US-based social media use and American life: A study of Chinese students’ acculturation and adaptation in America

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Abstract
This study investigated how the use of major US-based social media is related to the acculturation and adaptation among Chinese students in America. Survey data collected from 408 respondents showed that more frequent Facebook and Twitter use activities contributed to higher acculturation, whereas more frequent responses received on the two Social Networking Services led to better adaptation. Online network sizes have more robust effects on the acculturation than on adaptation. Implications about how social media use may affect their online network subgroups were also discussed.

Keywords
Acculturation, adaptation, diaspora, network size, social media

Introduction
Chinese international students as a fast growing group in the United States have intrigued many scholars in communication and cultural studies (e.g. Kline & Liu, 2005; Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993; C.-C. D. C. Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006). Nevertheless, due to various internal and external factors, their levels of satisfaction with life appear to vary in a great range. A study by Ingman (1999) showed that Chinese students in America tend to be highly interdependent with higher social anxiety and lower social adjustment. Along with the rise of computer-mediated communication (CMC), will social media use change this situation? This study aims at probing Chinese students’ usage of mainstream US-based Social Networking Services (SNSs), that is, Facebook and Twitter, in an effort to explore potential factors that could enhance the life quality of Chinese international students.

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Social media make it easy and efficient for people to interact with family, relatives, friends, and acquaintances over a long distance and are becoming an indispensable part of our life, especially among the younger generation. Although the world has witnessed the rise and fall of several SNSs in the past decade (such as Hi5, Friendster, MySpace, Bebo, and others), it is no doubt that Facebook has survived this fierce competition as the most popular SNS. Up to 2016, there are 1.71 billion monthly active users on Facebook (Fiegerman, 2016). Facebook’s dominance is also corroborated by a Pew Research Center report (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016) revealing that Facebook continues to be the most popular SNS website by a substantial margin. Another platform for social networking, known as microblogging service, attracts a different target audience with its simplistic interface and text-based posts. Twitter as the most popular microblog enjoys a total of 313 million monthly active users as of June 2016 (“Twitter,” 2016). The Pew Research Center report (Greenwood et al., 2016) showed that around one-quarter of online adults (24%) use Twitter.

SNS websites have been growing rapidly in China too. However, due to the Chinese government’s tightened policy of Internet censorship, Facebook and Twitter are both blocked in mainland China. As a consequence, Chinese Internet users literally have no access to either of the two websites. Meanwhile, many domestic SNS websites (e.g. Weibo, Weixin, and Renren) have cropped up and thrived in mainland China without the interference of their foreign competitors. When Chinese students relocate to America for the purpose of academic advancement, it remains a question whether they will start to adopt American-based social network services and how their usage on American-based SNSs affects their life overseas.

**Literature review**

*Acculturation and adaptation*

Acculturation refers to the gradual process of cultural and psychological change resulting from the contact between two cultural groups (Sam & Berry, 2010). The changes can be reflected not only in people’s social and work activities but also in their thinking patterns, values, and self-identifications (Wong-Rieeger & Quintana, 1987). To be specific, acculturation explains the changes in perception, attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors among members of one cultural group toward the standard of another cultural group (Gordon, 1964). Different from enculturation, which mainly describes the acquisition of someone’s first culture, acculturation mostly deals with the process of second-culture learning.

Adaptation is a term that is closely related to, but should be clearly differentiated from, acculturation. Several studies concentrated on the cross-cultural process of adaptation among overseas sojourners and immigrants, endeavoring to discover more efficient ways to cope with the mental stress accompanied in this process and to enhance the psychological well-being and functional fitness in a foreign society (e.g., Y. Y. Kim, 1977, 2001, 2006; Y. Y. Kim, Lujan, & Dixon, 1998). Later on, Berry and other scholars (Berry, 2009; Ward, 2013; Ward & Kennedy, 1994; Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999) revised Kim’s theory of adaptation by adding that adjustment (adaptation) is not only the individual’s process of handling stress and pain he or she experiences in a new culture but also the activities of learning new social skills to fit in the foreign culture. In other words, they argued that adaptation to a new culture has two aspects: psychological and socio-cultural. Berry (1980) claimed that the mental stress accompanied by people adapting to new cultures included various individual factors such as personality, education, gender, age, race, and income. Ward and Rana-Deuba (1999) stressed the differences between acculturation and adaptation, arguing that
although learning new skills can increase the level of acculturation in the socio-cultural aspect, the psychological level of adaptation may go in a different route as depression can develop over time.

Several factors have been found to influence the level of acculturation and adaptation. However, many researchers did not strictly differentiate these two constructs and others used them interchangeably. According to Mavreas and Bebbington (1990), the influential factors may include individual characteristics (i.e. age, personality, education, occupation, and motivation) as well as social factors (i.e. religion, school, neighborhood, and family). Time length of living in the host country is also a potential factor that affects acculturation as the study by J. K. Kim (1978) indicated that Korean immigrants are more likely to have a high level of acculturation if they have lived longer in the host country.

Uses and Gratifications

Uses and Gratifications (U&G) is a classic media theory that explores the active role of media users and has been intensively studied in the traditional media, including TV, radio, and books (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). U&G believes that audiences seek different media platforms to meet their particular needs and develop distinct media use patterns accordingly (Rubin, 1994). Various gratifications have been identified. For example, McQuail, Blumler, and Brown (1972) proposed the needs for diversion, personal relationships, surveillance, and personal identities. Katz and colleagues (1973) suggested a similar set of gratifications, that is, cognitive needs (e.g. getting useful information), affective needs (e.g. aesthetic or emotional experience), social interactive needs (e.g. contacting friends and family), tension release needs (e.g. watching movies and listening to music), and personal integrative needs (e.g. maintaining good personal image).

Although not much literature explicitly explored the need for acculturation and adaptation from a strict U&G perspective, the connection between media consumption and life quality among sojourners and immigrants has been studied by several media scholars (e.g. Chaffee, Nass, & Yang, 1990; Dalisay, 2012). For example, Barnett, Oliveira, and Johnson (1989) advocated that audience’s exposure to traditional media such as television and newspaper could affect their acculturation process. Reece and Palmgreen (2010) suggested that international students from India use mass media to obtain host-country information to fulfill their need for acculturation. In particular, several studies (Chaffee et al., 1990; Jeffres, 2000; Subervi-Velez, 1986) implied the role of using host media in enhancing the expatriates’ acculturation level. Yang et al. (2004) investigated the relationship between acculturation, acculturative motives, and media use in a study that also targeted Chinese students in the United States. Their results showed that need for acculturation is positively associated with both Internet and TV use, suggesting that stronger acculturation need will lead to stronger acculturation motives for media use and, as a consequence, a higher frequency of usage of US-based (host) Internet and TV among Chinese students. Allison and Emmers-Sommer (2011) found out that greater US (host) media use (i.e. TV, movie, video games, music, radio, Internet, magazines, and cell phones) is correlated with higher acculturation levels for international students in America; on the other hand, increased non-US (ethnic) media use is related to much lower scores in their acculturation level.

With the development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), acculturation studies concerning new media are on recent scholars’ agenda. Due to Chinese government’s restriction in accessing foreign websites, Facebook and Twitter as typical US-based social media are only available to a small group of Chinese people who travel or live abroad and thus could be considered
as host media from an intercultural perspective. Mao and Qian (2015) found out that overseas Chinese professionals in Western countries use Facebook as an acculturation platform to learn about popular social topics in host countries. In contrast to the popular belief that new media can facilitate sojourners’ and immigrants’ acculturation, several studies suggested otherwise that the increased accessibility and interactivity of new media does not necessarily lead to an increased level of acculturation (e.g. Lievrouw, 2001; Melkote & Liu, 2000). Melkote and Liu (2000) claimed that the Internet, satellite television, and other forms of easily available electronic media offered a convenient way for minority groups in a foreign country to maintain their preexisting ethnic ties over a long distance by receiving their ethnic information, including values, ideas, and ideologies from home nations. Therefore, more research is in demand before a conclusion can be reached regarding the role of digital media in the acculturation process.

Adaptation among the diasporic population might be related to both mass media usage and their acculturation level. Hsu (2010) did a study of cross-cultural adaptation among Chinese in America by means of questionnaire, showing that Chinese people with an increased proportion of life in America are more likely to identify with American culture. The findings suggested that their communication behavior was much influenced by the degree of exposure to and assimilation into the US culture. However, Croucher (2011) argued that immigrants can use media and technologies to either resist or assist, implying that exposure to mass media in the host culture does not necessarily enhance but may possibly impede people’s adaptation process under certain circumstances.

The Internet’s role in people’s adaptation to a host country is a new focus in many recent studies (e.g. K.-H. Kim, Yun, & Yoon, 2009; Wang & Sun, 2009; Ye, 2006). Tsai (2006) found out that Internet use could facilitate Taiwanese people’s cultural adaptation process by enhancing their English ability. Ye (2006) argued that social difficulties experienced by Chinese students in America are negatively associated with received support from online social groups, whereas mood disturbance among them is negatively associated with received support from long-distance networks in the home country. Wang and Sun (2009) conducted a study of Chinese students’ Internet use and its relationship with cross-cultural adaptation, concluding that loneliness played a crucial role in Chinese students’ motives for Internet use. They also suggested that non-lonely students are more likely to use the Internet for acculturation than for passing time and companionship, and loneliness is also negatively associated with the degree of socio-cultural adaptation and psychological adaptation.

Research questions and hypotheses

Two major US-based social media are under investigation, that is, Facebook and Twitter. The two most popular SNSs have some features that differentiate one from the other. First, Facebook’s social network is based on mutual consent of being friends, whereas Twitter users can create one-way following connection with any peer users without their approval or even notice. This difference in network connection pattern leads to Facebook users’ focus on a limited number of “close-tie” friends and Twitter users’ ability to connect a large amount of “weak-tie” friends or even random strangers. Second, Facebook draws a fine line between individual profiles and public pages (i.e. pages for celebrities, brands, services, companies, and organizations), whereas Twitter accounts do not. This difference in account/profile type could help strengthen Facebook’s relationship-maintaining goal and Twitter’s information-driven goal.
Frequency of US social media use and acculturation level

Based on the U&G theory, Yang, Ha, Yun, and Chen (2015) studied the relationship between the frequency of social media use and the size of their online social networks, concluding that users’ information seeking and broadcasting activities can predict the number of their Twitter followings and followers, but not the number of their Facebook friends. It is intriguing to discover whether frequent use of US-based social media will have a similar effect on Chinese students’ acculturation level. As Chinese students who use US-based social media more frequently tend to have an increased exposure to the American culture, we expect that they will intentionally use them to fulfill their needs for acculturation to the US culture. Hence, RQ1 and its related hypotheses are proposed:

RQ1. Does the frequency of active use on US-based social media use affect Chinese students’ acculturation to the American culture?

H1a. The more frequently Chinese students use Facebook, the higher their level of acculturation will be.

H1b. The more frequently Chinese students use Twitter, the higher their level of acculturation will be.

Network size on US social media and acculturation level

On the other hand, if a Chinese student added more friends on Facebook and Twitter, he or she may have a stronger desire to interact with people living in America and absorbing the US mainstream culture. Therefore, we predicted that a bigger size of their social networks on US-based social media can better cater to the need for acculturation. Hence, RQ2 was proposed:

RQ2. Does the size of Chinese students’ online networks on US-based social media affect their acculturation to American culture?

Due to the different connecting pattern of social networks between Facebook and Twitter, the following proposed hypotheses varied accordingly to fit the two social media platforms, respectively. Because the friendship on Facebook is based on two users’ mutual approval, Facebook adopted its closed networking feature that encourages “an intimate, private community” (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 218). Therefore, it is expected that Chinese students’ Facebook networks are mainly composed of friends and acquaintances, whereas their Twitter connections may have a large proportion of strangers. In this sense, Chinese students’ Facebook friends may include a large proportion of Chinese peers they know after relocating overseas due to their same national, cultural, and linguistic background since people in China have no access to Facebook and Twitter. Their Chinese peers may include Chinese immigrants, visiting scholars, professionals, students, and their family residing in America. These Chinese sojourners and immigrants represent a unique local community that adopts both Chinese and American cultural characteristics, which could possibly facilitate their acculturation needs. Hence, H2a was proposed:
H2a. The more Chinese friends Chinese students have on Facebook, the higher their level of acculturation will be.

Similarly, if Chinese students added more American friends on Facebook, these American friends are more likely to be people whom they got to know in real life rather than random strangers online. These American friends on Facebook may also play an important role in meeting their acculturation needs. Hence, H2b was proposed:

H2b. The more American friends Chinese students have on Facebook, the higher their level of acculturation will be.

Besides their Chinese peers, many international students from other countries experience the similar acculturation stress and difficulty. As X. Wang and Nayir (2006) argued, building social ties with international students in the host country can assist Chinese students in coping with language and cultural barriers for better adjustment in a new environment. Hence, H2c was proposed:

H2c. The more intentional students and friends Chinese students have on Facebook, the higher their level of acculturation will be.

Compared to Facebook, Twitter is more information-oriented than relationship-centered because its one-way linkage promotes information flow and encourages the establishment of weak ties (e.g. Brock, 2012; Honeycutt & Herring, 2009; Yang et al., 2015). As most Twitter users are outside mainland China, Chinese students could follow more Twitter accounts to meet their informational need for current news and hot issues related to the American society as well as the need to acculturate into the US values and ideology. Furthermore, there are a large number of public Twitter accounts owned by US pop stars, politicians, organizations, companies, and brands, embodying a miniature of American mainstream pop culture and corporate culture. Following these public Twitter accounts may better serve the need of Chinese students for acculturation. Therefore, we have the following hypotheses:

H2d. The more Twitter users Chinese students follow, the higher their level of acculturation will be.

H2e. The more public or celebrity Twitter accounts Chinese students follow, the higher their level of acculturation will be.

Frequency of US social media use and adaptation level

The concept of adaptation is a bit different from acculturation, in that acculturation is more of a subjective measurement of expatriates’ mental state, which deals with their self-identification with a host culture, whereas adaptation is more of an objective reflection and evaluation of how well these people are adjusted to life in a host culture. In this sense, the frequency of active social media use among Chinese students may not significantly enhance their adaptation to life in a foreign country because students with adaptation problems may use social media as a way to escape the mental stress and communication obstacles they encounter in the real world. On the other hand, the responses and feedback they received on social media can be an effective way to ease their loneliness and tension in adapting to life in a foreign country. Therefore, we have the following research question and hypotheses:
RQ3. Does the frequency of responsive activities Chinese students receive on US-based social media use affect their adaptation to life in America?

H3a. The more frequent responses Chinese students receive on Facebook, the higher their level of adaptation will be.

H3b. The more frequent responses Chinese students receive on Twitter, the higher their level of adaptation will be.

Network size on US social media and adaptation level

More connections on Facebook and Twitter may provide a convenient resource for Chinese students to acquire new social skills, get familiar with cultural knowledge, and alleviate their mental stress in cross-cultural communication, which could eventually play a role in enhancing their adaptation to the American culture and life. Therefore, RQ4 and relevant hypotheses are proposed:

RQ4. Does the network size on US-based social media affect Chinese students’ adaptation to life in America?

H4a. The more Chinese friends Chinese students have on Facebook, the higher their level of adaptation will be.

H4b. The more American friends Chinese students have on Facebook, the higher their level of adaptation will be.

H4c. The more international students/friends Chinese students have on Facebook, the higher their level of adaptation will be.

H4d. The more Twitter followers Chinese students have, the higher their level of adaptation will be.

Method

Participants and data collection

All the participants were Chinese students registered in American colleges and universities, including both undergraduates and graduate students. Participants were recruited in two ways: (1) a link to the online survey was posted in major online communities for Chinese overseas students living in America, including major BBS (Bulletin Board System), Facebook groups, and Tencent QQ chatrooms, and (2) an email including the survey link was sent to a mailing list for Chinese scholars and students in a northeastern public university in the United States. The whole survey could be completed within 10 to 15 minutes. The data were collected between February and May 2016.

Measures

The questionnaire collected the following categories of information: general background information, usage pattern of Facebook, usage pattern of Twitter, level of acculturation, and level of adaptation.
**Facebook active use.** Respondents were asked to rate the frequency of active Facebook use involving establishing new friendship, maintaining preexisting relationships, updating status, and obtaining and sharing information. An average score for the frequencies of these social media activities was calculated for the data analysis.

**Facebook responses.** Respondents were asked to rate the frequency of responsive activities received from peer Facebook users. An average score for the frequencies of responses on Facebook was calculated for the data analysis.

**Facebook network size.** It consisted of three sub-variables, that is, American friends, Chinese friends, and international students/friends on Facebook. They were measured by the self-reported total numbers of American friends, Chinese friends, and international students/friends a respondent has on Facebook.

**Twitter active use.** Respondents were asked to rate the frequency of active Twitter use involving tweeting, reading tweets, retweeting, liking, and following.

**Twitter responses.** Respondents were asked to rate the frequency of five responsive activities received from peer Twitter users, that is, “new following,” “mentioned with @,” “replying,” “liking,” and “retweeting.”

**Twitter network size.** It consisted of three sub-variables, that is, Twitter followings, public/celebrity Twitter account followings, and Twitter followers. The variable of Twitter followings was measured by the self-reported total number of people a respondent follows on Twitter. The variable of public/celebrity Twitter account followings was measured by the self-reported total number of public/celebrity Twitter accounts a respondent follows on Twitter. The variable of Twitter followers was measured by the self-reported total number of people a respondent is followed by on Twitter.

**Acculturation.** The degree of acculturation was measured by an ethnic/cultural identity scale developed by Ting-Toomey et al. (2000), with some modifications to meet the current study’s specific purposes. The revised 30-item composite measure of acculturation covered a wide range of cultural beliefs related to both home culture and host culture, such as identification with American or Chinese traditional values, concern with US or China issues, strength of ties with friends in America or back in China, attraction to US or Chinese pop culture and media, and so on. Based on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree,” an average score was calculated to represent each respondent’s acculturation level.

**Adaptation.** The degree of Chinese students’ adaptation was measured by a 32-item modified version of Ward and Kennedy’s (1999) Socio-Cultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS). The revised 32-item composite measure of acculturation covered a variety of questions covering both the psychological and socio-cultural stress of Chinese students’ life in America, such as language issue, social gathering, lifestyle, schoolwork and classroom communication, pastime, and others. Respondents were asked to rate the difficulty they experienced in their American life, with a 5-point scale from “no difficulty” to “extreme difficulty.” A reversed average score was calculated to represent each respondent’s adaptation level. Therefore, a higher score indicated a lower degree of experienced psychological and socio-cultural difficulty and thus a higher level of adaptation to life in America.
In total, 408 respondents who identify themselves as Chinese students living in America completed the survey. Among the 408 respondents, 336 are Facebook users (82.4%) and 168 are Twitter users (41.2%). The respondents’ average age is 26 years old (standard deviation (SD) = 4) with youngest being 19 and oldest being 43.

For RQ1, two models of multiple regression analysis were employed to examine the relationship between US-based social media active use and Chinese students’ acculturation to the American culture.

Table 1 shows that the frequency of active Facebook use (beta = .255, p < .01) significantly predicted the acculturation level among Chinese students living in America. Thus, H1a was supported, indicating that a higher frequency of active use on Facebook leads to higher levels of acculturation to the American culture.

Table 2 shows that the frequency of active Twitter use (beta = .616, p < .01) significantly predicted the acculturation level among Chinese students living in America. Thus, H1b was supported, indicating that a higher frequency of active use on Twitter leads to higher levels of acculturation to the American culture.

For RQ2, the same two models of multiple regression analysis were employed to examine the relationship between online social network size on US-based social media and Chinese students’ acculturation to the American culture.

Table 1 shows that the number of Chinese friends on Facebook (beta = −.109, p < .05) significantly predicted the acculturation level among Chinese students living in America. However, in contrast to the original assumption in H2a, the analysis suggested an opposite effect that more
Chinese friends on Facebook lead to lower levels of acculturation. Thus, H2a was not supported, indicating that the more Chinese friends on Facebook Chinese students have, the lower their level of acculturation will be.

Table 1 shows that the number of American friends on Facebook (\(\beta = .205, p < .05\)) significantly predicted the acculturation level among Chinese students living in America. Thus, H2b was supported, indicating that more American friends on Facebook lead to higher levels of acculturation.

Table 1 shows that the number of international students and friends on Facebook (\(\beta = .383, p < .01\)) significantly predicted the acculturation level among Chinese students living in America. Thus, H2c was supported, indicating that more international students and friends on Facebook lead to higher levels of acculturation.

Table 2 shows that the number of Twitter followings (\(\beta = -.838, p < .01\)) significantly predicted the acculturation level among Chinese students living in America. However, in contrast to the original assumption in H2d, the analysis suggested an opposite effect that more Twitter followings lead to lower levels of acculturation. Thus, H2d was not supported, indicating that the more Twitter users Chinese students follow, the lower their level of acculturation will be.

Table 2 shows that the number of public Twitter account followings (\(\beta = .826, p < .01\)) significantly predicted the acculturation level among Chinese students living in America. Thus, H2e was supported, indicating that the more celebrity and public Twitter accounts Chinese students follow, the higher their level of acculturation will be.

For RQ3, two models of multiple regression analysis were employed to examine the relationship between responses received on US-based social media and Chinese students' adaptation to life in America.

Table 3 shows that Facebook responses (\(\beta = .442, p < .01\)) significantly predicted the adaptation level among Chinese students living in America. Thus, H3a was supported, indicating that the more frequently Chinese students receive responses on Facebook, the higher their level of adaptation will be.

Table 4 shows that Twitter responses (\(\beta = .699, p < .01\)) significantly predicted the adaptation level among Chinese students living in America. Thus, H3b was supported, indicating that the more frequently Chinese students receive responses from peer Twitter users, the higher their level of adaptation will be.

For RQ4, the same two models of multiple regression analysis were employed to examine the relationship between the online network size on US-based social media and Chinese students' adaptation to life in America.
Table 3 shows that the number of Chinese friends on Facebook (beta = −.018, p > .05) failed to predict the adaptation level among Chinese students living in America. Thus, H4a was not supported, indicating that there is no relationship between the number of Chinese friends on Facebook and levels of adaptation among Chinese students.

Table 3 shows that the p-value for American friends is close to .5. Therefore, the number of American friends on Facebook (beta = .145, p < .1) marginally predicted the adaptation level among Chinese students living in America. Thus, H4b was marginally supported, indicating that more American friends on Facebook could potentially lead to higher levels of adaptation to life in America among Chinese students.

Table 3 shows that the number of international students/friends on Facebook (beta = −.138, p < .05) significantly predicted the adaptation level among Chinese students at all. However, in contrast to the original assumption in H4c, the analysis suggested an opposite effect that more friends on Facebook lead to lower levels of adaptation. Thus, H4c was not supported, indicating that the more international students/friends Chinese students have on Facebook, the lower their levels of adaptation to life in America will be.

Table 4 shows that the number of Twitter followers (beta = −.124, p > .05) failed to predict the adaptation level among Chinese students living in America. Thus, H4d was not supported, indicating that there is no relationship between the number of Twitter followers and Chinese students’ level of adaptation.

**Conclusion**

The data analysis suggested the following implications about the relationship between Facebook/Twitter use and levels of acculturation and adaptation among Chinese students.

First, more active use on US-based social media can lead to a higher level of acculturation among Chinese students in America. The result that Chinese students with a higher frequency of active Facebook and Twitter use reported to be better acculturated is consistent with previous studies that suggested Facebook’s positive impact on acculturation (e.g. Mao & Qian, 2015; Peeters & Fourie, 2016). It is reasonable because, aside from connecting with friends and acquaintances online, more and more people are using social media to obtain important news and information (Yang et al., 2015). Twitter is well known for its retweeting function, which can get a popular tweet viral among its larger user base within a short period. Although Facebook has specialized in maintaining a relatively “closed” social network, it recently also strengthened its informational function by promoting public pages and highlighting “trending” topics. Therefore, US-based social media can offer Chinese students an easily accessible acculturating platform so that active SNS users can get familiar with the current news media agenda in America.
Second, Chinese students’ online social network sizes across American SNSs tend to have an impact on their acculturation as both the number of Facebook friends and the number of Twitter followings significantly predicted their acculturation level. Chinese students with more American friends and international students/friends on Facebook are likely to have higher levels of acculturation. However, the number of Chinese friends on Facebook is negatively associated with Chinese students’ acculturation level. This suggested that to become more acculturated, Chinese students should not limit their social life to the Chinese online communities only but must also expand their networks to American and international networking circles. In other words, an effort to reach out to more American friends and international peers will enhance their comfort with and accelerate their acceptance into mainstream American culture. Echoing with previous findings of Twitter use for information-driven gratifications (Yang et al., 2015), students who follow more public Twitter accounts by American celebrities, organizations, and companies are likely to be better acculturated. Nevertheless, Chinese students who follow more peer Twitter users tend to have a lower level of acculturation, which runs counter to our original assumption that more Twitter followings can lead to better acculturation. This unexpected result hinted at the following possibilities: if Chinese Twitter users choose to distance themselves from American culture, they are more likely to spend time alone online following random peer Twitter users than go out to interact with people; on the other hand, if Chinese students are extremely enthusiastic about the American culture, they would intentionally follow more public/celebrity Twitter accounts that are relevant to the US socio-cultural context. Therefore, the number of public Twitter accounts Chinese students follow can effectively facilitate Chinese students’ acculturation, but the number of their total Twitter followings does not.

Third, the frequency of responsive activities received on US-based social media has a significant impact on Chinese students’ adaptation level, but the size of their online social network seems to be associated with their adaptation in a more complicated way. Above all, more frequent responses on Facebook and Twitter consistently predicted a better adaptation to overseas life. Meanwhile, online network size’s only significant effect on Chinese students’ adaptation was found for the number of international students/friends on Facebook. Nevertheless, the effect was negative in the sense that more international students/friends on Facebook led to a lower adaptation level. This suggested that Chinese students’ immersion in online interaction with too many international peers living in America could cause the tendency to confine their social circles to a marginalized non-American online community, which could minimize their exposure to the mainstream American social and cultural life and eventually reduce their confidence in and comfort with adapting to an American life. Furthermore, the number of American and international friends on Facebook has no significant effect on Chinese students’ adaptation. Nor is there any effect of the number of Twitter followers on adaptation. This indicated that to ease Chinese student’s tension and difficulty, a one-way approach to actively reaching out to users on US social media is not sufficient. The feedbacks and active interactions students received from peer SNS users are a much more influential factor to enhance their life quality in America.

Fourth, US-based social media use appeared to fulfill Chinese students’ need for acculturation and adaptation in two different patterns. On one hand, high frequency of social media use can satisfy students’ need for better acculturation, and so do larger network sizes on Facebook and Twitter. On the other hand, their adaptation level is affected by the responsive activities Chinese students received on Facebook and Twitter, while the effect of online social network sizes appears less robust. This difference is expected because the two concepts are based on two inherently different
conceptualizations. Acculturation is defined as the gradual process of cultural change resulting from cross-cultural communication and operationalized by measuring the degree that Chinese students identify themselves with American culture. Adaptation is the social and psychological change in an effort to accommodate oneself to a life in a foreign country. Despite the similarity of the two concepts, there is a clear difference in their foci: Acculturation focuses on the shifting of self-claimed cultural identity from home culture to host culture, whereas adaptation concentrates on the acquisition of social ability and the enhancement of psychological well-being in a foreign country. As one’s self-claimed cultural identity is subject to individual’s idealistic wish, the level of acculturation can be more maneuverable, lending Chinese students more capacity to intentionally customize their social media in terms of active use frequency and social network size so as to cater to their need for acculturation. Nevertheless, adaptation is a more objective evaluation of expatriates’ coping ability and mental health based on a real-life experience in a foreign country, which is beyond international students’ control. As several scholars have claimed (e.g. Chun & Choi, 2003; Croucher, 2008), acculturation sometimes is a stressful experience that could be accompanied with negative psychological tension, including depression and loneliness, which is unavoidably reflected in the measurement of their adaptation level.

**Implications**

The findings provided strong support for the claim that active use of social media bound in the host culture can affect the preferred cultural identity among sojourners and expatriates in a foreign country. Although several studies (e.g. Allison & Emmers-Sommer, 2011; Y. Y. Kim, 1988) have found out that greater use of US media is linked to higher acculturation levels among international students and the less acculturated are more likely to seek media outlets outside the United States, their research mainly focused on traditional mass media such as television, movies, radio, music, magazines, and books. The current study further corroborated that digital media platforms, especially when it comes to American-based SNSs, can be a powerful tool to get Chinese students interested in, motivated to learn, and eventually to help them identify with the mainstream American culture.

Consistent with the assumption based on U&G approach, the expansion of online social networks can effectively fulfill Chinese students’ desire to identify with and learn the American culture. It was reasonable because more non-Chinese Facebook friends, composed of American citizens as well as international students from other countries, and more followings of Public Twitter accounts can increase social media users’ exposure to posts or tweets related to the US society from their peer users. Nevertheless, an excessive number of Chinese peers on Facebook are likely to swamp them with information about the Chinese culture only, which may be a reason why more Chinese friends on Facebook are associated with lower acculturation. Thus, Chinese students should actively reach out to interact with more diverse online friends on Facebook and Twitter instead of cocooning themselves in an exclusive Chinese online community.

Different from the acculturation level, Chinese students’ adaptation to the American life is influenced by the responsive activities received on social media rather than their active use. Either on Facebook or Twitter, more frequent responses can alleviate their perceived difficulty with American life. In short, one-way active use of US-based social media does not necessarily elevate Chinese students’ psychological comfort and ease their acculturative stress because American people’s attitude toward Chinese students and their interactions with them on social media matter more. This
finding may complicate the claim by Cemalcilar, Falbo, and Stapleton (2005) that more use of CMC technologies to interact with the host culture will result in higher socio-cultural adaptation.

The comparison between Facebook and Twitter demonstrated more similarities than differences in their influences on acculturation and adaptation. Their similarities can be summarized in two points. For one thing, the active use frequency and social network size, across Facebook and Twitter, have an effect on Chinese students’ willingness to adopt and identify with American culture. For another, the frequency of responses received on both SNSs has an impact on how effectively Chinese students adapt themselves, but their online network sizes showed less evidence for influencing their adaptation. Nevertheless, in contrast to Twitter, Facebook seems to deliver a more delicate picture of the effect of social network sizes because its unique “strong-tie” network structure provides more detailed information about each specific subgroup: More Chinese Facebook friends lead to lower acculturation levels, whereas more international students/friends on Facebook lead to lower adaptation levels. This may suggest that the sole effort to grow an ethnically homogeneous Facebook network oriented to Chinese students’ home culture can only impede the process of cultural assimilation, leading to their reluctance to absorb American cultural values, whereas a networking circle on Facebook focusing on an excessive amount of non-American (i.e. international students/friends) may deprive Chinese students of their fair share of exposure to American social life, resulting in their less satisfactory adjustment in a foreign country. The negative impact of non-American social network size bears much resemblance to the findings that ethnic media use is negatively related to the level of acculturation (e.g. Jeffres, 2000; Subervi-Velez, 1986).

This study argued that the enhancement of life satisfaction in a foreign country can be realized in the cyberspace but has to be achieved in a mutual way. Contrary to the popular belief that active use of social media will make expatriates loners by estranging users from a healthy social life, online communities and social media can serve as a useful acculturation tool for Chinese students to connect with their social circles and to improve the life quality in a foreign land. As argued by Oh (2016), online communities can provide social support for immigrants’ acculturation by promoting the circulation of transnational knowledge and contributing to their positive emotional reactions. In this sense, if American SNS users can be more open-minded to embrace cultural and ethnic diversity in online communities and try to initiate more frequent interactions with their diasporic friends on Facebook and Twitter, Chinese students’ psychological well-being would be greatly boosted, possibly resulting in a higher satisfaction with American life and a more positive evaluation with American people.

**Limitations of the study**

Overall, the study contributed to the existing literature of Chinese international students but still has its limitations. First, the study relied on students’ self-reported data, which could be less accurate due to participants’ difficulty to recall or lack of memory. As the research goal is to discover a general trend, random errors in the students’ report will not pose a threat to the validity of the data. Second, survey research is often criticized for being less effective in proving a cause-and-effect relationship between variables. Nevertheless, because the yearlong process of acculturation/adaptation makes it unfeasible to manipulate variables in students’ life, an experimental design of acculturation is mostly far from practical. Thus, a survey study is probably still the most practical approach. Third, the current article did not investigate Chinese students’ use of traditional media simultaneously, which may provide more detailed information about the interaction between media use pattern and their life abroad.
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