



# A tale of two social networking sites: How the use of Facebook and Renren influences Chinese consumers' attitudes toward product packages with different cultural symbols

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## ABSTRACT

Culture influences people's information processing and attitude formation. This study examined the effects of using social networking sites from a cultural perspective, based on the culture learning model in the acculturation literature. A total of 251 Chinese individuals residing in the U.S. participated in the experiment. They were randomly assigned to one of four product package conditions with different cultural symbols (either American cultural symbols or Chinese cultural symbols, or both, or neither). Their usage intensity of two social networking sites, U.S.-based Facebook and China-based Renren ("the Facebook of China"), was measured. It was found that participants' usage intensity of Facebook and Renren reflected their cultural orientation, language proficiency, and length of stay in the U.S. It was also discovered that more intensive Renren usage led to more favorable attitudes toward packages carrying Chinese cultural symbols. However, participants' willingness to pay for the products with different packages was not affected by their usage intensity of social networking sites, due to the country-of-origin effect.

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## 1. Introduction

The trend of people being connected with each other online via social networking sites seems to continue as the total number of registered users of Facebook has already topped one billion (Ortutay, 2012). Many prior studies have discussed why such sites gain rapid popularity and how they affect the way people present self-identity and manage relationships (Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012). The current study aims to explore the effects of social networking site usage from a new angle—the culture learning perspective. Specifically, social networking sites are considered as cultural products, and they are expected to shape users' cultural orientation. As suggested by Lamoreaux and Morling (2012), cultural products refer to tangible representations of cultures such as advertising, television, texts, and laws. These tangible products are created by people based on conceptions of cultural consensus, and they in turn affect people's cultural preference. Because the essence of social networking sites is to help users connect and share user-generated content (Boyd & Ellison, 2007), in the current research they are regarded as special cases of cultural products that reinforce certain cultural values.

To understand the relationship between social networking sites and culture, this study tested the effects of social networking site

usage within an acculturation context. According to the culture learning model in the acculturation literature (Masgoret & Ward, 2006; Ward, 2004; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001), newcomers to a host society such as sojourners and immigrants need to master culture-related skills to survive. Mass media consumption has been proven to be a reliable avenue for the acquisition of such skills (Chen, 2010; Graves, 1967; Masgoret & Ward, 2006; Somani, 2010). The current research focuses on how people adopt certain social networking sites for culture learning, whether it is to learn the mainstream culture in the host society or to maintain their ethnic culture. The use of two compatible social networking sites, U.S.-based Facebook and China-based Renren ("the Facebook of China"), was examined among a sample of Chinese individuals residing in the U.S., and how the usage subsequently affected their attitudes toward product packages with different cultural symbols was also tested. The contribution of this study to the literature will be discussed at the end of the article.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Acculturation and culture learning model

Acculturation has long been an important line of research in cultural psychology (Berry, 1997). When individuals enter a new host society, they face a different cultural context from their original environment. By making such "continuous first-hand contact" with

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the new culture, these newcomers acculturate into the host society (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936, p. 149). In early studies, acculturation used to be described as a linear, one-dimensional, and unidirectional process, assuming that newcomers eventually and inevitably would be assimilated to the mainstream culture in the host society (Deng & Walker, 2007). Recent research, however, recognizes that acculturation “does not necessarily require individuals to disclaim their cultural values or disown their ethnic identities” (Duan & Vu, 2000, p. 226). Thus, the acculturation process may be better understood from a bidirectional perspective, suggesting that individuals may cope with both their original culture and the mainstream culture in the host society simultaneously (e.g., Arends-Tóth & Van de Vijver, 2007; Berry, 1980; Deng & Walker, 2007).

One of the most frequently adopted methods to examine the acculturation process is the culture learning approach (Ward et al., 2001). According to Masgoret and Ward (2006), the culture learning approach is based on the belief that cross-cultural conflicts arise because cultural novices have difficulties in managing daily social encounters. Therefore, newcomers to the host society need to learn culture-relevant skills to survive and thrive in the new environment (Ward, 2004). Personal (e.g., motivation, expectation, and personality) as well as situational (e.g., previous experience, length of residence, intercultural contact, and cultural distance) factors are expected to affect individuals' culture learning (Masgoret & Ward, 2006). Prior studies have illustrated that general knowledge of the new culture and length of residence in the host society influence acculturation (Searle & Ward, 1990). Cultural distance—referred to perceived similarities and differences between newcomers' original culture and the mainstream culture in the host society—also impacts the acculturation process (Ward, 2004). Language ability is another key indicator of acculturation since it significantly affects the effectiveness of intercultural communication (Masgoret & Ward, 2006; Ward, 2004). Moreover, social interaction with members of the host society is a reliable avenue for acquiring culture learning skills (Masgoret & Ward, 2006). Searle and Ward (1990) showed that the psychological well-being of Malaysian and Singaporean students in New Zealand was related to their satisfaction with the relationships with New Zealanders.

In addition to direct contact with members of the host society, indirect contact such as exposure to the host society mass media content (e.g., newspapers, magazines, television, and Internet) also contributes to culture learning (Chen, 2010; Graves, 1967; Masgoret & Ward, 2006). Consumption of these media not only helps newcomers polish their language skills but also enhance their ability to interpret the new cultural environment (Masgoret & Ward, 2006). For example, in Somani's (2010) research, it was shown that Indian immigrants to the U.S. learned how to act “American” by watching American television. Instead of focusing on traditional mass media such as newspapers and television, the current study investigates the relationship between social networking site usage and acculturation.

## 2.2. Social networking sites

According to Boyd and Ellison (2007, p. 211), social networking sites refer to “Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.” Depending on their specific features and user base, social networking sites can be classified into various categories. For example, they can be used to connect people in a work-related context (e.g., LinkedIn), in college (e.g., the original goal of Facebook), or in a romantic-relationship seeking scenario (e.g., the original goal of Friendster) (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007).

Over the past few years, many studies have examined why the general public adopts social networking sites and uses them routinely (see Wilson et al., 2012 for a review). To meet new friends and to maintain relationships with old friends were found to be primary motivators (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). Entertainment, information, and convenience were among other reasons of usage (Kim, Sohn, & Choi, 2011; Lin & Lu, 2011). Prior studies have also discussed the impact of social networking site usage on social capital, well-being, social adjustment, and other outcomes. It was revealed that social networking site usage had a positive impact on social capital, and was associated with psychological well-being, self-esteem, life satisfaction, social trust, civic engagement, and political participation (Ellison et al., 2007; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009; Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006). Social networking sites also help decrease conflict in the parent-child relationship when a parent and his/her child become “friends” online (Kanter, Afifi, & Robbins, 2012).

Recently, scholars have started to examine the use of social networking sites from cultural perspectives. Some of these studies were focused on how users with different cultural backgrounds used social networking sites differently. For example, Kim et al. (2011) examined the disparities of motives for using social network sites among college students in the U.S. and Korea. It was found that major motives—seeking friends, social support, entertainment, information, and convenience—were similar between the two student groups, but the weights placed on those motives were different. Korean students put more weight on obtaining social support from existing social relationships, while American students placed a greater emphasis on seeking entertainment. It was also shown that American students tended to have larger networks online than did Korean students. In another study, Chu and Choi (2010) demonstrated that Chinese users gained a higher level of bridging and bonding social capital, maintained a greater ratio of strong ties, and reported a higher degree of perceived trust on social networking sites than American users. Other studies further discussed how users perceived social networking sites in different languages as different cultural platforms. For instance, Qiu, Lin, & Leung's (2013) research showed that Chinese users perceived Renren to be more collectivism-oriented than Facebook, thus they were more likely to behave in accordance with the collectivist culture on Renren.

As argued by Chu and Choi (2010), social networking site usage may be culturally shaped. Different social networking sites tend to foster and encourage distinctive cultural value systems by facilitating information exchange among users (Qiu et al., 2013). The current study aims to test the effects of social networking site usage from an acculturation perspective by focusing on two sites: Facebook and Renren. Facebook has more than one billion registered users and it is the most widely used social networking site in the U.S. (Ortutay, 2012). By comparison, Renren is “the Facebook of China” and it has a total of 162 million registered users (Mozur, 2012). The functionality of these two sites is highly compatible, but they don't directly compete against each other since Facebook is inaccessible in China (Mozur, 2012). However, Chinese individuals residing in the U.S. have equal access to both sites. Their usage of these two sites is therefore expected to reflect their cultural orientation. Specifically, Facebook may be considered as the host society media since it is widely used by American people, while Renren may be regarded as the home society media as it is primarily used by Chinese individuals. Based on the culture learning model, more usage of the host society media is associated with a better understanding of the mainstream culture in the host society, stronger host society language skills, and longer residence as well. Since the use of social networking sites is measured with a scale of usage intensity in this study (Ellison et al., 2007), it is thus hypothesized:

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