



Social network sites and international students' cross-cultural adaptation



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ABSTRACT

Prior research demonstrates the great potential of social network sites (SNSs) to international students' cross-cultural adaptation, but fails to explain how specific dimensions of SNS use may be related to cross-cultural adaptation. Extending anxiety/uncertainty management (AUM) theory, we added new antecedents about social ties on SNSs distinguished by cultural origins and geographic locations to understand the role of SNS use in cross-cultural adaptation. Path analysis results from an online survey ($N = 156$) show that directed communication via SNSs with local host nationals was positively associated with uncertainty reduction, but that with local co-nationals was negatively related to uncertainty reduction, suggesting that the effectiveness of SNSs in developing and maintaining local relationships may lie in their ability to provide a supplementary channel to offline communication. Overall, our results demonstrate that SNS effect on cross-cultural adaptation depends on individuals' proficiency of host language, who they communicate with and how they communicate via SNSs.

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1. Introduction

The number of international students attending universities in the U.S. has increased significantly in the last decade. By the end of 2014, this number had reached 886,052, constituting 4% of the total U.S. higher education population, and increased 54.6% compared to a decade ago (Open Doors Data, 2014). Although international students can bring talents and diversity to higher education in the U.S., they inevitably experience challenges as they adjust to the American culture. These challenges range from language barriers, relational issues, to loneliness and racial discrimination (Al-Sharide & Goe, 1998; Ying & Liese, 1991). They are all part of the cross-cultural adaptation process that individuals experience while adjusting to the host country.

The extant scholarship on cross-cultural adaptation reveals that interpersonal communication is essential to the outcome of this adjustment process (Gudykunst, 2005). As a popular interpersonal communication tool on American campuses, social network sites (SNSs) provide easy access to social interactions on- and offline and facilitate relationship development and maintenance. Thus, SNSs can hold great potential to facilitating cross-cultural

adaptation. Evidence that supports this assumption has started to emerge (Cao & Zhang, 2012; Lin, Peng, Kim, Kim, & LaRose, 2011; Park, Song, & Lee, 2014; Sawyer, 2013; Ye, 2005, 2006a, 2006b). However, these studies lack a theoretical framework which defines cross-cultural adaptation and explains how specific dimensions of SNS use may be related to the adaptation outcome. Furthermore, these studies simply demonstrated a positive relationship between the frequency of SNS use and cross-cultural adaptation. However, besides frequency, the quality of SNS use should also influence the outcome of cross-cultural adaptation. Specifically, we propose that how international students use SNSs for social interactions and who they communicate with via SNSs should be associated with cross-cultural adaptation. Thus, the primary goal of the present study is to provide theoretical explanations of how specific dimensions of SNS use are related to cross-cultural adaptation among international students in the U.S. Specifically, we use anxiety/uncertainty management (AUM) theory and add new antecedents about social ties on SNSs distinguished by cultural origins and geographic locations to the original theory.

We begin this paper by conceptualizing cross-cultural adaptation within the theoretical framework of AUM. We then extend AUM theory by highlighting directed communication via SNSs with social ties distinguished by cultural origins and geographic locations, and propose our original model. After reporting data collection and analytical procedures, we provide results of

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hypothesis testing, overall model goodness of fit, model modifications, and propose the final model. We conclude with a discussion on our major findings as well as their theoretical and practical implications.

2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses

2.1. Applying AUM to cross-cultural adaptation

AUM was first proposed to explain effective intercultural interactions (Gudykunst, 1988) and later extended to research on cross-cultural adaptation (Gudykunst, 2005). This theory is limited to explaining cross-cultural adaptation by *sojourners*, which refers to temporary visitors in another culture (Gudykunst, 2005). This assumption makes AUM applicable to international students, which the present study focuses on. While some international students stay in the host country after they graduate, very few intentionally planned so when they first arrived (Hazen & Alberts, 2006). Therefore, most international students are sojourners, making AUM well suited for the present study.

AUM has two core constructs: *uncertainty* about behaviors and values embodied by individuals from the host culture (hereafter host nationals), and *anxiety* about communicating with host nationals. Uncertainty describes cognitive difficulty in intercultural communication, whereas anxiety describes affective challenges. When uncertainty is reduced, individuals become more confident in explaining and predicting host nationals' behaviors. When anxiety is reduced, individuals are more likely to feel at ease when communicating with host nationals. Thus, individuals can better communicate with host nationals and are considered better adapted to the host culture when both uncertainty and anxiety are low (Gudykunst, 1988, 2005). Therefore, AUM suggests that cross-cultural adaptation involves both cognition and affect, and effective communication with host nationals is the core of cross-cultural adaptation.

To be consistent with AUM, we adopted Ward (2001)'s conceptualization of cross-cultural adaptation that integrates *sociocultural* and *psychological* adaptation. Ward (2001) combined two main theoretical approaches to cross-cultural adaptation. First, *the cultural-learning approach* proposes that problems of cross-cultural adaptation result from lack of understanding of host culture (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). Therefore, cross-cultural adaptation is a process by which sojourners learn new cultural knowledge, acquire new skills, and gradually fit in the host cultural environment (Masgoret & Ward, 2006). Based on this approach, Ward (2001) proposed *sociocultural adaptation*, which was defined as individuals' ability to understand the host culture and function appropriately in the new cultural environment. Second, *the stress-coping approach* focuses on acculturative stress—the stress associated with cross-cultural adaptation (Berry & Annis, 1974), and maintains that social support can alleviate acculturative stress and facilitate cross-cultural adaptation (Adelman, 1988). Ward (2001) thus argued that an additional dimension of cross-cultural adaptation should be considered: *psychological adaptation*, which was defined as individuals' general well-being or emotional satisfaction.

By integrating sociocultural and psychological adaptation, our conceptualization addresses cognitive and affective dimensions of cross-cultural adaptation, thereby aligned closely with AUM. Furthermore, Ward (2001) argued that individuals who can communicate effectively with host nationals are more likely to acquire survival skills and receive stress-coping support, thereby exhibiting higher levels of sociocultural and psychological adaptation. Therefore, this definition suggests that effective communication with host nationals is the core of cross-cultural adaptation, consistent with the premise of AUM.

Although uncertainty and anxiety are two key constructs in AUM, the extant literature demonstrates ambiguity about their relationships. Originally, Gudykunst and Hammer (1987) argued that uncertainty and anxiety are “independent aspects of the adaptation process” (p. 108). The only empirical evidence that supports this argument is Gao and Gudykunst (1990). They found a non-significant relationship between attributional confidence (the opposite to uncertainty) and anxiety. However, the anxiety scale in their study demonstrated poor reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .65$), so attenuated correlations due to unreliable measurement might account for the nonsignificant finding. Besides, failing to find a significant relationship cannot claim null relationship (Cohen, 1990).

Gudykunst (2005) later proposed that uncertainty and anxiety represent two equivalent but different dimensions of cross-cultural adaptation. Thus, they should be correlated, as Gudykunst and Nishida (2001) found.

However, other research generates different opinions about the relationship between uncertainty and anxiety. Scholarship on social psychology shows that individuals experience heightened level of self-presentational concerns when they are uncertain of their performances in some social situations (Leary, 1995). Heightened self-presentational concerns can result in a series of negative affect such as anxiety (Leary, Kowalski, & Campbell, 1988) and embarrassment (Edelmann, 1985). Specifically, Schlenker and Leary (1982) argued that anxiety aroused when individuals were motivated for positive self-presentation but doubted they could because they were uncertain about forthcoming social interactions. These studies demonstrate that anxiety, as an affective response, may result from cognitive evaluations of one's inability to effectively fulfill social tasks, which is close to uncertainty, thereby suggesting a causal relationship between uncertainty and anxiety.

Specifically in intercultural communication research, Gudykunst and Kim (1977) argued that interactions with people from different cultures often involved high levels of uncertainty, and actual or anticipation of these uncertain experiences could heighten individuals' anxiety. Later, Hammer, Wiseman, Rasmussen, and Brusckke (1998) supported those speculations with empirical evidence which shows that uncertainty reduction positively predicted anxiety reduction.

Based on the scholarship presented above, we predict a causal link from uncertainty to anxiety because social psychology research has generated enough theoretical reasoning on the causal relationship between these two variables (e.g. Leary et al., 1988; Schlenker & Leary, 1982). Moreover, empirical result from Hammer et al. (1998) provides additional support to their causal relationship. Hence,

H1. Uncertainty reduction predicts anxiety reduction.

Next, AUM theory predicts high levels of cross-cultural adaptation when uncertainty and anxiety are low (Gudykunst, 2005). Hence,

H2. (a) Uncertainty reduction and (b) anxiety reduction are positively related to cross-cultural adaptation.

In addition, language is the tool of and provides basis for communication. AUM proposes that host language proficiency reduces uncertainty and anxiety in cross-cultural interactions (Gudykunst, 2005). Empirical studies also found that host language proficiency reduced anxiety about communicating with host nationals (Stephan & Stephan, 1985) and uncertainty about behaviors and values of host nationals (Hammer et al., 1998). Hence,

H3. Host language proficiency is positively related to (a) uncertainty reduction and (b) anxiety reduction.

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