Digital Self-Presentation on Instagram: A Qualitative Study on Nigerian Students' Experiences of Cultural Identity and Adaptation

Sarah Monioluwa Bolajoko
American University of Cyprus, Faculty of Fine Arts

Abstract

This study examines how Nigerian students studying at the American University of Cyprus represent their selves through Instagram and how these representations contribute to their cultural adaptation processes. The research is designed based on Goffman's *"The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life"* theory and Kim's *"Theory of Cross-Cultural Adaptation."* It analyzes how students perform their cultural identities through visual posts, stories, likes, and follower relationships on Instagram, and what roles these digital performances play in their adaptation to a new culture. Using a qualitative research design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 Nigerian students. The findings reveal that the students use Instagram not only as a platform for entertainment but also as a space for identity construction, cultural interaction, and social visibility. Participants stated that through digital sharing, they both preserve their sense of cultural belonging and adapt to new cultural norms. In conclusion, Instagram functions as a digital stage where Nigerian students perform their cultural identities and negotiate social acceptance.
Keywords: Goffman, Digital Self-Presentation, Instagram, Cultural Identity, Cultural Adaptation, Qualitative Research

1. Introduction

Today, social media has become an essential medium through which individuals express their identities, reflect their cultural affiliations, and engage with different cultures. In particular, visually oriented platforms such as Instagram function as digital stages where individuals perform self-presentations and shape their pursuit of social approval (Goffman, 1959; Hall, 1997; Boyd, 2014). Through social media, individuals not only share information but also reconstruct their social identities (Castells, 2013; Yılmaz, 2025b).

In this context, the study aims to examine how Nigerian university students studying in Northern Cyprus use Instagram, how they perform self-presentation through visual content, and how these practices relate to their cultural adaptation processes. The research adopts Goffman's *"The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life"* (1959) and Kim's *"Theory of Cross-Cultural Adaptation"* (2001, 2005) as its theoretical framework. According to Goffman, individuals act as performers in social life and construct their interactions through "impression management." Kim, on the other hand, explains the process of adaptation to new cultural environments as a cycle of stress, adaptation, and growth. These two perspectives jointly form a complementary theoretical foundation for understanding identity performance and cultural interaction in social media environments (Yılmaz, 2019a; Bağcı, 2023; Couldry, 2012).

The study employs a qualitative research design and involves in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 30 Nigerian students studying at the American University of Cyprus. Participants were selected through purposive sampling (Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2002). Data were collected using a semi-structured interview form and analyzed through descriptive analysis. The findings reveal how students' visual posts on Instagram represent their cultural identities and how these posts function as tools in their processes of social adaptation.

The significance of this research lies in demonstrating that social media use is not merely a communicative act but also a decisive factor in individuals' processes of cultural identity construction (Talas & Öztürk, 2015; Yılmaz, 2025a). The fact that Nigerian students actively use social media to both make their own cultures visible in digital environments and adapt to new social contexts in Cyprus constitutes a unique contribution to the fields of intercultural communication and education. Methodologically, this study was inspired by Emel Yılmaz's (2025a) research on social media and language learning; however, it shifts the focus from foreign language acquisition to the performance of cultural identity, offering a holistic evaluation of the role of social media in cultural adaptation processes.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study is built upon Goffman's concept of self-presentation, Kim's theory of cultural adaptation, and Adorno and Horkheimer's notion of the culture industry. These three approaches are jointly employed to explain how individuals represent themselves in social media environments, express their cultural belonging, and navigate digital interactions. Today, social media has become a space where individuals make both their personal identities and social positions visible while simultaneously reproducing cultural norms (Hall, 1997; Yılmaz, 2025b).

2.1. Goffman and Self-Presentation

Goffman (1959) likens social life to a theatrical stage and views individuals as actors performing different roles upon it. Each person represents a particular identity through impression management during social interactions. In this process, the "front stage" reflects behaviors exhibited to gain social acceptance, while the "back stage" represents private domains. In the digital age, this stage metaphor becomes vividly observable on platforms such as Instagram.

Instagram users curate their identities through photos, stories, and comments while simultaneously maintaining their role performances in pursuit of social approval (Boyd, 2014; Couldry, 2012). In this context, digital identity is shaped not only by individual choices but also by audience expectations and the cultural codes of social media. Particularly for international students, this environment becomes a space where they strive to both preserve their cultural identities and present them in ways compatible with their new surroundings (Yılmaz, 2025a, p.10; Kara, 2016a, p.3; Kara, 2016b).

2.2. Kim's Theory of Cultural Adaptation

Kim (2001, 2005) posits that when individuals encounter different cultures, they experience a cycle of "stress–adaptation–growth." This cycle explains how individuals adjust to new cultural environments and reconstruct their identities through communicative interaction. In this context, social media functions not merely as a communication tool but as a central space of cultural interaction.

In digital environments, individuals simultaneously carry traces of their own cultures and engage with new ones, thereby creating hybrid identities (Talas & Öztürk, 2015; Yılmaz, 2019a). For Nigerian students, this process manifests through platforms like Instagram, where they make their cultural identities visible while adapting to the social environment of Cyprus. Thus, cultural adaptation transcends the limits of face-to-face communication and evolves into a digital process of interaction.

2.3. Instagram and Self-Presentation in the Context of the Digital Culture Industry

Adorno and Horkheimer (2002) argue that in modern societies, cultural production has acquired an industrial character, and individuals are guided by standardized cultural patterns through the media. This perspective highlights how social media, rather than liberating individuals, subjects them to specific aesthetic and ideological norms. Instagram, as a visually centered platform, represents the digital manifestation of the culture industry.

Users, in their pursuit of authenticity and visibility, often contribute to the reproduction of cultural hegemony (Hall, 1997; Van Dijk, 2008).

When Goffman's theory of self-presentation is considered alongside Adorno and Horkheimer's concept of the culture industry, Instagram emerges as both a *stage* and a *system* for the individual. While users perform their identity expressions, they simultaneously conform to the platform's popular aesthetic codes. This dynamic transforms personal expressions into commodified cultural displays (Yılmaz, 2025c; Castells, 2013). Social media thus becomes a sphere where users participate in mechanisms of social validation and develop strategic behaviors to make their identities visible. Among young users in particular, elements such as "likes," "follower count," and "posting frequency" directly influence self-perception (Boyd, 2014). This process corresponds to Goffman's concept of "impression management" in digital contexts. By presenting themselves within a specific social image, users continuously reproduce both their personal and cultural identities.

Consequently, Instagram functions as both a medium of expression and a site of cultural reproduction in individuals' cultural adaptation processes. While the platform accelerates the learning and interaction phases defined in Kim's model of cultural adaptation, it also provides a setting for the systematic transformation of individuality, as Adorno emphasized (Yılmaz, 2025b; Couldry, 2012).

2.4. Social Media, Digital Interaction, and Learning Experience

Yılmaz's (2025) model on social media and learning processes explains the multilayered effects of digital interactions on individuals' cognitive, cultural, and behavioral development. According to the researcher, social media is not merely a domain for information exchange but an interactive learning environment where observational learning, self-efficacy construction, and cultural awareness are produced. This perspective transposes Bandura's (1977) concepts of observation, modeling, and reinforcement in learning into the context of digital culture. In online environments, social media users reproduce learning processes by observing others' behaviors, linguistic practices, and cultural representations.

Yılmaz's (2025b, p.5) approach directly aligns with Kim's theory of cultural adaptation. Through social media, individuals not only engage in cognitive learning but also experience cultural learning that enables them to experiment with new identity forms. This allows individuals to express themselves within different cultural contexts, recognize cultural symbols, and enhance their communicative competence. Particularly for international students, social media serves as both a learning environment and a space for cultural transition, giving rise to hybrid cultural identities (Yılmaz, 2019a; Talas & Kaya, 2007; Talas & Öztürk, 2015).

In this regard, Instagram exemplifies the "learning ecosystem" defined in Yılmaz's model. Through visual content, users access knowledge, language, and culture while simultaneously reshaping their identities. Goffman's notion of self-presentation through impression management transforms, in digital environments, into an interactive form of learning. Students, through observing cultural representations, behavioral patterns, and communication codes on Instagram, not only socialize but also acquire new knowledge and attitudes (Boyd, 2014; Yılmaz, 2025a, 2025c).

Aksu's (2024a, p.2; 2024b, p.3) studies on digital learning demonstrate that online interactions share processes similar to individual learning and perception management. This indicates that individuals also act as "learning subjects" on social media. In these environments, individuals are both passive observers and active producers of cultural content. This dual structure is defined as the "interactive learning cycle" in Yılmaz's (2025c) model.

Furthermore, Castells (2013) and Couldry (2012), in explaining the communication structure of the digital society, emphasize that individuals play active roles in knowledge production and dissemination through social networks. Accordingly, social media has created a new learning culture that transcends traditional forms of education and cultural transmission. Individuals adapt what they learn from online experiences into their personal lives, integrating these learning processes with cultural adaptation (Kim, 2001; Yılmaz, 2025b).

Yılmaz's social media model, therefore, intersects with both Goffman's understanding of self-presentation and Kim's approach to cultural adaptation. While Goffman explains how individuals manage their identities on the stage, Yılmaz demonstrates how they become interactive learners on the digital stage. Kim's model of cultural adaptation defines the cultural dimension of this digital learning process: individuals observe, interpret, and integrate different cultural norms into their behavioral repertoires through social media.
In conclusion, social media serves not only as a space for sharing but also as a dynamic domain where processes of learning, observation, and cultural integration intersect. In this process, platforms like Instagram embody the contemporary convergence of Yılmaz's digital learning model and Goffman's understanding of self-performance.

3. Method
3.1 Research Model
This research was designed as a qualitative case study examining the role of Instagram use in the processes of cultural adaptation and identity presentation. The methodological framework is based on Goffman's 1959 concept of self-presentation, Kim's 2001 theory of cross-cultural adaptation, and Yılmaz's 2025 social media learning model. This theoretical framework aims to explain how individuals present their identities through social media interactions, adapt to cultural environments, and acquire digital behavioral patterns.

Social media functions as an interactive learning environment that supports individuals' levels of observational learning, self-efficacy, and cultural awareness (Zor, 2017; Yılmaz, 2025a). Similarly, Kim 2001 defines cultural adaptation as a learning process that occurs through communicative interaction. Goffman's 1959 metaphor of the social stage provides a conceptual basis for understanding how individuals represent themselves on Instagram. This study considers social media use not only as a communicative activity but also as a socio-digital space where cultural adaptation and identity construction occur. The study is limited to 30 Nigerian students studying at Cyprus American University, and the findings are not intended for generalization (Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2002).

3.2. Research Design
The research employs a qualitative case study design. Creswell 2018 defines qualitative case studies as investigations that explore a particular phenomenon in depth within its natural context. Accordingly, this study aims to understand the cultural and social effects of Instagram on students. The rationale for selecting this method lies in its capacity to analyze individuals' personal narratives, experiences, and observations within their natural environments (Silverman, 2020; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The study analyzes students' digital identity performances within Goffman's self-presentation framework and explores their cultural adaptation strategies using Kim's adaptation model. The qualitative approach seeks to understand how students express themselves through social media interactions and how this process relates to social learning.

3.3. Study Group
The study group consists of 30 Nigerian students enrolled at Cyprus American University during the 2025–2026 Fall Semester. Participants were selected through purposive

sampling, which enables the collection of in-depth data from individuals who possess awareness and experience relevant to the research topic (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 2018). All participants are active Instagram users who engage in daily posting, sharing stories, commenting, or following others. This characteristic is important for observing their digital identity construction processes. Participants' ages range from 18 to 26, and most study in the fields of social sciences and communication.

3.4. Data Collection Instrument
Data were collected using a semi-structured interview form developed by the researcher. The form was designed considering Goffman's concept of impression management and Kim's concept of cultural adaptation, and it incorporated the themes of self-efficacy, observational learning, cultural awareness, and digital interaction from Yılmaz's 2025 model.

Example questions included: 1) For what purposes do you use Instagram, 2) How do you express yourself on Instagram, 3) Do you think your posts represent you, 4)How does your social media use affect your adaptation to new cultures, 5)What do you learn from observing others' visual posts or stories.

All participants provided informed consent, and the study was conducted in accordance with the principles of confidentiality and voluntary participation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interviews were carried out online via Zoom during the Spring 2025 semester and lasted approximately 30 to 40 minutes. Audio recordings were taken with permission and later transcribed.

3.5. Data Analysis
The data were analyzed using descriptive and content analysis methods. They were thematically coded and classified under five main themes: self-presentation, observational learning, cultural adaptation, self-efficacy, and digital identity (Yılmaz, 2025; Boyd, 2014). Lincoln and Guba's 1985 trustworthiness criteria were followed; member checking was applied for validity, and inter-coder reliability was ensured. The qualitative data analysis principles suggested by Silverman 2020 and Creswell 2018 were adopted. The findings were interpreted in connection with the theoretical approaches of Goffman, Kim, and Yılmaz.

4.Findings and Analysis
This section presents the analysis of data obtained from 30 Nigerian students studying at Cyprus American University. The data were gathered through semi-structured interviews focusing on students' Instagram usage practices, forms of self-presentation, and experiences of cultural adaptation. The findings indicate that students use Instagram not merely as a sharing platform but as a space for expressing identity and engaging in cultural interaction.

The data were analyzed through descriptive and thematic analysis, and students' responses were grouped into five main themes: frequency of use, purposes of use, cross-cultural interaction, social relationships, and digital identity presentation. The results were interpreted within the frameworks of Goffman's 1959 Presentation of Self, Kim's 2001 Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory, and Yılmaz's 2025 Social Media Learning Model.

4.1. Frequency of Instagram Use
Seventy percent of the participants reported using Instagram daily, twenty percent several times a week, and ten percent only on special occasions or for specific content. Students stated that they frequently use the Stories feature, particularly during evening hours.

Themes: constant connectivity, need for visibility, digital self-performance
Theoretical interpretation: This finding aligns with Goffman's 1959 concept of the front

stage. Students maintain their self-presentations through continuous online activity and seek visibility as a form of social approval. According to Kim's 2001 adaptation model, such online engagement contributes to the development of digital belonging in new social contexts. As Yılmaz 2025a indicates, social media interaction enhances observational learning and self-efficacy.

4.2. Purposes of Instagram Use
Fifty percent of participants use Instagram for social interaction such as communication, cultural sharing, and entertainment; thirty percent for self-presentation and personal branding; and twenty percent for academic or informational purposes. Themes: social belonging, self-presentation, cultural visibility

Theoretical interpretation: In Goffman's framework, individuals perform roles appropriate for social acceptance. Students use Instagram both to introduce their own cultures and to adapt their behavior to the host culture (Goffman, 1959; Yılmaz, 2025a). In Kim's 2005 model, this corresponds to the digital form of the stress–adaptation–growth cycle. Within Bandura's 1977 theory of observational learning, students model each other's posts to learn digital interaction patterns.

4.3. Cross-Cultural Interaction and Adaptation
Sixty percent of participants stated that they communicate with people from different cultures through Instagram, twenty-five percent interact mainly with those from their home country, and fifteen percent have limited intercultural experience. Most participants reported that culturally themed posts such as music, food, and clothing increased their cultural awareness.

Themes: cultural awareness, hybrid identity formation, digital cultural exchange
Theoretical interpretation: Within Kim's 2001 and 2005 adaptation theory, interaction with diverse cultures promotes behavioral flexibility and cultural learning. This process corresponds to Yılmaz's 2025b cultural awareness dimension in the social media learning model. In Goffman's perspective, digital interaction represents a multi-layered performance space where individuals both represent their own cultures and observe others'.

4.4. Social Relationships and Emotional Interaction
Fifty-five percent of participants stated that Instagram strengthens their social relationships, thirty percent said it has a partial effect, and fifteen percent reported that it causes loneliness. Some noted that their emotional motivation depends on the number of followers and likes. Themes: social support, visual interaction, digital fatigue

Theoretical interpretation: According to Bandura's 1986 social cognitive theory, individuals learn behaviors through observation, and these behaviors influence emotional attitudes. The participants' search for approval in social media corresponds to Goffman's notion of impression management. This pattern indicates that individuals adapt to both cultural and emotional norms in the digital environment (Kim, 2005; Yılmaz, 2025b).

4.5. Digital Identity and Self-Expression
Sixty-five percent of participants said their Instagram posts represent them, twenty percent said partially, and fifteen percent said their posts do not reflect their real selves. Most of them emphasized presenting idealized self-images through photos and stories. Themes: digital identity, self-presentation, cultural representation

Theoretical interpretation: These findings support Goffman's 1959 self-presentation theory. Students strategically manage their front-stage behaviors in digital environments. However, from the perspective of Adorno and Horkheimer's 2002 culture industry concept, this process also entails the risk of cultural standardization. Even in the pursuit of

authenticity, participants reproduce popular cultural norms, creating a dual structure in which the individual is both liberated and bound by the aesthetic codes of the system (Hall, 1997; Couldry, 2012; Yılmaz, 2025c) /

5.Conclusion

The findings of the study revealed that Nigerian students studying at Cyprus American University use Instagram not merely as a sharing platform but as a space for cultural interaction, self-presentation, and learning. Through Instagram, students experience an active learning process at social, cultural, and cognitive levels. In this process, Instagram functions as a digital stage where individuals construct their identities through visual representations, express their cultural belonging, and adapt to new social environments. The majority of participants stated that their posts on Instagram are directly related to how they express themselves and that they receive social approval and feedback from their surroundings through these posts. This situation is in complete harmony with Goffman's 1959 approach to self-presentation; individuals perform front-stage behaviors in digital contexts and construct identities that align with social expectations. At the same time, participants emphasized that during their time on the platform, they both represented their own cultures and interacted with people from different cultural backgrounds. This finding indicates that Kim's 2001 stress–adaptation–growth model of cultural adaptation is also applicable in digital environments.

The data obtained also support Bandura's 1977 and 1986 social learning theory. Students develop behavioral models by observing the posts of other users on Instagram and thereby gain cultural and linguistic awareness. This process of observational learning strengthens individuals' sense of self-efficacy and enhances their social interaction skills. In particular, the mechanisms of stories and likes reinforce students' learning motivation and digital identity awareness.

The results of the study are largely consistent with the principles highlighted in Yılmaz's 2025 social media–learning model. Social media eliminates spatial and temporal limitations in learning processes and provides an interactive environment in which digital observational learning, cultural awareness, and self-efficacy develop together. In this context, Instagram serves not only as a social sharing platform for international students but also as a holistic learning ecosystem where cultural adaptation, self-presentation, and behavioral learning take place.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that social media functions as a multilayered tool in individuals' processes of identity presentation, cultural adaptation, and learning. Instagram promotes cultural exchange among students, strengthens their sense of social belonging, and deepens their learning experiences. When Goffman's self-presentation approach, Kim's cultural adaptation model, and Bandura's social learning theory are evaluated together, it becomes evident that digital interaction contributes to both individual identity construction and cultural integration.

Overall, Instagram and similar social media platforms are not merely spaces for communication for today's youth; they are dynamic stages where behavioral learning, cultural transformation, and digital identity construction take place. This study provides both theoretical and practical contributions to social media research by enhancing the understanding of how digital culture influences individuals.

6. References

Adorno, T. W., & Horkheimer, M. (2002). *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (J. Cumming, Trans.). Stanford University Press. (Original work published 1944)

Aksu, S. (2024a). Evaluation of Turkish language pre-service teachers' opinions on the vocabulary of Old Anatolian Turkish and interlinear translation. *International Online Journal of Education and Teaching (IOJET), 11*(2), 383–409.

Aksu, S. (2024b). Motivation and learning psychology of teachers in language translation learning. *British Educational Research Journal.* Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.4044

Bağcı, E. (2023). From the tourist's perspective: A neuroscientific analysis of the promotional film "Watchtower of Turkey." *Journal of Tourism Intelligence and Smartness, 6*(2), 160–171.

Bağcı, E. (2024). Neurotourism and national tourism promotion: A thematic analysis of the Turkish tourism market based on neuroscience. *International Journal of Tourism Anthropology, 9*(4), 281–299. https://doi.org/10.1504/IJTA.2024.143396

Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Boyd, D. (2014). *It's complicated: The social lives of networked teens.* Yale University Press.

Castells, M. (2013). *Communication power.* Oxford University Press.

Couldry, N. (2012). *Media, society, world: Social theory and digital media practice.* Polity Press.

Creswell, J. W. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life.* Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor.

Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices.* Sage Publications.

Kara, B. (2016a). The sociological anatomy of cartoons: The case of Pepee. *Journal of Social Sciences in the Turkish Cultural Geography, 1*(2), 14–22. (Publication No. 3025166)

Kara, B. (2016b). Discourses resulting from globalization and ideology in the context of media. *Education and Society in the 21st Century, 5*(14), 149–162. (Publication No. 2889244)

Kim, Y. Y. (2001). *Becoming intercultural: An integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation.* Sage Publications.

Kim, Y. Y. (2005). Adapting to a new culture: An integrative communication theory. In W. Gudykunst (Ed.), *Theorizing about intercultural communication* (pp. 375–400). Sage Publications.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry.* Sage Publications.

Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.

Silverman, D. (2020). *Doing qualitative research* (6th ed.). Sage Publications.

Talas, M., & Kaya, Y. (2007). The cultural consequences of globalization. *Journal of Turkish Studies (TÜBAR), 22,* 149–162.

Talas, M., & Öztürk, M. F. (2015). The interaction between social media and education. *Zeitschrift für die Welt der Türken / Journal of World of Turks, 7*(1), 101–120.

Van Dijk, T. A. (2008). *Discourse and power.* London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Van Dijk, T. A. (2015). *Discourse and knowledge: A sociocognitive approach.* Cambridge University Press.

Yılmaz, E. (2019a). Identity, ideology, and discourse: A study on the discursive construction of identity in the Turkish Cypriot press (Presidencies of Derviş Eroğlu (2010–2015) and Mustafa Akıncı (2015–present)) [Doctoral dissertation, European University of Lefke, Institute of Education and Research, Department of Communication Studies].

Yılmaz, E., & Bektaş, M. Ç. (2019b). Reproduction of national discourse through different ideologies in newspapers. *Transilvania Journal of Social Sciences, 10*(2), 63–68.

Yılmaz, E. (2025a). Social media as a tool of political communication: An analysis of the Instagram use practices of political leaders in Northern Cyprus. In V. Yakın (Ed.), *International Studies and Evaluations in Communication Sciences* (pp. 1–23). Gece Kitaplığı.

Yılmaz, E. (2025b). Cultural identity and ideology in children's media: A comparative analysis of Caillou and Nasreddin Hodja. *Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology (TOJET), 24*(3), 1–8.

Yılmaz, E. (2025c). The visible face of popular culture: A critique of the culture industry through TV competitions, media representations, and the case of Nihal Candan. *International Journal of Environmental Sciences, 11*(Suppl. 18), 1456–1459.

Zor, L. (2017). Application of Van Dijk's critical discourse analysis to cinema films: An example from Kazakh cinema, *A Gift to Stalin. Academic View Journal,* (61), 877–899. Institute of Social Sciences of the Turkic World Kyrgyz–Turkish University of Economics and Entrepreneurship.