



A Sociological Perspective on Cultural Exchange through Social media: Connecting Traditions, Values, and Global Audiences

Muhammad Afzal¹, Nusrat Azeema^{2*}

^{1,2} School of Public Administration, Department of Sociology, Hohai University, Nanjing 211100, P.R. China

Article DOI: 10.55677/SSHRB/2026-3050-0801

DOI URL: <https://doi.org/10.55677/SSHRB/2026-3050-0801>

KEYWORDS: social media, cultural exchange, intercultural communication, cultural identity, digital platforms, global audiences

Corresponding Author
Nusrat Azeema

Published: August 04, 2026

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ABSTRACT: Social media platforms have become transnational spaces in which cultural traditions, values, and identities are circulated, interpreted, and contested. This study examines how social media users engage with cross-cultural content and how they perceive its contribution to cultural exposure, understanding, and representation. A quantitative, cross-sectional survey was administered to 300 active social media users recruited through educational institutions, online networks, and personal contacts using non-probability convenience sampling. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographic characteristics, patterns of media consumption, platform preferences, online intercultural interaction, perceived cultural effects, and barriers to authentic representation. The sample was predominantly female (68.3%), aged 18–25 years (96.0%), and composed of students (93.0%). More than half of respondents (53.0%) reported consuming media from other cultures for more than two hours per day, while 61.3% did so daily or several times a week. Instagram (50.5%) and YouTube (27.3%) were the most frequently preferred platforms. Although exposure was high, only 16.2% frequently interacted online with people from other cultures, and 55.6% rarely or never did so. Most respondents believed that media substantially or somewhat exposed them to other cultures (85.4%), and 69.7% agreed or strongly agreed that social media enhanced their understanding of different cultures and traditions. However, respondents also identified a lack of diverse perspectives, commercialization, stereotyping, and cultural bias as barriers to accurate representation. Interpreted through network-society, participatory-culture, and cultural-dimensions perspectives, the results show that social media can widen cultural access and support intercultural learning, but exposure alone does not guarantee reciprocal dialogue or authentic representation. The study recommends culturally contextualized content, source attribution, inclusive participation, and critical media literacy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Cultural exchange refers to the circulation and negotiation of customs, meanings, values, symbols, and ways of life among people and groups with different social and cultural backgrounds. Historically, such exchange depended heavily on migration, trade, education, tourism, diplomacy, and face-to-face contact. Digital communication has not replaced these processes, but it has changed their scale, speed, and visibility. Social media users can now encounter a religious ritual, traditional recipe, local festival, language practice, artistic performance, or political debate without being physically present in the community from which it originates. Social network sites are not only channels for transmitting information; they are social environments in which users construct profiles, connect with others, circulate content, and participate in networked publics (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). (Castells, 2010) conceptualizes contemporary society as organized increasingly through networks that connect people, institutions, and flows of information across territorial boundaries. From this perspective, platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, and X

enable cultural materials to move through transnational networks, where they can be reproduced, commented on, adapted, and recirculated.

The form of a medium also shapes how cultural meaning is experienced. (McLuhan, 2019) proposition that the medium structures the message is particularly relevant to visual and algorithmic platforms, where short videos, images, hashtags, captions, music, and recommendation systems influence what becomes visible and how audiences interpret it. (Jenkins, 2006) similarly emphasizes participatory culture, in which audiences do not merely consume media but also produce, remix, and distribute it. These practices can support cultural learning and visibility, yet they may also detach cultural expressions from their historical and social contexts. Global cultural circulation therefore involves both opportunity and tension. (Appadurai, 1996) describes globalization as a set of overlapping cultural flows through which people imagine identities and communities beyond national borders. Social media intensifies these flows by making local cultural expressions immediately available to global audiences. At the same time, unequal access, platform commercialization, linguistic hierarchies, stereotyping, and algorithmic selection can shape which cultural narratives become prominent and which remain marginal.

The present study examines these issues from a sociological perspective by focusing on users' exposure to cross-cultural media, their motivations and platform choices, their online interaction with people from other cultures, their perceived gains in cultural understanding, and their concerns about representation. Rather than treating social media as automatically beneficial or harmful, the study considers it as a contested social space in which cultural exchange is enabled but also structured by social inequalities, platform logics, and representational practices.

1.1 Objectives

1. To examine how digital platforms enable cross-cultural exposure, engagement, and communication.
2. To assess users' perceptions of social media's influence on intercultural understanding and cultural appreciation.
3. To identify perceived barriers to authentic and inclusive cultural representation in digital media.

1.2 Research Question

1. How does social media shape the exchange, interpretation, and preservation of cultural traditions and values among global audiences?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Social Media as a Networked Space for Cultural Circulation

Digital platforms allow cultural information to circulate through interpersonal networks rather than only through traditional media institutions. In (Castells, 2010) network-society framework, communication networks reorganize social relations by connecting geographically dispersed actors. Social media users can participate in these networks as both audiences and producers, allowing cultural narratives to travel across boundaries with relatively low distribution costs.

This networked circulation is reinforced by convergence between media formats. (Jenkins, 2006) argues that contemporary media culture is characterized by the movement of content across platforms and by active audience participation. A cultural practice may be documented in a long-form YouTube video, condensed into a TikTok clip, translated through captions, discussed in comments, and reposted on Instagram. Such circulation can broaden access to cultural knowledge, but each transformation may also change the meaning or context of the original practice.

Recent empirical research demonstrates the intercultural potential of visual platforms. (Mahaputri et al., 2025) show that Instagram can be used as a virtual environment for intercultural learning, while (Huttayavilaiphan, 2024) identifies visual storytelling, educational content, multilingual communication, hashtags, and audience interaction as strategies used by Thai TikTok creators to present local culture to wider audiences. These studies indicate that platform affordances can support cultural explanation and engagement when content is contextualized and interactive.

2.2 Cultural Interpretation, Identity, and Hybridity

Cross-cultural media exposure does not involve the simple transfer of fixed cultural facts. Audiences interpret cultural content through their existing experiences, values, language, and social positions. (Appadurai, 1996) account of global cultural flows helps explain how images, narratives, and practices are detached from one setting and reassembled in another. This process can produce hybrid forms in which local traditions are combined with global genres, technologies, and aesthetics.

(Hofstede, 2001) cultural-dimensions framework offers one way to consider how broad value orientations may affect communication and interpretation. In the present study, the framework is used as a sensitizing perspective rather than as a deterministic classification of individuals or nations. Social media users within the same country may differ substantially by generation, class, education, gender, ethnicity, and personal experience. Cultural dimensions therefore provide interpretive categories, but they do not replace attention to internal diversity and situational context.

(Tkachuk, 2025) argues that social media can facilitate intercultural communication by increasing contact with cultural difference, while also creating risks of misunderstanding when messages are stripped of context or interpreted through stereotypes. This dual

possibility is central to sociological analysis: digital contact may increase awareness, but meaningful intercultural understanding requires dialogue, reflexivity, and recognition of unequal power in representation.

2.3 Participation, Heritage, and Cultural Memory

Social media also contributes to the documentation and interpretation of cultural heritage. (Liang et al., 2021) find that social media can widen public participation in cultural-heritage management and provide spaces for storytelling, cultural expression, and collective memory. (Foroughi et al., 2024) similarly demonstrate that social media posts can reveal public perceptions of built heritage and can be analyzed as evidence of cultural values and meanings.

Digital preservation, however, is not equivalent to simply uploading cultural material. Meaningful preservation requires contextual explanation, accurate attribution, community participation, and respect for cultural ownership. A video may preserve the visible form of a ritual while omitting its sacred meaning, social rules, or historical significance. Accordingly, digital archives and user-generated content are most valuable when communities retain agency over how their cultural knowledge is described and shared.

2.4 Representation, Commercialization, and Digital Inequality

Platform visibility is shaped by commercial and algorithmic incentives. Content that is visually dramatic, emotionally engaging, or easily simplified may circulate more widely than complex or less marketable cultural narratives. As a result, traditions may be packaged as entertainment, tourism, or lifestyle content, potentially increasing visibility while also encouraging commodification. Stereotypes can be reinforced when a single practice is presented as representative of an entire society or when creators prioritize familiar images that fit audience expectations.

Digital inequality also affects cultural participation. Access to devices, connectivity, language skills, media literacy, and production resources is unevenly distributed. Communities with limited access may be represented primarily by outsiders, while dominant groups have greater capacity to shape how cultures are framed. (Fermanian, 2025) guidelines on digital-platform governance emphasize human rights, transparency, media and information literacy, and the availability of diverse cultural content. These principles are relevant to cultural exchange because authentic representation depends not only on individual creators but also on platform policies and broader structures of visibility.

2.5 Theoretical Orientation

The study integrates three complementary perspectives. First, network-society theory explains how digital connectivity enables cultural materials to circulate across geographical and institutional boundaries (Castells, 2010). Second, participatory-culture theory explains how users actively produce, remix, and redistribute cultural content (Jenkins, 2006). Third, (Hofstede, 2001) cultural-dimensions framework provides a cautious interpretive lens for considering how value orientations may influence communication and interpretation. Together, these perspectives direct attention to technological networks, user participation, cultural values, and unequal representational power.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design. A survey was appropriate because the research sought standardized information about respondents' media-use patterns, motivations, perceptions, and reported interaction with people from other cultures. Cross-sectional data were collected at one point in time and were analyzed descriptively; therefore, the findings identify patterns in the sample but do not establish causal relationships (Levitt et al., 2018).

3.2 Population, Eligibility, and Sampling

The target population comprised active social media users. The final sample included 300 respondents. Participants were eligible when they actively used social media, understood the purpose of the research, voluntarily agreed to participate, and completed the questionnaire sufficiently for analysis. Recruitment was conducted through educational institutions, online networks, social-media communities, and personal contacts.

The study used non-probability convenience sampling, with purposive eligibility criteria to ensure that participants were relevant to the research question. Convenience sampling was feasible because no complete sampling frame of all social media users was available. However, the method does not provide every member of the population with an equal probability of selection and limits statistical generalization beyond the achieved sample (Taherdoost, 2016).

3.3 Instrument and Data Collection

Data were collected through a structured Google Forms questionnaire. The instrument included demographic questions and closed-ended items addressing time spent consuming media from other cultures, frequency of exposure, motivations, online intercultural interaction, preferred platforms, perceived cultural exposure, influence on cultural perceptions, cultural understanding and appreciation, and barriers to accurate representation. Standardized response options allowed the results to be summarized consistently through frequencies and percentages.

3.4 Measures and Operational Categories

Daily exposure was measured using three-time categories: less than two hours, two to four hours, and more than four hours. Frequency of engagement was measured as daily, several times a week, occasionally, or rarely. Online intercultural interaction was measured as frequently, occasionally, rarely, or never. Perceptual items used categorical or agreement-based responses. For interpretation, respondents consuming cross-cultural content for more than two hours per day were described as having higher daily exposure, while those consuming two hours or less were described as having lower daily exposure. These descriptive categories were not treated as validated psychological scales.

3.5 Data Analysis and Consistency Checks

Responses were summarized using descriptive statistics, primarily frequencies and percentages. Before revision, the percentages reported in the demographic table, figure narratives, and embedded chart data were cross-checked for internal consistency. Mutually exclusive response categories were required to total approximately 100%. Typographical and transcription errors were corrected, and figure labels were standardized. Percentages are reported to one decimal place; consequently, some totals equal 99.9% or 100.1% because of rounding.

3.6 Ethical Considerations and Methodological Limitations

Participation was voluntary and based on informed agreement. The manuscript reports aggregated results rather than individual responses. The study nevertheless has important limitations. The sample was concentrated among women, students, and respondents aged 18–25 years, which restricts representativeness. Convenience recruitment may have overrepresented highly connected and educated users. The study relied on self-reported behavior and perceptions, and its cross-sectional design cannot demonstrate change over time or causality. The instrument also generated descriptive single-item measures rather than validated multi-item scales; therefore, proposed mechanisms such as awareness or engagement should not be interpreted as statistically tested mediators.

4. RESULTS

The results are presented as percentages of the 300 respondents. All tables, figures, and narrative descriptions use the same corrected values. Minor differences from 100% are attributable to rounding.

4.1 Demographic Characteristics

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of respondents (N = 300)

Variable	Category	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	68.3
	Male	31.7
Current status	Student	93.0
	Employed	3.0
	Unemployed	4.0
Age group	Below 18	2.0
	18–25	96.0
	Above 25	2.0

Note. Current-status categories are mutually exclusive and total 100.0%.

The sample was predominantly female (68.3%), while 31.7% of respondents were male. Most participants were aged 18–25 years (96.0%); 2.0% were below 18 and 2.0% were above 25. Students constituted 93.0% of the sample, followed by unemployed respondents (4.0%) and employed respondents (3.0%). The demographic concentration indicates that the findings primarily reflect the experiences of young adult student social media users.

4.2 Exposure to Cross-Cultural Media

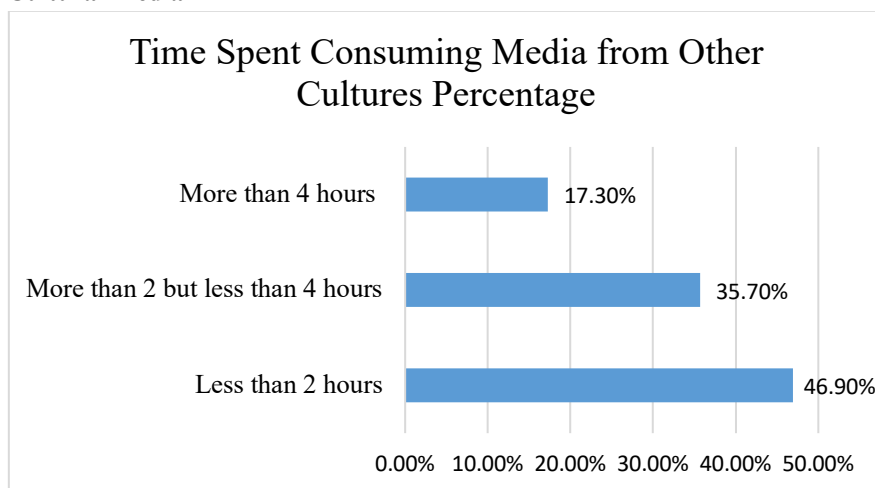


Figure 1. Time spent consuming media from other cultures

Figure 1 shows that 46.9% of respondents consumed media from other cultures for less than two hours per day. A further 35.7% reported two to four hours, and 17.3% reported more than four hours. Combined, 53.0% consumed cross-cultural content for more than two hours per day, indicating substantial daily exposure among a majority of the sample.

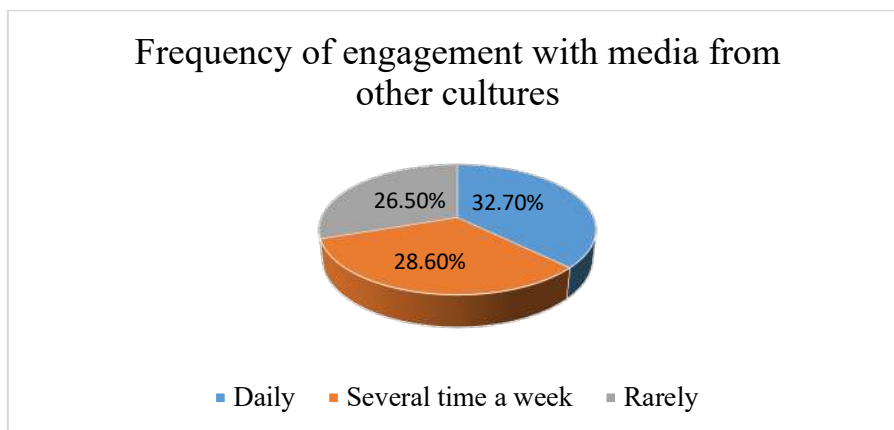


Figure 2. Frequency of engagement with media from other cultures

As shown in Figure 2, 32.7% consumed cross-cultural media daily and 28.6% did so several times a week. Together, these categories represent 61.3% of respondents. Another 26.5% engaged rarely, while 12.2% did so rarely. The findings indicate that cross-cultural content formed a regular part of media use for most participants.

4.3 Motivations and Online Intercultural Interaction

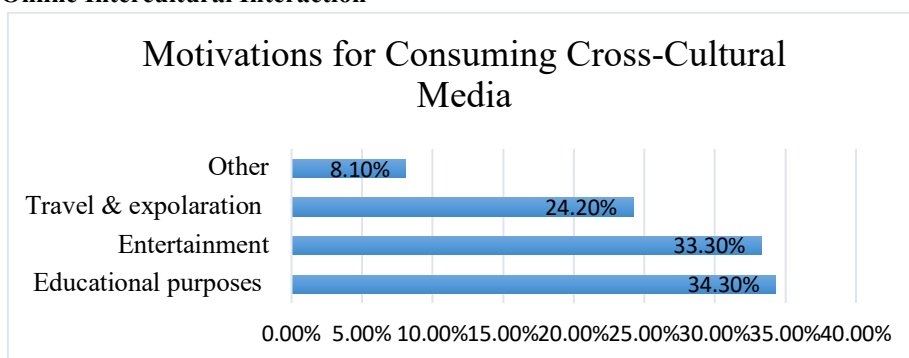


Figure 3. Motivations for consuming cross-cultural media

Educational purposes were the most frequently reported motivation (34.3%), closely followed by entertainment (33.3%). Travel and exploration motivated 24.2% of respondents, and 8.1% selected other reasons. The distribution suggests that cross-cultural media use serves both informational and recreational needs.

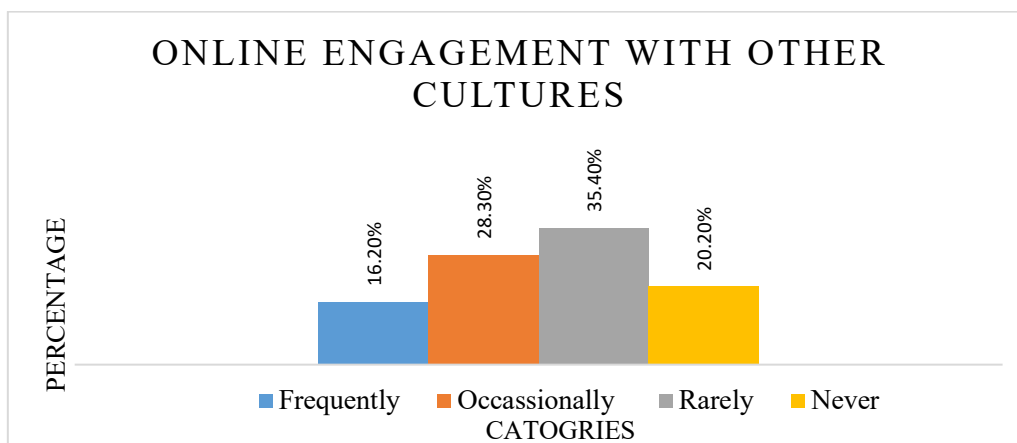


Figure 4. Online engagement with people from other cultures

Only 16.2% of respondents frequently interacted online with people from other cultures because of media content, while 28.3% did so occasionally. In contrast, 35.4% rarely interacted and 20.2% never interacted. Thus, 55.6% reported little or no online intercultural interaction, revealing a gap between exposure to cultural content and reciprocal communication with people from other cultural backgrounds.

4.4 Platform Preferences

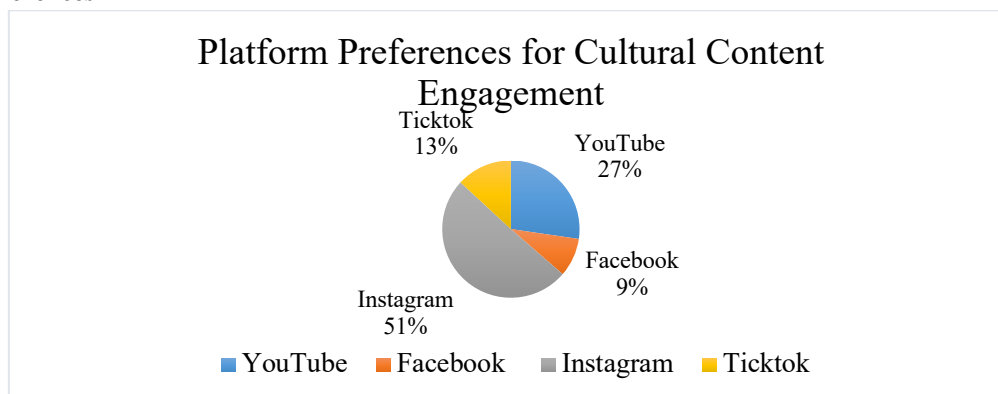


Figure 5 Preferred platforms for engaging with cultural content

Instagram was the dominant platform for cultural-content engagement (50.5%), followed by YouTube (27.3%), TikTok (13.1%), and Facebook (9.1%). The preference for Instagram and YouTube underscores the importance of visual storytelling, short videos, demonstrations, documentaries, and user-generated narratives in the circulation of cultural information.

4.5 Perceived Cultural Effects

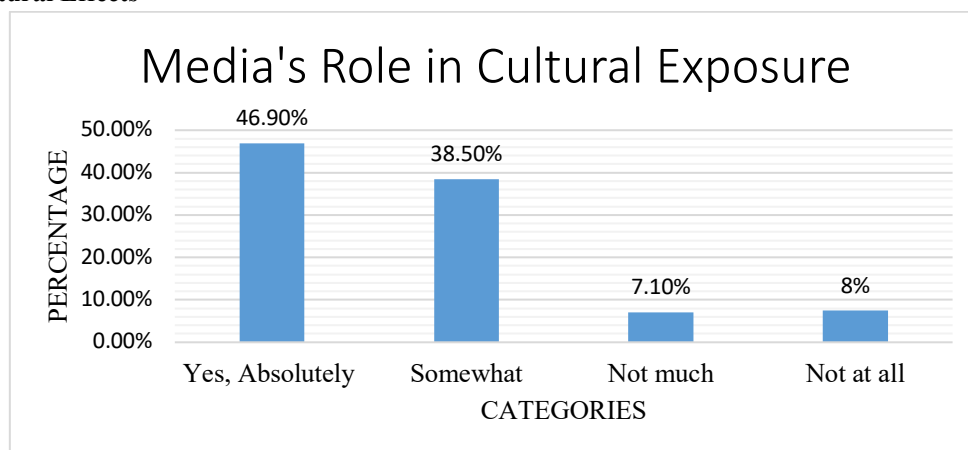


Figure 6. Perceived role of media in exposing users to other cultures

A large majority believed that media played either a substantial (46.9%) or partial (38.5%) role in exposing them to other cultures. Only 7.1% selected 'not much' and 7.5% selected 'not at all.' Overall, 85.4% attributed at least some cultural-exposure role to media.

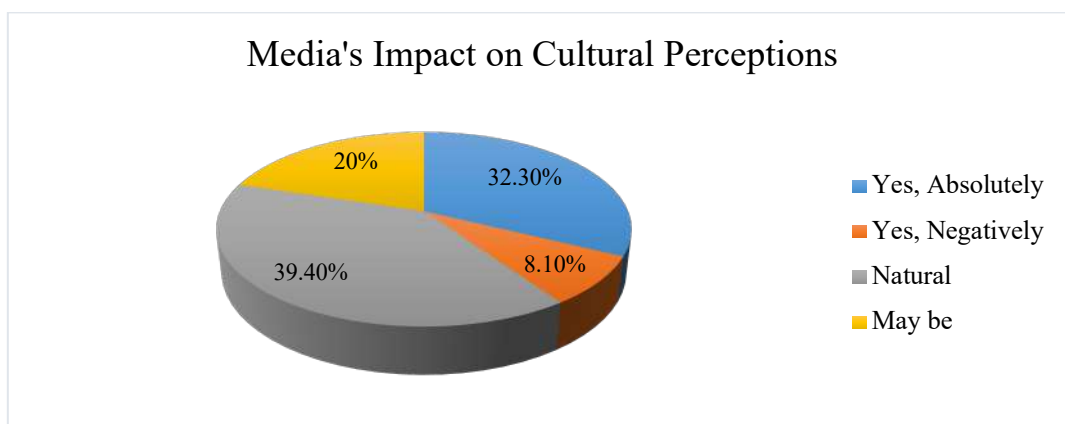


Figure 7. Media influence on perceptions of specific cultures or traditions

Regarding changes in cultural perceptions, 32.3% reported a positive influence, 39.4% reported no clear change or a neutral position, and 20.2% were uncertain. A smaller group (8.1%) reported a negative influence. These results suggest that media can shape cultural perceptions, but the direction and intensity of influence vary considerably among users.

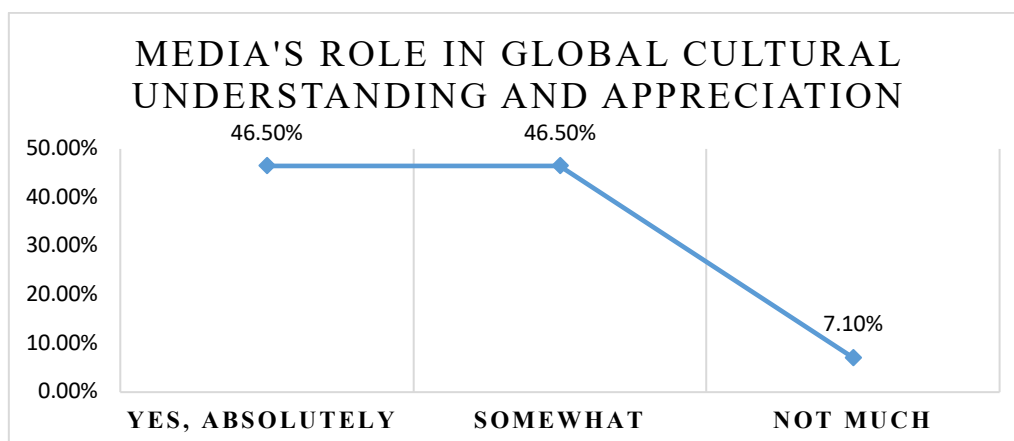


Figure 8. Perceptions of media's role in global cultural understanding and appreciation

Almost all respondents believed that media could contribute to global cultural understanding and appreciation: 46.5% selected 'yes, absolutely' and 46.5% selected 'somewhat.' Only 7.1% selected 'not much.' The total of 100.1% reflects rounding to one decimal place.

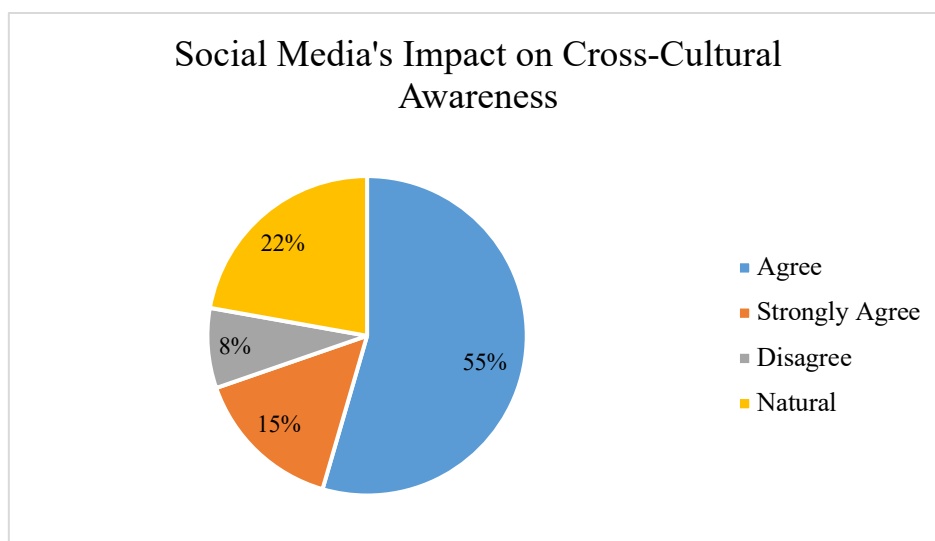


Figure 9. Social media's contribution to cross-cultural understanding

More than two-thirds of respondents reported that social media enhanced their understanding of different cultures and traditions. Specifically, 54.5% agreed and 15.2% strongly agreed, producing a combined positive response of 69.7%. Neutral responses accounted for 22.2%, and 8.1% disagreed.

4.6 Barriers to Accurate Cultural Representation

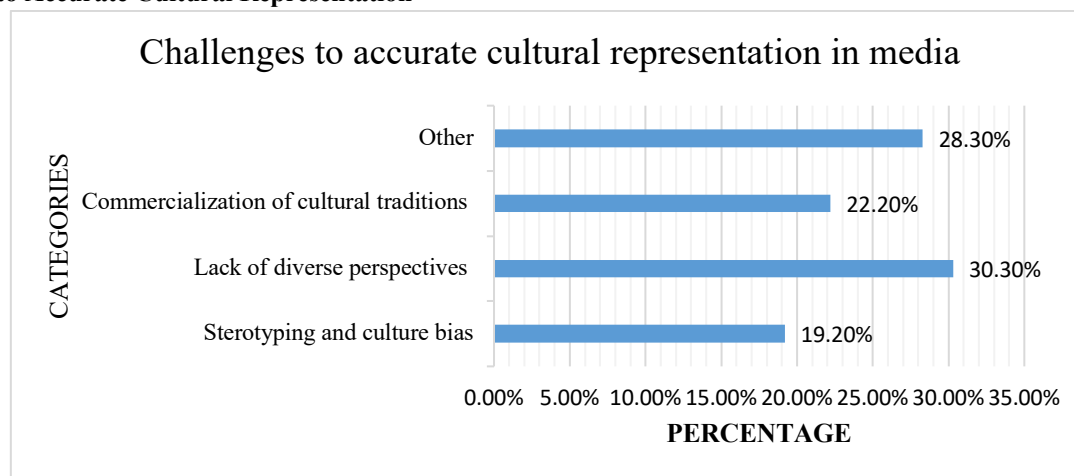


Figure 10. Challenges to accurate cultural representation in media

The most frequently identified barrier was a lack of diverse perspectives (30.3%). Other factors, including inadequate research, decontextualization, or political and commercial pressures, were selected by 28.3%. Commercialization of cultural traditions accounted for 22.2%, and stereotyping or cultural bias accounted for 19.2%. The distribution shows that respondents understood representation problems as both structural and content-related.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 High Exposure Does Not Necessarily Produce Interaction

The findings indicate a clear distinction between consuming cultural content and engaging in intercultural dialogue. More than half of respondents spent over two hours per day with media from other cultures, and 61.3% encountered such material daily or several times a week. However, only 16.2% frequently interacted with people from other cultures, while 55.6% rarely or never did so. This gap suggests that digital platforms can facilitate cultural visibility without necessarily creating reciprocal social relationships.

From a network-society perspective, connectivity expands the potential range of cultural contact, but users may remain positioned primarily as observers within algorithmically curated networks (Castells, 2010). Exposure is therefore a necessary but insufficient condition for intercultural communication. Dialogue requires opportunities for interaction, confidence in communicating across language differences, and platform practices that reward explanation and exchange rather than passive viewing.

5.2 Visual Platforms and Participatory Cultural Circulation

Instagram and YouTube accounted for 77.8% of preferred platform use. This pattern is consistent with the growing importance of visual and audiovisual storytelling in cultural communication. Images, demonstrations, short videos, documentaries, and creator narratives can make unfamiliar cultural practices accessible to audiences with limited prior knowledge. Research on Instagram and TikTok similarly shows that visual storytelling, multilingual captions, educational framing, hashtags, and audience interaction can facilitate intercultural learning and expand the reach of local cultural narratives (Huttayavilaiphan, 2024; Mahaputri et al., 2025). (Jenkins, 2006) concept of participatory culture helps explain why these platforms are significant. Users can comment, remix, imitate, translate, and redistribute cultural content, becoming participants in its circulation. Yet participation is not automatically equitable. Creators with greater visibility, technical resources, language competence, and algorithmic reach have more power to define how a culture is presented.

5.3 Cultural Awareness, Interpretation, and Social Position

The majority of respondents viewed media as an important source of cultural exposure, and 69.7% agreed or strongly agreed that social media enhanced their understanding of different cultures. These findings support the argument that digital media can increase awareness and curiosity. Nevertheless, the 39.4% neutral response regarding changes in cultural perceptions and the 20.2% uncertain response indicate that exposure does not always generate a clearly perceived attitudinal change.

Interpretation is socially situated. Users encounter cultural content through their own value systems, educational backgrounds, language abilities, and previous experiences. (Hofstede, 2001) framework draws attention to broad differences in value orientation, but the demographic concentration of the present sample also highlights the importance of age, student status, and gender. The

results should therefore be read as perceptions within a particular young, student-dominated sample rather than as universal patterns of cultural interpretation.

5.4 Authenticity, Commercialization, and Representation

Respondents identified a lack of diverse perspectives, commercialization, stereotyping, and cultural bias as major challenges. These concerns reflect the contradictory position of culture on social media. Visibility may support recognition and preservation, but it can also encourage simplified, marketable, or exoticized portrayals. A tradition may be detached from community authority and reframed primarily as entertainment, tourism, fashion, or lifestyle content.

Research on heritage communication shows that social media can broaden public participation and document cultural meanings (Foroughi et al., 2024; Liang et al., 2021). However, meaningful digital preservation requires context, accurate attribution, and community involvement. (Antoninis et al., 2023) emphasis on diverse cultural content, transparency, and media literacy is relevant here. Platforms and creators should provide historical and social context, consult members of represented communities, distinguish appreciation from appropriation, and avoid presenting one practice as representative of an entire culture.

5.5 Sociological Implications

Sociologically, social media should be understood as an institutionally organized cultural arena rather than a neutral technological channel. Platform ownership, algorithmic ranking, advertising models, language dominance, and unequal digital access influence which cultures are visible and whose interpretations gain authority. Cultural exchange online is therefore embedded in relations of power.

At the same time, users and communities retain agency. They can challenge stereotypes, document local knowledge, create multilingual explanations, and connect cultural memory to younger audiences. The central implication is that digital cultural exchange is most constructive when it moves from one-way exposure toward reciprocal, contextualized, and respectful participation.

6. CONCLUSION

This study examined how social media shapes cultural exposure, interpretation, interaction, and representation among 300 users. The findings show extensive exposure to cross-cultural content, particularly through Instagram and YouTube. Most respondents believed that media contributes to cultural exposure and global cultural appreciation, and more than two-thirds reported improved understanding of different cultures and traditions.

However, the study also demonstrates that cultural consumption is not equivalent to intercultural communication. A majority rarely or never interacted online with people from other cultures despite regularly consuming cross-cultural media. This distinction is important because passive exposure may increase familiarity without producing dialogue, empathy, or a critical understanding of context.

The potential of social media is further limited by representational problems. Respondents identified insufficient diversity, commercialization, stereotyping, and cultural bias as barriers to accurate portrayal. Digital platforms can preserve cultural memory and amplify underrepresented voices, but they can also simplify cultural practices and reward content that is commercially attractive or algorithmically engaging.

The study recommends that content creators provide contextual information, acknowledge sources and cultural ownership, use multilingual captions where appropriate, and engage directly with represented communities. Educational institutions should integrate critical media literacy and intercultural communication into teaching. Platform companies should improve transparency and support diverse cultural content. Future research should use more representative samples, validated multi-item measures, interviews, focus groups, digital ethnography, and inferential statistical analysis to examine relationships among exposure, awareness, interaction, and cultural appreciation.

Overall, social media can connect traditions, values, and global audiences, but its sociological significance depends on how networks, users, institutions, and communities negotiate authenticity, participation, and power. Cultural exchange becomes meaningful not merely when cultural content is visible, but when it is communicated accurately, interpreted critically, and exchanged through respectful and reciprocal engagement.

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