

## Acculturation and Social Media: How Do International Students Engage with Facebook While Abroad?

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### Abstract

*This study investigates the relationship between Facebook use and acculturation using Berry's acculturation orientations and Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) as theoretical frameworks. The researchers followed 15 international students' Facebook walls during their first and second semester in the U.S. by creating a fake Facebook page to be added as the international students' social network. The major findings of this study include a) the pattern of Facebook postings was the same during the semester, b) international students used convergence communication strategies to better communicate with people in their network, and c) some participants' Facebook postings indicate a strong identification with their home culture.*

**Keywords:** acculturation, Berry's acculturation model, Communication Accommodation Theory, Facebook, international students

## **Introduction**

Advancements in technology have changed the experiences of international students while studying abroad. For example, even in the host country, international students are able to access a large percentage of home country media through the Internet. Among many contextual factors that are associated with adaptation to a new culture, media use is believed to be one of the critical factors in the acculturation process since it is highly related to an individual's language skills, communication behavior, information-seeking options, and opportunities for social interaction (Yang et al., 2004). With the advent of Web 2.0 technologies and platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and other Social Network Sites (SNS), international students studying abroad can more easily and efficiently maintain contact with their friends, family, and home culture. Furthermore, college students, domestic, or international, constitute a significant population that uses SNS (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). The aim of this study is twofold. The first aim is to investigate how international students communicate with others using Facebook, one of the most widely used SNS around the world, during their first and second semester in the US. The second aim is to investigate how international students negotiate their identity on Facebook during their first and second semester in the US.

### **Theoretical Framework: Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT)**

In a new cultural environment, international students are expected to learn and adapt to the norms of the host society if they are to function successfully. Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) posits that people use two types of orientation: convergent orientation and divergent orientation (Gallois et al., 2005). When people use convergent orientation, they will accommodate to their interlocutor's communicative strategies, while those who employ divergent orientation strategies are attempting to differentiate themselves from their interlocutors and are accentuating their differences (Gallois et al., 2005). That is, if international students are trying to fit-in in the new environment, they might use a convergence communication style even when using a SNS, such as communicating with American friends using English and talking about American lives. On the other hand, using convergence communication style might feel awkward or even betrayal of one's true self, then they might use divergence communication style to show how different they are. In that case, those international students might communicate with people back home using their native language and talk about home country matters. In terms of language choice, then, international students who have English as an additional language may use English as a way of practicing a convergence orientation. On the other hand, when international students want to diverge from American mainstream culture while interacting with American friends, they might use their native language when posting on their Facebook walls.

## **Literature Review**

### **Acculturation and the Use of Facebook**

Previous literature has documented that use of a host country SNS facilitates acculturation for international students (Li & Tsai, 2015). For example, Lin et al. (2011) found that the use of Facebook helped international students adapt to US society. At the same time, international students can also maintain access with the home country culture via a home country SNS (e.g., Renren in China). For example, Zhang (2012) found that the international students from China used Chinese SNS (Renren) to maintain their home country social ties while abroad. In a new environment, it is not uncommon for people to feel stressed due to unfamiliar foods, culture, social systems, language, and more; thus, newcomers may experience what Berry (1971) called "acculturative stress." Using the home country SNS to help alleviate acculturation stress and maintain high psychological well-being, on the surface, may appear to be logical; however, previous literature offers evidence contradicting these intuitions. Park et al. (2014), in fact, found that Korean and Chinese international college students in the US, who used only Facebook, demonstrated significantly less acculturation stress than those students who used both Facebook and a home country SNS or a home country SNS exclusively. Similarly, the level of psychological well-being was significantly higher with the group that only used Facebook compared to

those who used both Facebook and home country SNSs. Zhang (2012) found that students who engaged with Chinese SNS (Renren) experienced greater swings in culture shock than students who only engaged with Facebook. These results are consistent with the linear or unidimensional acculturation process view (e.g., Kim, 1979). That is, in order to adjust to a new culture, people need to spend more time with people in the new culture and spend less time with people with their home culture. It should be noted, though, that Kim's theory is focused on long-term adaptation and does not address short-term stays such as foreign exchange students (Kim, 2005).

At the same time, because causality of the research (Park et al., 2014; Zhang, 2012) is not clear, the directionality is still unknown. As such, it may be possible that international students who have less acculturative stress may consume more of the host country SNS. That is, these international students may have already adjusted to a new culture. In order to understand this the causality between acculturation processes and SNSs, this study focused on international students who were in their first or second semester of study and who had never lived in the US before as its research population. By observing the real time Facebook wall postings, we were able to observe and document the changes or lack thereof from the beginning of the participant's study abroad experience.

In addition, the increased use of Facebook might reduce opportunities to communicate with others face-to-face. Song et al.'s (2014) meta-analysis found that lonely individuals tend to use Facebook more than people who are not as lonely. Therefore, it follows that international students who are unfamiliar with their new cultural context and who are lonely tend to depend on SNS sites for their social needs. Due to the prevalence of SNS, international students can easily live their lives in different countries without intergroup contact in the host country by using social media to communicate with people from their home countries. In a similar vein, Raman and Harwood (2016) stressed the importance of interpersonal contact, along with mediated contact with individuals from the host country to reduce intergroup anxiety.

Until recently, a comparison of host country SNS consumption with home country SNS consumption was meaningful because people used several different SNSs (Park et al., 2014). However, the landscape of SNS is changing daily. Many ethnic SNSs have become obsolete, e.g., Cyworld (Korea), Mixi (Japan), My Space (USA). Today, instead of the divide between home and host country SNSs, many students have access to 'global SNSs', which are accessible around the world and are available in several languages (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram). As such, past comparisons and conclusions derived from studies of home versus host country SNSs on acculturation are no longer sufficient for the current dynamic SNS context. Instead, the use of global SNSs and their potential influence on acculturation has supplanted the home vs host SNS research because of their global reach and, therefore, are the impetus for this study. Because of the widespread international accessibility of Facebook, the authors chose to analyze the ways in which international students make use of Facebook as they adapted to their new living environment.

Previous studies have also focused mainly on the length of use (how long each person used the SNS per day) and have largely ignored the variety of functions that SNS serve. Zhang (2012), for instance, found that Chinese international students, when in the US, used Facebook because they wanted to learn about American culture. Zhang (2012), however, found the students tended to use Facebook passively, only reading other peoples' posts and news, and not actively posting anything on their Facebook wall. Thus, using Facebook as a tool for learning about the culture of the US, while not actively contributing to it; a fly on the wall position. Thus, comparing the use of SNS solely based on the length of SNS use is misleading and only provides a partial picture of participant activity. The holistic nature of the current study and its qualitative method helps to fill in the gaps revealed by previous studies. Thus, this study asks the following questions:

RQ1: What are the characteristics of Facebook posts that international students made during the first or second semester in the US?

RQ2: What communication strategy (convergence/divergence) do international students invoke to communicate with others on Facebook?

### **Acculturation, Identity, and the Use of Facebook**

International students' self-perception guides their behavior both in face-to-face and computer mediated communication. For example, Chen and Hanasono (2016) found an interesting dichotomy of usage in their study of Chinese students studying in the US. For those Chinese who identified themselves more as Chinese spent more time and updated their status more often on Chinese SNS (Renren); whereas Chinese students who identified themselves more as American spent more time and updated their status more frequently on American SNSs, (i.e., Facebook).

Berry's (1990) acculturation orientations are a useful concept to understand international students' acculturation and their behavior on Facebook. Berry (1990) developed a model that includes four acculturation orientations: a) integration (positive attitude toward both host and home cultures); b) assimilation (positive attitude toward host culture, but not home culture); c) separation (positive attitude toward home culture, but not host culture;) and d) marginalization (negative attitude toward both host and home cultures). Thus, as different from Kim's (2005) integration theory of acculturation, people can acculturate without losing contact with their home country's culture. Furthermore, Block (2007) proposed that the acculturation process is not unidirectional moving from the home culture to the host culture; rather, it is dynamic. At times a person may wish to activate a convergent orientation toward one or the other cultures with whom the person has connections, while at other times the same person may invoke a divergent orientation. For example, during holidays or other special events in a year, a person may wish to associate more with the home culture, but at other times, that same person may strive to be more a part of the host culture, and therefore, strive to exercise more convergence strategies in an attempt to acculturate with the host culture.

At times, the reverse direction might be true. Zhang (2012) found this to be true with a group of students from China. Zhang observed that the longer Chinese students stayed in the US, the more they identified with their Chinese culture. Similarly, Block (2007) found that some American students studying abroad reinforced their American identity, and in turn, some of them expressed more isolationist views rather than expanding their worldview. Thus, the acculturation process and convergent and divergent orientation strategies, when incorporating issues of identity and language learning, create a complicated, complex, and dynamic relationship that requires investigation.

Further, Ward (2008) advocated studies that investigate acculturation outside Berry's (1990) four orientations by providing three new lines of research (i.e., the study of ethnocultural identity conflict; the development of a new construct, the motivation for ethno-cultural continuity; and the application of acculturation and intergroup theory to the study of tourism). Ward (2008) described possible cases where migrants experience an ethno-cultural identity conflict because "for some individuals traditional and new identities may be perceived as incompatible" (p. 112). Thus, in addition to RQ1 and RQ2, this study asks the following question:

RQ3: How do international students communicate their identity on Facebook?

### **Research Method**

In order to answer our research questions, we followed international students' Facebook wall posts during their first or second semester in the U.S. Further, we used a quantitative method to collect background and demographic data so we would know more about who the participants were, but our primary data was that collected from documenting participants' Facebook wall posting behavior. In the following section, we explain the sample of our participants first, followed by descriptive quantitative data collection and analysis, and lastly the procedure of qualitative Facebook content analysis.

### **Sample**

The participants were recruited through English as a second language (ESL) bridge courses (in which English language learners take freshman level university content courses and ESL classes concurrently) and student organizations at a university located in the upper Midwest in the US. In order to avoid breaching ethical and validity issues, only ESL students whose English proficiency level is above an intermediate (circa CEFR A2-B1) level were included in the study. We collected data from this specific

population because many international students begin their academic careers in the US in some kind of ESL classes. By the time international students are immersed completely in content courses and no longer enrolled in language support programs, they will have already spent at least one semester in the US. Thus, to address our research questions, we felt it was necessary to focus on international students' SNS behavior during their first or second semester.

Seventeen international students agreed to participate in the study. Although all of them completed the pre-survey, only seven participants completed the post-survey. Also, only 15 of the 17 original participants added the researcher created profile as their Facebook friends. Thus, we followed these 15 international students. These 15 international students came from a variety of countries. Please see Table 4 for the characteristics of the 15 international students. Next, we explain the measurements we used to understand the characteristics and backgrounds of the participants.

### **Measurements**

Participants of the study were asked to complete two online surveys: one at the beginning and another at the end of the semester. Demographic information such as age, gender, and nationality were collected. Besides demographic information, the researchers assessed the following: 1. Quality of intergroup contacts, 2. Media use, 3. SNS use, 4. Sociocultural adjustment, 5. Intergroup anxiety, 6. English language proficiency, 7. Number of American friends, and 8. Depression.

**SNS & mass media use.** Following Raman and Horwood (2016), SNS use was assessed by the possession of membership and duration of use (in minutes and hours per day). Likewise, the researchers followed Raman and Horwood (2016) to collect participants' media use by asking participants to self-report on the different types of media (e.g., print, TV, radio, Internet) they consume in their home country and the United States. The means and SD for each media is summarized in Table 1.

**Sociocultural adaptation.** To gather information about participants willingness and ability to adapt to their new environment, the researchers used the Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS) (Furnham & Bochner, 1982). The SCAS was designed to measure the skills required to function in a sociocultural context that is new to the person. The SCAS consists of 30 Likert style items and are designed to measure a person's ability to make friends and to interact with others at social events. The SCAS was chosen because it has been proven to be consistently reliable in previous research (Ward & Kennedy, 1994). Higher scores illustrate the difficulty adapting to a new environment whereas lower scores tend to correlate to relative ease with adapting to a new culture. The reliability coefficient was satisfactory for the pre-survey data (Cronbach's alpha = .90,  $N = 16$ ,  $M = 2.44$ ,  $SD = .56$ ) as well as the post-survey data (Cronbach's alpha = .85,  $N = 7$ ,  $M = 2.49$ ,  $SD = .39$ ). Also see Table 2.

**Depression.** To measure for symptoms of depression and to track these symptoms over the course of the study, the researchers used the Zung Self-Rating Depression Scale (ZSDS) (Zung, 1965). The ZSDS consists of 20 Likert style items that seek to identify the frequency of depressive symptoms a person may be experiencing. The ZSDS uses a 4-point scale in which a 4 means the person is always experiencing a particular symptom, and a 1 means the person never or rarely experiences the depressive symptom. Thus, the higher the score, the greater the level of potential depression. Scores may range from 20 to 80 with cutoff scores of 48 suggesting a depressed mood. The reliability coefficient was satisfactory for the pre-survey data (Cronbach's alpha = .72,  $N = 15$ ,  $M = 41.4$ ,  $SD = 7.03$ ,  $range = 31-61$ ). On review, all the participants' scores fell in the normal range except one student who scored higher than normal (61). A score of 61 suggests this student is moderately depressed (Zung, 1965). The reliability coefficient was lower for post-survey data (Cronbach's alpha = .61), but when we deleted question item 18, which asked, "My life is pretty full", the reliability coefficient became satisfactory (Cronbach's alpha = .72,  $N = 7$ ,  $M = 39.14$ ,  $SD = 6.64$ ,  $range = 30-48$ ). In the post-survey, nobody scored into the depressed range. Also see Table 2.

**Intergroup anxiety.** Based on Stephan and Stephan's (1985) intergroup anxiety scale, we assessed students' level of anxiety on anticipated intergroup anxiety along eleven adjectives. The survey asked, "If you were the only member of your ethnic group and you were interacting with Americans (e.g., talking with them, working on a project with them), how would you feel compared to occasions when you are interacting with people from your own ethnic group?" The adjectives are *certain* (reverse coded), *awkward*, *self-conscious*, *happy* (reverse coded), *accepted* (reverse coded), *confident* (reverse coded), *irritated*, *impatient*, *defensive*, *suspicious*, and *careful*. Responses were reported using a five-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The reliability coefficient was lower than expected for the pre-survey data (Cronbach's alpha = .60,  $N = 14$ ,  $M = 2.86$ ,  $SD = .37$ ), but the reliability coefficient for the post-survey was satisfactory (Cronbach's alpha = .84,  $N = 7$ ,  $M = 2.91$ ,  $SD = .50$ ). Also see Table 2.

**Language proficiency.** To capture participants' perceptions of their English language abilities, the researchers adapted Bekteshi and van Hook's (2015) language proficiency instrument in which participants self-reported their ability to read, speak, and write in English. Participants indicated their proficiency levels on a 5-point Likert type questionnaire (scale 1 = very uncomfortable; 5 = very comfortable). Also see Table 3.

**Quality of intergroup contact.** Following Raman and Horwood (2016), quality of intergroup contact was measured by a single item asking, "How do you describe quality of contact with Americans?" The response options varied from 1=Very bad to 5= Very good. Also see Table 2.

**Number of American friends.** The number of American friends were measured by a single item, "How many American friends have you made since you came to the US? Please put only the numbers of American friends. For example, if you have 10 American friends, write 10 in the blank. If you don't have any American friends, write "0". Also see Table 2.

## Facebook Content Analysis

### Procedure

The participants of this study all friended a *hypothetical friend* on Facebook that had been set up by the researchers for the purpose of this study. The researchers then began documenting participants' interactions on their Facebook walls. The data collected was later analyzed after the study was closed. Hoping to minimize the effects of the researcher's paradox, it is important to note that the researchers did not actively post on the *hypothetical* Facebook wall during the study.

As Hsieh and Shannon (2005) described, qualitative content analysis contains three distinct approaches (i.e., conventional, directed, or summative). We used a "directed approach to content analysis" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The directed approach to content analysis is useful when the research is deductive based on previous research and existing theories (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The directed approach to content analysis starts with identifying key concepts or variables as initial coding categories (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Thus, we first conceptualized key variables, such as convergence and divergence phenomena, and then operationalized the variables to be measured. The two researchers, independent of each other, coded the Facebook postings of the participants. The Facebook wall coding process included manifest (e.g., posting frequency, language) and latent content (e.g., targeted audience, positive/negative/neutral). We started with the following fixed categories: Posting frequency, Posted by, Language, About, Targeted Audience, etc. However, as we coded, other phenomena began to emerge. For example, in the category Language, we originally had two choices, English or Other. Because of the frequency of code switching and/or the use of multiple languages, it became clear that additional choices were necessary. Another example of the shifting categories is that of Targeted Audience. At first there were two choices, American friends or home country friends, yet it became clear that a category for Non-American friends in the US was necessary. During the next phase, the researchers combined their coding

into one Excel spreadsheet, and then met to negotiate any discrepancies between their original coding decisions. It should be noted that after analyzing the two independent code sheets, there was 99% agreement (percent agreement intercoder reliability) in the initial codes; thus, interrater reliability is very strong. The next step of the directed approach to content analysis is to see whether “The findings from a directed content analysis offer supporting and nonsupporting evidence for a theory. This evidence can be presented by showing codes with exemplars and by offering descriptive evidence” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1282).

The researchers did not “return to the field” so to speak to ask participants to verify the researchers’ coding accuracy for several reasons. First, data collection continued up until the very end of the semester when students were studying for final exams, preparing end of term projects, and traveling, making it difficult to conduct these member checks. Also, as Flick (1992) points out, conducting member checks for the purposes of triangulating data can be considered an act of re-entering the field, and, therefore, any data collected during re-entry adds to the qualitative data. In short, attempts to triangulate, while well intentioned, can lead to a never-ending cycle of data collection, verification, data collection, verification, etc.

### Results

Because only seven participants completed both pre and post online surveys, we decided to treat online survey data as background information for the participants of our Facebook content analysis. That is, the online survey data presented here are descriptive in nature. The descriptive information is addressed first to understand the Facebook posting analyses that followed.

#### Descriptive Statistics from Online Surveys

All of participants self-reported that they had a Facebook and Instagram account while some reported having a Twitter account too. Over the three months in which the study took place, participants’ SNS use did not change dramatically. For some students, their Instagram and Twitter usage increased slightly during the three months. Facebook was used regularly across all of the participants. In both pre- and post-surveys, participants indicated that they consumed more home country media than American media (See Table 1).

**Table 1: Media Use (in hours per day)**

	<i>Pre-survey (n = 17)</i>		<i>Post-Survey (n = 7)</i>	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Home Country TV	3.18	1.29	2.43	1.40
Home Country Radio	1.69	.95	1.43	.54
Home Country Newspapers	2.41	1.28	1.43	1.13
Home Country Print (e.g., magazines)	1.94	1.03	1.86	.90
Home Country Websites	3.76	.97	4.00	.82
American TV	2.06	1.09	1.71	.95
American Radio	1.35	.70	1.29	.49

American Newspapers	1.41	.71	1.29	.49
American Print	1.35	.70	1.29	.49
American Websites	2.65	1.00	2.5	1.23

In the pre-study survey, we found that the participants had an average of 4.15 friends from the United States. In the post-survey, it appears that the average number of American friends increased by nearly 1 and  $\frac{3}{4}$  points to 5.50. In terms of psychological well-being, it appears that participants did not suffer from depression with the possible exception of one student as evidenced in the Table 2.

**Table 2: Pre-and Post-Survey Comparison**

	<i>Pre-Survey</i>		<i>Post-Survey</i>	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Depression	41.4	7.03	39.14	6.64
Social Function	2.44	.56	2.49	.39
Intergroup Communication Anxiety	2.86	.37	2.91	.50
Quality of Intergroup contacts	2.88	.93	2.29	.95
Number of American Friends	4.15	4.53	5.50	7.40

We also measured the level of English proficiency of our participants. It is a well-established fact that anxiety (Krashen, 1981) about one's own language skills in their L2 can directly affect a person's ability to interact in the new language. The pre-and post-study survey data show that the participants felt neutral to comfortable when speaking, reading, and writing in English. As can be seen participants did not report any significant change in their level of English proficiency between the pre- and post-study survey (also see Table 3).



**Table 3: Perception of English Proficiency**

	<i>Pre-Survey (n = 17)</i>		<i>Post-Survey (n = 7)</i>	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Speaking English	3.0	.94	3.14	.69
Reading English	3.41	.80	3.29	.95
Writing English	3.24	.90	3.57	.71

*Note.* 1 = Very uncomfortable, 2 = Uncomfortable, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Comfortable, 5 = Very comfortable

**Table 4: Facebook Posts**

ID	Gender	Home Country	Posting Frequency (1. None, 2. 1-2times a month, 3. 1-2 times a week, 4. everyday)	Language (1. English, 2. Other, 3. Code-switch)
A	Male	Burkina Faso	3	1,2,3
B	Female	Japan	3	1,2,3
C	Female	Albania	2	2
D	Male	Nepal	3	1,2,3
E	Female	Japan	2	1&3
F	Male	Nepal	1	No posts
G	Male	Nepal	2	1
H	Female	The Ivory Coast	2	2
I	Female	Korea	1	No posts
J	Female	Turkey	1	No posts
K	Male	Japan	2	2 &3
L	Female	Japan	1	No posts
M	Female	Japan	2	1&2
N	Female	Nepal	2	1,2,3 or no words
O	Male	Malaysia	2	Mostly no words/just a picture or a link

**Research Question One**

Research question one asked the characteristics of international students' Facebook posts during the semester. The analysis of the coded data revealed: 1) lower Facebook posting frequency; 2) Communication back home; 3) No change.

**Lower Facebook posting frequency**

Consistent with Zhang (2012), the present study found international students' low active use of Facebook. Although most of the participants were tagged or received messages from their Facebook friends at times, only three participants posted on their Facebook walls 1-2 times per week during the three-month period. Most of the participants did not either post anything at all on their walls or posted only 1-2 times per month. In the quantitative data we collected, our participants rated their level of writing, reading, and speaking English proficiency as between neutral (3) and comfortable (4). Thus, we can believe that English might not be the issue for not posting on their Facebook walls. Consistent with Zhang (2012), it is possible that international students use Facebook mostly to read others' posts or personally communicate with their friends using a messenger, and not posting much on their Facebook wall.

### **Used mostly as a communication tool with friends back home**

Across all of the participants, pictures of trips and campus events were the most frequently posted content. There were no postings regarding current news and opinions about certain topics. Most of the pictures appeared to be targeted to their home country friends because they were mostly using their native language to explain the pictures. Furthermore, most of the corresponding comments about the participants' posts came from friends who are, presumably, from their home countries, but certainly not from friends at the local university where the current study was conducted. For example, Student E posted mostly pictures from her trips during break without any comments. She once wrote on her wall that she could not connect to Line (Japanese originated SNS, mostly used in Japan), but she used only Japanese, not English. This suggests that she mainly uses Line to communicate with her friends in Japan, and she also communicates with her friends in Japan on Facebook as well.

### **No change during the first semester**

Although the frequency of posting and the use of language varies across participants, the pattern of posting is consistent for each participant. When comparing the beginning and end of the semester, the content and language of the posting is identical for each participant. In other words, no noticeable behavioral changes were evidenced on Facebook.

### **Research Question Two**

Research question two asked what kind of communication strategies international students used to communicate with others on Facebook. In order to answer the question, the researchers analyzed the coding results of international students' Facebook wall postings based on CAT's convergence/divergence communication strategy. The differences among participants surfaced due to the variations of Facebook friends. When the participants only included Facebook friends from their home country, they used their native language exclusively and the topics were relevant primarily to events, past and present in the home country. Although our participants indicated that they felt neutral to comfortable on average to speak/read/write in the English Perception Survey, their usage of English in their Facebook wall was none or very limited. This is also an indication that their target audience was not American. The participants used convergence communication style to effectively communicate with Facebook friends who were in or from their home country. For example, Student A who posted pictures frequently, often did so without including a caption or the captions were in his native languages. Student A commented about a well-known soccer player of his own country using his native language. Similarly, Student O shared a link of a funny video that appears to be a criticism of American culture. The language in the video is his home language, not English.

On the other hand, when students' Facebook friends included both Americans and friends in their home country, students code-switched, using both their home language and English. For example, student B code-switched using both English and Japanese. Student B's topics of Facebook postings also included some events occurring in the US, including holiday celebrations or vacations.

### Research Question Three

Research question three asked what identity negotiation international students used on Facebook. In order to answer the question, we analyzed participants' Facebook wall postings to see how international students negotiate their cultural identity. It appears that our participants identify themselves with the home country cultural group. For example, Students M and G posted their own pictures in their country's traditional dress. The characteristics of the postings were coded as positive. They were both smiling and showing off their traditional costume. Furthermore, Students C and D posted pictures from their time in high school or other activities they shared in their home country. These "memory-lane" posts were both frequent and extensive. Student D frequently posted pictures of her family from her country. Student C posted several pictures that show high school friends in his country. In addition to pictures recalling fond memories, Student C also posted pictures promoting his culture such as "Nepal Night" (an annual campus event). Seven students posted information or events about their affiliated cultural student organizations on Facebook, such as Japan, Korea, or Turkey Night. Student A posted links related to their home country. These pictures and links, as one might expect, emphasize a strong connection with their formative cultural backgrounds. Therefore, these postings indicate positive views of their home cultures.

When the participants post pictures and events relating to their life in the US, the depiction and the pictures illustrated the comparisons and/or contrasts between their own countries and the US. Student H, who came from the Ivory Coast, for example, posted the clothes she needed to wear in the US to keep warm during the winter months. Similar types of postings are comparing or contrasting clothing, foods, transportation, etc. are seen across participants. There were also the predictable vacation trip pictures posted on Facebook, depicting participants' lives in the US. While visiting popular destinations such as Disney Land, New York City, or San Francisco. For example, Student O posted several pictures from his trip to San Francisco with his friends who happen to be from the same culture. Although the pictures were coded as positive, these postings gave the impression of a traveler. That is, the participants continued to position themselves as outsiders.

### Discussion

This study was able to investigate international students' use of Facebook through the observation of first or second semester international students' Facebook behavior. At the same time, this study should be received as a case study as the results are not generalizable.

### Limited Exposure to American Culture

Based on our surveys, it is clear that international students, especially those people who are new to the US, prefer to consume their home country media rather than the media of the host country. In the past, international students needed to communicate with American students or consuming American media if they wanted to adapt to the new culture (e.g., Kim, 2005). However, it might be possible to adapt to a new culture while continuing to communicate with friends and family and consuming media in their native country. Based on the quantitative background information, our participants reported that they felt neutral to comfortable when speaking, reading, and writing in English. Further, the level of English proficiency had not changed between the pre- and post-survey. Thus, it is unlikely that the relatively small amount of American media consumption reported by our participants is due to a lack of English proficiency. At the same time, our participants reported relative ease of adaptation to a new culture as evidenced in the sociocultural adaptation score, which showed a narrowing in the standard deviation from the pre-survey data ( $M = 2.44, SD = .56$ ) and the post-survey data ( $M = 2.49, SD = .39$ ). It may be that international students use their home country media, like comfort food, to cope with acculturative stress. With increased globalization and migration, societies around the world are becoming more diverse and accepting of different practices and behaviors. That is, international students can continue to live into

their home culture, while also learning to communicate well in English and learning more about and possibly adopting some American behaviors or norms.

Similarly, many of our participants used Facebook mainly to communicate with their friends in their home countries. As such, the relationship between the use of American media or SNS and adaptation to a new culture is still unclear. Although previous studies reported that the use of American media and SNS affects international students' adaptation positively (e.g., Li & Tsai, 2015), international students do not appear to engage enough with host country SNS and media to affirm or reject claims that these communication sources assist students with positive cultural adaptation. In order to better clarify the relationship between SNS use and media consumption and adaptation, future experiments should be designed to incentivize participants' use of SNS sites during the data collection period. Additionally, understanding a lack of motivation for using American SNS and other media may be beneficial for furthering our understanding of the reality current international students live with while abroad. The easy connection with people in their home country might be the cause for what appears to be a lack of interest or motivation.

Previous study found that international students had "friends from their own country or culture, and higher number of co-national friendships compared to host-national ones" (McFaul, 2016, p.11). Similarly, our participants indicated they had only a limited number of American friends (4-5 on average), which suggests a lack of SNS use to communicate with American friends. Because we only followed our participants' Facebook activities, there exists the possibility that international students communicated with American individuals face-to-face. At the same time, given the current popularity of SNS among college students, this scenario is unlikely. It should be noted that there are culture differences in terms of SNS usage. For example, Americans add a large number of friends to their SNS compared to Japanese SNS users (Barker & Ota, 2011; Omori & Allen, 2014). Traditionally, a larger social network and high relational mobility is valued in the US (Schug et al., 2010). Relational mobility refers to the "opportunities to voluntarily form new relationships and terminate old ones within a given context" (Schug et al., 2010, p.1). As such, when international students come from a culture where intense friendships (strong ties as opposed to weak ties), and lower relational mobility, international students might need more time before "friending" someone to their SNS network. Further research investigating international students' offline communication with local students may provide a more robust understanding students' communication behavior.

### **International Students' Online Behavior**

Consistent with CAT, the results of our analysis indicate that international students' use a convergence communication style to help them communicate better with people in their network on Facebook. When Facebook friends are limited to people in the same country, international students used their native language and mainly posted events and pictures from their home countries. Conversely, when international students include American Facebook friends, they code-switched, communicating with their Facebook friends using both English and their home language. Similarly, they posted both events and pictures relating to their time in the US as well as their home countries.

In terms of international students' identity, participants' Facebook postings indicate their strong identification with their native culture. Showing off their ethnic uniqueness such as wearing their traditional clothes, and advertising student cultural organization events suggest their positive feeling toward their home country. In addition, pictures taken while on a trip in the US gave the impression of a traveler. Because this study was conducted during students' first and second semester in the US, it is understandable that they identify strongly with their home country culture.

CAT explains that people tend to use divergent communication style when they are communicating with outgroup members. Because international students are in the US for a limited time, it is natural for them to identify themselves as outgroup when communicating with American students stressing the differences and identifying with their home cultures. From our data, self-identifying as

outsiders and separating from mainstream American culture did not seem to affect participants' psychological well-being or physical fitness. As such, if we use psychological well-being and physical fitness as indicators for measuring adaptation goals to a new culture, the present study shows that people can acculturate without losing contact with home country culture as opposed to Kim's (2005) integration theory of acculturation. This may potentially be one of the greatest assets of SNS in that they quite possibly can function as a scaffolding agent, allowing students to stay connected to their home cultures as they learn to live, study, and socialize in the host culture. Before the advent of digital SNS, international students had to rely on letter writing, newspapers, television, and the occasional long-distance telephone call, to stay connected with the home culture. Today's SNSs allow for international students to engage with their home cultures on a regular basis and virtually instantaneously.

### **Theoretical Implications**

The present study investigated how international students negotiate their cultural identity by analyzing international students' Facebook wall posts during their first and second semesters in the U.S. Our analysis revealed that international students mostly identified themselves with their home cultures. When international students posted about their lives in the U.S., they positioned themselves as an outsider, which gave the impression of a traveler. Although Berry's (1990) acculturation orientations are a useful tool, we found the needs to develop more nuanced in-between categories for international students as Ward (2008) argued. Berry's (1990) acculturation orientations' four categories are created based on the combination of positive and negative attitude toward home and host cultures. However, the attitude might always be positive and negative. Our results revealed that many international students identify themselves with their home culture. At the same time, their Facebook posts show the positive attitude toward American culture. However, their view is more from the outsider's point of view. Thus, although their attitude toward their home culture as well as American cultures are positive, we don't believe their cultural orientation is not quite "integration" orientation because they identify strongly with their home culture. As such, acculturation theories such as Berry's (1990) acculturation orientation needs more discussion and development given the variety of combinations and degree to which individuals feel toward their home and host country cultures.

### **Limitations**

The present study contains several limitations which prevent generalizing the results. The first limitation is the small number of participants. Because this study focused on international students who have English as an additional language and who were enrolled in advanced ESL classes in their university, the pool of the possible participants in one institution was limited. Thus, this study should be taken as a case study. In order to generalize, it's necessary to have a larger participant pool.

Second, the present study focused exclusively on the experiences of international students during their first and/or second semesters abroad. Thus, the duration of the data collection is limited. While adapting to a new culture varies from individual to individual, three months only allows a person to scratch the surface of a new culture and begin to fully acculturate into a new society. A longitudinal study consisting of international students' entire undergraduate program would likely reveal a more robust understanding of the role SNS, specifically Facebook, play and allow us to unpack the role of SNSs in the acculturation processes.

Finally, the present study collected data from ESL classes and while these specific ESL classes are designed for all students who have English as an additional language, domestic and international, the primary population is international. Therefore, the participants had limited opportunities to meet American students on campus because their classmates were also international with some being from the same home country. In order to fully understand international students' adaption to a new culture, collecting data from international students who are taking content classes, i.e., business, chemistry, math, history, etc. with American students are needed. The potential for contact and relationship building is

greater and may actually propel international students on to an inbound trajectory (Wenger, 1998), which in turn may manifest itself in richer SNS activity.

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### Appendix-Code Book

The Facebook postings were coded according to the following codebook.

**Unit of data collection:** Every posting that the international students posted during the first/second semester in the US.

**Participant ID** and **coder ID** were entered.

- A. Posting frequency
  - 1. None
  - 2. 1-2 times a month
  - 3. 1-2 times a week
  - 4. Everyday
- B. Number of FB friends
- C. Posted by
  - 1. Self
  - 2. A Friend
- D. Social network
  - 1. Friends from home
  - 2. American friends in the US
  - 3. Non-American friends in the US
  - 4. Combinations
  - 5. Somebody else
- E. Topic
  - 1. Relevant to home country
  - 2. Relevant to host country
  - 3. Something else
- F. Language
  - 1. English
  - 2. Native language
  - 3. Code-switching
- G. Characteristics of the post
  - 1. Positive
  - 2. Negative
  - 3. Neutral
- H. Targeted audience
  - 1. American friends
  - 2. Friends in a home country
  - 3. Non-American friends in the US
- I. Picture
  - 1. Yes
  - 2. No
- J. Type
  - 1. Selfie
  - 2. Group
  - 3. Solo
  - 4. Video
- K. Occasions (Explain)
- L. Link
  - 1. Yes
  - 2. No