



# Social networking sites and other media use, acculturation stress, and psychological well-being among East Asian college students in the United States



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## ABSTRACT

It is notable that previous studies often looked at either traditional mass media or new technologies in explaining the effects of media on acculturation. We claim that media effects on acculturation should be investigated by simultaneously considering traditional and new media, as today's media environment is far from being simple. The present study examined the effects of ethnic social networking site (SNS) and Facebook use (i.e., minutes per week), interpersonal and mass media use, and individual differences on Korean and Chinese college students' acculturative stress and psychological well-being in the United States. An online survey was conducted in two large universities that were located in cities that were not main ethnic residential enclaves for Korean and Chinese people. The findings indicated that the students who used Facebook only demonstrate a lower degree of acculturative stress and a higher degree of psychological well-being compared to other groups in the study. In addition, the use of ethnic SNS is positively associated with acculturative stress. Also, individual differences—extraversion, years of stay in the U.S., academic achievement stress, and English competence—showed strong explanatory power to account for the students' acculturative stress and psychological well-being. Theoretical implications and limitations of the study were discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

International students are a significant population at American universities, totaling 819,644 students in the 2012–2013 academic year (Institute of International Education, 2013). The number of Asian students, in particular, has continuously increased. For instance, compared to the previous academic year, the enrollment rate of the top three nations—China, India, and South Korea—at U.S. colleges, was 28.7%, –3.5%, and –2.3%, respectively, and the number of students from these three countries comprises 49.1% of all international students (Institute of International Education, 2013). These Asian international students may have to overcome some cultural differences between their home country and the United States (U.S.) and adapt themselves in a new environment

to successfully manage their school work and lives. The acculturation process through which international students adjust themselves to a new culture by adopting its values, attitudes, and practices, and the factors that affect their acculturation have been an ongoing research topic in the area of intercultural communication (e.g., Kline & Liu, 2005; Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006; Wei et al., 2007; Ye, 2005, 2006; Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008).

With the help of recent technology advancement, numerous media choices on the top of traditional media are available for international students to connect to their home country. For example, the recent popularity and wide use of social networking sites (SNSs) among college students provide international students with an opportunity to maintain the relationships with friends and family in their home country and to communicate easily with new friends in the host country. SNSs of international students' countries of origin enable them to easily post writings and photos about their new life in the host country, in turn, staying in touch with their significant others in their home country. Moreover, Facebook,

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the most popular SNS among the U.S. universities, may help international students' acculturation process, given that it can be used to facilitate new relationships thanks partly to the similar functions and features of the SNS to their home country's counterpart. In fact, [Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe \(2007\)](#) suggested that Facebook may be used for maintenance of both newly-developed and existing relationships. Facebook also may be used by international students to gather information about classes, schools, and communities, helping them become familiar with new environments sooner. However, research on the effects of using ethnic and host countries' SNSs on international students' acculturation is relatively scarce. Considering that past research has indicated that international students' acculturation is affected by media use and interpersonal communication ([Berry, 1980; Kim, 1978, 1988](#)), the role of SNSs in the process of acculturation deserves research attention. Two studies examined the effects of Facebook use on international students' social capital and adjustment in U.S. colleges; however, they investigated the students' use of Facebook only, without much focus on ethnic SNSs ([Lin, Peng, Kim, Kim, & LaRose, 2012; Phua & Jin, 2011](#)). In contrast, the primary purpose of the present study is to investigate international students' use of both ethnic SNS and Facebook and its associations with acculturation stress and psychological well-being. In addition, it is notable that previous studies often looked at either traditional mass media or new communication technologies in explaining the effects of media on acculturation. We posit that media effects on acculturation should be investigated by simultaneously considering traditional and new media, as today's media environment is far from being simple. In addition to the use of ethnic SNS and Facebook, international students are likely to use interpersonal and mass media to stay in touch with their friends and family and to adapt themselves to the U.S. culture. That is, SNS use related to acculturation should be studied in the larger context of the media environment. Thus, we attempt to investigate overall media use and its effects on acculturation.

In the current study, we use college students from two East Asian countries—South Korea and China—as a study sample for four reasons. First, the two countries are among the top three countries sending students to U.S. universities. Second, they possess similar collectivistic cultures ([Hofstede, 2001](#)), which are directly opposite of the individualistic culture in the U.S. Third, students from South Korea and China may face bigger linguistic challenges than international students from other countries (e.g., European countries) do. Fourth, both countries have their own local social networking sites (i.e., Cyworld in South Korea and Renren [formerly Xiaonei] in China),<sup>1</sup> whose functions and features are similar to those of Facebook. An investigation of the effects of SNS along with other media uses on Korean and Chinese college students' acculturation stress and psychological well-being will thus contribute to the study of the role of media and computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies in the process of acculturation.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Uses of social networking sites and media and their effects on acculturation

Past studies have demonstrated accumulated evidence supporting the significant association between media use and acculturation. [Kim \(1988\)](#) claimed that the use of a host country's media

facilitates acculturation, while the use of a home country's media retards acculturation. Other studies have also supported this claim. [Jeffres \(2000\)](#) discovered, through a panel study, that home country media use leads to stronger ethnic identification across time in a multicultural context, while [Hwang and Zhou \(1999\)](#) found that Chinese immigrants who used more English media revealed a higher degree of acculturation than those who relied upon Chinese media. Similarly, [Lee and Tse \(1994\)](#) suggested that the use of a host country's media is associated positively with immigrants' acculturation of new social norms. Further evidence has also shown a positive association between the use of host media and acculturation and a negative association between the use of ethnic media and acculturation (e.g., [Choi & Tamborini, 1998; Deshpande, Hoyer, & Donthu, 1986; Melkote & Liu, 2000](#)).

The development of the Internet and CMC technologies has shed new light on research of international students' acculturation (e.g., [Cemalcilar, Falbo, & Stapleton, 2005; Ye, 2005, 2006](#)). For instance, [Ye \(2005\)](#) investigated the relationships between acculturative stress of East Asian international students and their use of the Internet, based upon the uses and gratifications perspective. [Kline and Liu \(2005\)](#) explored Chinese students' use of media and communication practices, including email, phone, and mail, and examined the association between communication practices and the level of stress and acculturation. [Cemalcilar et al. \(2005\)](#) also examined the role of CMC technologies in the early stages of cross-cultural transition for international students in the U.S. These studies as a whole found that the use of CMC technologies to communicate with the culture of the home country is associated positively with the degree of maintenance of ethnic identity, while the use of CMC technologies focusing on communication with the host culture is associated positively with socio-cultural adaptation.

The current study examines international students' media use—both traditional and new media—and its associations with their acculturative stress and psychological well-being. Acculturation stress is defined as “one kind of stress, that in which the stressors are identified as having their source in the process of acculturation, often resulting in a particular set of stress behaviors that include anxiety, depression, feeling of marginality and alienation, heightened psychosomatic symptoms, and identity confusion” ([Williams & Berry, 1991, p. 634](#)).

Many studies have attempted to explore the relationship between acculturation and mental and physical health (e.g., [Berry & Kim, 1988; Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001](#)), and these studies have generally found a positive association. A recent meta-analysis on 184 studies also confirmed that ethnic identity significantly affects psychological well-being and other mental health symptoms ([Smith & Silva, 2011](#)). Of note is that previous studies have revealed that acculturation does not cause stress for everyone. The degree to which acculturative stress is experienced may vary, depending on several social (e.g., pluralism of the society) and individual factors (e.g., modes of acculturation, personality). For example, [Smith and Silva \(2011\)](#) found that the association between ethnic identity and personal well-being was stronger among adolescents and young adults than among adults over age 40. In addition, it has been known that experiencing stress is not inevitable if he/she actively seeks social support from his/her home or host country, even when an individual is situated in a new culture ([Williams & Berry, 1991](#)). It is largely unclear, however, whether ethnic SNS and Facebook use also affect acculturative stress and psychological well-being. Given that there are only a few studies that examined the relationship between SNS use and acculturation stress and psychological well-being ([Lin et al., 2012; Phua & Jin, 2011](#)), the following research question was proposed:

**RQ1:** Is there any difference between the groups of international students who use both ethnic SNS and Facebook, who

<sup>1</sup> Cyworld has been the most popular SNS in South Korea with over 19 million members at its peak in 2006, which was almost all South Korean in their 20s and 25% of the total population ([Bowley, 2006; Cameron, 2005](#)). Renren, with a similar format to Facebook, is also the most popular SNS in China with 160 million members as of February 2011 ([Hille, 2011](#)).

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