with my participation in the project. I am aware that
  - a. the following risks are associated with my participation: Information pertaining to my country of origin, race and media use can become public if leaked.
  - b. The following steps have been taken to prevent the risks: All information, survey, videos and audio interviews are stored in a drive which requires login information to access.
  - c. There is a 1% chance of the risk materializing. Google Drive has been hacked before. However, Google has patched the issue so that any documents shared via the service going forward will no longer be affected by the privacy problem.
10. The researcher intends publishing the research results in the form of a Master's Thesis. However, confidentiality and anonymity of records will be maintained and that my name and identity will not be revealed to anyone who has not been involved in the conduct of the research.
11. I will receive feedback in the form of email regarding the results obtained during the study.
12. Any further questions that I might have concerning the research or my participation will be answered by Kelia Losa Reinoso, [keyla.losa@gmail.com](mailto:keyla.losa@gmail.com)
13. By signing this informed consent declaration I am not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies.
14. A copy of this informed consent declaration will be given to me, and the original will be kept on record.
15. Request to take pictures, video and voice recording for this study

I, ..... have read the above information / confirm that the above information has been explained to me in a language that I understand and I am aware of this document's contents. I have asked all questions that I wished to ask and these have been answered to my satisfaction. I fully understand what is expected of me during the research.

I have not been pressurised in any way and I voluntarily agree to participate in the above-mentioned project.

.....

**Participants signature**

**Witness**

**Date**

Rhodes University, Research Office, Ethics

Ethics Coordinator: [ethics-committee@ru.ac.za](mailto:ethics-committee@ru.ac.za)

t: +27 (0) 46 603 7727 f: +27 (0) 86 616 7707

Room 220, Main Admin Building, Drostdy Road, Grahamstown, 6139

## Appendix F-individual interviews

### INTERVIEW ONE

#### Biographical Details

<b>Name</b>	<b>Hannah Craig</b>
<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Zimbabwean</b>
<b>Time spent at Rhodes University</b>	<b>five years</b>
<b>Age</b>	<b>24</b>

#### Interview transcript:

**Speaker: Hannah Craig**

No	Conversation	Code	Category
1.	Okay, so the first question.		
2.	Could you tell me about your decision to travel to South Africa?		
3.	I travelled to South Africa to start my degree at Rhodes University. And I've been	1	5
4.	there for five years. I finished at the end of 2020.	2	5
5.	Number two. Was it the first time you travelled abroad?		
6.	No, I had been to South Africa, once before, and I had travelled to the UK.	3	5
7.	Number three. Did you travel alone or did someone accompany you?		
8.	I travelled alone but then I met my sister in what was then Grahamstown.	4	5
9.	Four. Do you have family in South Africa? No I do not have any family in South	5	6
10.	Africa.		6
11.	Okay. For the social and academic landscape. One. Tell me about your social		
12.	landscape, what does it look like?		
13.	I would consider myself, my first three years at Rhodes, very social. I made a lot of	6	5
14.	friends. I spent a lot of time at Friars. And Yeah, it was very social. And then with	6	5
15.	my family I was kept in contact with them, and with my friends back home from	7	3
16.	university. I've kept in contact with them a lot as well. So I would consider myself	8	3

17.	very social. Maybe less so in my last two years due to the pressure of my degree.	9	3
18.	Okay, number two, tell me about your academic landscape.		
19.	My academic landscape was quite hectic. The Bachelor of Laws. For the past my	9	6
20.	last two years. It was pretty much just law. But hectic but enjoyable.	9	6
21.	What deliberate steps did you take to feel that you're part of the community?		
22.	I was just friendly. I made friends in my res, when I was in res. I made an effort to	6;10	5
23.	go out and meet people. Luckily for us, tuts is a good place to meet people. In my	6	5
24.	lectures and tuts. I made an effort to talk to people.	6	5
25.	Number four: were any of these effective?		
26.	Yes, they were quite effective, especially meeting peers on a night out. And then	11	5
27.	you just recognise them at the lectures which was quite cool and an easy way to	11	5
28.	get to know someone and also to create common ground with someone.		5
29.	Five. In what ways do you/don't you feel intergated into the community. I don't		
30.	think there's any way that I didn't feel integrated into the community.	12	5
31.	Social media use. Number one, when you first arrived. Did you use any social		
32.	media as a way of communicating with new acquaintances. If so, how, or why not?		
33.	So, when I first arrived and I say I use WhatsApp for the res groups and to just chat	13; 14;10	3
34.	to people I met. I followed people on Facebook and Instagram. But I would say I	15;16; 17	3
35.	was very active in the social medias.	18	3
36.	Number two, did being able to communicate with home make things easier?		
37.	Yes, definitely. Especially at times when you felt, particularly homesick.	19;7	3
38.	Number three, have you used social media as a deliberate mechanism for meeting		
39.	people.		
40.	I have never used social media as my mechanism for meeting people. I prefer to	20	3
41.	meet people face to face and also it wasn't that common when our starting at	6; 21	3
42.	Rhodes.		3
43.	Number six. How much are you in contact with people at home, how does		
44.	That make you feel?		

45.	I think I'm constantly in contact with people at home. My friends back home we	7;8	3
46.	have running conversations going and yeah makes me feel happier especially when		3
47.	I'm alone, feeling a bit lonely or homesick. I mean, I chat to my parents at least	19;7;23	3
48.	once a week, and it's quite comforting.	24	3
49.	Experience stories. Can you tell me about a positive experience where you		
50.	describe the benefits of social media specifically to your life? Is there moments		
51.	moments with social media have contributed to feeling a part of the Rhodes		
52.	University environment. Yes, I think there are moments where social media		5
53.	contributes to feel, feeling like part of the Rhodes University environment.	25;12	5
54.	Especially in my first and second year where Rhodes Crushes was a thing. It was	27	5
55.	quite fun to see friends post about friends or even about yourself. It made you feel		5
56.	really part of the community. And I think also social media competitions about at	26	5
57.	Rhodes that was also, or like things you could win that was also, did really make	26	5,2
58.	me to the part of university environment.	26	5
59.	Tell me about a negative experience or challenging experience with social media		
60.	and resulted in you feeling that feeling of being discriminated against. Fortunately,		
61.	I am quite privileged as a white woman. I've never really experienced or felt		6
62.	experience of being discriminated against or othered or feeling left out. I don't		6
63.	think like apart from intentional posts by others but obviously due to the nature of	28	6
64.	social media, and		6
65.	I found the comparisons. By Instagram, especially when people are having a really		6
66.	fun night and you're staying at home studying. That could have a negative effect	29	6
67.	on my emotions.		6

## **INTERVIEW TWO**

### **Biographical Details**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Eric Kamau</b>
<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Kenyan</b>
<b>Time spent at Rhodes University</b>	<b>three years</b>
<b>Age</b>	<b>27</b>

<b>No.</b>	<b>Speake r</b>	<b>Conversation</b>	<b>Cod e</b>	<b>Categor y</b>
1.	Kelia	So, getting to know you. Could you tell me about your		
2.		decision to travel to South Africa.		
3.	Eric	Okay. So I came to South Africa basically to study here. I did	1	
4.		my undergraduate back home in Kenya. And there we have		
5.		like four years, four years degree. So the fourth year sort of		
6.		like counts as Honours. So after my fourth year I came here		
7.		did my master's degree and then after a master's degree		
8.		now I'm doing my PhD.		
9.	Kelia	Okay, awesome and was it the first time that you travelled		
10.		abroad.		
11.	Eric	Yes, the first time leaving the country.	3	
12.	Kelia	And why specifically South Africa.		
13.	Eric	Because it has the programme I'm interested in. The	1	
14.		astronomy program.		
15.	Kelia	And did you have any family here in South Africa.		
16.	Eric	uh, no.	5	6
17.	Kelia	And did you travel alone.		
18.	Eric	Yes. well, I came with a colleague of mine. We got accepted		
19.		to the same program, so I came with him but he shifted to		
20.		Australia for his PhD.		
21.	Kelia	So could you tell me about what those initial couple of		
22.		months looked like for you.		
23.	Eric	For me, they were actually, they were actually quite	4,30	5
24.		welcoming, because the first time when I came, I was taken	4,30	5
25.		to Postgrad village. The people there, they were friendly.	10	5
26.		They were accommodating. It was a nice sort of like a	4,30	5
27.		community	4	5
28.		with a central area where you can actually meet up and have	4,11	5
29.		fun, talk to whatever. The first time I arrived here also, at the	4,11	5
30.		airport. For me it was kind of surprising finding a complete	4, 31	5
31.		stranger just coming to a community in South Africa, they	4,30	5
32.		was actually nice.	4	5

33.	Kelia	Awesome. Thank you. And then what about your		
34.		expectations. Did you have any expectations of what South		
35.		Africa was gonna be like and were those different or the		
36.		same.		
37.	Eric	I actually didn't have expectations I was more of like, let's	33,	
		see	34	
38.		what South Africa is like. I was like, kind of like a blank	35,6	
39.		canvas, waiting to see what, what, what I'd find here.	34,	
			32	
40.	Kelia	And did you feel like you came with the intention of		
		getting		
41.		to know the culture, or were you kind of just like, I'm just		
42.		here to study.		
43.	Eric	Okay so initially I was just here to study, but also like	36	5
		interact		
44.		with people and make friends and maybe to whatever and	36	5
		then		
45.		with time I started actually learning the culture so yeah I	36,	5
			35,	
			37	
46.		actually liked it with time.	36	5
47.	Kelia	Thank you. And tell me about your social landscape, what		
48.		does it look like is it made up of international students, is it		
49.		made up of South Africans is it older people is it students is		
50.		it, you know. Could you describe that to me.		
51.	Eric	All right. um so most of my friends are students. Well from		
52.		different universities across Africa. There's a good fraction,		
		a		
53.		good fraction of them are international students, and also	38	
54.		have South African students, but very few students who are	40	
55.		my friends from my own country. Quite a few. So I will		
		say, I		
56.		will say that of all my friends combined I think I have		
		more. I		
57.		have more South Africans than international students or		
58.		rather they are roughly almost 50/50.		
59.	Kelia	Thank you. Just a quick question about your social media		
		use		
60.		here, we'll bring it up again in the next section but you say		
61.		you have friends from all over the country from different		
62.		universities, is this within South Africa or within Africa in		
63.		general.		
64.	Eric	Okay, within South Africa, and of course in Kenya, but	8	
		also		
65.		within South Africa, met in conferences.	40,	
			15	
66.	Kelia	Oh lovely and how do you keep in touch with them. Do		
		you		

67.		have them on social media.		
68.	Eric	Yes, I have them on Facebook, mostly Facebook, and	16, 15, 20	
69.		sometimes Instagram.	17, 15, 20	
70.	Kelia	could you tell me about your academic landscape, what does		
71.		that look like?		
72.	Eric	In what sense exactly		
73.	Kelia	Right so kind of what you're studying, who the people that		
74.		you... who your colleagues who do you relate to, who do you		
75.		talk to in the in a professional sense of the word.		
76.	Eric	Okay, so I am studying astronomy, astronomy, and I, my		
77.		colleagues are basically made of people from different		
78.		countries, mostly in Africa, different countries in Africa. And	38	
79.		we have for the students I think they just students in Africa, I		
80.		don't think in varsity, or within our group we have		
81.		international students like outside Africa. It's mostly with	38	
82.		students in Africa, and, but our supervisors are from		
83.		everywhere. Basically from Russia, Germany, Italy like they're		
84.		everywhere. The people we work with-the professor's.		
85.	Kelia	Awesome. Do you think that you took any deliberate steps,		
86.		perhaps consciously or unconsciously. To make yourself feel		
87.		a little bit more of a sense of belonging in a new		
88.		environment.		
89.	Eric	Yes, I think so because even like it, let me start with the first		
90.		thing in PGV. I had to actually had to go and like sit in the	6,10, 11	
91.		common room, and try to talk to people, to new people that	34, 35	
92.		I see. So, I guess. I guess that's that seems to be working that		
93.		seemed that seemed to have worked basically: me going out	6,10, 11,3 4,35	
94.		of my way to meet new people:that really helped.	12	
95.	Kelia	That's amazing. How would you measure your own integration into the community.		
96.	Eric	Okay. Well, I would say that, that depends. It's actually going		

97.		in phases. So, when I arrived, the first phase were actually		
98.		new people from where I was staying. And then I got like we		
99.		got we actually bonded a lot we became friends, but then		
100.		again they left after about a year. And then after two years		
101.		like literally almost everyone I knew left. And then there was		
102.		round two of friends that I made. And then now right now as		
103.		we speak. There are two, most of them have basically left.		
104.		Well, apart from a few, technically not around.		
105.		Say around two are basically left, I've left only a few friends		
106.		that say so it's- it comes with phases. Right around the		
107.		beginning of the year there aren't a lot of people in		
108.		Grahamstown. So it's like we always have to start from		
109.		scratch.	35	
110.	Kelia	Thank you and I suppose that is one of the things about		
111.		coming as a post grad student, and not necessarily as an		
112.		undergrad.		
113.	Eric	Yes. how to be the one who sees people leaving.		
114.	Kelia	So before you came to South Africa Did you do any		
115.		research on the country.		
116.	Eric	Actually, no, not really not clearly. I didn't know anything		
117.		of the country.		
118.	Kelia	So you didn't use the web or social media to see what		
119.		Grahamstown was like?		
120.	Eric	Okay. I used Facebook just a little bit but since I didn't	27,	1
121.		know my way around. Even we mentioned the names the	41	
122.		residence names that was suggested we didn't know which-	41	
123.		or what was what, and we didn't have anyone on ground to		
124.		tell me so I just had a quick look and that's it. I didn't		
125.	Kelia	bother me much And did you join any Facebook groups before coming here.		
126.	Eric	No, I didn't know any. Actually, I didn't know any before		
127.		coming here.		
128.	Kelia	And then how did that compare when you arrived, how did		
129.		you know get told about all of these different social		
130.		media platforms that you could be a part of.		
131.	Eric	It depends, like for instance when I was looking for		1
132.		accommodation friends suggested I should check, check	28	1
133.		out Facebook page, Digsmates, when I want to buy something	28	1
		I		

134.		was told about the second hand Grahamstown and then with	28	1
135.		time I came to actually find more and more of these	28	1
136.		groups on my own you know this whole thing about	28	1
137.		Facebook suggesting for you similar groups that you join, so	28,26	1
138.		that also happened on its own with time.	36	1
139.	Kelia	What was your communication with home like during those		
140.		first months, versus what they were like now.		
141.		Okay so during those first months it was fun in between. Like	7	3
142.		say once or once or twice once or once every two weeks	7	3
143.		roughly every two weeks, especially with my sister, with my	7	3
144.		mom is more frequent, like say once a week or twice or	7	3
145.		thrice a week, but right now it's more frequently with my	7	3
146.		sister and my mom, mostly because now they have proper	7	3
147.		proper internet, so we can communicate better also on	7,43,44	3
148.		WhatsApp	43,44,13	
149.	Kelia	super interesting point thank you and have you used social media is a deliberate way of meeting people.		
150.	Eric	When I, well, maybe when I see events happening, let's say	11,45	1,2,5
151.		for instance I see there's an event happening at Triple S. I just	11,45	1,2,5
152.		go have a look, see if I can see anyone I know, or try with	11,45	
153.		new people, in that sense, yes.	11,45	
154.	Kelia	Right, so the next kind of section is about experiences with		
155.		your social media, both positive and negative. So, is there a		
156.		positive experience that you can describe that talk about the		
157.		benefits of social media specific to your life as an		
158.		international student. So is there a moment where social		
159.		media has contributed to you feeling a part of the		
160.		community		
161.	Eric	Social media on its own, quite honestly No, not really. Not on	46,26,	
162.		its own, no. Cause I usually check for events or to buy to buy	46,26	
163.		stuff or to see what's happening and then I get off.	46,26	
164.	Kelia	Yeah, so when you are it's kind of just like, I want to say like a		

165.		starting point and then you need to go and do those things	46	
166.		in order to be a part of the environment.		
167.	Eric	Yes, exactly.		
168.	Kelia	That's very interesting to know. And have you had a negative		
169.		experience on social media that's made you feel kind of left		
170.		out or like alone.		
171.	Eric	Actually not really also. There's been really nothing that has		
172.		made me feel left out. I feel disconnected, per se, with social	29	
173.		media on its own as an entity. I'd say disconnected. I do have	29	
174.		to like go outside and actually be there physically.	29, 6	
175.	Kelia	Awesome, thank you so much for your time. I'm so glad we		
176.		finally got around to this.		
177.	Eric	All right. Sure thing.		

### **INTERVIEW THREE**

#### **Biographical Details**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Audrey Sophie Kagwere</b>
<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Zimbabwean</b>
<b>Time spent at Rhodes University</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Age</b>	<b>24</b>

No.	Speaker	Conversation	Code	Category
	Kelia	Can you start by telling me about your decision to come study in		
		South Africa.		
	Audrey	It was actually last minute. It was, it wasn't planned as such. I plan		
		to leave the country but I didn't plan to come to South Africa. But		
		when that happened it was not the main reason, it also applies to		
		the reason why I wanted to leave the country was that I wanted to		

		be more independent. I just want to be away from home and just	1, 48, 47	
		experience things that I didn't want to be in a situation where I just		
		get laid on me, you know, when you're done, university they just go		
		experience the world because it's easy to not experience the world		
		when you're living with your parents because your parents were		
		just looking like that like that's my kid, I'll do it for them. So that		
		was my reason why, I just take challenge myself.		
	Kelia	So why South Africa, Why not like the UK the US, Australia.		
	Audrey	I think it was mostly a financial reason. So for my masters I am	1, 49	
		moving to Australia. I'm actually waiting for my application to go		
		through. But it was mostly it was financially feasible at that time.		
		And at the point where I had been, I thought, My plan was going to		
		be Asia. I lost so much time like trying to apply and argue with my		
		parents or where to go. So we just applied a SA like last minute or		
		just like, just keen to leave. And my mom was just like it works		
		financially so let's do that for now, then we'll do the other options	1, 49	
		later.		
	Kelia	That was the first time that you travelled abroad?		
	Audrey	I had been to South Africa before late in 2015, just to tour	3	
		Capetown		
	Kelia	You kind of knew what South Africa was like before you came here.		
		Yeah. And do you think that that helped you at all did that		
		experience in Cape Town help you at all assimilate when you go to		
		Graham's town or was a completely different.		
	Audrey	It was quite helpful. There was, I think, less shock. Like I had		
		already had one two years earlier. It was just handling money was		
		easier because you're using a different currency. How you guys		
		count money and the and different coins and stuff it's different. So	51	
		it was quite helpful, and before coming here- going to		

		Grahamstown I travelled by myself, was when I went to Cape Town		
		town with a group of friends. So, at least they knew my way around		
		Oliver Thambo. It was a bit easier when I went to Grahamstown.	4	
	Kelia	What kind of support structure did you want when you arrived?		
	Audrey	I just want, when I got there I just wanted to have just have a sense	55	5
		of belonging. So I was still looking for people who just accept who I	55	
		am and what it is being a foreigner is that fear they sure might be		6
		outcasted. So I just wanted that. And mostly that you're in		6
		academic school get like, what, and find all those things, that's	56	
		basically what it is just a smoother ride.		
	Kelia	what did your social landscape look like in those first couple of		
		months that you were here.		
	Audrey	It was a bit tricky. I was- we were only two Zimbabweans in my res.	4, 38	5
		And the other Zimbabwean hadn't been in Zimbabwe since she was		5
		eight. So, she didn't really count. Being there for first year it was	4	5
		overwhelming for me. And the relationships were- because I'm not	57	5
		like going into relationships type of person I wait and observe		5
		people from a distance and actually get into it. So, it was	6	5
		overwhelming but after like the first week. It was amazing. I found	30	5
		people I could relate to people were really supportive, loving, so	30, 31, 40, 53, 55	5
		the first months were really great I belong to the tight knit group.	53, 55	5
		And we did almost everything together.		
	Kelia	Did you keep in contact with people at home in those first couple of months.		
	Audrey	Yes, I spoke to my mom at least three times a week, on the phone.	7,	3
		Phone calls. Then we texted every day. Both my sister as well.	7, 13	3
		Yeah, it was still- it's still the same, we kept in contact all the time,	7	3
		because it's also they know that I'm alone in a country for the first		3
		time. So communicating was happening all the time.		3
	Kelia	Did you chat to friends from Zimbabwe or not really?		

	Audrey	No, we did chat a lot because we like all belong to- my two best	8	3
		friends and I to a group so we chat all the time. We were all	8, 58	3
		starting university so it was a new chapter in our lives so we	8	3
		always		
		constantly talking. Then my other friends from high school	8	3
		we're		
		also talking all the time. And the great thing is one of my	8	3
		friends		
		was at Rhodes at a time. So, it makes the process easier. I also	8	3
		felt		
		like I had piece of home with me.	8	3
	Kelia	Do you feel like you had to take any deliberate steps to feel a		
		part		
		of the Rhodes community, did you join any after school		
		activities,		
		or did you go to any events...?		
	Audrey	When I arrived, No. (33) I'm quite like a hard headed person.		
		Like I		
		stick to-I'm quite stubborn- so I stick to what I want to stick to	6	
		So, when I did arrive. I was just, I just did my own thing .	4	
		Most of		
		the time I was alone. I didn't join any societies or sports.		
		Actually		
		believe it or not, I did not go out after class. After class, I went		
		straight to my dining hall, back did assignments, did the same		
		process until like end of March. That's when I went to	59	
		something, and my friends were like, you should go and we'll		
		go		
		and I just said okay, I think I was mostly really interested in-		
		most of		
		my friends were South African. I was interested in learning		
		about		
		the place I am in that's why I did not make any Zimbabwean	37	
		friends, or join Zimsoc. People encouraged me to do so. But I	38	
		just		
		felt like I already have Zimbabwe within me. Why should I		
		just try		
		and be comfortable when I could go learn something new and		
		something new.		

## Appendix G -Focus Group Transcript-Social Media Use

Facilitator: Kelia Losa Reinoso

Participant 1: Tatenda

Participant 2: Leslie

Participant 3: Dudu

Participant 4: Chichi

Participant 5: Roland

No.	Speaker	Conversation	Code	Category
	Kelia	Are there any suggestions you can make where media is involved to help the		
		International students at Rhodes University integrate better?		
	Dudu	Kelia, are you still doing that website?		
	Kelia	Yes, it has gone in for marking.		
	Dudu	Well what I was going to say is maybe something like that. Because I was gonna say that, that is a nice and like intentional, deliberate way of engaging with international students. Something that is created by international students, for	62, 22	2
		international students to tell you like where you can find services and grants on how much money you need and stuff like that. Because I know when I was looking on the website, before coming to Rhodes, and I was just looking at, like, I didn't know how much like money you needed and stuff at like Rhodes to survive	60	2
		inGrahamstownlike pocket money, Doctor services, the best medical aid to use and stuff, because honestly, like, the University just gives you all the options that are out there, but they don't, I think give you like, you don't know all the details about them, or which ones are possibly the best, like choosing momentum. I didn't know there were only two doctors in all of Grahamastown that take the medical aid that I chose, you know, that I feel like that's information that students could benefit from.	61	2
	Kelia	Thank you, that's a great suggestion for Informational support, and there's another sort of support, which is a social aspect of it. So what are the measures that we can take?		
	Roland	Maybe we could have an intercultural day some countries you know have their own. But then when we like, cultures from different countries all come together and showcase what they're all about. not only South Africa like not just heritage day so yeah, sort of, like communities come together	63	2, 3, 5
	Kelia	I believe we do have something...		
	Tatenda	The international parade	63	
	Kelia	Yes, thank you		
	Roland	When did they last do that		
	Kelia	Before 2020 I believe, but even in 2019 It wasn't that big. I don't know who actually attends. Did anyone here go? I saw pictures on Facebook.		

Tatenda	Yes, same here. I didn't go. Just, um, I think. Yeah, I think the issue of like, support, social connection and stuff, I think, just depends, I think from one person to the other. Some people, you know, are outgoing, so you know, they	6	
	would love these kind of things. Let's have a party. Let's do this and that but some people are more introverted and prefer to be by themselves and stuff like that, but I think it also depends with where you are against. From the academic perspective, I think things can change as you progress up to. And from where I stand now, I think a more like, Listen, I could just say one meaningful international friendship, I don't have to be in a group of people. Yes, it is nice and	6, 9, 38	5
	stuff like that. But um, I think I'm more like, it's more important to have meaningful, meaningful friendships and deep friendships, not just surface, let's go out Have a drink and stuff like that, but actually people that you can rely on, and you can actually tell you issues and things that are facing you that you know, you're encountering, or even a personnel issues, really. So I think it also depends with that where you are in those in that kind of space. So think for me, I think what's been important is to sort of, yeah, establish those connections, they don't have to be a lot established two or three connections that you have with people.	64	5
	And that's what you nature. And from there, you can actually talk because, as I've said that I, to be honest, just for us, yeah, I think I don't have any hope in the, in the in the institution was addressing that. We might say, okay, we need this and that. And actually things do move in that direction. I think it's increasingly getting difficult. And it's almost like, yeah, it's like, you know, it's almost like the sand taking over on the beach, that as time goes on, you know, things are just, you know, I don't know, I don't have all this what I'm saying. So I think it's up to us to just find those connections with the, if there are two or three. And that's what we actually need, try and build on. So people can rely on. So that's what I would say we can do. And obviously, yes, it is important to be involved with what's happening, what's happening around, so international parade and things like that. But I think those are more like events. But I don't see that actually sustaining or helping with your when you are having a meltdown, either with things or being fired at home and stuff like that, I don't know how that would actually be quite helpful. So I think just having establishing personal friendships is is it is important. And another thing is, I think just taking charge of whatever that is needs to be done. Because sometimes relying on people can be I don't know, like I get my again, for me, it's like structures like SRC, and stuff like that, yes, the different purpose, but I don't see actually those structures actually helping international students. So sometimes I think it's a matter of just a person approaching whatever it is that you need, where you need help with. So even issues like fees, I go, I personally go to national office, and I go and make noise by myself and say, Listen, I'm going to help with this and that, and I'm not speaking for everybody, but I'm super myself. Because and I know that through speaking-speaking for other people. So I think it's also just taking that personal responsibility to have issues rather than to wait for the collective to make decisions and to do stuff. Yeah.		5

Leslie	Oh, can I just give my two cents before my internet? freaks out again. Um, I don't know in terms of integration as well. I was just thinking that, like intro classes to some of the native South African languages is equals. Whatever, you know, Zulu might be helpful too, because I've noticed a lot of the locals Africans are very apprehensive when you try to speak English initially to them, even if they can't speak English. Well. So I think if you could, if international students had like a base to build off, you know, just the, the basics Hello, how you doing? How can I get here that kind of, you know, basic language information, an intro class that isn't like a credit that you have to necessarily attend. But that is an opt in form international students?	65	6
Kelia	Thank you guys. I want to move on to Social Media use based on the Survey you all filled in. Did anyone use any facet of their social media? To find out anything about South Africa before coming here?		
Roland	Yeah, thank you. I think I used Instagram. I was checking out local information into town the Rhodes University itself. And yeah, I used Instagram for some for I also check out some shops and restaurants, I used social media for that.	42, 39	2, 3
Leslie	Um, so I didn't use it personally, but like, really saying, first year group, know, quite a lot of my friends were on it before they arrived at Rhodes. And that allowed them to make some connections before they arrived that made integration orbit easier, as opposed to arriving blind. And you know, you know, literally, you know, and you're trying to figure your way around. And I think a more beefed up version of the Rhodes first year group would be very helpful.	41, 39	2, 3
Chichi	So for me, I didn't even check on social media pages. Because you know, also Rhodes has these codes for their pages, like something like you car. You only know about that when you come to rules like what you can means and stuff like that. So I didn't join any of the other first year pages. I think the only thing I did was just Google Grahamstown and stuff like that, and boom, I just arrived and found my way the I think I'm one of the few people who just hit the ground running. I didn't even go through any like groups or stuff like that. Yeah.	32, 18	2, 3
Kelia	That's a great perspective. Yeah. So you kind of just came here and you were like, let's figure this out. How does that compare with your usage of social media now with South Africans and with international students? Has it played a part in making friendships in establishing friendships? Or has it just kind of been something that you have? In case you need to contact someone? Have you felt that that is influenced? What in whatsoever or not?		
Chichi	for me, I think when I came to Rhodes, and I joined all these pages, I even regretted joining the pages. So for me, my perspective is very different. I found other people were just super mean to others, beetle Africans and whatnot, whatnot. I think that put me off. Like how I was when I came without joining any of these pages. Yes, of course, sometimes I helped for maybe days will chip in to answer a question and stuff like that, and you picked up from there. But sometimes I would see somebody genuinely asking something. And people just been bluntly, like, rude to them and stuff like that. So I mean, now I'm alone got Rhodes. And I think the first things I did was leave the pages. I was like, why was I even in these pages? So I don't think they saved the purpose for me, honestly. Yeah.	66, 68, 69	4, 6

Leslie	Just to working off what she said. Um, I feel slightly opposite. I did see a light being on some of these pages. Rhodes confessions, Rhodes crushes? are you connected? I mean, are you whatever it's called? I forget the name now. It's been whatever. Yeah. So many of them you call page? Yeah, all these random page pages, especially the UCKAR page. Like, I don't know, how many of the of you were there during the protests and stuff, but they were very helpful and keeping updated on what was happening across campus and whatever. And without them, it would have been a little bit different to living up the hill, we got most of that information, WhatsApp, with a lot of it coming through the Uckar Page	67, 68, 69	2, 3
Chichi	And like, I mean, you know, Rhodes for a long time. Makes sense. But pages like Rhodes crushes whatever it's called. You hear you I post grad people are posting about second is like and then what my happened. Now these are people you don't know. You only know a few people who are in class with maybe there's like 15. And you're reading all these stories about this house or this girl from and just like, you know what I mean? For me, I found that gap the like, Okay, what makes you know what I mean? I'm taught as a post grad page. Now, having joined it as a post grad page. Maybe that's, that's a good thing for post grads, I'm sure there's a specific post grad page. So yeah, but I think maybe for the page thing, it goes back to what Tatendahad talked about, about deep intentional friendships and stuff like that. I found it like it's just good for stress relief you go to UGA you laugh is gonna be the part that anything can happen and you laugh about it, it		3
	just ends me but when it comes to like, real deep stuff and stuff like that, I found that to be to be missing. So yeah.		
Kelia	Okay. But can you guys give me examples of anything negative that you've seen on? Not just the you call pages, but also like on Instagram, over WhatsApp chains over Twitter and that kind of thing? Have you experienced or have you had someone experienced something incredibly negative?		
Chichi	I think for me, the one thing that had put me off, I can't remember what was going on in Zim at that moment or a time. Those are posts, it was supposed to be as funny thing, in quotes. Somebody had posted like how to Trump is Zimbabwean and that put cooking oil and stuff like that. Like maybe they just come to South Africa for the good stuff. Yes, they did put down. But I thought that was very insulting, like I'm not doing from zoom and stuff like that. But I found I found that to be very, like super offensive. Like, there's no way. Even if it's a meme, we're supposed to laugh about it. And I think maybe it's what put me over. But those pages, because my chat was there should be an admin who approves this before it goes on the page. And this is just a page where anybody can post. But there should be some community standards on what is considered to be fine or funny or something like that. So I think that's one thing that I saw that I was like this, this page is childish, and I just read it out. I'm sure it has had other good stuff that has come out of it. But for me, it was that one incident. I was like, No, this is not for me. This is childish. Yeah.	69, 66	4, 6
Leslie	Um, so this is a bit of a sin sensitive topic. So I'm sure you guys remember the reference list		

	<p>purchased and whatever. And people put on these lists who weren't guilty. And as a result suffered negative consequences. Because just because someone has the power to post your name in association with something that happens to be trending at that moment. I don't know, turnings probably a poor word, but something that happens to be a big topic, a big talking topic at the time. And even when they thought they made like lists and stuff and whatever. And some, obviously, a lot of the people on there were guilty of various things. But there were people that then got added to those lists that suffered negative consequences. unjustly.</p> <p>Yeah. 100%. So it's this whole idea that social media has, you know, is a multifaceted</p>		
Kelia	<p>Yeah. 100%. So it's this whole idea that social media has, you know, is a multifaceted thing. It can be negative just as much as it can be positive. So, you know, as international students, you know, we need to see both the positive and the negative. How we use it, not just as, you know, people or students, how is it specifically used as international students?</p>		
Leslie	<p>So, okay, you know, it's fine. All right. Sure. Thanks. Um, I was just gonna talk as Zimbabwean during the period where we had the hashtag ku, KU. Social media, half provided information, but it was also a very toxic place with people. uninformed people saying a lot of uninformed things about Zimbabwe in general. And what was going, what was going on in the ground? And obviously, sorry, excuse me, um, with, like, the contact that I kept, would then post on these social media platforms. As an international students, it's difficult to filter through, what's the true stuff that's going on back home, and what's actually what's just someone saying something because they feel like they have an opinion.</p>	69, 66	4, 6
Kelia	<p>Thank you, yes. Anyone want to talk about their experience with social media influences?</p>		
Tatenda	<p>Well, I think, I think for me, I don't really have much to say, because I don't actually use social media, per se. I've got a lot of issues and social media and stuff. And possible also that's influenced my, my PhD topic, because I'm kinda looking at data colonialism and things I was trying to walk the talk. So I don't really have much to say, but I think from what I see from what I hear from what I feel, I think there's a lot of cancelled culture going on, you can really have any co constructive discussions, constructive disagreements and stuff like that existed way back in the day, I guess, where people could be able to speak and have different opinions and do not feel like you're being attacked as a person. Which I feel like now it's near to impossible to actually happen. So again, give me my my example again from last year. I can also see that I was touched about the about the fees and stuff that like, you can jump in there in the discussion and start to actually talk about like Gavin guys, you know, we are paying for this service. So I need to go to school I need to school open, I don't want to go and protest, because I'm paying for this. And then you'd be really good. Like you're the elitist, privileged and stuff like that. But sometimes it's not readable that you know, and even if I am privileged, whatever it is, I think the are ways to sort of like engage and attack the issues without attacking the person. So that lack of critical engagement for me is why I just dislike social media, and I never take anything seriously. That happens there. from Instagram, to Facebook, to even WhatsApp itself. You know, I really checked my phone.</p>		

		And so it is that that, you know, I don't think it is a constructive space to have meaningful engagement. And certainly for international student, I think it's a, it's a constructive place to find meaning or sort of like, no build these structures of belonging in a foreign country for institution.		
	Kelia	That's certainly something to consider and, and look into, thank you.		
	Roland	Sorry, you mean for making friendships? Is it something that in a supportive social media is misinformation, so you can use it? To find out critical issues? Yeah, try to close something more reliable. For me, more like a source of just entertainment. Yeah.	70	2
	Kelia	Thank you everyone for your time . I think we're going to wrap it up here.		

## Appendix H- Coding

code	description
1.	Reason for coming to SA
2.	Length of time in SA
3.	Previous travel XP
4.	Initial arrival to Rhodes
5.	Family support in SA
6.	Personality: social/extrovert
7.	Keeping contact: family from home
8.	Keeping contact: friends from home
9.	Academic stress
10	Living in res
11	Hotspots for socialising
12	Level of integration
13	WhatsApp
14	Social media usage
15	Online contact: New friends (SA)
16	Following: FB
17	Following: IG
18	Level of social media activity
19	Homesickness
20	Using SM to maintain friendships
21	Meeting people over SM
22	SM Platforms for International Students
23	Coping mechanism
24	Accessibility of support facilitated through SM
25	Integration VIA SM
26	SM & inclusivity
27	FB
28	Nature of SM
29	Neg. effect SM
30	Feeling welcomed
31	Feeling surprised at welcome
32	Positive expectations
33	Negative expectations
34	Embracing personality
35	Adaptive personality
36	Integration timeframe
37	Learning a new culture
38	International community

39	Using SM before coming to SA
40	Becoming friends with SA
41	Using FB for info
42	Using IG for info
43	Struggling to communicate with family from home
44	Accessibility of SM
45	Using SM for events
46	SM as a catalyst
47	Reason for SA-Study
48	Reason for SA-independence
49	SA specifically- Finances
50	Previous XP in SA
51	Handling money in a foreign country
52	Initial shock
53	Support structure
54	SM campaigns
55	Sense of belonging
56	Success of academics
57	Overwhelming
58	Whatsapp groups
59	Isolation
60	Financial Information
61	Medical information
62	Using websites to access info
63	Intercultural days
64	Establishing meaningful friendships
65	Language
66	Online discrimination
67	Staying politically informed
68	Positive uses SM
69	Negative consequence SM
70	Source of entertainment

