

**Online Co-National Peer Support Across the Migration Journey: Iranian  
International Students' Pre- and Post-Arrival Experiences with Telegram in  
Ottawa**

**Baran Sabzalizadeh**

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Department of Sociological and Anthropological Studies  
Faculty of Social Science  
University of Ottawa

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the role of an online Telegram-based co-national peer support group in shaping the experiences of Iranian international students during the pre-sojourn and early settlement phases in Ottawa. Using a descriptive phenomenological methodology, the study examines how voluntary, peer-driven interactions across these phases provided participants with crucial emotional, informational, and practical support. Long before arrival, students engaged with the Telegram group to reduce uncertainty, foster familiarity, and build a sense of communal belonging. The group served not only as a space for acquiring lived-experience-based guidance, but also as an emotionally safe and empathetic environment where support was offered freely and without expectation. It also helped students navigate foundational cultural differences while maintaining connections to their Iranian identity—fostering an emerging sense of bicultural orientation. Over time, reliance on the group declined as participants formed in-person networks and gained independence, yet its significance as a community remained. This study adds to the literature by offering empirical and theoretical insights into how co-national digital peer networks provide informational, emotional, and instrumental support to international students during the pre-sojourn and early settlement phases of adaptation.

## **Résumé**

Cette thèse explore le rôle d'un groupe de soutien entre pairs co-nationaux sur Telegram dans la structuration des expériences des étudiants iraniens internationaux pendant les phases de pré-séjour et d'installation initiale à Ottawa. En adoptant une méthodologie phénoménologique descriptive,

l'étude examine comment des interactions volontaires et entre pairs ont apporté un soutien émotionnel, informationnel et pratique crucial à travers ces différentes phases. Bien avant leur arrivée, les étudiants s'engageaient déjà dans le groupe Telegram afin de réduire l'incertitude, favoriser un sentiment de familiarité, et bâtir un sentiment d'appartenance communautaire. Le groupe ne servait pas uniquement à fournir des conseils fondés sur l'expérience vécue, mais constituait également un espace émotionnellement sûr et empathique, où le soutien était offert librement et sans attente de réciprocité. Il a également permis aux étudiants de naviguer dans les différences culturelles fondamentales tout en maintenant un lien avec leur identité iranienne – favorisant ainsi l'émergence d'une orientation biculturelle. Au fil du temps, la dépendance au groupe a diminué à mesure que les participants construisaient des réseaux en personne et gagnaient en autonomie, mais sa signification en tant que communauté est restée présente. Cette étude enrichit la littérature en apportant des éclairages empiriques et théoriques sur la manière dont les réseaux numériques de pairs co-nationaux offrent un soutien informationnel, émotionnel et instrumental aux étudiants internationaux pendant les phases de pré-départ et de début d'installation.

*Keywords:* online peer support, co-national networks, Iranian international students, social support, cross-cultural adaptation

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## Introduction

International students, as defined by UNESCO Institute of Statistics, are those who have crossed a national or territorial border for the purpose of education and are currently enrolled outside their country of origin (UIS, n.d.). This global movement of students has catalyzed the internationalization of higher education, showing consistent expansion since the 1970s (Beine et al., 2014). Within this landscape, Canada has positioned itself as a premier destination for international education through supportive immigration policies. Recent data from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) demonstrates this trend, with international student enrollment reaching a milestone of over 1,027,668 students in 2022, representing a 43.2% increase from 2018. Iranian students form a significant cohort within this population, with approximately 26,000 students enrolled in Canadian institutions in 2022, placing Iran among the top five source countries for international students in Canada.

While international students contribute substantially to their host institutions' intellectual, cultural, and economic vitality (Martirosyan et al., 2019), their transition often involves significant hurdles. Studies have identified several key challenges in this adaptation process, including academic strain, financial difficulties, feelings of isolation, experiences of discrimination, social disconnection, and cultural adjustment difficulties (Baba & Hosoda, 2014). Evidence suggests that international students generally demonstrate lower adaptation levels than their domestic counterparts (Grayson, 2023), with this gap particularly pronounced among students from non-Western geographies due to greater cultural distance (Gareis, 2012).

Iranian students in Canada encounter additional unique challenges beyond typical adaptation issues. The absence of an Iranian embassy in Canada creates significant administrative complications in handling documentation and consular affairs. Iran's internet restrictions pose substantial barriers to accessing essential online resources and maintaining family communication,

while the severe devaluation of the Iranian Rial against the Canadian dollar creates extraordinary financial pressures. Furthermore, the complex political relationship between Iran and Canada impacts various aspects of these students' academic sojourn, from visa processing to banking services.

Research has identified social support as a critical factor in mitigating these adaptation challenges. Studies demonstrate that stronger perceived social support correlates with enhanced sociocultural adjustment and reduced acculturative stress (Jackson et al., 2019; Misra et al., 2003). Particularly significant is the role of co-national peer support, which offers both psychological comfort and cultural continuity (Myles & Cheng, 2003). The emergence of social media has revolutionized these support mechanisms, creating new possibilities for maintaining homeland connections while fostering host country relationships (Ng et al., 2017).

For many Iranian students, the journey to Canada begins not at the airport, but months earlier—through online spaces where questions are asked, emotions are shared, and tentative bonds begin to form. Even before setting foot in their host country, some students enter into a co-national network that offers not only practical peer guidance, but also emotional reassurance and a sense of cultural familiarity. These early digital interactions can foster feelings of belonging, empathy, and shared understanding that ease the emotional and informational strain of transition. In some cases, they even lay the groundwork for bicultural negotiation and instrumental support before arrival.

This thesis addresses the limited understanding of how online peer co-national networks influence international students' adaptation experiences, focusing specifically on Iranian students' use of Telegram for multi-dimensional social support during their pre-arrival and early settlement experiences in Ottawa. Through examining how these students experience and perceive

emotionally, informationally, and instrumentally supportive interactions within peer-based co-national digital networks, this research uncovers the role of Telegram as a digital space for mediating cross-cultural adaptation. The findings will enhance theoretical understanding of digitally facilitated co-national peer support in the early phases of adaptation, while providing practical insights for educational institutions, policymakers, and settlement services to better support international students during their critical transition period.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study is:

- To explore and understand the lived experiences of Iranian international students in relation to their engagement with their online Telegram-based co-national peer community, spanning the pre-sojourn, arrival, and early settlement phases
- To describe the different forms of social support experienced by Iranian international students through interactions developed within the online Telegram-based co-national peer community
- To uncover how Iranian international students perceive and make meaning of the relationship between online co-national peer support on Telegram and their cross-cultural adaptation experiences in Canada

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the lived experiences of Iranian international students in Ottawa regarding their engagement with and social support received from their online Telegram-based co-national peer community across the pre-sojourn, arrival, and early settlement phases?
2. How do Iranian international students make meaning of their cross-cultural adaptation experience in Canada in relation to the online co-national peer interactions and support they receive through Telegram?

### **Thesis Outline**

Chapter One presents a comprehensive review of five interrelated literatures that form the conceptual foundation of this study. It begins with an overview of the settlement challenges faced by newcomers, emphasizing issues such as housing, employment, healthcare access, and social isolation. The second section focuses on international students, highlighting their unique academic, social, psychological, and financial difficulties during the adjustment process. The chapter then turns to the critical role of social support, particularly emphasizing the unique functions of co-national and co-ethnic peer networks in facilitating adaptation. Building on this, the fourth section explores the evolving role of social media as a space for co-national support, with particular attention to its emotional, informational, and cultural functions. Finally, the chapter reviews Telegram's platform-specific affordances and dilemmas—such as its openness, searchability, and privacy features—exploring how these shape peer-based communication and support within Iranian student communities. Together, these five areas contextualize the research questions and help illuminate how digitally mediated co-national peer networks influence the adaptation experiences of newly arrived Iranian international students in Canada.

Chapter Two presents the theoretical framework that guides this study. I begin by reviewing several influential models of acculturation and cross-cultural adaptation, including the ABC model, the U-curve theory, and Berry's acculturation strategies. While each of these frameworks offers valuable insights, I discuss their limitations in capturing the dynamic, communication-centered, and context-specific processes relevant to my research. I then introduce Young Yun Kim's (2001) integrative theory of cross-cultural adaptation as the primary framework for this thesis. Kim's model, particularly her emphasis on the stress–adaptation–growth dynamic and the dual role of ethnic communication, provides a strong foundation for examining how co-ethnic peer support operates in both supportive and potentially limiting ways. I also draw on recent scholarship that expands Kim's theory into the digital age, offering a more nuanced understanding of how online platforms like Telegram mediate adaptation. This chapter lays the conceptual groundwork for analyzing how Iranian international students engage with digital co-national peer networks during their settlement in Canada.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodological approach of the study. I adopted a descriptive phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of Iranian international students who engaged with co-national peer support via Telegram across both the pre-arrival and settlement phases of their transition to Canada. This chapter introduces the philosophical foundations of phenomenology and explains why Giorgi's method was particularly suitable for capturing the essence of participants' experiences. I include a bracketing statement to reflect on my own connection to the research topic and the steps I took to set aside personal assumptions during data collection and analysis. The chapter then describes the participant recruitment process, inclusion criteria, and procedures for conducting semi-structured interviews in Persian to preserve the depth and authenticity of participants' narratives. I also outline how I analyzed the data using Giorgi's

five-step method, which led to the emergence of six essential themes. Finally, the chapter discusses the ethical safeguards implemented throughout the research, including confidentiality, informed consent, and data security, alongside the strategies I used to ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of the study.

In Chapter 4, I present the empirical findings that emerged from my descriptive phenomenological analysis. This chapter explores how Iranian international students experienced co-national peer support via Telegram across both the pre-arrival and post-arrival phases of their settlement journey in Ottawa. Drawing on participants' narratives, I outline six major themes that illuminate the evolving functions of the Telegram group—from fostering early emotional bonding and information exchange to supporting bicultural adjustment and eventually receding into the background as participants gained independence. I highlight how Telegram was perceived not just as a messaging platform, but as a peer-built digital archive, a cultural bridge, and a shared emotional space marked by generosity, empathy, and community belonging. Each theme is presented with detailed participant quotes to retain the depth and nuance of their lived experiences. Through these findings, I aim to show how digitally mediated peer support shaped participants' adaptation in ways both practical and deeply personal.

In Chapter 5, I interpret the findings in relation to relevant literature, conceptual insights, and Kim's (2001) theory of cross-cultural adaptation. While the previous chapter presented participants' lived experiences thematically, here I examine how these experiences formed, what they reveal about co-national peer support through Telegram, and how they contribute to broader understandings of cultural adaptation. Each theme is restated and explored in light of both theoretical framing and concepts such as emotional support, peer-based solidarity, shared hardship, and evolving support needs. I give particular attention to the timing of support—especially how

the Telegram group played a key role even before arrival in Canada—and how its emotional and practical value shifted over time. This chapter also discusses participants' transition from digital reliance to more localized, offline support networks, and how many still remained in the group out of a sense of community and the desire to support others. The chapter concludes by reflecting on what these findings contribute to existing research and how they support or expand Kim's model.

In Chapter 6, I conclude the thesis by synthesizing key findings and reflecting on their broader implications. I discuss how the Telegram group, as a co-national digital space, played a central role in supporting Iranian international students during both their pre-arrival and early post-arrival phases. The chapter highlights how emotional comfort, informational guidance, instrumental help, and cultural negotiation were all facilitated through this peer-led group. I emphasize that the group's impact extended beyond functional support—it offered a sense of belonging, reduced isolation, and even contributed to a bicultural orientation. As students adapted and became more confident, their engagement with the group evolved, but many continued to feel emotionally connected and motivated to support newcomers. I also address how these findings expand on Kim's (2001) cross-cultural adaptation theory by showing how co-national peer support can foster preparedness and ease early transition without necessarily hindering long-term integration. The chapter closes with an acknowledgment of methodological and contextual limitations, including the geographic focus on Ottawa, the exclusive use of Telegram, and the absence of more diverse participant perspectives. I then propose directions for future research, including the need for cross-city comparisons, platform-based studies, and longitudinal tracking of digitally initiated peer ties. Together, these reflections aim to contribute a more nuanced understanding of international student adaptation in the digital age.

## **Chapter 1: Literature Review**

This literature review examines five interconnected areas that form the foundation of this study: (1) the broad challenges faced by newcomers in the settlement process, (2) the unique academic, social, and psychological difficulties experienced by international students, (3) the mechanisms of social support that facilitate their adjustment, with particular attention to co-national and co-ethnic networks, (4) the evolving role of social media in enabling peer-based co-national support, and (5) the specific affordances and constraints of Telegram as a platform for community-building and information exchange. Together, these sections contextualize how digitally mediated co-national networks influence the cross-cultural adaptation of newly arrived Iranian international students in Canada.

### **Newcomers**

The process of settling in a new country presents newcomers with diverse challenges as they attempt to navigate unfamiliar sociocultural and economic environments. Research has documented these difficulties across multiple domains, ranging from securing basic necessities to achieving broader social integration (Wayland, 2006; Lane et al., 2021; Li & Que, 2016).

Career establishment emerges as a fundamental challenge, with particular difficulty in securing positions aligned with prior qualifications and experience. Research indicates that employment barriers represent one of the most significant obstacles in the settlement process,

compounded by several factors including communication difficulties, challenges with credential recognition, and limited familiarity with local employment practices (Li & Que, 2016).

Communication barriers create cascading effects across multiple aspects of newcomers' lives. As Lane et al. (2021) demonstrate in their study of healthcare access in Canada, linguistic challenges combined with interpretation difficulties create substantial barriers to accessing essential services. These communication obstacles extend beyond basic service access to impact both professional advancement and social connection opportunities.

The search for suitable housing presents another significant challenge. Research by Walsh et al. (2015) examining women newcomers' experiences in Montreal revealed that housing insecurity often stems from a combination of financial constraints and limited understanding of local housing systems. This finding aligns with Teixeira and Drolet's (2017) research showing that housing challenges frequently exceed newcomers' initial expectations.

Healthcare access presents distinct challenges for newcomers, particularly those from non-Western backgrounds. Studies indicate that individuals from low- and middle-income countries face more significant barriers compared to those from Western nations, with obstacles including system navigation difficulties, service awareness gaps, and cultural considerations (Lane et al., 2021).

Many newcomers experience profound social isolation. Wayland's (2006) research identifies multiple contributing factors to this isolation, including language barriers, family separation, inadequate housing, and economic constraints. Additionally, Caxaj and Berman (2010) document how experiences of discrimination and cultural disconnection can impede newcomers' sense of belonging, particularly among youth.

In navigating these challenges, research consistently shows that newcomers primarily rely on informal support networks. Studies indicate that family and friend networks often take precedence over formal support systems in addressing settlement needs across multiple domains (Wayland, 2006; Teixeira & Drolet, 2017). Ghosh's (2007) research reveals how these support networks often begin functioning even before arrival, facilitating initial settlement preparations through transnational information exchange. However, as Quirke (2012) notes in their study of Afghan youth in Toronto, the effectiveness of these informal support systems can vary significantly.

Ethnic communities play a vital role in newcomer settlement experiences. Sethi's (2009) research demonstrates how these communities provide crucial spaces for cultural connection and belonging. This finding is reinforced by Dias (2021), who emphasizes the particular importance of connections with other newcomers in fostering community integration.

Settlement needs and information-seeking patterns evolve over time, as demonstrated by Allard's (2022) longitudinal study of Filipino newcomers in Canada. While initially heavily dependent on social networks, newcomers gradually diversify their information sources and develop more sophisticated resource utilization strategies as they progress in their settlement journey.

This complex interplay of challenges and support systems highlights the need for nuanced understanding of newcomer experiences. While formal support structures exist, the predominant reliance on informal networks and ethnic communities suggests the need for policy approaches that recognize and enhance these natural support systems. Understanding how information practices and support needs evolve throughout the settlement process is essential for developing more effective integration support strategies.

## **International Students**

Students pursuing higher education abroad encounter multifaceted challenges that extend across academic, social, cultural, psychological, and financial spheres. The interplay of these challenges significantly influences both their academic performance and personal well-being.

Academic adaptation represents a primary concern for international students. Research indicates that navigating unfamiliar educational systems creates distinct pressures for these students (Mori, 2000), with linguistic barriers often impeding their full participation in academic activities such as classroom discussions, lecture comprehension, and assignment completion (Ward, 2001). These academic challenges are not isolated; studies have demonstrated a negative correlation between academic pressure and cross-cultural adjustment (Baba & Hosoda, 2014).

Social disconnection emerges as another critical challenge. A recent study reveals that approximately 75% of international students report experiencing moderate loneliness, particularly during their initial transition period (Wawera & McCamley, 2020). This experience of isolation often intensifies due to separation from established social support networks (Hayes & Lin, 1994). The process of cultural adjustment and adapting to new social norms can trigger what researchers characterize as 'culture shock,' further complicating students' social integration efforts (Ng et al., 2017).

Research on international students' social connections yields concerning findings. In a notable study of international students in the United States, Gareis (2012) found that 'more than a third of international students had no close American friends.' This difficulty in establishing meaningful relationships with host country nationals can profoundly affect students' adaptation process and general well-being.

The convergence of these various pressures - academic demands, social isolation, and cultural adjustment - often manifests in psychological challenges. Research has established a significant relationship between acculturative stress and depressive symptoms among international students (Constantine et al., 2004). These findings are reinforced by subsequent studies showing that higher levels of acculturative stress correlate with increased psychological difficulties and challenges in sociocultural adjustment (Jackson et al., 2019).

Financial considerations add another layer of complexity to international students' experiences. Research identifies financial strain as a significant factor in student dissatisfaction and withdrawal from studies, with challenges spanning employment opportunities, internship access, scholarship availability, and tuition management (Martirosyan et al., 2019).

The complexity of international students' challenges necessitates comprehensive support approaches. These students must simultaneously navigate unfamiliar academic systems, address feelings of isolation, manage cultural transitions, handle financial pressures, and overcome language barriers. Their experiences often intersect with broader challenges such as discrimination, creating a compound effect on their adjustment process.

This multifaceted nature of international student challenges underscores the importance of developing targeted support systems that address their specific needs. As global student mobility continues to increase, understanding these challenges becomes increasingly crucial for developing effective institutional policies and support mechanisms.

### **Mechanisms of Social Support for International Students**

Research consistently demonstrates that social support serves as a fundamental resource for international students navigating the complexities of studying abroad. During the demanding

transition to an unfamiliar academic and cultural environment, robust social connections can significantly influence students' adaptation outcomes. Multiple empirical studies have documented how social support networks contribute to successful adjustment, psychological health maintenance, and academic achievement among international student populations (Baba & Hosoda, 2014; Jackson et al., 2013; Misra et al., 2003).

The impact of social support manifests across multiple dimensions of international students' experiences. Research has established clear connections between strong social support systems and improved cross-cultural adjustment, reduced psychological distress, decreased academic anxiety, and enhanced cultural adaptation (Baba & Hosoda, 2014; Jackson et al., 2013; Misra et al., 2003). Beyond these direct benefits, studies indicate that social connections strengthen students' capacity to overcome challenges, contributing to their overall resilience (Sabouripour & Roslan, 2015). Taken together, this body of evidence highlights how social support functions as a crucial mechanism for promoting international students' success across psychological, cultural, and academic domains.

Although social support originates from multiple sources, research indicates that co-ethnic and co-national support networks play a distinctively important role for international students. These networks serve multiple functions that warrant specific examination.

Research demonstrates that co-ethnic support acts as a significant psychological buffer during the adaptation process. Studies have shown that access to ethnic community support networks plays a vital role in managing acculturation challenges and sustaining psychological health (Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013). This finding is reinforced by research indicating that students who combine broad social support with an integration-focused approach to acculturation typically experience reduced acculturative stress (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015).

In the academic sphere, co-ethnic networks contribute significantly to student success. Research reveals that high-achieving students from underrepresented groups frequently develop connections with peers of similar backgrounds, benefiting from both knowledge sharing and emotional reinforcement (Mishra, 2020). Importantly, studies have refuted concerns about potential negative academic impacts of co-ethnic peer relationships, demonstrating that such support does not impair academic achievement (Baker, 2013).

The influence of co-ethnic support extends beyond immediate adjustment needs to serve a more complex cultural function. Research indicates that students often acquire understanding of their host culture through interactions with peers who share their cultural and linguistic background (Myles & Cheng, 2003). This process enables cultural adaptation while preserving cultural identity, a dynamic particularly significant for students from backgrounds distinctly different from the host culture (Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015). Evidence suggests that cultural group activities enhance students' sense of campus belonging (Brunsting et al., 2018).

During initial adjustment phases, co-national networks provide essential practical assistance. Established international students frequently develop into informal mentors for newcomers, offering both tangible help and emotional guidance (Daniel, 2014). These cultural subgroups create spaces where students can form primary relationships and maintain familiar cultural practices (Hayes & Lin, 1994).

Research particularly emphasizes the effectiveness of co-ethnic support in combating social isolation. Studies indicate that international students predominantly rely on peers from similar cultural backgrounds when managing social stress and loneliness (Kasese-Hara & Mugambi, 2021). The development of these new social connections proves crucial in addressing feelings of isolation (Wawera & McCamley, 2020)."

Despite the documented advantages of co-ethnic support networks, researchers have identified potential limitations. Studies suggest that excessive reliance on co-ethnic relationships may inadvertently reinforce cultural stereotypes and restrict exposure to broader cultural experiences (Myles & Cheng, 2003). Research indicates that developing connections with host country nationals plays a vital role in reducing cultural adjustment stress, suggesting that an exclusive focus on co-ethnic relationships might impede overall cultural adaptation (Olaniran, 1993). This challenge appears particularly pronounced for students from non-English speaking and collectivist cultural backgrounds, who often encounter additional barriers in establishing meaningful relationships with host country peers (Gareis, 2012).

### **Social Media and Local Co-National Peer Support Networks**

Recent scholarship has begun examining how digital platforms transform traditional patterns of co-ethnic support. Social media technologies provide international students with unprecedented opportunities to maintain homeland connections while simultaneously developing new relationships in their host country (Ng et al., 2017). This evolution of support mechanisms through digital platforms adds a new dimension to understanding co-ethnic networks.

Social media platforms have become vital tools for international students in securing practical, day-to-day information during their migration journey. Many students begin forming co-national peer connections online even before arrival, particularly through platforms like Facebook and Telegram, where they seek guidance from those already living in the host country (Lim & Pham, 2016; Nikkhah et al., 2020; Rodikova, 2023). These digital ties serve immediate and functional purposes—sharing advice on housing, documentation, and visa procedures (Nikkhah et al., 2020; Alencar, 2024). While some digital communities, like those on Telegram, have been

described as transactional and focused purely on information exchange (Nikkhah et al., 2020), others combine practical support with emotional connection depending on group dynamics and individual user experiences (Sinanan & Gomes, 2020; Yusuf, 2024). This pattern holds across geographic and cultural contexts: Iranian and Syrian migrants in Türkiye used Telegram for legal and local updates (Alencar, 2024), while international students in Prague used social media to gather visual, informal information about life before arrival (Rodikova, 2023).

These digital networks continue to play a practical role after arrival, especially in overcoming language barriers and navigating unfamiliar bureaucratic systems. Oh et al. (2014) note that international students actively use co-national Facebook groups to learn about local geography, transportation, and grocery shopping—essentials for basic survival. Oliver (2025) similarly finds that students in South Korea rely on social media for real-time, peer-based tips about housing, healthcare, and food, often preferring these channels over institutional sources, which were seen as inaccessible or linguistically difficult. The effectiveness of these networks is amplified by their experiential nature: they are populated with peers who have firsthand knowledge of what newcomers need to know (Oh et al., 2014; Ihejirika & Krtalic, 2021). Co-national peers are especially trusted for sharing accurate, insider knowledge, which helps students overcome the cognitive and logistical challenges of early settlement (Sinanan & Gomes, 2020; Li, 2024).

However, these platforms are not without challenges, and the quality of information students receive can be inconsistent. Nikkhah et al. (2020) describe how high message volume, lack of threading, and limited search functions on Telegram made it difficult for Iranian students to retrieve useful content or organize information effectively. Oliver (2025) also identifies information overload and the spread of unreliable or unwanted content as key issues. Obi et al. (2021) go further by emphasizing how “selective shopping” for migration-related content—

especially in the absence of balanced formal sources—can lead to idealized or distorted expectations. These findings highlight that while co-national networks through social media offer accessible and often trusted pathways for practical support, they also demand digital literacy, discernment, and caution in how information is shared and interpreted.

Co-national social media networks often offer international students a sense of emotional comfort and familiarity during their early adaptation. Lim and Pham (2016) show that pre-migration connections to co-nationals in the host country—facilitated through platforms like Facebook—help form instant support networks that provide both practical assistance and emotional reassurance during early settlement. These connections ease the psychological shock of transition and create an initial sense of belonging, though they may also form cultural silos over time. Similarly, Yusuf (2024) finds that post-relocation media use among Nigerian immigrants supports emotional well-being by satisfying needs for affect, expression, and companionship, enabling migrants to re-create a sense of communal life in an individualistic host society. Akter et al. (2024) reinforce this by highlighting how social media helps international students manage emotional stress and respond to structural inequalities, positioning digital platforms as tools for both coping and connection. These affective benefits also appear in Iherjirika and Krtalic's (2021) study, which shows that migrants across different phases rely on social media to reduce anxiety, especially through peer-driven emotional support and shared lived experiences.

Beyond emotional reassurance, co-national social media interactions also help sustain cultural identity and foster imagined communities. Chao and Xie (2023) describe how Chinese students use ethnic communication as a means of cultural identity negotiation, community building, and psychological adaptation, forming emotionally significant spaces rooted in shared memory and values. Similarly, Zhao (2023) finds that WeChat enables Chinese international

students to maintain co-national solidarity and cultural boundaries, offering emotional connection and symbolic belonging even as they differentiate themselves from other migrant subgroups. Gaitán-Aguilar et al. (2022) add that identification with co-nationals via social media acts as a coping strategy in response to poor psychological adaptation. Although this form of identification does not always improve acculturation outcomes, it clearly offers emotional anchoring. These digital communities act as spaces where cultural references, humor, and group norms are shared, reinforcing students' sense of who they are in the midst of cultural transition.

However, the emotional role of co-national social media networks is not uniformly experienced or always sufficient. Sinanan and Gomes (2020) point out that while social media offers access to trusted, relatable information, emotional grounding and a deeper sense of belonging are more often found in face-to-face co-national friendships. Digital connections, though useful, were often described as short-lived or instrumental rather than deeply supportive. Similarly, Rodikova (2023) observes that while social media helped students form latent and weak ties that fostered early familiarity with the host environment, the emotional depth of these ties remains limited. In some cases, emotional support through social media may serve only a transitional role, or may be constrained by group dynamics, superficial exchanges, or limited opportunities for sustained engagement. As these findings suggest, co-national networks online provide meaningful but uneven emotional and identity-based support—helping some students feel anchored while leaving others partially disconnected.

Co-national social media networks often play a critical yet complex role in international students' cross-cultural adaptation. Several studies highlight how these platforms ease the psychological stress of migration by offering emotional safety and access to familiar cultural norms. For example, Yusuf (2024) shows that social media supports both emotional well-being

and practical adjustment, helping immigrants recreate a sense of communal life in unfamiliar, individualistic host societies. Similarly, Pazil et al. (2023) notes that co-national communities contribute to students' emotional resilience and cultural adaptation by offering shared language, background, and support. Oliver (2025) adds that social media helps international students build informal communities where both practical and emotional support are exchanged, even though deeper integration with host society members remains limited. Gaitán-Aguilar (2019) demonstrates that identification with home nationals can negatively affect adaptation in early phases, but later becomes beneficial as settlement progresses. In a separate study, Gaitán-Aguilar et al. (2022) show that students struggling emotionally often turn to co-nationals via social media for coping and belonging, though this does not always lead to better adaptation outcomes. In this way, social media becomes a flexible resource that initially reinforces cultural identity but can later support broader adaptation as students settle in.

At the same time, reliance on co-national networks through social media can also constrain intercultural engagement and limit broader sociocultural integration. Lim and Pham (2016) observe that digital connections with co-nationals, while emotionally comforting, often reinforced cultural silos and reduced meaningful interaction with host nationals. Similarly, Hosseini et al. (2020) found that Iranian students in Finland used social media mainly to stay connected with fellow Iranians and address practical needs, but rarely to engage with locals or deepen their understanding of the host culture. Li (2024) further distinguishes between types of support, concluding that while co-nationals assist with functional adaptation, only host nationals contribute to deeper emotional and cultural integration. Gaitán-Aguilar (2019) and Gaitán-Aguilar et al. (2022) also caution that strong identification with co-nationals via social media—especially in the early stages—may initially hinder adaptation outcomes and reinforce in-group boundaries. Though

this dynamic can shift positively over time, the findings underscore the need for more balanced, diverse social ties to support comprehensive adaptation. Together, these studies present social media as a double-edged tool: an essential lifeline for early support and identity affirmation, but one that may also limit exposure to new cultural environments if not complemented by broader engagement.

In response to the limitations of conventional social media spaces, several studies propose the creation of more structured, accessible, and culturally responsive digital tools to support international students and immigrants. Blijenburg (2022) envisions a multifunctional chatbot designed to alleviate acculturative stress by combining emotional and practical assistance. This tool would offer pre-departure guidance, trustworthy peer experiences, logistical support, and social connection features such as peer-matching for study or companionship. Similarly, Garza (2015) emphasizes the value of online anticipatory orientation programs, advocating for interactive, visual, and practical resources that begin before departure and continue post-arrival. These tools would provide realistic expectations and crucial information about housing, food, transportation, visa rules, and cultural norms—topics students often feel underprepared for. Adding to these proposals, Mogharrab (2018) identifies the lack of a centralized, Persian-language information hub for Iranian immigrants and recommends the development of a user-generated, mother-tongue website. This platform would not only deliver accessible, settlement-related information but also encourage social engagement and emotional support within the community. Collectively, these studies highlight a shared insight: while existing social media groups offer fragmented support, purpose-built digital platforms—designed with user needs, language, and emotional context in mind—hold greater potential to holistically support immigrants' adaptation journeys.

Overall, the literature highlights that co-national peer connections through social media play a meaningful role in easing the early stages of international students' adaptation. These digital networks provide accessible, peer-driven support across multiple domains—helping students gather practical information, manage daily logistics, reduce emotional distress, and maintain a sense of cultural continuity. They offer a sense of familiarity and solidarity that can buffer feelings of isolation and help students navigate the uncertainty of a new environment. At the same time, some limitations have been noted, such as fragmented and overwhelming digital spaces, limited support for broader social integration, the reinforcement of cultural silos, and the circulation of selective or idealized information that may skew students' expectations. A few scholars have responded to these challenges by recommending more structured, culturally attuned digital tools designed to offer both informational and emotional support. While not without their shortcomings, existing co-national digital ties remain an indispensable part of the international student experience, especially in the absence of comprehensive formal support systems.

### **Telegram: Digital Affordances and Dilemmas**

Telegram is a cloud-based messaging application launched in 2013 by Pavel and Nikolai Durov, designed to offer fast, secure, and cross-platform communication. With over one billion active users worldwide, Telegram supports private messaging, voice and video calls, large group chats, and public broadcasting channels. Its distinguishing features include multi-device synchronization, cloud storage, open API for developers, and optional end-to-end encryption through Secret Chats. Telegram has gained global popularity not only for its functionality but also for its emphasis on user privacy and minimal content moderation, making it a prominent platform in both everyday communication and politically sensitive contexts (Telegram, n.d.).

Telegram emerges across these studies as a symbol of digital resistance and user empowerment, especially in authoritarian contexts like Iran and Russia. Its refusal to localize servers or comply with state surveillance demands (Akbari & Gabdulhakov, 2019) and its support for encrypted and self-destructing communications (McRae, 2020; Nohara, 2024) have made it a go-to platform for users seeking refuge from censorship and political control. For Iranian migrants and users inside Iran, Telegram's reputation for privacy and security is a decisive factor in their platform choice, reflecting a deeply rooted need to protect personal and political expression from regime surveillance (Tabassum et al., 2025). Even in the face of bans and suppression, users have found ways to creatively bypass censorship using VPNs (Tabassum et al., 2025), showing Telegram's role as a lifeline for free communication. The app's lack of algorithmic interference, paired with its large-scale public and private messaging features, creates a uniquely open digital space where marginalized voices, dissidents, and independent journalists can reach wide audiences without the risk of automated suppression (Nohara, 2024; Hamelmann, 2018).

Despite its privacy promises, several studies highlight gaps between Telegram's perceived security and its actual usage practices. Most notably, end-to-end encryption is not the default; many users—especially in Iran—share sensitive information through unencrypted Cloud Chats, often due to lack of knowledge or misplaced trust (Vaziripour et al., 2018; Demir & Ovrur, 2021). Telegram also requires extensive device permissions, and its storage of non-secret chats on servers raises questions about potential state access to metadata (Demir & Ovrur, 2021; Khaund et al., 2020). Moreover, the absence of content moderation in private spaces allows Telegram to remain hands-off (Hamelmann, 2018), but also opens the door for criminal activity and extremist propaganda (McRae, 2020; Nohara, 2024). In heavily surveilled states, users experience emotional strain and relational self-censorship, even on secure platforms, reflecting the psychological toll of

government monitoring (Mohamed, 2021). Finally, Telegram's reactive reporting system struggles to scale with its massive user base, leaving harmful content largely unchecked in public spheres (Nohara, 2024).

While Telegram's architecture offers vital opportunities for connection, autonomy, and information-sharing, especially in constrained environments, its limited default protections and unmoderated structure present ongoing challenges. Still, its ability to foster wide-reaching, decentralized interactions remains central to understanding how communication and community-building evolve across digitally mediated spaces.

## **Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework**

Acculturation and cross-cultural adaptation have been widely studied across several disciplines, resulting in the development of multiple theoretical models that provide distinct yet complementary lenses for understanding how individuals navigate cultural transitions. While this study adopts Kim's (2001) integrative theory of cross-cultural adaptation as its primary framework, it is important to situate this approach within the broader theoretical context. Several key models continue to inform contemporary research and offer relevant insights for this investigation. Among the most widely referenced are Ward and colleagues' ABC model of acculturation (Ward et al., 2001), the culture shock and U-curve models (Lysgaard, 1955; Oberg, 1960), and Berry's acculturation strategies framework (Berry, 1997). The following section critically reviews these models, discussing both their contributions and their limitations as they relate to the present study.

### **Ward et al.'s ABC Model of Acculturation**

Ward and colleagues (2001) introduced the ABC model of acculturation as an integrative framework that organizes the diverse psychological approaches to studying cross-cultural transitions. Rather than presenting a singular theory, the ABC model synthesizes three primary domains of adaptation: Affective, Behavioral, and Cognitive.

The affective component centers on the stress and coping approach, which focuses on how individuals emotionally adjust to acculturative stress. This includes managing anxiety, uncertainty, and psychological strain that often accompany cultural transitions (Berry et al., 1987). The behavioral component emphasizes the culture learning approach, which highlights the acquisition of culturally appropriate social skills, language proficiency, and knowledge necessary for effective

functioning within the host society (Brislin et al., 1983). The cognitive component draws on social identity theory, exploring changes in self-concept, group membership, and identity negotiation as individuals navigate multiple cultural contexts (Ellemer et al., 2002).

The ABC model offers a valuable framework for capturing the multidimensional nature of cross-cultural adaptation, acknowledging that successful adaptation involves not only emotional well-being but also behavioral competence and cognitive integration. Its comprehensive structure allows researchers to examine various aspects of the adaptation process concurrently. However, while the ABC model provides a helpful organizing taxonomy, it does not function as a developmental or process-oriented theory that explains how adaptation unfolds over time. Moreover, it offers limited guidance on the dynamic role of co-ethnic communities, particularly the evolving influence of ethnic peer support systems such as online platforms, which are central to the focus of this study.

### **Culture Shock and the U-Curve Model**

One of the earliest conceptualizations of cross-cultural adjustment emerged from the culture shock and U-curve models. Lysgaard (1955) first introduced the U-curve hypothesis, proposing that sojourners' emotional well-being follows a predictable trajectory: an initial honeymoon phase characterized by excitement and curiosity, followed by a crisis phase marked by frustration and disorientation, then a gradual recovery phase, and finally, long-term adjustment. This U-shaped pattern became widely cited in early acculturation research.

Building on Lysgaard's foundation, Oberg (1960) introduced the term "culture shock" to describe the emotional disorientation experienced by individuals exposed to unfamiliar cultural environments. Oberg identified four stages—honeymoon, crisis, recovery, and adjustment—

offering more detailed descriptions of the emotional challenges involved in cross-cultural transitions. His model emphasized the psychological strain that can emerge when individuals lose familiar cultural cues and are required to adapt to new behavioral norms and social expectations.

While these early models offer valuable insights into the emotional fluctuations individuals may experience during cultural transitions, they present certain limitations when applied to contemporary international students. Oberg's descriptions largely reflect the experiences of temporary sojourners, such as diplomats or tourists, who often receive immediate hospitality, accommodations in hotels, and guided support upon arrival. In contrast, international students frequently face substantial stressors from the moment they enter the host country. They must independently secure housing, navigate complex academic and bureaucratic systems, and address financial, legal, and linguistic challenges—often without the protective buffer of a honeymoon phase. Thus, many international students begin their acculturation process not with excitement and comfort, but rather with immediate survival demands and elevated stress levels. This distinction makes the culture shock and U-curve models less directly applicable to the population studied in this research.

### **Berry's Acculturation Strategies Framework**

Berry (1997) expanded the conceptualization of acculturation by introducing a bidimensional model that examines how individuals and groups navigate the process of cultural contact. Berry identified two key questions that individuals face: (1) Is it considered valuable to maintain one's cultural heritage? and (2) Is it considered valuable to engage with the larger host society? The intersection of these two dimensions produces four acculturation strategies: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization.

- Integration involves maintaining one's original cultural identity while simultaneously participating in the broader host society.
- Assimilation entails relinquishing one's heritage culture in favor of full engagement with the host culture.
- Separation reflects a preference for retaining one's cultural heritage while minimizing interaction with the host society.
- Marginalization occurs when individuals neither maintain their original culture nor establish meaningful connections within the host culture.

Berry's framework has been extensively utilized in empirical research to categorize individuals' acculturation orientations and assess the influence of both personal preferences and host-society attitudes on adaptation outcomes. Additionally, Berry acknowledged that societal factors such as national policies on multiculturalism, levels of discrimination, and the receptivity of the host society play a critical role in shaping individuals' acculturation experiences (Berry, 1997).

However, despite its wide applicability, Berry's model remains largely descriptive, categorizing adaptation outcomes without fully theorizing how individuals shift between strategies or how the process unfolds over time. Importantly, Berry's framework offers limited attention to the dynamic role of communication processes or the specific influence of co-ethnic communities and digital peer support systems. Given the centrality of online co-ethnic support networks in this study, Berry's framework, while valuable, does not adequately capture the evolving nature of these

communication-based support structures or their dual influence across different stages of adaptation.

### **Why Kim's Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory?**

Kim's (2001) integrative theory of cross-cultural adaptation offers a comprehensive framework that addresses several limitations present in the earlier models discussed. At the heart of Kim's theory is the emphasis on communication as the primary mechanism driving adaptation. Adaptation, in Kim's view, is not simply a matter of selecting a particular acculturation strategy or enduring a series of emotional stages; rather, it is a dynamic, lifelong, and spiraling process of growth, transformation, and increasing intercultural competence.

One of the distinguishing features of Kim's model is the stress-adaptation-growth dynamic, conceptualized as a "draw-back-to-leap" pattern. Individuals encounter stress as they confront unfamiliar cultural environments, engage in adaptive efforts to manage these challenges, and subsequently experience personal growth as a result of successful adaptation. This cyclical process repeats over time, leading to progressively greater functional fitness, psychological health, and intercultural identity.

Of particular relevance to this study is Kim's detailed treatment of ethnic social communication. Unlike earlier models that focus primarily on host culture integration or psychological adjustment, Kim directly theorizes the dual role of ethnic networks. In the initial stages of adaptation, co-ethnic support—whether face-to-face or online—serves as a critical resource for managing stress, providing emotional reassurance, informational guidance, and a sense of belonging. However, prolonged reliance on ethnic networks may ultimately limit individuals' engagement with the host society, thereby constraining the development of host

communication competence and impeding full adaptation over time. This temporally shifting role of ethnic communication is highly salient for international students who utilize online platforms such as Telegram to maintain homeland peer support.

Kim's model also incorporates both individual-level factors (e.g., personal preparedness, personality traits, motivation) and environmental conditions (e.g., host society receptivity, presence of ethnic communities, institutional support), offering a comprehensive multilevel perspective that aligns closely with the complex realities faced by international students.

Given that this study focuses on Iranian international students' use of online co-ethnic peer support during their settlement process in Canada, Kim's integrative theory of cross-cultural adaptation provides the most appropriate and sophisticated lens through which to examine the dynamic interplay between ethnic social communication and host society adaptation.

### **Cross-cultural Adaptation Theory (Kim, 2001)**

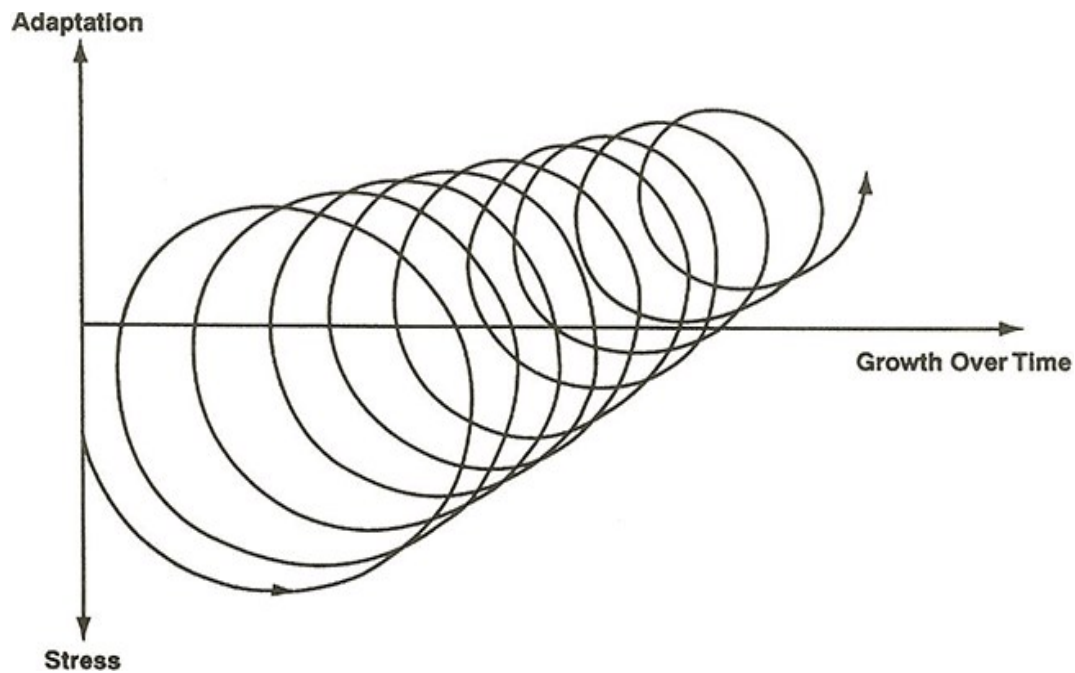
This research draws upon Young Yun Kim's (2001) cross-cultural adaptation theory as its theoretical foundation. Through this framework, Kim offers a systematic approach to understanding the role of communication in cultural adaptation processes.

Kim (2001, p.31) defines cross-cultural adaptation as 'the dynamic process by which individuals, upon relocating to new, unfamiliar, or changed cultural environments, establish (or re-establish) and maintain relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationships with those environments.' This conceptualization emphasizes the transformative nature of adaptation.

The theoretical framework rests on three fundamental premises regarding human adaptation: the inherent human capacity for adaptation and growth, the centrality of communication in the adaptation process, and the dynamic, complex nature of adaptation (Kim,

2001). A distinguishing feature of the theory is its 'stress-adaptation-growth' dynamic, which conceptualizes adaptation as a cyclical rather than linear progression. Kim characterizes this pattern as 'draw-back-to-leap,' where periods of stress and regression ultimately facilitate adaptive growth.

**Figure 1:** *Stress-Adaptation-Growth Dynamic*



*Note.* From *Becoming Intercultural: An Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation* (p. 57), by Y. Y. Kim, 2001, SAGE. Copyright 2001 by SAGE Publications. Reproduced with permission.

Particularly relevant to this study is Kim's analysis of ethnic social communication in the adaptation process. The theory identifies a dual nature in ethnic communication: while it provides essential support during initial transition periods, extensive long-term dependence on ethnic communication networks may constrain broader cultural adaptation by limiting engagement with the host environment (Kim, 2001). This theoretical insight helps explain why newcomers often

gravitate toward co-ethnic support during periods of heightened stress while suggesting potential limitations of this strategy.

The theory emphasizes communication as the primary mechanism for adaptation, encompassing both interpersonal and mass communication within host and ethnic contexts. While acknowledging the value of ethnic social networks, particularly in early adaptation stages, Kim argues for the necessity of developing host communication competence for successful long-term adaptation. This suggests a gradual transition from predominantly ethnic communication toward increased engagement with host culture channels.

Kim's framework also considers the influence of both individual characteristics (including preparedness and personality traits) and environmental factors (such as host society receptivity and ethnic group presence) on adaptation outcomes. This multilevel perspective captures the complexity of adaptation processes and their various contributing factors.

This theoretical framework provides valuable insights for examining international students' use of online homeland peer support during cultural adaptation. The theory's attention to both the supportive and potentially limiting aspects of ethnic communication, combined with its focus on initial adaptation phases, offers particularly relevant perspectives for understanding how digital co-ethnic support networks might influence students' cross-cultural adjustment experiences.

### **Social Support and Cross-Cultural Adaptation**

The concept of social support encompasses multiple dimensions of interpersonal connection and assistance. In his seminal work, Cobb (1976, p.300) defines social support as 'information leading the subject to believe that he is cared for and loved, esteemed, and a member of a network of mutual obligations.' Building on this foundation, Cohen and Wills (1985) delineate

distinct components of social support: emotional support through reassurance of care and concern; esteem support via affirmation of personal value; informational support in the form of guidance for problem-solving; social companionship through shared activities and time; and instrumental support involving tangible assistance and resources.

The mechanisms through which individuals access these support resources occur through three primary channels, as identified by Barrera (1986): the structural connections to significant others (social embeddedness), individuals' perceptions of available support (perceived social support), and the actual receipt of supportive actions (enacted support).

Research on international student experiences has consistently demonstrated social support's crucial role in facilitating psychological adjustment and minimizing acculturative stress (Bender et al., 2019). Recent meta-analytic findings establish a clear inverse relationship between social support levels and acculturative stress (Kristiana, 2022). Studies particularly highlight the significance of perceived social support in buffering against adaptation challenges (Li & Peng, 2019).

This buffering function aligns with Kim's (2001) stress-adaptation-growth framework, suggesting that social support helps manage adaptation-related stress while promoting developmental progress. However, research indicates that support effectiveness varies with cultural context - particularly the degree of cultural distance between home and host environments (English et al., 2021). This finding reinforces Kim's (2001) emphasis on considering both personal and environmental factors in the adaptation process.

### **Kim's Theory in the Digital Age**

Contemporary scholarship has begun examining how Kim's theoretical framework applies to digital-age adaptation processes. Recent studies reveal a nuanced relationship between online co-ethnic support and cultural adaptation. While digital platforms offer valuable emotional and informational resources during initial transition periods (He, 2024; Wong & Liu, 2024), researchers have identified potential limitations when digital co-ethnic networks become the primary source of social support (Screws, 2022).

Interestingly, emerging research presents contrasting perspectives on the role of online ethnic communities. Wong and Liu (2024) suggest that these digital spaces may actually enhance cross-cultural connections by first establishing a secure sense of belonging among co-ethnic peers. However, research specifically examining Iranian international students presents a more complex picture. Hosseini et al. (2020) found that while social media effectively maintains connections with compatriots and family members, it shows limited efficacy in promoting broader cultural adaptation or meaningful host culture relationships.

These findings simultaneously reinforce and expand Kim's theoretical propositions about ethnic communication's dual nature in the adaptation process. The research extends Kim's framework by illuminating how digital platforms introduce new dimensions to the traditional dynamics of ethnic support and cultural adaptation.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This chapter outlines the methodological approach employed to explore the lived experiences of Iranian international students who utilized co-national peer support networks via Telegram across both the pre-arrival and settlement phases of their transition to Canada. The chapter begins by presenting the research design and philosophical foundations underpinning the study, with particular emphasis on the descriptive phenomenological approach. It then details the sampling strategy, participant recruitment, and data collection procedures. The chapter further describes the data analysis process, grounded in Giorgi's phenomenological method, followed by a discussion of ethical considerations related to participant confidentiality, informed consent, and data security. Finally, strategies used to ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of the study are presented. Collectively, these sections demonstrate the systematic and transparent procedures undertaken to generate credible and meaningful insights into participants' lived experiences.

#### **Research Design**

This study adopts a qualitative research design guided by the principles of descriptive phenomenology. Phenomenology, as both a philosophical tradition and a methodological approach, is particularly suited to exploring the essence of lived experiences as described by those who have directly encountered a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Giorgi, 1997; van Manen, 1990). In this study, phenomenology provides a lens through which to examine how Iranian international students experience and make meaning of their involvement in co-national peer support networks facilitated through Telegram across both the pre-arrival stage and the broader settlement process in Ottawa.

Phenomenology originated as a philosophical movement in the early 20th century through the work of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), who is widely regarded as the founder of the field. Dissatisfied with the limitations of empirical science and positivist approaches to knowledge, Husserl developed a systematic method for exploring human consciousness and lived experience. Central to Husserl's philosophy is the concept of intentionality—the notion that consciousness is always directed toward something, and that meaning emerges through individuals' conscious experiences of the world (Giorgi, 1997; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Rather than seeking to explain phenomena through causal relationships or objective measurement, phenomenology focuses on the subjective meanings individuals attribute to their experiences. Husserl referred to this as returning “to the things themselves,” emphasizing the importance of setting aside pre-existing theories and assumptions to grasp the essence of the phenomenon under investigation (van Manen, 1990). This emphasis on describing essential features of experience, rather than predicting or explaining them, is a defining feature of phenomenological research.

Over time, Husserl's original ideas were expanded by scholars such as Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre (van Manen, 1990; Creswell & Poth, 2018). While many of these later developments leaned toward interpretive or hermeneutic phenomenology, this study is grounded in Husserlian descriptive phenomenology, which emphasizes faithfully describing participants' lived experiences while minimizing interpretive interference (Giorgi, 1997).

Descriptive phenomenology, as developed by Giorgi (1997), offers a structured methodology for applying Husserl's principles to empirical research. Giorgi adapted Husserl's transcendental phenomenology into a systematic method particularly applicable to the social and psychological sciences. The purpose of descriptive phenomenology is to uncover the universal

structures and essences that characterize a shared human experience by carefully analyzing detailed descriptions provided by individuals who have lived through the phenomenon under study.

In this approach, the role of the researcher is to adopt the phenomenological attitude, which requires setting aside prior assumptions and focusing fully on participants' descriptions. Giorgi (1997) emphasizes that while absolute elimination of researcher bias is not possible, researchers should strive to bracket, or suspend, their own experiences in order to approach the data with openness. This process, known as epoché or bracketing, is central to maintaining the integrity of descriptive phenomenological research (Giorgi, 1997; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Descriptive phenomenology was particularly appropriate for the present study, as the goal was not to build theory but rather to illuminate the core structures of participants' experiences with co-national peer support initially facilitated through Telegram and subsequently evolving into a combination of both online and in-person interactions. Through careful attention to participants' own words and descriptions, this approach allowed for the emergence of essential themes that captured both the shared and unique dimensions of the phenomenon.

Phenomenology has been widely employed in research fields that examine lived experiences related to health, education, migration, and cultural transitions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 1990). In the context of international student settlement, phenomenology offers a valuable framework for exploring how individuals subjectively navigate complex adaptation processes. As Iranian international students face academic, social, cultural, and emotional challenges during their transition to life in Canada, their involvement in co-national peer networks represents a meaningful dimension of their lived settlement experience.

Given the focus on participants' internal perspectives, feelings, and meaning-making processes, descriptive phenomenology provided an ideal fit for this research. Rather than examining Telegram as a technological platform or quantitatively measuring participants' adaptation outcomes, this study sought to reveal how participants experienced and interpreted their engagement with co-national peer support within the broader context of their transitions.

As van Manen (1990) emphasizes, phenomenological research is not only descriptive but also reflective, requiring researchers to engage deeply with participants' narratives to uncover what makes their experiences meaningful. Although van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology emphasizes interpretive processes, his work reinforces the importance of remaining grounded in participants' lived experiences, which complements Giorgi's descriptive focus. Both approaches share a commitment to understanding lived experience as it is perceived and described by those who live it.

In addition, descriptive phenomenology was particularly suitable for this study given the cross-linguistic nature of the data. As the interviews were conducted in Persian and subsequently translated into English for analysis, employing an interpretive or hermeneutic phenomenological approach—which requires deeper engagement with nuanced language, metaphor, and culturally embedded meanings—could have risked introducing additional interpretive distortions during translation. In contrast, the descriptive focus of Husserlian phenomenology allowed me to prioritize participants' explicit descriptions while minimizing the compounding interpretive layers that translation might introduce.

### **Bracketing Statement**

As an international student from Iran who arrived in Canada in Fall 2022, I have personally experienced many of the challenges and emotional moments that define the early stages of cross-border transition. Before my arrival, I was a member of a Telegram group for newly admitted Iranian students—similar in structure and purpose to the one examined in this research. At that time, the group became a key source of informational support for me, particularly in navigating visa procedures, travel logistics, and early settlement decisions.

Like many others, I entered this journey with very limited knowledge about immigration processes, the city of Ottawa, or how to manage the demands of life in a new country. The Telegram group offered both practical advice and a profound sense of emotional companionship. It was a space where we not only exchanged questions and tips, but also shared our stress, hopes, and small victories. That shared experience built a sense of collective belonging that softened the isolating aspects of immigration. Personally, I cannot imagine my own sojourn without the support of this group—it significantly reduced the psychological toll of entering a new country alone.

One particularly impactful moment occurred just before my flight to Canada. At that point, I still had no accommodation in Ottawa and did not even know what address to enter into my immigration forms. When I asked the group for suggestions, a fellow member whom I had never spoken to before privately messaged me and offered to host me. Although they had arrived in Canada only a week earlier, they welcomed me with warmth, had dinner prepared, and created a sense of safety and belonging at a time when everything felt uncertain. This act of generosity—extended purely on the basis of shared membership in the Telegram group—left a lasting impression on me. It reflected the level of trust that existed within the group, even among strangers. At the same time, I have come to recognize that as this survival phase gradually passed, relying exclusively on co-national support—especially in-person—could create limitations. While such

networks are vital in the early transition, broader cultural adaptation often required stepping beyond familiar circles and engaging with the host society more directly. Nevertheless, I believe that in the vulnerable entry stage, the presence of a trusted, culturally attuned community was not a luxury, but a necessity.

Being so deeply embedded in the phenomenon under study, I have made a conscious effort throughout this research to bracket my personal experiences. By setting aside my own assumptions and emotional connections, I sought to remain fully open to participants' voices and meanings as they described their own lived experiences.

### **Participants and Sampling**

This study focuses on Iranian international students who have engaged with co-national peer support networks through Telegram during both the pre-arrival and post-arrival phases of their settlement in Ottawa. Throughout this thesis, participants are described variously as Iranian, international students, and migrants; this intentional variation reflects the multiple, intersecting aspects of their identities that shaped both their experiences and their engagement with the Telegram group. In order to identify participants with sufficiently rich lived experiences appropriate for phenomenological reflection, criterion sampling was employed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Criterion sampling allows for the selection of participants who meet specific pre-established conditions directly related to the phenomenon being studied, ensuring that all participants have directly experienced the central phenomenon under investigation.

In line with van Manen's (1990) guidance that phenomenological reflection requires participants to have lived through and had sufficient time to process their experiences, the study included only those who had completed at least one full academic term (approximately four

months) at a post-secondary institution in Ottawa. This criterion ensured that participants had moved beyond the very initial phases of arrival and could reflect meaningfully on their experiences of engaging with Telegram-based peer support networks within the context of their academic and social adaptation.

The following inclusion criteria were used to select participants:

- Iranian international student status
- Currently enrolled in a post-secondary institution in Ottawa
- Arrival in Canada between June 2023 and January 2024
- Completion of at least one academic semester at the time of the interview
- Active membership in the Telegram group serving as the focus of the study

To initiate recruitment, I first gained access to the specific Telegram group after presenting my student identification and research documentation, including my thesis proposal, to one of the group administrators<sup>1</sup>. Upon receiving approval, I monitored group discussions to identify active members who regularly engaged in conversations or contributed to group activities. Potential participants were contacted individually through private messages on Telegram, which included a full announcement containing all relevant information about the study. Those who expressed

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<sup>1</sup> Most participants learned about the group through an invitation process managed by its administrators. Telegram is widely used in Iran for information exchange, including among those planning to study abroad. In larger public Telegram groups for prospective international students in Canada, members often announce when they have received university admission offers. Administrators of this specific group monitor these larger spaces, and when they identify newly admitted students to a post-graduate institution in Ottawa, they send them private messages explaining the purpose of this group and inviting them to join, contingent on providing proof of admission for verification.

interest after receiving this initial message were then contacted via email to complete consent forms and schedule interviews. Additional questions, if any, were addressed at this stage.

The recruitment process lasted approximately two weeks. Some individuals declined participation due to scheduling conflicts or personal reasons, but no one withdrew after consenting. Ultimately, eight participants were recruited, consisting of four master's and four doctoral students, equally divided by gender, and ranging in age from 27 to 37. While this number is consistent with the depth-oriented aims of descriptive phenomenology—which prioritizes obtaining rich, reflective accounts over statistical generalizability—a larger sample might have broadened the range of perspectives and experiences represented, potentially capturing greater variation in settlement trajectories, interaction styles within the Telegram group, or approaches to cultural adaptation. Nevertheless, the sample size generated substantial, detailed narratives and was sufficient to reach thematic saturation within this methodological framework. Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the sample:

**Table 1:** *Participant Demographics*

<b>Participant Number</b>	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Level of Study</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>
P1	Hamid	Male	PhD	31	Single
P2	Nima	Male	Master	27	Single
P3	Nasim	Female	Master	32	Married
P4	Amir	Male	PhD	27	Single
P5	Kamran	Male	PhD	33	Single
P6	Sara	Female	Master	37	Married
P7	Tannaz	Female	Master	35	Single
P8	Shakiba	Female	Master	36	Married

The use of criterion sampling enabled the inclusion of participants who were well-positioned to provide in-depth, reflective accounts of their experiences with Telegram-based peer support as part of their broader settlement process. This sampling approach ensured that all participants had both direct experience with the Telegram group and sufficient exposure to academic, social, and cultural adaptation processes to engage in rich phenomenological reflection.

### **Data Collection**

Data for this study were collected through individual, semi-structured, in-depth interviews designed to elicit rich, detailed descriptions of participants' lived experiences. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed for both consistency across participants and sufficient flexibility to probe deeper into unique aspects of each participant's experiences as they emerged during the interview (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Giorgi, 1997). In alignment with the descriptive phenomenological approach, the interview questions were intentionally open-ended, enabling participants to freely articulate their experiences with co-national peer support networks during both the pre-arrival and settlement stages of their transition to Canada.

The interview guide was developed to broadly cover the essential dimensions of the research questions while remaining flexible to participants' unique narratives. The guide consisted of nine core open-ended questions, each designed to explore different aspects of participants' engagement with the Telegram group and their overall adaptation process. Topics explored included participants' initial experiences learning about and joining the Telegram group; their perceptions of group interactions and activities; the personal meaning they assigned to their

engagement with the group; comparisons between online and in-person connections; the group's influence on navigating daily life challenges; its emotional impact on participants; its role in shaping bicultural identity; and the evolving role of the group over time. Follow-up prompts were used as needed to encourage elaboration or clarification. The full interview guide is presented in [Appendix A](#).

All interviews were conducted in Persian, the participants' native language, to ensure they could comfortably and accurately express their thoughts, emotions, and experiences without the barrier of second-language limitations. This linguistic choice is especially important in phenomenological research, where participants' own words serve as the foundation for meaning-making (van Manen, 1990). Conducting interviews in the participants' native language facilitated more nuanced and emotionally authentic narratives.

Interviews took place over approximately one month and were conducted in both in-person and online formats. In-person interviews were held in private, sound-isolated study rooms located at the university library to ensure privacy, comfort, and confidentiality for participants. Online interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams, allowing for flexibility in scheduling while maintaining the privacy and security of participants' information. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent.

The length of interviews varied slightly, ranging from approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Upon completion, the audio recordings were transcribed in Persian and subsequently translated into English to prepare the data for analysis. Transcripts were reviewed for accuracy prior to the commencement of analysis to ensure that participants' original meanings were preserved through the translation process. This careful handling of language and meaning was essential to maintain

fidelity to participants' lived experiences while transitioning to the language of analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Giorgi, 1997).

Throughout the data collection process, attention was given to participants' comfort and emotional well-being, as some interview topics involved personal challenges and vulnerabilities related to the immigration and settlement experience. Participants were informed that they could pause, skip questions, or discontinue the interview at any time. No participants expressed discomfort or discontinued participation at any stage.

By utilizing open-ended, language-appropriate, and ethically sensitive interview practices, this data collection process generated rich, detailed descriptions of participants' experiences. These data provided a strong foundation for subsequent phenomenological analysis following Giorgi's method, as described in the next section.

## **Data Analysis**

Data analysis in this study followed Giorgi's (1997) descriptive phenomenological method, which provides a structured, rigorous approach for identifying the essential structures of lived experience while maintaining fidelity to the phenomenological attitude. I applied Giorgi's five-step process systematically to the translated interview transcripts, engaging directly with participants' descriptions to uncover the invariant meaning structures that characterize the shared phenomenon.

### ***Step 1: Collection of Verbal Data***

In the first stage of analysis, I gathered rich, first-person verbal descriptions of participants' experiences related to their engagement with the Telegram group and its evolving role throughout both the pre-arrival and settlement stages of their transitions. These verbal data were collected through semi-structured interviews and prepared for analysis through transcription and translation, as described previously in the data collection section.

### ***Step 2: Reading for a Sense of the Whole***

Following Giorgi's (1997) recommendation to approach the data holistically, I read each translated transcript in its entirety to gain an overall sense of the participant's experience. This initial reading was conducted without segmenting the data, allowing me to absorb the full context, emotional tone, and narrative flow before proceeding to more detailed analysis.

### ***Step 3: Dividing the Data into Meaning Units***

After developing a holistic understanding of each participant's narrative, I re-read each transcript carefully, segmenting the data into meaning units. Meaning units are sections of text where a shift in meaning or focus occurs, marking distinct experiential elements described by participants (Giorgi, 1997; Creswell & Poth, 2018). While identifying meaning units, I remained attentive to participants' own words and stayed grounded in the phenomenological attitude, setting aside my preconceptions to allow the data to speak for itself.

Across all eight transcripts, I identified approximately 500 meaning units that captured various aspects of participants' lived experiences. These meaning units reflected shifts in

participants' experiences, insights, emotions, and reflections as they described their engagement with co-national peer support through Telegram and the connections that followed.

#### ***Step 4: Transforming Meaning Units into Psychological Expressions***

Once I identified the meaning units, I transformed each unit into psychologically sensitive language that captured its underlying significance while remaining faithful to the participant's intended meaning (Giorgi, 1997). This transformation process involved rephrasing participants' everyday expressions into descriptive terms that highlighted the psychological or sociological relevance of each unit while preserving its experiential essence.

After this stage, I organized the transformed meaning units into approximately 30 categories based on recurring experiential patterns observed across participants. These categories served as an intermediate step that allowed me to cluster related meaning units while remaining close to participants' original expressions.

#### ***Step 5: Synthesizing Essential Structures Using Free Imaginative Variation***

The final step involved synthesizing the transformed meaning units into essential themes using free imaginative variation. Free imaginative variation, as described by Giorgi (1997), requires systematically reflecting on the data and imaginatively altering or removing components of participants' experiences to determine which elements are essential to the phenomenon and which are incidental. Through this process, I repeatedly asked myself whether particular elements—such as the initial sense of familiarity established through Telegram, the peer-driven

exchange of settlement information, or the emotional reassurance participants described—could be removed without fundamentally altering the nature of the phenomenon.

Only those components that proved indispensable to the phenomenon were retained in the final synthesis. This rigorous process ensured that the resulting themes reflected the core experiential structures shared across participants.

Through this iterative synthesis, I generated six essential themes that captured the central features of participants' lived experiences<sup>2</sup>. These themes represent the essential structures that characterized participants' experiences engaging with co-national peer support through Telegram and its evolving role across multiple stages of their transition.

By applying Giorgi's method systematically, this analysis allowed for the reduction of participants' diverse narratives into essential thematic structures while preserving the depth and complexity of their lived experiences. The detailed presentation of these themes will be provided in the next chapter.

## **Ethical Considerations**

All research procedures for this study were conducted in full compliance with the University of Ottawa's research ethics policies and the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2, 2022). Prior to the commencement of data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board

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<sup>2</sup> I derived the six themes directly from participants' accounts using Giorgi's method, applying free imaginative variation to distill the essence of their descriptions, rather than relying on prior literature. Before data collection, I had completed an initial literature review that was broad and scattered. Once the themes emerged, I conducted a more targeted, second-round search that yielded highly relevant studies, which helped me position and discuss the themes in relation to existing research.

(REB), ensuring that all aspects of participant protection and responsible research conduct were reviewed and authorized.

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Individuals who met the study's inclusion criteria were provided with comprehensive information about the research objectives, procedures, potential risks, and anticipated benefits before deciding whether to participate. This information was included directly in the recruitment messages sent to potential participants via private Telegram messages, ensuring that individuals had full access to study details at the time they were invited to participate. Additional opportunities to ask questions were provided during follow-up communications as needed. Informed consent forms were distributed electronically prior to the interviews, and written consent was obtained from each participant before data collection began.

Throughout the study, participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the research at any stage without penalty or consequence. No participants chose to withdraw after providing consent. To further protect participants' well-being, interviews were conducted in private, secure locations (for in-person interviews) or using secure online platforms (for online interviews). Participants were informed that they could skip any questions or discontinue the interview at any time if they experienced discomfort, though no participants chose to do so.

Confidentiality and anonymity were safeguarded throughout the research process. All participants were assigned pseudonyms, and any identifying information was removed from interview transcripts and research records. A master list linking participants' real names to their assigned pseudonyms was maintained separately in a secure location, accessible only to me. Audio recordings, transcripts, and research files were stored on a password-protected external hard drive, with backup files encrypted and securely stored to prevent unauthorized access.

To further ensure ethical data management, research records will be retained for five years following the completion of the study, after which all data will be securely deleted in accordance with institutional policies. No financial compensation or incentives were offered for participation in the study, and no form of deception or coercion was employed at any stage of the research.

By adhering to these ethical safeguards, the study prioritized participants' autonomy, safety, and privacy while maintaining the integrity of the research process.

## Chapter 4: Findings

*The transition from Iran to suddenly being in a country where you don't know anything or anyone began to feel like something else — like we were classmates, all traveling together from one city to another. That's how it felt for me.*

— Amir

This chapter presents the empirical findings of this study, which explored Iranian international students' lived experiences of co-national peer support across both pre-arrival and post-arrival phases of their migration journey to Ottawa. Drawing on descriptive phenomenological analysis, the findings illuminate how Telegram served as a key online platform through which participants accessed emotional, informational, and practical support from fellow Iranian peers during different stages of preparation, relocation, and early settlement.

The Telegram group was experienced not only as a space for exchanging critical information about visas, housing, and settlement logistics, but also as a source of emotional reassurance, community belonging, and shared cultural familiarity throughout the migration process. The findings highlight how these online peer connections played evolving roles — from initial social anchoring and pre-arrival preparation to ongoing adjustment, cultural negotiation, and gradual development of independence after arrival.

The following section presents six major themes that emerged from participants' accounts. Table 1 provides an overview of these themes, which are then discussed in detail with illustrative quotes from participants.

**Table 2:** *Theme Descriptions*

Theme	Summary
1. Not Alone: Belonging Before Arrival	Pre-arrival co-national peer support system (Telegram) provided early social connectedness and a sense of familiarity and anchoring, reducing social unfamiliarity and buffering initial settlement uncertainty, allowing participants to feel already socially connected to fellow Iranian peers in Ottawa before arrival.
2. Empathy in Shared Struggles	Telegram group functioned as a safe emotional space during vulnerable periods, offering peer-based empathy, emotional validation, and non-judgmental support for managing immigration-related stressors, visa anxieties, and adaptation difficulties through shared lived struggles.
3. Lived Experience as Guidance—and Guesswork	Peer-driven informational support based on lived experience across pre-sojourn, arrival, and settlement phases; provided context-sensitive, practical, and experience-based guidance, while also involving some information inaccuracies and collaborative correction.
4. A Peer-built Digital Database	Telegram’s platform features (searchability, pinned messages, hashtags) created a peer-built digital database of insider knowledge that supported ongoing settlement navigation and autonomous information retrieval.
5. Cultural Balancing	Supported early cultural adjustment by addressing basic cultural differences and early social norms (e.g., tipping, hygiene, daily routines), while facilitating Iranian cultural maintenance (food, traditions, community), fostering an emerging bicultural identity.
6. From Early Solidarity to Background Presence	The group served as an important early-stage informational and emotional resource, later becoming a background support network as participants developed in-person networks, built greater self-efficacy and adaptive independence, diversified social resources, and progressed in their host society integration.

## Theme 1: Not Alone: Belonging Before Arrival

Participants described the Telegram group as a vital digital entry point into a broader Iranian student community—one that helped establish early social connections, a sense of belonging, and practical reassurance even before arriving in Canada. Almost all interviewees emphasized that they joined the group during the pre-sojourn phase, often right after receiving their university admission, and that this timing was crucial. The group served as both an emotional buffer during the uncertainty of migration and as a preparatory space for navigating future life in Canada.

Kamran recalled how even their very first night in the group became a turning point:

As soon as I joined, I saw everyone talking about study plans... then the conversation shifted to food, and I said: 'If only someone could make Ash Reshteh for us there.' A woman replied, 'I'll make it for you.'... They even named it 'Ashtawa.' Those 4–5 people who joined in on the joke that night became my main friends here.

The reference to *Ashtawa* came from a playful exchange in which members imagined starting a business in Ottawa selling *Ash Reshteh*—a traditional Iranian noodle and herb soup—and humorously combining the dish's name with "Ottawa" to create the name *Ashtawa*.

This seemingly playful moment underscores a larger pattern—informal emotional bonding layered into practical group exchanges, where joking, empathy, and cultural familiarity made strangers feel like soon-to-be friends.

Many participants shared that by the time they arrived in Canada, they already felt acquainted with several group members, despite not having met them face-to-face before. For some, meeting these individuals in person felt more like reconnecting with long-time friends rather than introductions to strangers. This early sense of familiarity was particularly comforting for those who were relocating alone or who naturally sought social interaction and connection.

The support extended beyond emotional comfort. In some cases, practical help flowed from these early connections. Shakiba recalled:

They voluntarily came privately and said: 'We saw your message that you're coming to Ottawa. Tell us what days you want to go for your initial arrangements... we'll get a car seat... one of us will come take you for your SIN number and bank account.

Similarly, participants like Nasim and Tannaz described how friends met through the group visited rental properties for them in advance, signed leases on their behalf, and even handed over apartment keys.

Participants also highlighted that being part of the group helped alleviate their families' concerns, as knowing that their children had already connected with some peers and were entering

an existing community provided a sense of reassurance. For the students themselves, it was comforting to know that upon arrival, they would not be entirely alone; there would be familiar contacts they could turn to for support or assistance if needed.

A repeated theme was the deep emotional connection formed through shared immigration stress, especially during long visa wait periods. “We all had the same stress, waiting for visas. We understood each other much more easily. We complained together, consoled each other, and completely understood what each other wanted” (Nasim). This sense of emotional solidarity was grounded in mutual vulnerability and the collective experience of entering a stressful, unknown process.

However, participants acknowledged that the emotional closeness developed online did not always translate smoothly into offline relationships. Some noted that certain connections gradually faded once they arrived, suggesting that the interactions were often sustained by the ongoing conversations within the chat itself. Others observed discrepancies between how individuals presented themselves in the Telegram group and how they behaved in person, sometimes finding that people who seemed pleasant online displayed less agreeable behavior face-to-face.

Still, most participants emphasized that the group played a key role in laying the groundwork for their social networks in Canada. Many of the friendships and acquaintances they later developed had initially originated through the group. While it would have been possible to meet other Iranians through academic departments or university events, they noted that without the Telegram group, this process would likely have been slower and more limited in scope. The group provided broad and early access to peers from various programs and institutions, extending their social reach from the start.

The group also acted as an emotional bridge between the fear of leaving home and the hope of starting anew. Amir described how, toward the end of the pre-arrival period, people would post messages saying “we arrived today” or share photos of going out together in Ottawa. “It was like you were already there. This transition from Iran to suddenly a country where you don’t know anything and don’t know anyone... it turns into: we’re classmates, we’re in this city together.”

In sum, the Telegram group served not only as a functional tool but also as a social anchor—helping participants feel known, emotionally held, and practically prepared before they even boarded the plane. It transformed a potentially isolating immigration journey into a more connected and community-oriented experience, even if that early intimacy didn’t always translate directly into long-term, close relationships.

## **Theme 2: Empathy in Shared Struggles**

Participants consistently described the Telegram group as a unique emotional haven—an informal, peer-driven space where empathy, kindness, and non-judgment were not just present, but foundational to the culture of interaction. In contrast to formal support systems or institutional structures, the group was experienced as a horizontal network rooted in shared hardship and mutual understanding. What made this group stand out, participants emphasized, was the voluntary, selfless nature of the support offered—extended not for status, recognition, or obligation, but simply because members genuinely wanted to help one another.

Several participants reflected on how unexpectedly touching it was to receive guidance from strangers, many of whom were students managing their own busy lives. Shakiba characterized the group as a social space made up of individuals who were notably self-sacrificing,

willingly giving their time—something particularly valuable for those starting over in a new country. This theme of generosity, freely offered without any expectation of something in return, was consistently echoed across the interviews.

The group's empathy became especially evident during emotionally vulnerable periods, such as visa delays, housing challenges, or the initial experience of culture shock. Nasim recounted being caught in a prolonged security check, facing uncertainty about when or whether her visa would be approved. During that time, group members would occasionally reach out, inquire about the status of her application, offer reassurance that everything would work out, and remind her that support was available if needed. These gestures, even from people she had never met in person, brought her significant comfort. She also mentioned that even after her visa was granted, many members continued to reach out, offering assistance with housing arrangements and other logistical matters.

This sense of care wasn't performative or superficial—it was personal. Nasim described the group as being “like a family in a foreign country. Even though my uncle is here, my cousin is also here, I'm more comfortable asking questions in this group than I would be asking my family.” Several others made similar comparisons, noting that they could speak more freely in the Telegram group than with actual relatives, because the group members genuinely understood what they were going through. Emotional safety stemmed from shared experience and emotional alignment, not just familiarity.

Another defining characteristic of the group was its absence of judgment. Participants emphasized that, unlike many other online spaces or cultural communities, this group allowed them to comfortably ask any type of question—whether related to university procedures, personal

challenges, or cultural uncertainties. Nima shared that even when he had very minor questions, he felt completely at ease raising them within the group. He explained that members were empathetic and never singled anyone out or suggested that difficulties were a personal failing or a sign of an inability to adapt. This supportive environment fostered openness and significantly lowered the emotional burden of seeking help.

The emotional openness extended beyond moments of crisis. Participants noted that simple, everyday acts of kindness also contributed to building trust and reassurance within the group. Sara recalled that during his initial interactions, he was struck by how friendly and welcoming the members were, how thoroughly they explained things, and how quickly they responded to questions, which made a strong impression on him. Similarly, Nasim remembered how members often joked and engaged in playful conversations with one another, creating a lighthearted atmosphere that helped her feel comfortable and at ease. She described the overall environment as kind, friendly, and highly supportive.

This environment of shared emotional investment was underpinned by a powerful ethical drive: to protect others from the pain one had experienced. Tannaz reflected, “When students see each other’s challenges, they very caringly want to help. When I had this difficult experience, I didn’t want others to go through the same thing.” That sentiment was embodied in how people offered support not just when asked, but proactively.

Several participants also pointed out that the large size of the group made it easier to seek assistance. Rather than feeling uncomfortable about repeatedly approaching a single friend with numerous questions, they could ask in the group without hesitation, confident that someone among

the many members would be able to provide a helpful response. This collective structure allowed them to seek support more comfortably and without guilt.

Even after participants no longer relied on the group for direct guidance, many remained emotionally connected to it. Some expressed a continued sense of comfort knowing the group was still there—a quiet but reliable presence they could turn to if needed. This ongoing emotional security, the feeling that support was always just a message away, was described as one of the group's most lasting and meaningful qualities.

In short, participants described the Telegram group not just as a tool or platform, but as a kind of communal safety net: a space where it was safe to be overwhelmed, confused, sad, or inexperienced, and still be met with kindness. The group's defining features—unconditional empathy, absence of judgment, and peer-driven support—transformed it into something that felt rare and precious in the often isolating experience of immigration. Even when its practical necessity faded, its emotional presence lingered.

### **Theme 3: Lived Experience as Guidance—and Guesswork**

Participants widely described the Telegram group as a crucial informational lifeline during the pre-sojourn and early settlement phases. It was more than a forum for questions—it was a collective knowledge base built on the lived experiences of peers who had recently navigated similar challenges. This context-specific, experience-driven knowledge was perceived as both practical and emotionally reassuring, especially when official sources felt overwhelming, unclear, or detached from students' immediate needs.

Several participants described how the nature of information-sharing within the group evolved throughout the different phases of migration. Amir noted that during the initial stages, newcomers were often overwhelmed with numerous questions—about visas, daily life, or the city itself. He explained that the structure and organization within the group helped make sense of this mental chaos by bringing order to those scattered concerns.

The support began with visa applications, then turned to flight logistics, packing, and what to expect at the airport. After arrival, the focus shifted to daily life challenges—how to get a debit card, set up insurance, find housing, or navigate local transportation. This evolving stream of support gave students a sense of structure in what otherwise felt like a chaotic process.

Participants emphasized that what made the information especially valuable was not only its content but also how recent and directly relevant it was to their own situations. Many felt that because the group members had personally gone through similar experiences just months earlier, their advice felt more trustworthy, current, and tailored to student needs. This sense of shared, up-to-date knowledge gave participants greater confidence in relying on peer guidance.

The credibility came from peers having lived through the same process within the past year or two. As Amir pointed out:

I used only this group for costs and things like: what kind of city is it? What kind of university is it? ... it seemed certified. Because all the people were here and had gone through this process once. So you knew that what they were saying had at least worked for them.

In contrast, university websites and formal platforms were often perceived as impersonal and difficult to navigate. Amir explained that despite having passed a language proficiency test, he still encountered limitations when using official sources. He found that searching the university website often led to numerous pages, and suspected that his difficulty in finding relevant information might have been due to not using the right keywords or fully grasping the language used on those platforms.

Participants appreciated that the information shared in the Telegram group was communicated in Persian and conveyed in simple, everyday language. It often included practical aids such as screenshots, links, or ready-to-use templates. The collaborative nature of discussions also stood out—group members would engage in back-and-forth exchanges until they collectively arrived at a clear and helpful conclusion.

This real-time responsiveness was also a key feature. Nasim shared an experience when her debit card was locked shortly after arrival, “I immediately messaged in this group saying, ‘Guys, my debit card is locked, I don’t know what to do.’ And right then, about 4–5 members immediately responded.”

Nima similarly described how the group had been helpful with many logistical tasks and emphasized the usefulness of being able to search through previous messages before posting a new question. He shared that whenever he faced a problem, his first step was to look through the group’s chat history, trusting that others had likely encountered the same issue and could offer guidance.

Still, participants recognized that information based on lived experience was not always entirely accurate. Kamran reflected that after spending about a year and a half in Canada, he had come to realize that some of the advice shared in the group was incorrect. While much of it was helpful, he estimated that around 60 to 70 percent of the information was accurate, while the remaining 20 to 30 percent could be misleading or wrong.

Shakiba explained that when receiving advice from peers—such as information about post-graduation work permits—she tended to assume that about 75% of it was likely accurate. However, she would still verify the remaining portion on her own to ensure its reliability.

There were also instances where inaccurate advice from peers had tangible consequences. Nima reflected on a case involving peer review of study plans, noting that many group members had assumed the feedback being given was correct. However, the person who shared their study plan likely wasn't aware of the limited expertise of those offering comments. Nima believed it would have been better for individuals to avoid giving such feedback unless they had a stronger level of knowledge or experience.

Nevertheless, participants noted that the group's resilience stemmed from a strong culture of correction. When misinformation surfaced, it was often revisited and updated. Shakiba shared an example in which a well-respected admin initially dismissed a claim about a post-graduation work permit requirement. However, after doing further research, the same admin returned to the group to acknowledge the mistake and confirm that the information was indeed accurate.

Participants also attributed the group's effectiveness to its large size and diversity. Nima pointed out that with around 200 members, many of whom were going through the same stage of

migration, there was a high likelihood that someone had already faced similar challenges and could offer relevant guidance based on their experience.

Ultimately, the Telegram group served as a living, evolving resource, shaped by active participation, shared trial-and-error, and the collective motivation to ease others' paths. Tannaz captured this beautifully: "When you get accepted, a path opens up for you... now there are some people who have placed some lights on that path and are showing you the way."

#### **Theme 4: A Peer-built Digital Database**

In addition to emotional and informational exchanges, participants emphasized a technical feature of the Telegram group that proved critical to their adaptation process: its searchability and archive-like structure. The platform's digital infrastructure—pinned messages, searchable threads, and keyword-based navigation—transformed the group from a space for live support into a peer-curated knowledge base. This searchable quality allowed participants to access not only real-time help but also a persistent, cumulative record of shared insights.

For many participants, the Telegram group served not only as a space for real-time interaction but also as a practical archive of useful knowledge. Rather than always needing to ask new questions, they often searched past discussions, confident that relevant information was already available. The group functioned as an informal database of shared experiences and solutions that could be revisited when needed.

This feature allowed participants to continue benefiting from the group long after their initial arrival. Even a year or more into living in Canada, some would still turn to the Telegram group as their first step in solving unfamiliar tasks. Kamran noted:

After a year and a half, I recently dealt with home insurance payment for the first time. I actually searched the group for that... In the next month, I'll be dealing with applying for the electricity subsidy. The first place I'll look is probably in the group.

Participants described this kind of asynchronous, experience-based support as especially valuable because it was tailored to their specific demographic and context. The advice had often been written by students with nearly identical life circumstances, which made it feel more relevant and applicable than official or generalized sources.

The enduring nature of written messages in the group offered participants a sense of emotional reassurance. Unlike face-to-face conversations that could easily fade from memory, the group's content remained accessible over time. Some noted that even months or years later, they could return to past discussions and find the exact information or support shared—something that added to the group's long-term value.

Several participants emphasized the value of the group's pinned messages and archived documents, which included useful resources such as resumes, visa cover letters, and housing guides. Sara explained that one of the first things she did upon joining was to read through these pinned messages and download the available samples. She also noted that when questions were asked in the group, members often responded by linking to earlier discussions or directing others to the pinned content for quick reference.

This process gave the group a form of internal structure and memory, which made it possible to search independently before asking again. Amir described this as a major time- and stress-saving tool:

The whole group and all those chats were an archive of answers to questions that I had, or ten other people like me had... You often didn't need to ask a question and wait for someone to answer you. You could search through questions that had been asked before and find answers to your questions.

He added that there was a strong likelihood any given question had already been asked and answered within the group. This made it much quicker to find solutions and, at the same time, significantly lowered the stress of not knowing what to do.

Participants noted that what they valued most was not only the content of the answers but also the digital infrastructure that made self-guided support possible. The design of the Telegram group enabled them to access help at their own pace and on their own terms. Nima remarked that the ability to search for keywords in past conversations made it easy to locate specific information, and he believed that the group's overall efficiency and usefulness stemmed from the fact that it existed entirely online.

## **Theme 5: Cultural Balancing**

Participants described the Telegram group as a space where early cultural orientation occurred in both directions: toward adaptation to the Canadian context and toward the preservation of Iranian cultural identity. While the group was not used as a primary space for in-depth cultural education, it provided essential guidance on major cultural differences—especially those that Iranian newcomers found confusing, awkward, or difficult to navigate during their early days in Canada.

Topics frequently discussed included tipping customs, hygiene practices, winter clothing, and university communication etiquette. These topics were usually shared informally, and what made them meaningful was the fact that host country norms were introduced through the lens of shared Iranian cultural experience. Advice came not from external authorities, but from fellow Iranians who had already adapted to those norms, and who understood the subtle cultural differences. This shared frame of reference made it easier to understand, interpret, and sometimes question what was being recommended.

Kamran provided an example of how the same cultural topic could receive contradictory input from group members:

A simple example is about tipping. It's not a specific question someone might directly ask—though they might—but those who were already here or had some experience would share their recommendations. Often these were contradictory. An admin or senior student might say: 'Don't worry about tipping, it's not important' while another might say: 'No, it's very rude in their culture not to tip.'

Rather than being disorienting, these varied opinions helped normalize confusion and offered multiple ways of approaching cultural learning.

Some of the most sensitive cultural challenges participants encountered involved hygiene and restroom norms. They observed that while Canadian standards were introduced in the group, Iranian practices were also acknowledged and supported. For instance, Nasim mentioned that she continued to carry a water bottle with her for personal hygiene, reflecting her preference to maintain familiar cultural habits despite the new environment.

This was one of several examples where students discussed strategies for navigating cultural dissonance while maintaining their own preferences. In this case, members introduced tools or adaptations—like installing bidets or using portable alternatives—which allowed students to decide how much to adapt without judgment. The group, therefore, became a space where cultural maintenance and adaptation coexisted.

Amir described how even seemingly minor uncertainties around cultural etiquette—such as how to address a professor—illustrated the deeper challenges of adjusting to a new environment. He recalled feeling unsure about whether it would be inappropriate to use a professor's first name in an email, noting that expectations around this kind of interaction were vastly different in Iran compared to Canada.

These types of questions were brought to the group, and answers from peers often included personal anecdotes, offering reassurance that others had gone through the same dilemmas.

Participants also emphasized that while Canadian culture was unavoidable—embedded in daily experiences like food, social behavior, and academic life—Iranian cultural expression

required more intentional effort. As Kamran explained; “Whether you want it or not... you encounter the Canadian identity every day... but there's no Ghormeh Sabzi. No Yalda Night. No Nowruz. No kebab. These things aren't there.”

The Telegram group helped bridge this cultural gap not only by offering discussion and validation but also by serving as a channel through which members informally shared links to other interest-based groups rooted in Iranian culture. Amir recalled that people would post links to gatherings such as summer running or hiking groups, which offered further opportunities for social connection and cultural expression.

These additional spaces allowed participants to engage with their cultural identity through social and leisure activities such as music, hiking, or celebrating Nowruz. In this way, the group indirectly helped reinforce Iranian identity—not only through emotional or informational support, but also by facilitating entry into culturally resonant communities.

Some participants saw both ends of the cultural spectrum represented in the group: those who strongly preserved Iranian norms and those who fully embraced the host culture. Nasim reflected:

I've seen both sides: both the members who insisted on preserving this Iranian identity, and the members who completely released themselves from Iranian identity and tried to completely immerse themselves in the other culture. And this group helped me see these two and float myself between these two cases.

For her and others, the group enabled a selective and personally meaningful approach to adaptation—an environment in which students could make sense of unfamiliar norms while preserving their own values. Whether navigating whether to tip, how to phrase an email, or how to manage restroom habits, participants valued the Telegram group for giving them a culturally familiar frame of reference through which to interpret their new surroundings.

### **Theme 6: From Early Solidarity to Background Presence**

As participants transitioned from the intensity of pre-arrival stress to the demands of daily life in Canada, the Telegram group's role shifted from central to peripheral. While the group had once been an essential support system—a place for immediate help, emotional reassurance, and shared urgency—it gradually became a more distant, optional resource. This theme captures that emotional and functional disengagement: the process through which the group, once experienced as a lifeline, slowly receded into the background as members gained independence, formed in-person relationships, and faced new challenges—particularly post-graduation ones—that the group was no longer equipped to support.

The pre-arrival phase was remembered by all participants as the most vibrant and supportive period. During that time, the group was filled with activity—guidance on visas, flights, housing, and emotional solidarity through shared uncertainty. But this dynamic began to shift after students settled in Canada. Participants pointed to factors like academic workload, growing social networks, and shifting priorities as reasons for the decline in engagement.

Tannaz reflected that as her responsibilities grew—with employment, academic pressures, and the general demands of life—she found herself less able to offer the same level of support to others in the group as she had earlier on.

Some participants noted that as they developed in-person friendships—often with individuals they initially connected with through the Telegram group—their reliance on the larger online community naturally declined. Once people had formed their own social circles in Canada, the need to engage with the broader group diminished, except in cases where urgent support was required.

Many participants described a shift in how they engaged with the group—moving from being help-seekers to becoming sources of support for others. Amir explained that he now mostly answered questions when he could, and it had become rare for him to need to ask anything himself.

Hamid similarly said; “Sometimes I need to ask questions, and sometimes I see others asking questions that I can answer. So it's both about helping and being helped.”

This transition was often rooted in a pay-it-forward mentality. Participants who had received support from the group before their arrival felt a sense of responsibility to assist others in return. Tannaz mentioned that during her earlier terms—when she had more free time—she made a greater effort to support new students and respond to their questions.

However, despite these occasional contributions, several participants described a sense of longing for what the group used to be. They missed the emotional closeness, humor, and constant activity that once made the group feel like a virtual community. Tannaz reflected on this contrast; “At that time, I felt more that... even though it was virtual, I felt like I knew the person when they were talking. But now I don't feel that solidarity much anymore.”

Alongside the emotional distancing, many participants observed that the group no longer addressed the types of support they currently needed. Although it had been essential during their

initial settlement, it offered limited guidance when it came to issues like post-graduation planning or job searching. Shakiba remarked that discussions related to life after graduation were quite rare within the group

Participants described wishing for more resources related to resume help, job referrals, or professional development. Some expressed disappointment that the group hadn't evolved to meet those needs, even though they acknowledged that everyone was simply busier now.

Today, the group is still alive—but with a different rhythm. It functions primarily for logistical support such as event announcements, short-term help, or currency exchange. Messages come less frequently, and responses are slower. But the group hasn't been abandoned. It still represents a shared space of connection, even if that connection is quieter.

Sara offered a metaphor that several participants echoed in spirit; “You were that child who couldn't walk, now gradually you can walk by yourself, without them holding your hand. Now sometimes you fall too, but it's okay. You've learned, you've learned how to walk.”

The Telegram group, once a lifeline, has become a gentle presence in the background—quietly available, shaped by memory, and sustained by those who continue to answer when someone new reaches out.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter interprets the findings of this study in light of relevant literature, conceptual insights, and theoretical framing. While the previous chapter presented participants' lived experiences thematically, this section moves into deeper interpretation—examining how and why these experiences took shape, what they reveal about digital co-national networks, and how they contribute to broader understandings of immigrant adaptation.

Participants described the Telegram group as a profoundly supportive and empowering space—particularly during the early phases of their migration journey. It played a vital role in the pre-sojourn and early settlement periods, offering emotional comfort, practical help, and a sense of community in the face of uncertainty. However, this support was not unlimited. As participants' needs evolved, they described limitations in the group's ability to meet their changing concerns, especially around post-graduation challenges. These findings tell a story not of a flawless or permanent support system, but of one that was dynamic, temporary, and deeply shaped by the emotional and logistical rhythms of migration.

This study addresses an underexplored area in the literature. While prior research has largely focused on international student support after arrival—typically emphasizing institutional or host-society sources, a smaller but growing body of work has begun to recognize the role of digital co-national networks in the pre-sojourn phase (e.g., Rodikova, 2023; Li, 2024). Building on this emerging attention, the present study deepens our understanding by showing how platforms like Telegram offer not only early informational support, but also facilitate emotional preparedness, relational familiarity, and culturally anchored orientation—long before students physically arrive in the host country.

The findings are interpreted, in part, through the lens of Kim's (2001) cross-cultural adaptation theory, particularly her emphasis on the role of ethnic communication networks in the adaptation process. Kim suggests that co-ethnic support systems can facilitate early-stage adaptation, but may hinder deeper integration if over-relied on in the long term. In this study, the Telegram group was experienced as a supportive ethnic peer network during the early phases, but its use declined over time as participants drew on a wider range of resources. Importantly, this disengagement reflected a shift away from one specific co-ethnic platform—not from co-ethnic support altogether. This theoretical dimension will be explored further later in the chapter.

The rest of this chapter is organized by theme. Each theme is briefly restated, then interpreted in light of relevant literature, theoretical ideas, and conceptual language. Special attention is given to tensions, surprises, and aspects of the findings that offer fresh insight. The chapter concludes with a synthesis across themes, a reflection on theory, contributions to knowledge, and study limitations.

### **Theme 1: Not Alone: Belonging Before Arrival**

The first theme captures the critical role of the Telegram group as a digital space for establishing co-national connections prior to physical migration and how these online connections influenced students' emotional security and social integration upon arrival in Canada. Participants described how the group offered not only access to informational support but also a sense of familiarity and communal belonging that reduced the psychological weight of relocation. From casual banter and humorous exchanges to structured peer assistance with housing, visa logistics,

or airport navigation, the Telegram group emerged as a multifaceted support environment grounded in shared identity and migration trajectory.

What was most striking about this theme was the temporal layering of support: before students had even left Iran, they were already building networks of emotional proximity and practical solidarity. This pre-sojourn connectivity became a form of anticipatory socialization, in which students began mentally and emotionally adjusting to their host country by forming bonds with peers similarly preparing to migrate. Participants recalled that this early bonding gave them the feeling of already having a micro-community in place upon arrival—turning the unknown into something familiar. As one participant put it, “I went there and found good friends... it wasn’t like I’d be alone.”

This phenomenon aligns with what Kim (2001) characterizes as the stress-adaptation-growth dynamic of cross-cultural adaptation. While adaptation is traditionally understood as beginning after arrival, this theme reveals that digital pre-arrival peer engagement catalyzed a psychological orientation toward adaptation before students even physically entered the host society. Kim emphasizes the importance of communication in facilitating adaptation, and this theme affirms the idea that ethnic interpersonal communication—even in a virtual format—functions as both a buffer against stress and a scaffold for growth. In Kim’s framework, ethnic social communication serves as an early-stage support, potentially impeding long-term host integration if over-relied upon. However, in this case, the Telegram group seemed to act more as a bridge than a barrier: a preparatory ground for settlement, not a place of retreat from the host society.

From a social support perspective, the Telegram group most prominently offered a blend of instrumental support and social companionship, both of which were especially meaningful

during the pre-sojourn and early settlement phases. Instrumental support was evident in the way peers offered tangible, real-world help: picking each other up from Montreal, helping scout rental properties in Ottawa on someone's behalf, or even hosting newcomers temporarily upon arrival. These actions went beyond sharing information; they represented hands-on, peer-based caregiving that bridged geographic and logistical gaps. At the same time, social companionship was cultivated through humorous chats, playful exchanges (such as the "Ashtawa" joke), and casual online bonding that often transitioned into offline hangouts, neighborhood visits, and spontaneous get-togethers once in Canada. This duality of support helped participants feel less alone in their migration process and significantly reduced early emotional distress and settlement anxiety—especially for those who otherwise had no existing social ties in the host country.

What was also notable was how the Telegram group contributed to what can be described as an early emotional orientation toward the host environment, even before arrival. By offering shared humor, insider references, and a steady stream of peer interaction, it helped participants build a mental and emotional map of their new destination. This process did not necessarily create enduring emotional intimacy, but it laid a foundation of familiarity that lowered emotional barriers to post-arrival interactions. Some participants did observe that certain peers appeared warmer online than in person, but rather than interpreting this as a shortcoming, they understood it as a natural difference in communicative expression between digital and face-to-face settings.

This theme underscores a meaningful shift in the literature on international student adaptation—one that moves beyond a post-arrival lens to recognize the significance of pre-sojourn digital peer engagement. While earlier studies emphasized the importance of co-national support after students arrive in the host society (Jackson et al., 2019; Kasese-Hara & Mugambi, 2021), more recent research has highlighted how pre-migration digital ties—especially on platforms like

Telegram—create "instant support networks" that can offer both practical guidance and emotional reassurance (Lim & Pham, 2016; Rodikova, 2023; Alencar, 2024). Participants' narratives in this study—recounting playful group chats, peer-organized pickups, and home-finding support before arrival—closely align with the literature's view that social media connections in the pre-arrival phase foster a sense of familiarity and belonging, easing psychological stress and enhancing the perceived safety of migration (Yusuf, 2024). These peer-driven digital interactions were not just sources of information; they were affective spaces where a collective sense of anticipation, humor, and mutual vulnerability helped create emotional anchors before students set foot in Canada. As recent scholarship argues, the emotional comfort and cultural continuity facilitated by early co-national digital engagement help reduce the alienation often experienced during the transition to a new country (Sinanan & Gomes, 2020; Ihejirika & Krtalic, 2021).

At the same time, the present findings support and expand earlier insights into the role of co-national peer support in international student adaptation. As previous research has shown, these networks can reduce social isolation, offer a secure space for cultural expression, and serve as a buffer against early migration-related stressors (Hayes & Lin, 1994; Constantine et al., 2004; Wawera & McCamley, 2020). However, what this study adds is an emphasis on timing and medium: rather than forming only after arrival, these ties were already active, emotionally resonant, and functionally useful before migration even occurred. The findings echo literature that sees co-national digital communities not merely as information hubs but as emotional infrastructures, scaffolding students' confidence and preparedness for their new lives (Oliver, 2025; Yusuf, 2024).

While prior research has emphasized the emotional value of online co-national ties, the current findings introduce a novel dimension: in this specific context, several participants

described how their pre-arrival digital connections directly evolved into face-to-face relationships after arrival. These interactions moved beyond online support to include apartment visits, airport pickups, and shared daily routines—bridging virtual engagement and real-world companionship. This process of continuity between digital and embodied belonging was not explicitly addressed in the reviewed literature, offering a new layer to understanding how online co-national networks shape the lived experience of cultural transition.

This theme also stands in marked contrast to findings by Nikkhah et al. (2020), who described Iranian Telegram groups as purely transactional spaces for instrumental support, devoid of emotional interaction or community-building. In their study, users explicitly stated that they were “not here to make friends,” and casual exchanges, personal storytelling, or expressions of empathy were discouraged. However, the present findings reveal a Telegram group that functioned quite differently—one where emotional bonding, humor, and familiarity were woven into practical exchanges from the very beginning. Far from being impersonal, this group laid the groundwork for offline friendships and peer-based caregiving, suggesting that the structure and tone of such digital communities may vary significantly depending on group norms, member dynamics, and shared timing of migration. These results complicate earlier depictions of Telegram as emotionally sterile and highlight its potential to foster meaningful human connection in the migration context.

To conclude, this theme illustrates the transformative role of digital co-national communities in cross-cultural adaptation, particularly in the pre-sojourn and early arrival phases. By functioning simultaneously as a source of practical guidance, emotional reassurance, and cultural anchoring, the Telegram group facilitated a unique form of anticipatory adaptation that both complemented and softened the cultural transition. It broadened students’ social worlds, reinforced their diasporic belonging, and positioned them to engage with host society structures

from a place of grounded familiarity rather than alienation. This theme adds nuance to existing theories by showing how digital ethnic communication, when structured as peer-to-peer support, can empower rather than inhibit cultural transition—especially when understood not as an endpoint but as a transitional bridge toward integration.

## **Theme 2: Empathy in Shared Struggles**

This theme explores how the Telegram group served as a uniquely empathetic, emotionally safe space for newly arrived Iranian international students navigating the uncertainties of immigration. While the group’s explicit purpose was to offer practical guidance, participants emphasized that what stood out most was its emotional atmosphere: a space where one could ask “even the simplest questions” without fear of judgment, share sadness or frustration, and receive genuine comfort, often from people they had never met in person.

What made this support particularly meaningful was not merely shared national background, but a shared immigration timeline. Participants repeatedly pointed out that those who supported them—often admins or peers who had arrived one or two terms earlier—had recently faced the same bureaucratic, financial, or emotional hurdles themselves. That common hardship created a kind of deep, experience-based empathy that transcended generic cultural affinity. One participant noted that peers helped “because they didn’t want others to suffer like they had.” This detail offers a meaningful contribution beyond what is emphasized in the literature: while existing research often highlights the importance of culturally similar support (e.g., Kasese-Hara & Mugambi, 2021), these findings suggest that it was shared pain, not just shared culture, that laid the foundation for this type of peer-driven emotional solidarity.

Participants described the group as emotionally safer and more responsive than both formal support systems and even family members in Canada. The group's horizontal structure—voluntary, peer-led, and deeply informal—made it easier to express vulnerability without shame. As one participant reflected, “I’m more comfortable asking questions in this group than I would be asking my own family” (Nasim). In moments of crisis, like visa delays or financial uncertainty, the responsiveness and encouragement offered by peers served as an essential emotional buffer.

This dynamic reflects what Cohen and Wills (1985) identify as emotional support, one of the core forms of social support. Emotional support refers to the experience of being cared for, understood, and reassured—often through empathetic communication and validation of one's feelings. In this study, such support was not abstract; it manifested through tangible actions like checking in during long visa waits, offering encouragement during early hardships, or simply creating a warm, accepting tone in group exchanges. From the perspective of social support research, emotional support plays a distinct role in reducing psychological distress, which helps explain why participants often described the Telegram group as significant during particularly vulnerable phases of migration. This form of support was not instrumental or informational—it was about emotional containment and affective resonance, offered voluntarily and without expectation.

These dynamics align with a growing body of literature highlighting the emotional functions of digital co-national peer networks. Social media platforms have been shown to offer international students emotional comfort and help fulfill needs for affect, expression, and companionship, particularly during early settlement (Yusuf, 2024; Akter et al., 2024). In particular, these peer-based interactions provide forms of emotional anchoring and shared lived experience, contributing to psychological relief during stressful migration transitions (Ihejirika & Krtalic,

2021; Gaitán-Aguilar et al., 2022). The Telegram group examined in this study was not only perceived as helpful, but also as an emotionally safe, empathic, and reassuring environment. Support was frequently proactive, warm, and grounded in recent, shared hardship. These findings reinforce Kristiana et al.'s (2022) conclusion that emotional support functions as a buffer against acculturative stress, particularly when it is peer-driven and experientially grounded.

At the same time, the findings contrast with aspects of previous research. For instance, Nikkiah et al. (2020) characterized Iranian Telegram communities as strictly informational and transactional, highlighting the absence of personal sharing, emotional interaction, or relationship-building. Users reportedly stated that they were “not here to make friends,” and group culture discouraged casual tone, emojis, and expressions of gratitude. By contrast, the Telegram group analyzed in this study was described as emotionally generous, non-judgmental, and intimate, with members routinely offering comfort during visa delays, culture shock, and other emotional stressors. This also complicates claims by Rodikova (2023) and Sinanan & Gomes (2020) that the emotional depth of online co-national interactions tends to be limited or short-lived. While that may be true in certain contexts, the present case illustrates a digital peer community where emotional resonance was both sustained and meaningful. These findings suggest that group culture, timing of migration, and shared vulnerability may play critical roles in determining whether online co-national spaces become transactional or emotionally supportive.

Within Kim's (2001) theory of cross-cultural adaptation, this theme resonates with her observation that ethnic communication networks provide necessary emotional grounding in early stages of the adaptation process. Kim emphasizes that such networks can offer a psychological safety net before individuals are ready to meaningfully engage with host society structures. Participants in this study were not yet focused on building host-national relationships at the time

they relied on this group—but that did not represent stagnation. Rather, this phase of co-national emotional care seemed to function as a preparatory foundation, from which participants could later explore broader social integration more confidently.

What emerges here, then, is a nuanced portrait of digital, co-ethnic peer support that was not simply based on cultural similarity, but on temporally aligned hardship and the desire to pay forward the emotional help one had once received. This form of solidarity—while underrepresented in the current literature—suggests that recency of shared struggle may be just as important as cultural proximity in shaping the depth of empathy in immigrant support networks. Far from fostering dependence, this early emotional infrastructure appeared to offer students exactly what they needed in order to begin building stable lives in Canada.

### **Theme 3: Lived Experience as Guidance—and Guesswork**

This theme captured how the Telegram group functioned as a peer-curated space for informational support, offering guidance rooted in the recent lived experiences of fellow Iranian international students. Participants described how the group accompanied them through both the pre-immigration stage (e.g., visa preparation, travel arrangements) and the early post-arrival phase, when they encountered a wide range of unfamiliar systems. The support received spanned an extensive range of topics—including visa applications, banking procedures, housing and rent contracts, public transportation, shopping strategies, product recommendations, driving, insurance, buying a car, and identifying safe neighborhoods. In these early stages, participants experienced the group as an immediately accessible and highly relevant knowledge-sharing platform.

What gave the group its unique value was not only the content of the information but also the source of that information. Participants described the guidance as especially credible because it came from peers who had recently gone through the same processes. The relatability and familiarity of these peer experiences added to the trust placed in the shared information. Moreover, participants valued the fact that many of the shared instructions, templates, and recommendations were updated, giving them a sense that the information was both current and context-specific—unlike official websites, which were often experienced as unclear or hard to navigate.

This theme aligns closely with the concept of informational support as outlined by Cohen and Wills (1985), which refers to guidance, advice, and problem-solving support received from others. In the context of the Telegram group, participants did not just receive abstract advice but instead accessed detailed, peer-tested instructions—ranging from what to write in an email to how to fill out immigration or academic documents. This dimension of support provided direct assistance in practical decision-making during a period marked by uncertainty and high demands. The group helped bridge a knowledge gap for newcomers who were unfamiliar with bureaucratic expectations and daily systems in Canada.

Several functions of the Telegram group align closely with recent findings on co-national digital networks. Participants frequently turned to the group for practical, experience-based information about essential day-to-day needs—including housing, banking, documentation, transportation, healthcare access, and grocery shopping. These topics mirror those identified in the literature as central to the informational support international students seek from co-national social media groups (Oh et al., 2014; Oliver, 2025; Alencar, 2024). This form of support was especially valued because it was locally grounded and drawn from peers who had recently navigated the same systems, echoing studies that highlight the trusted nature of insider, experiential knowledge shared

by co-national peers (Sinanan & Gomes, 2020; Li, 2024; Ihejirika & Krtalic, 2021). Participants emphasized that what made this information valuable was not just its content, but its context-specific accuracy and relatability—qualities not often found in institutional platforms.

In contrast to university websites and formal government channels, the Telegram group was described as easier to access, more relevant, and less overwhelming. Participants often found institutional sources linguistically difficult or poorly designed for immediate needs, a sentiment echoed in the literature, which notes that international students prefer peer-driven digital networks when institutional resources are inaccessible or insufficiently tailored (Oliver, 2025; Nikkhah et al., 2020). The group’s conversational, Persian-language format—with screenshots, templates, and quick replies—enhanced both comprehension and usability. These findings support broader observations that co-national digital spaces function as practical alternatives to formal systems, providing real-time guidance in an accessible and culturally familiar format (Rodikova, 2023; Lim & Pham, 2016).

At the same time, participants acknowledged that peer-based information could occasionally be inaccurate—yet the Telegram group showed a distinct pattern not emphasized in the literature: a reflexive, peer-driven process of correction and updating. While some studies caution against the spread of unreliable or overwhelming content in social media groups (Nikkhah et al., 2020; Oliver, 2025), participants in this study actively monitored and revised shared content when errors were detected. This collaborative maintenance of credibility distinguished the group as a self-organizing knowledge network. Notably, unlike some concerns raised in the literature—such as “selective shopping” that leads to distorted migration expectations (Obi et al., 2021)—no participants described experiencing significant expectation gaps. Instead, they described the group as a reliable, evolving database shaped by shared experience and mutual accountability.

In relation to Kim's (2001) theory of cross-cultural adaptation, this theme represents both a partial alignment and a meaningful departure. While Kim acknowledges that co-ethnic ties may provide short-term emotional relief, her model prioritizes interpersonal communication with host society members as the mechanism for long-term adaptation. The findings here do not contradict that view but expand it—demonstrating that co-national peer support, particularly when delivered through digital platforms, may contribute to functional outcomes such as increased competence in everyday tasks and institutional navigation. These gains closely resemble what Kim describes as functional fitness, one of the key outcomes of successful adaptation. Therefore, even if co-ethnic communication does not drive intercultural transformation in Kim's model, it may still lay important foundational groundwork by helping individuals become more capable and confident in the early phases of resettlement.

What sets this theme apart is the insight into how peer-based digital networks can operate as dynamic, self-correcting systems. Participants did not passively consume information—they actively monitored its accuracy, corrected outdated content, and refined each other's suggestions through lived experience. This collaborative vigilance turned the Telegram group into more than a source of informal support: it became a reflexive, peer-maintained infrastructure of shared knowledge. Unlike generalized concerns in the literature about misinformation or passive content consumption, the findings here reveal a highly participatory model of digital support, marked by mutual accountability and real-time responsiveness. This adaptive, crowd-sourced correction mechanism remains largely unaddressed in existing research on co-national social media communities.

Taken together, these findings underscore the evolving role of co-national digital spaces as more than passive forums for information exchange. In the case of the Telegram group,

informational support was not only trusted and experientially grounded but also continuously refined through collaborative engagement. By combining accessibility, cultural familiarity, and real-time correction, the group operated as an informal yet sophisticated infrastructure that helped newcomers navigate the complexities of early settlement. This theme highlights how co-national peer networks, when mediated through digital platforms, can function as agile systems of practical adaptation support—filling gaps left by institutional resources and offering a uniquely participatory model of settlement navigation.

#### **Theme 4: A Peer-built Digital Archive**

This theme focuses on the ways newcomer students relied on a specific Telegram group not merely as a chat space, but as a technologically organized archive of information. For many, the group operated as a searchable database of previously asked questions and shared solutions—providing immediate access to a wide range of practical information. What made the group particularly effective was not simply the content, but the way it was curated: questions were tagged by admins using hashtags, enabling users to quickly retrieve relevant information rather than repeating inquiries or scrolling through endless message threads.

The group's efficiency rested in its technical structure. Participants praised the use of hashtags, pinned posts, and keyword search functions that allowed for ease of access and minimized the risk of information being lost. While prior studies, such as Nikkhah et al. (2020), have raised concerns about Telegram's limitations—including the difficulty of retrieving information in large message streams—this group circumvented those challenges through active moderation and thoughtful tagging practices. Students noted that they could often find answers

simply by entering key terms in the search bar, which made the group feel more like a structured database than a casual messaging thread.

This usage pattern represents a practical response to the uncertainty and cognitive overload often associated with early migration. According to Kim's (2001) stress–adaptation–growth model, newcomer students navigating unfamiliar systems often experience high levels of stress, which can impede adjustment unless mitigated by accessible support tools. The Telegram group served precisely that function—providing students with immediate, low-friction access to relevant, pre-existing information at the very moment they encountered challenges. By lowering the barriers to orientation, the group played a key role in supporting smoother transitions and building self-efficacy.

Within this dynamic lies a notable example of design-enabled support. The group's value did not stem solely from the content shared within it, but from how that content was made accessible. The tagging system, message visibility, and searchability reflect an informal but highly functional informational infrastructure, shaped by both the platform's affordances and the intentional practices of its members. This allowed students not only to receive help but to help themselves—navigating past messages much like users of a searchable knowledge base.

Interestingly, the findings from this study echo the kind of support envisioned in a recommendation by Blijenburg (2022), who proposed designing a chatbot to assist international students with acculturative stress. That tool was imagined to offer preparation tips, trustworthy information, and peer-based suggestions to ease the transition. Although the chatbot was not implemented, the Telegram group organically fulfilled many of these envisioned roles. It offered access to peer experiences, practical advice, and—importantly—searchable, context-relevant content, allowing students to locate the information they needed without waiting for responses.

This shows how a co-national peer group, when well-structured, can serve as a community-powered alternative to institutionally designed digital support tools.

What also stands out in this theme is how the effectiveness of the group's structure represents a novel finding not previously emphasized in the literature. While studies like Nikkhah et al. (2020) point to Telegram's clutter and ephemerality as barriers to effective use, the present findings offer a clear counterexample. In this case, Telegram's design affordances were not only preserved but actively enhanced by group norms—particularly admin-enforced tagging and collective attentiveness to information organization. This highlights how the functionality and sustainability of digital co-ethnic support platforms depend not only on the platform itself but on how it is socially and strategically maintained.

In conclusion, Theme 4 reveals how Telegram's platform-specific features, when combined with community practices, can create a functional, sustainable, and user-friendly system of informational support. Far from being a disorganized stream of messages, the group evolved into a searchable, peer-curated database that addressed the practical challenges of migration with precision and accessibility. This case not only expands how we understand the potential of digital co-ethnic support systems but also challenges prior assumptions about the limitations of informal platforms. When thoughtfully used, such groups can offer a stable form of searchable solidarity, bridging the gap between institutional absence and the immediate needs of students navigating unfamiliar terrain.

## **Theme 5: Cultural Balancing**

This theme highlights how the Telegram group facilitated a dual process of cultural adaptation and cultural preservation among newly arrived Iranian international students. While the participants regularly encountered Canadian cultural norms through daily life, the Telegram group offered a culturally familiar lens through which these norms were interpreted, evaluated, and, in many cases, selectively adopted. Simultaneously, the group created spaces—both digital and physical—for students to maintain and express their Iranian identity. This co-national digital community did not serve as a static cultural refuge but as an active, dynamic site of meaning-making, where students negotiated their positions between two cultural worlds.

Participants described the group as a place where early cultural orientation took place, not through formal instruction but through peer-informed narratives and conversations. Cultural elements such as tipping etiquette, academic email communication styles, hygiene practices, and winter clothing were among the topics discussed. The significance of these discussions lay not only in the content but in the way the information was delivered: through a shared Iranian cultural frame. As one participant explained, recommendations were offered informally by other Iranians who had recently adapted to Canadian norms, and the presence of multiple, sometimes contradictory, perspectives was not disorienting but reassuring: “Even through these conflicting pieces of advice, it helped a lot... even if some information was wrong, it at least helped us not be completely clueless about various topics” (Kamran).

Participants’ accounts revealed that the Telegram group was not merely a source of informational or emotional support, but also a space for cultural sense-making through peer dialogue. Unlike formal channels of adaptation that focus on instructive delivery of cultural norms, the group enabled students to process their reactions to cultural dissonance in real time—with peers who shared their background. Members shared not only practical advice but also voiced their

frustrations, discomfort, and reflections about unfamiliar customs. This created a hybrid communal space where cultural interpretation, critique, and adaptation were performed collectively and informally—something not extensively emphasized in prior research on co-ethnic support networks.

While prior research has highlighted the role of co-national networks in preserving cultural identity and offering emotional comfort (Myles & Cheng, 2003), the present findings show that these networks also facilitated cultural learning and interpretation. Through peer storytelling, advice, and personal anecdotes, participants were able to process unfamiliar host country norms—such as hygiene practices or academic etiquette—in ways that felt cognitively accessible and emotionally grounded. This mode of learning was not unidirectional: it allowed for critique, negotiation, and selective adoption of host cultural norms within a familiar cultural frame. The group enabled a kind of bicultural adjustment, where students could reconcile their Iranian identity with emerging practices in Canada without feeling forced to assimilate. These dynamics align with Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern's (2015) observation that understanding the host culture through co-national peers can support both cultural maintenance and smoother adaptation.

While some scholars caution that extended reliance on co-national networks may reinforce cultural silos and limit deeper integration with host society members (Lim & Pham, 2016; Li, 2024), the findings here offer a more flexible and agentic picture. Students in the Telegram group were exposed to a wide range of cultural attitudes—from those who prioritized preserving Iranian norms to those who fully embraced Canadian cultural practices. Rather than creating polarization or rigidity, this diversity encouraged reflexive comparison. As one participant put it: “I’ve seen both sides... and this group helped me see these two and float myself between these two cases” (Nasim). In this sense, the group supported a form of cultural self-efficacy and selective adaptation,

empowering students to experiment with cross-cultural adjustment while preserving cultural continuity. What emerged was a negotiated, fluid form of bicultural orientation—not dictated by top-down assimilationist pressures, but shaped through peer observation, dialogue, and intentional identity work.

When viewed through Kim's (2001) cross-cultural adaptation theory, this theme offers insight into how the group intervened in the stress–adaptation–growth cycle. According to Kim, adaptation begins with stress—triggered by unfamiliar cultural encounters—which initiates adjustment. However, in this case, the Telegram group sometimes introduced students to culturally novel situations before they experienced them in real life. This anticipatory exposure, whether about hygiene norms, classroom etiquette, or social customs, helped mitigate the disorientation often associated with early encounters. In addition, when students did experience such stressors, they often returned to the group to ask questions, share their reactions, and receive culturally familiar interpretations. What softened the impact of these stressors was not only the peer narratives and shared interpretations, but also the practical tools and context-specific solutions the group offered—from strategies to navigate washroom norms to guidance on culturally appropriate behavior.

Finally, this theme contributes several novel insights to the literature. It reveals how a peer-driven, horizontal discourse enabled students to explore cultural integration without top-down instruction. Within this non-hierarchical environment, members shared observations, exchanged cultural perspectives, and modeled diverse adaptation strategies. This bottom-up knowledge production allowed cultural integration to unfold organically, shaped by lived experiences rather than prescribed norms. In doing so, the group provided students with the freedom to define their own pathways toward bicultural belonging.

In sum, Theme 5 illustrates how the Telegram group helped students balance cultural adaptation and cultural preservation through a peer-mediated, emotionally resonant process. Far from being a passive archive or a space of cultural retreat, the group enabled students to interpret and selectively absorb host norms, express cultural ambivalence, and affirm their Iranian identity—all while navigating the early stages of life in Canada. This finding underscores the significance of informal digital communities in shaping how international students experience and manage cultural transition.

### **Theme 6: From Early Solidarity to Background Presence**

The sixth theme captures a subtle yet significant evolution in participants' relationship to the Telegram group: a shift from active reliance to peripheral presence. During the pre-arrival and early post-arrival stages, the group operated as a virtual lifeline—a central hub for urgent guidance, emotional comfort, and communal solidarity. But as students settled into the rhythms of academic and everyday life in Canada, the group's relevance began to diminish. Engagement declined not only in frequency but also in emotional intensity. While the group remained part of participants' social landscape, it transitioned into a background resource—something to occasionally check, rather than a space to actively inhabit.

At the heart of this shift lies a process of adaptive transformation. Participants' decreased dependence on the group mirrored an emerging sense of confidence and self-sufficiency, particularly after completing foundational tasks like securing housing, navigating bureaucratic systems, and building initial local networks. The metaphor offered by one participant—that they had been like toddlers learning to walk, and now could walk independently, even if they occasionally fell—aptly reflects this trajectory. Rather than signaling a rupture, the group's fading

centrality marked a developmental passage from externally scaffolded adjustment to internalized coping capacity. In this light, the group functioned as a temporary but potent emotional and informational bridge between pre-sojourn vulnerability and post-sojourn autonomy.

This temporal transition aligns closely with Kim's (2001) stress-adaptation-growth model, which conceptualizes cross-cultural adaptation as a cyclical and developmental process. In Kim's framework, initial exposure to cultural disorientation generates stress, which—if managed through communication and support—triggers adaptive responses and ultimately leads to personal growth. The Telegram group played a critical role during the stress and early adaptation phases, helping participants navigate cultural novelty, emotional insecurity, and bureaucratic uncertainty. But as students moved through this cycle, their growing adaptation meant they no longer required the same level or type of support. What Kim calls the "draw-back-to-leap" pattern is echoed in participants' trajectory from intense engagement to detached competence. Importantly, however, the group's gradual loss of centrality did not indicate a rejection of co-ethnic support. Instead, it reflected a recalibration of support networks as students diversified their sources of social capital and became more embedded in their host environment.

The literature further contextualizes this transformation. Research shows that newcomers initially depend heavily on informal, co-ethnic support systems but gradually expand their networks and develop more complex strategies for accessing resources over time (Allard, 2022). Some scholars have even described such digital communities as short-lived and limited in scope (Oh et al., 2014), suggesting that their relevance fades once newcomers move beyond the initial settlement stage. Participants in this study echoed this pattern of time-bound utility, describing how the group played a critical role during the pre-sojourn and early settlement phases, but gradually lost relevance as their support needs evolved. Although the group's utility waned, its

earlier role in forming these enduring connections remained deeply valued. This reflects the evolving nature of support needs across the migration trajectory: as settlement progresses, informational and emotional needs become more localized, specific, and personalized. In this later phase, participants' support networks diversified beyond the Telegram group to include a combination of in-person co-national friends, other digital sources, and increasingly, members of the host society. Many noted that cultural learning and emotional reassurance now came from conversations with Canadian peers, academic mentors, or workplace colleagues—sources that felt more aligned with their current stage of life and challenges.

One of the clearest expressions of this shift was the recognition that the Telegram group no longer addressed participants' emerging post-graduation needs—particularly in relation to career development, job referrals, and resume preparation. The group had offered abundant guidance during the visa and initial settlement phases, but participants noted a marked gap in career-related support later on. This lack of structured guidance was not only experienced as a shortcoming of the group but was often compared—implicitly or explicitly—with what participants perceived to be the more coordinated and responsive support systems in other ethnic communities. The absence of such targeted support was thus experienced as a reduction in informational support, especially as participants sought help with transitioning into the Canadian workforce—a stage widely documented in the literature as one of the most difficult for newcomers due to credential recognition issues, employment barriers, and unfamiliarity with local job market norms (Li & Que, 2016; Lane et al., 2021).

Still, this decline in function did not equate to a total loss of relevance. Many participants continued to stay in the group—not necessarily out of practical need, but because of a lingering sense of social companionship and belonging. While the intensity of solidarity had faded, the group

retained symbolic value as a shared space of communal memory, familiarity, and quiet reassurance. The continuation of members' presence in the group—even in passive ways—suggests that the feeling of being part of a co-national community remained important, even if their active engagement had declined. This subtle but enduring emotional tie points to the group's ongoing role in sustaining a sense of membership within a familiar cultural network.

At the same time, in-person co-national friendships that were originally sparked online grew in significance over time. These relationships were not only emotionally meaningful but also became key sources of instrumental, emotional, and informational support—now adapted to each person's life context. Participants emphasized that these embodied networks offered more personalized, responsive, and context-sensitive forms of support than the large online space could. This shift aligns with literature on co-ethnic support dynamics, which underscores the importance of moving from generalized social networks to more targeted and reciprocal relational structures over time (Myles & Cheng, 2003; Baba & Hosoda, 2014). It also illustrates how informal digital spaces can seed more durable support structures offline, blending the efficiency of mediated communication with the intimacy of lived experience.

Finally, a unique and recurring feature of this theme was participants' commitment to paying forward the support they once received. Even as their own dependence on the group diminished, many felt a moral obligation to remain available for newer arrivals. Whether answering a question, sharing a document, or offering encouragement, these small acts reflected a communal ethic that kept the group's original spirit alive. It also reaffirmed the group's role as a mutual support system—no longer essential for survival, but still meaningful as a collective safety net.

In conclusion, Theme 6 reveals that disengagement from the Telegram group was not a sign of detachment, but a reflection of participants' developmental progression. As their adaptation matured, students transitioned from public group engagement to more intimate, offline, and contextual support networks. The group, once central, faded into the background—not abandoned, but transformed. Its reduced capacity to address evolving needs such as career establishment marked a decline in informational utility, but its symbolic value and affective presence persisted. Participants remained not because they still relied on the group for help, but because it continued to represent a community they belonged to—an archive of solidarity, a space of recognition, and a reminder of the journey they had navigated together.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

This study explored online Telegram-based co-national peer support among Iranian international students during their pre- and early post-arrival experiences in Ottawa. Guided by a descriptive phenomenological approach, the research aimed to understand how digital peer communities shaped emotional, informational, instrumental, and cultural aspects of students' early adaptation journey. The findings demonstrate that the Telegram group was not merely a platform for exchanging information—it played a meaningful role in how participants anticipated and navigated their migration process. It served as a vital social support network, where emotional reassurance, informational guidance, and even practical assistance were exchanged in culturally familiar and timely ways. Through peer-based digital interaction, many students developed a sense of already belonging, reducing their emotional vulnerability and shaping a softer landing into Canadian life.

From the earliest stages—often months before departure—students began engaging with the group to collect information, calm their anxieties, and prepare for the unknown. Their questions were not only about visa processes or what to pack, but about how life in Canada might feel. In response, the group offered both technical guidance and emotional reassurance. This blend of informational and emotional social support helped students feel seen and understood. Participants described the comfort of reading shared concerns, finding answers, and feeling “on the same boat” with others. Emotional support in the group was grounded both in cultural proximity and in temporally aligned migration hardships, making the empathy offered feel genuine and immediately relevant.

Alongside emotional reassurance, the group provided a flexible and responsive form of informational support. Rather than relying on official institutional channels, students turned to

peers to receive up-to-date advice shaped by recent lived experience. The group's conversational tone, use of Persian, and user-generated resources (such as shared templates and screenshots) contributed to its accessibility. Participants noted that even when inaccurate information occasionally appeared, it was quickly corrected, reflecting a culture of shared accountability. This collaborative correction process—where members actively updated, refined, and organized advice—made the group function like a peer team rather than a passive information board. These collaborative practices highlight how the group also functioned as a participatory support system, rather than a one-way channel of help. This type of coordination was not reflected in the reviewed literature. The Telegram space functioned not only as a social community, but also as a peer-maintained digital archive—informal yet resourceful, personal yet efficient.

The Telegram group played a notable role in supporting participants' cultural orientation across both the pre-arrival and early settlement phases. Through informal peer conversations about daily life, social norms, and academic expectations in Canada, students gradually became more familiar with the host culture's values and routines. At the same time, they remained immersed in Persian language and cultural references within the group, which allowed them to maintain a strong connection to their home identity. This dual engagement—staying rooted in their cultural background while learning about the new environment—allowed participants to begin navigating their new lives with a bicultural awareness that reflected both continuity and change in their evolving identity.

Over time, most participants became less active in the group, but they did not view it as irrelevant. On the contrary, their continued presence often reflected two core motivations. First, many described a sense of belonging to the group as a co-national community that had accompanied them through a key transition. Staying in the group, even passively, helped preserve

that emotional connection. Second, several participants expressed a desire to support others the way they themselves had once been supported. This pay-it-forward approach is itself a form of sustaining social support, reinforcing the group's role not only as a space of receiving help, but also of offering it. This pay-it-forward mentality motivated them to remain available to answer questions or offer guidance—not out of obligation, but as a way of giving back to a space that had once played a meaningful role in their own journey.

In addition to extending previous research, this study produced several unique findings. While existing literature on co-national online networks often frames them as transactional and primarily informational, the participants in this study described their group as a genuine emotional community. The presence of empathy, moral responsibility, and a shared sense of belonging distinguished this group from more impersonal forums. Importantly, instrumental support—including real-world help like airport pickups or housing guidance—sometimes came from peers who had only interacted with participants online. This illustrates how online spaces can successfully translate digital social support into offline assistance. Moreover, the group's active maintenance, correction, and resource-sharing habits reflected a collaborative spirit that resembled teamwork more than isolated advice-giving. These insights show that digital peer groups can build not only information flow but also trust, solidarity, and sustained emotional connection.

This study also offers a valuable extension to Kim's (2001) cross-cultural adaptation theory. While Kim emphasizes the importance of communication with host nationals in reducing stress and promoting growth, she also notes that personal characteristics and preparedness factors—such as prior knowledge of the host culture—can shape the stress-adaptation-growth process. The Telegram group contributed directly to this kind of preparedness. Participants became familiar with host culture systems, norms, and unwritten rules before arrival. In this way, their

emotional and cognitive readiness was enhanced through indirect exposure. Although this interaction occurred within a co-national space, it still reduced uncertainty and facilitated early adaptation.

At the same time, the study does not contradict Kim's caution about the potential long-term risks of relying on co-ethnic networks. Participants in this research naturally transitioned from heavy group use toward more individualized and offline forms of support. The findings are therefore bounded within the early settlement phase, where co-national digital peer support appeared to facilitate—not hinder—adjustment. The Telegram group operated not as an obstacle to integration, but as an early-stage resource that many outgrew as their social and emotional capacities developed in the host context.

In conclusion, this study illustrates how an informal, co-national, digital space—built by and for students—offered much more than functional help. It provided emotional buffering, cultural insight, and a socially safe point of entry into an unfamiliar world. Its role as a multi-dimensional social support system—emotional, informational, and instrumental—was central to students' early adaptation and sense of connectedness. The group helped participants feel already connected before arrival, reduced feelings of isolation, and gave them the tools to manage their own adaptation with greater confidence. Even after their active engagement declined, their continued presence in the group reflected not ongoing dependency, but a desire to remain linked to a shared journey. The Telegram group became a symbolic anchor—a quiet digital trace of a formative chapter, and a reminder that they were never truly alone in crossing borders.

## **Limitations**

While this study offers meaningful insights into the early settlement experiences of Iranian international students in Ottawa through the lens of digital co-national peer support, several limitations must be acknowledged.

First, as a qualitative study rooted in phenomenological inquiry, it did not incorporate statistical analyses of demographic factors such as age, gender, marital status, language competency, or preparedness levels for migration. These variables—often considered in quantitative research—could significantly shape adaptation experiences but were beyond the scope of this methodology.

Second, the geographic context of the study is limited to Ottawa. As participants were all members of a Telegram group tied to this city, findings may reflect Ottawa-specific dynamics. Given Ottawa's particular Iranian student demographic and community composition, the experiences captured here may not generalize to Iranian international students in other Canadian cities, such as Toronto or Vancouver, where the size, structure, and social strength of the Iranian community differ significantly.

Additionally, this research focused exclusively on students who were joining the group in preparation for their arrival. The perspectives of long-term members, group administrators, or senior students—those who were responsible for organizing events, moderating discussions, or providing sustained support—were not included. Their insights could have enriched the data by offering a broader view of group dynamics and motivations behind peer support.

Another important limitation lies in the platform specificity of the study. The findings are tied to Telegram and may not be applicable to other platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, or Instagram, which offer different affordances and foster different types of interactions. Moreover,

Telegram is not widely used by all international student populations globally, limiting the cross-contextual generalizability of these results.

The ethnic dimension of the group also poses a boundary to broader applicability. According to Kim's (2001) theory, the strength and structure of ethnic communities influence adaptation processes. The present study examined a group of Iranian students in Ottawa—a context that may differ significantly from other ethnic or national groups, or even from Iranian communities in cities with more established diasporic networks. Results may have looked different in contexts with either weaker or stronger ethnic group cohesion.

In terms of temporal scope, the study emphasized the pre-arrival and early post-arrival phases of the migration journey. As such, it does not capture how relationships and group dynamics evolve over time, nor the long-term impacts of early Telegram-based connections on participants' broader integration or intercultural engagement.

Finally, participant selection was limited to active group members who voluntarily responded to interview invitations. This introduces the possibility of self-selection bias, as individuals who had positive or meaningful experiences with the group may have been more inclined to participate. The study therefore does not capture the perspectives of those who disengaged from the group, had negative interactions, or chose not to participate for other reasons.

Together, these limitations suggest avenues for future research that includes a broader range of participants, considers multiple platforms and cities, and adopts mixed-methods approaches to more fully capture the complexity of international students' digital peer support experiences.

## **Future Recommendations**

Future research could deepen the understanding of co-national peer support among international students by incorporating demographic factors such as age, gender, marital status, language proficiency, and level of preparedness for migration. A mixed-methods approach or a complementary quantitative study could help illuminate how such variables shape the dynamics and outcomes of support-seeking behaviors during the early stages of settlement.

The geographic specificity of this study—focused solely on students relocating to Ottawa—limits the transferability of findings to other Canadian contexts. Future research could explore how digital co-national networks operate in other cities such as Toronto, Vancouver, or Montreal, where the density, structure, and strength of ethnic communities may differ. Comparative studies across urban centers could offer richer insights into how geographic context influences the nature and effectiveness of peer-based digital support.

This study concentrated on the perspectives of new or incoming students who were recipients of support in the Telegram group. Future work could expand the participant pool to include group admins and more senior students who actively provided support. These voices could shed light on the motivations, efforts, and emotional labor involved in sustaining such online communities, offering a fuller picture of peer support dynamics and leadership roles in diasporic digital networks.

Since this study focused on Telegram—a platform popular among Iranians but not universally used—future research could examine similar digital peer support mechanisms on other platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, or WeChat. Comparative platform analysis would help clarify how different technological affordances and group cultures influence the quality, tone, and functionality of co-national peer support.

Finally, future longitudinal research could examine how digitally initiated co-national ties—particularly among international students—transform over time, especially as they shift from online interactions to in-person relationships. While much of the existing literature has explored co-ethnic networks in immigrant contexts, less is known about how international students specifically experience and maintain peer connections that begin online. Tracking these transitions across migration stages would help illuminate how early digital engagement shapes students' evolving social networks, coping strategies, and long-term adaptation processes.

These future directions would deepen our understanding of international student adaptation in the digital era and help develop more inclusive, context-sensitive frameworks of support across migration stages and social platforms.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Interview Guide**

#### **Pre-Interview:**

- Welcome participant
- Review and sign consent form
- Answer any questions
- Explain interview process
- Ask demographic questions
- Set up recording devices

#### **Interview Questions:**

##### **1. Initial Engagement**

"Could you tell me about how you first learned about and joined the Iranian students' Telegram group in Ottawa? What motivated you to join, and what was that initial process like?"

Follow-up probes:

- How did you discover the group?
- What made you decide to join?

##### **2. Group Activities**

"Could you walk me through what typically happens in these Telegram groups - what kinds of interactions and activities do you observe and participate in?"

Follow-up probes:

- What types of discussions occur?
- How do you personally participate?

### **3. Notable Experiences**

"What stands out to you most when you think about your own experiences interacting with other Iranian students in these groups? Could you share a particular experience?"

Follow-up probes:

- What made this experience memorable?
- How did you feel during this interaction?

### **4. Personal Meaning**

"Looking back at your time in Ottawa, what has it meant to you to have access to these Telegram groups with other Iranian students?"

Follow-up probes:

- How has it impacted your life here?
- What role does the group play for you?

### **5. Online vs In-Person**

"How does connecting with other Iranian students through Telegram compare to meeting and interacting with them in person?"

Follow-up probes:

- What are the main differences?
- What are the advantages/challenges of each?

## **6. Daily Life Impact**

"Comparing the first few months of your arrival in Canada to now, in what ways have your interactions in these Telegram groups influenced your ability to handle daily life situations in Ottawa?"

Follow-up probes:

- Can you give specific examples?
- How has this changed over time?

## **7. Emotional Aspects**

"Comparing the first few months of your arrival in Canada to now, how do your conversations and connections in these Telegram groups affect you emotionally as you navigate life as a newcomer in Canada?"

Follow-up probes:

- What emotions do you experience?
- How has this changed over time?

## **8. Cultural Identity**

"Comparing the first few months of your arrival in Canada to now, how has participating in these Telegram groups influenced your understanding of how to be both Iranian and a member of Canadian society?"

Follow-up probes:

- How do you balance these identities?
- What role does the group play?

## **9. Evolution Over Time**

"How have your experiences and interactions in these Telegram groups evolved over time since you first joined?"

Follow-up probes:

- What major changes have you noticed?
- What has remained consistent?

### **General Follow-up Probes:**

- Could you tell me more about that?
- How did that experience feel?
- What does that mean to you?
- Could you provide an example?

- What happened next?

### Post-Interview:

- Answer any final questions

- Thank the participant

### Translation of the Interview Questions in Persian/ Farsi:

1. میتونید در مورد اینکه چطور با گروه‌های تلگرامی دانشجویان ایرانی در اتاوا آشنا شدید و به اونها پیوستید برام .  
تعریف کنید؟ چی باعث شد بخواید عضو بشید و اون فرایند اولیه چطور بود؟
2. میشه توضیح بدید که معمولاً توی این گروه‌های تلگرامی چه اتفاقاتی می‌افته - چه نوع تعاملات و فعالیت‌هایی رو مشاهده می‌کنید و در چه فعالیت‌هایی مشارکت دارید؟
3. وقتی به تجربیات خودتون در تعامل با دانشجویان ایرانی در این گروه‌ها فکر می‌کنید، چه چیزی بیشتر به چشمتون میاد؟ می‌تونید یک تجربه خاص رو به اشتراک بگذارید؟
4. وقتی به زمانی که در اتاوا بودید نگاه می‌کنید، دسترسی به این گروه‌های تلگرامی با دانشجویان ایرانی چه معنایی براتون داشته؟
5. ارتباط با دانشجویان ایرانی از طریق تلگرام چه تفاوت‌هایی با ملاقات و تعامل حضوری با اونها داره؟
6. وقتی ماه‌های اول ورودتون به کانادا رو با الان مقایسه می‌کنید، تعاملات شما در این گروه‌های تلگرامی چه تاثیری روی توانایی شما در مدیریت موقعیت‌های روزمره در اتاوا داشته؟

7. وقتی ماه‌های اول ورودتون به کانادا رو با الان مقایسه می‌کنید، گفتگوها و ارتباطات شما در این گروه‌های تلگرامی

چطور روی شما از نظر احساسی تاثیر گذاشته در حالی که به عنوان یک تازه‌وارد در کانادا زندگی می‌کنید؟

8. وقتی ماه‌های اول ورودتون به کانادا رو با الان مقایسه می‌کنید، مشارکت در این گروه‌های تلگرامی چه تاثیری روی

درک شما از اینکه چطور می‌شه همزمان هم ایرانی بود و هم عضوی از جامعه کانادا داشته؟

9. از زمانی که اول به این گروه‌ها پیوستید، تجربیات و تعاملات شما در این گروه‌های تلگرامی چطور تغییر کرده؟