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“Oh, I’m Here!”: Social Media’s Impact on the Cross-cultural Adaptation of Students Studying Abroad

Todd L. Sandel

This study investigates the perceptions and interpretations of social media and online communication by students engaged in study abroad programs. In-depth interviews were conducted and analyzed with 23 American and international students who completed or were engaged in a study abroad program. Results suggest that online communication enhanced the students’ experience, providing help with sociocultural skills, informational needs, relational bonds, and psychological well-being. Different platforms were preferred when communicating with friends versus family and intimates. Online communication between co-nationals from the student’s home country buffered both the sojourning student’s acculturative stress, and the stress and concern of distant family members.

Keywords: cross-cultural adaptation; study abroad; online communication; Facebook

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Leaving one’s home country to go elsewhere for the purpose of study is an activity that students have engaged in for centuries. Whether it was the young English aristocrat of the eighteenth century traveling through Europe on the “grand tour” (Chaney, 2000), or the Chinese youth who went to the United States for study in the early twentieth century (Ye, 2001), one aspect of the experience has been much the same: the border-crossing student experiences a different culture, language, and way of life. This may raise the level of stress, and the way to lessen such stress is to learn to “adapt” to the new culture (Kim, 2001). Yet with the development of the Internet, cell phones, and a range of social media platforms, the perception that going to study in a foreign country means cutting off or reducing contact

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with friends and family at home has changed. How does access to these communication technologies impact the adaptation of students in the age of Facebook? Uncovering the answer to this question is the purpose of this study.

Kim's Theory of Cross-Cultural Adaptation

In a line of research spanning decades, Kim and colleagues (e.g., Kim, 1977, 2001, 2006; Kim, Izumi, & McKay-Semmler, 2008, 2009; Kim, Lujan, & Dixon, 1998) have proposed cross-cultural adaptation theory to (1) explain the process of adaptation experienced by the border-crossing sojourner or student, and (2) prescribe ways to lessen the degree of psychological stress and increase the person's "functional fitness" and "psychological well-being" (Kim, Izumi, & McKay-Semmler, 2009). The theory claims the adapting individual experiences a "stress-adaptation-growth" dynamic that unfolds over time, pushing and pulling the sojourner to increasing levels of adaptation, and that some communicative practices may accelerate adaptation, such as greater communication with host nationals, while others may impede it, such as greater communication with co-nationals over the long-term. (Kim, 2001, claims that communication with co-nationals, or "co-ethnics" can initially be helpful.)

A weakness of Kim's theory, however, is that it treats the host culture as a fixed end, unaffected by the presence of the adapting individual (Kramer, 2000; Sandel & Liang, 2010). Adaptation depends entirely upon the sojourning individual's efforts to change and conform to the host culture. This discounts the observation that over time cultures change, some more rapidly than others, and that there is a dynamic interaction between the dominant culture and newly arriving members.

Berry's Model of Acculturation

Work that better accounts for the dynamic process of adaptation is by Berry (e.g., Berry, 1974, 2005, 2009). He and others have developed a model of acculturation that maps out the strategies of both acculturating "ethnocultural groups" and the "larger society" (Berry, 2005; Ward, 2008, 2013). The non-dominant group may follow one of four acculturation strategies: integration, separation, assimilation, or marginalization; the dominant culture may interact with the smaller ethnocultural group according to one of four strategies: multiculturalism, segregation, melting pot, or exclusion. The strategy of the former, ethnocultural group is a response to two questions: "(1) Is it important to maintain my original cultural heritage? and (2) Is it important to engage in intercultural contact with other groups, including members of the dominant culture?" (Ward, 2008, p. 106). Not all choices, however, may be available to the ethnocultural group; the selection of available strategies depends upon the dominant group's willingness to permit the ethnocultural group the "freedom to choose how they want to acculturate" (Berry, 2005, p. 705). For instance, the strategy of "integration," whereby the ethnocultural group maintains

some of its heritage and has contact with and adapts to the dominant group, is available only when the dominant group follows the strategy of multiculturalism. The “cultural context” matters (Ward & Kus, 2012).

A second contribution of Berry’s model is an updated understanding of the concept of adjustment. Kim (2006) claims that adjustment (or adaptation) is the individual’s response to the stress and “pain” of experiencing a new culture, and that the successfully adapted individual creates a new identity, one that is “interethnic” through the process of “reorganizing oneself” (p. 292). Building upon previous work in “culture shock,” Ward and Berry (Berry, 2009; Ward, 2013; Ward & Kennedy, 1994; Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999) argue that adjustment has two components, psychological and sociocultural. The former is a response to acculturative stress (called “culture shock” in other literature, e.g., Lin, 2006; Oberg, 1960) and related to emotional well-being and satisfaction. The latter is related to learning new, culture-specific social skills, motivated by the desire to “fit in” with the new culture (Ward, 1996; Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999); it is associated with length of residence in the new culture, cultural knowledge, and language abilities. With time, problems tend to decrease as new skills are learned, while psychological adaptation may fluctuate, and problems such as depression may increase with time (Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999).

Furthermore, higher levels of adaptation—associated with fewer problems and a greater sense of well-being—may be due to higher levels of ethnic maintenance. For example, in a study of the adaptation of Asian Muslim youth in New Zealand, Ward (2013) found that higher levels of “ethnic identity predicted greater life satisfaction,” and higher Muslim identity “predicted fewer behavioral problems” (p. 398). In other words, both a higher psychological regard for an ethnic, Asian identity and greater adherence to sociocultural behaviors to act “Muslim” were associated with better adaptation. These findings differ from Kim’s (2006) conceptualization of adaptation as a unitary reorganization of the person, according to the dual processes of “deculturation” and “enculturation.”

Insights from Studies of Online and CMC Communication

While the above work provides theoretical and conceptual insights into adaptive processes, it does not directly address the focus of this study, which is to understand how changes in media technologies and platforms—allowing for the development of interactive, social media—impact the cross-cultural adaptation of today’s international students. Just as the Internet and cell phone have shortened the perception of distance and made it easier for students to stay in contact with family and friends from afar, the experience of being an international student far from home is qualitatively different today from what it was years ago. Changes in software platforms for using such devices impact the “media richness” of communication. These range from the “thin side,” using text-based messages such as email, instant messenger, and cell phone texting, to the “thick side,” using social websites such as *Facebook* that include visual images and VoIP programs such as

Skype or Google Talk that allow users to stream video across the Internet (see Daft & Lengel, 1986; Sheer, 2011). Thus, while the physical distance between countries has not changed, the virtual and perceptual distance has decreased.

The growing literature on studies of online and computer-mediated-communication (CMC) shows evolving understandings of the role of these technologies on interpersonal communication and relationship development. In early work Walther (1992) examined whether users of CMC, which at the time involved the exchange of text-based messages, were able to communicate emotion and affect. His studies, and the theory that he developed to explain his research, social information processing theory, demonstrated that while there were differences in the amount of time required to communicate emotion CMC versus face-to-face (FtF), users were able to overcome these challenges. Emotion and affect could be communicated effectively despite the limitations of the technology. However, today's CMC users are not limited to using just text, and often incorporate pictures and video in their messages. In a recent review article Walther (2012) explains that the visual image conveys information that may alter the impact of communicative messages, even changing the interpretation of verbal messages meant to impress a partner (Walther, Slovacek, & Tidwell, 2001).

Online Communication's Impact on Acculturating Students

CMC studies indicate that emotion, affect, and interpersonal relationship development can occur online, and that different digital forms—text-based vs. visual—may have different effects on users. This supports the focus of this study, to understand how these forms of communication impact the adaptation of border-crossing students. We know from previous research by Keshishian (2000) that television coverage of the Iranian hostage crisis and other events in her homeland impacted her adaptation to America in the 1980s. The negative portrayal of the acts of the Iranian government and hostage takers, as played out on television daily during the crisis, as claimed by the author, “slowed down the adaptation process I had so arduously begun” (p. 99). In today's CMC environment, how then, do online and mediated messages impact the acculturation and adaptation of today's international students?

A few studies guide us toward an answer. First is a line of studies conducted by Kim and colleagues (Kim, Izumi, & McKay-Semmler, 2008, 2009). By studying the interpersonal and mediated communication of 51 international students in the United States, they found greater host interpersonal communication—international students with Americans—was correlated with higher levels of functional fitness and psychological health. The researchers found no significant effects when examining how ethnic interpersonal communication impacted functional fitness and psychological health; they concluded that while international sojourners actively use mediated forms of communication with co-ethnics, these activities played an insignificant role in functional fitness and psychological well-being (Kim, Izumi, & McKay-Semmler, 2009). These findings are consistent with Kim's theory of cross-cultural adaptation:

“[H]igher levels of functional and psychological well-being” are positively related with increased “host personal communication” (p. 29); in other words, greater communication by international students with people from the host culture results in higher levels of adaptation.

Second, however, using a similar study design, Ye (2006) came to a different conclusion. From surveying Chinese international students in universities across the United States, she found that those who were younger and had lived in the United States a shorter period of time were more engaged in online ethnic networks. Those older and who had lived in the United States a longer time experienced “a lower level of social difficulties” (p. 870). This supports Kim’s (2001) claim that greater host communication over time leads to higher levels of adaptation. Yet in contrast with Kim’s theory, Ye (2006) found that higher levels of ties with long-distance social networks were associated with positive emotions and that “weak [online] ties can function as important sources of new information” (p. 872). She concluded that “all three types of social networks [online ethnic, face-to-face ethnic, host country] play different roles in an individual’s cultural adjustment” (p. 873). In other words, ethnic and host communication ties may not work as opposites in the adaptive process, but may be complementary.

In a study conducted after the development and popularity of social networking websites such as *Facebook*, Lee, Kim, Lee, and Kim (2012) looked at how international students in the United States on a high school exchange program coped with the stresses of their one-year sojourn. They found that Facebook served as a “stress-coping tool”: They could share their feelings, make social comparisons, and gain social support with other international students through Facebook (p. 73). Some students identified more strongly with their host cultural environment during their stay in the United States. For example, one student changed her Facebook profile page and adopted the surname of her American host family. For most, however, Facebook was a means by which students “held on to their native cultural identities and were not afraid to defend themselves when challenged” (p. 73). It was a meeting space, where international students—spread geographically across the United States—could find and support each other, share feelings and stories, and maintain a culturally distinct identity.

Finally, Kim, Yun, and Yoon (2009) studied interpersonal relationship management among Asian international students in South Korea where social media websites such as *Cyworld* and *Wechat* were popular. These were places for international students to meet and communicate with South Koreans, primarily for the purpose of gaining “necessary information to effectively manage [their] daily lives” (p. 162). Yet international students also engaged in online communication on a regular basis with co-nationals who resided in South Korea or lived in the student’s country of origin. Such communication primarily served to meet emotional and relational needs, a type of communication they identify as “bonding.” They conclude that these different functions suggest two different kinds of social capital at work among these students, “bridging and bonding” (see Putnam, 2000): Bridging refers to information seeking behaviors—observed across socially heterogeneous,

that is, international and Korean, groups; bonding refers to the emotional support and relationship building that was observed primarily within tight-knit social groups, namely co-nationals.

The above studies demonstrate contrasting findings: Kim and colleagues (Kim, Izumi, & McKay-Semmler, 2008, 2009) claim that higher adaptation and improved psychological well-being are the outcome of greater communication with the host culture and that the results of their study do not diverge from earlier theoretical claims of the theory of cross-cultural adaptation. Yet other studies (Kim, Yun, & Yoon, 2009; Lee et al., 2012; Ye, 2006) indicate that while communication with host nationals may meet informational needs, increased online communication with co-nationals (or other sojourning international students) has benefits, and that these are mainly emotive and relational in nature.

Design of Study

The purpose of this study is to understand how border-crossing students in the age of Facebook adapt: How does online and mediated communication with friends and family far away impact their experiences? How do these activities impact communication with people in the physically close environment? Kim and colleagues argue that successful adaptation depends upon building and strengthening ties with host nationals and that social media have limited effects. (Kim, 2001, claims host mass communication is helpful, and ethnic mass media harmful to adaptation.) Yet Kim, Yun, and Yoon's (2009) study indicates that the online world offers a range of resources—informational, affective, and relational—and that these, in combination with face-to-face resources close at hand, may work together to improve the quality of adaptation. In other words, is adaptation a zero-sum communicative process, whereby communication with co-nationals detracts from communication with host nationals? Or as argued by Kramer (2003) in his critique of Kim's cross-cultural adaptation theory, can the varieties of host national and co-national communication activities be complementary and not contradictory?

The present study draws primarily upon Kim's (2001) cross-cultural adaptation theory and Berry's (2005) and Ward's (2013) understanding of adaptation as both psychological and sociocultural processes; these help us examine intercultural communicative online practices and psychological and emotive responses to the stresses of functioning in a new cultural environment. The study also alludes to, but does not examine in depth, concepts of social capital and social network theory, namely that virtual relationships serve a range of functions—from informational to emotive—and that the ties associated with and/or developed through these functions may range from strong to weak. These theories are drawn upon to examine data from in-depth interviews with participants, paying close attention to how they interpret and evaluate online communicative activities, and how these activities impact their psychological and sociocultural adaptation. Finally, the

perspective is taken that communicative activities are situated (Miller, Wang, Sandel, & Cho, 2002); therefore, there may be contextual and cultural issues that shape the nature of communication (see also Ward, 2013). In sum, the study investigates the following research questions.

RQ1: What are the perceived uses of online and mediated communication by students on international or study abroad programs?

RQ2: How do students' perceptions of mediated activities vary by site, nationality and/or culture, type, and duration of the student's educational program?

RQ3: How do students evaluate and interpret online and mediated activities?

RQ4: How do students perceive their adaptation and cultural adjustment—their sense of psychological well-being, identity, and sociocultural behaviors?

Method and Procedures

Participants

The participants for this study were students either preparing for, currently on, or recently returned from a program of study in a country outside the student's home. (Going on a "study abroad" was defined broadly, ranging from short, one-month programs to multi-year undergraduate or graduate degree-seeking programs.) They included students from a range of programs: Americans who went to Europe or Asia for a period of study, international students who came to the United States for exchange or degree programs, and students who left one country in Asia and went to another country in Asia for study, similar to Kim, Yun, and Yoon's (2009) study of Asian international students in South Korea. The aim of the study was to understand how social media use impacts students across time, ranging from preparation to return, and a variety of spatial contexts.

Participants were recruited through the author's and research assistants' connections to a large university in the southwestern United States in one of two ways: (1) they responded to a call for participation placed in the Department of Communication's bulletin board at the author's university, with extra credit in a communication class offered for participation; (2) they were personally contacted by the author or one of the graduate students who assisted with the project, with no compensation offered. Interviews transpired over an eight-month period, from April to November, 2011. Members of the research team included the author, one international student from China, one Fulbright scholar from Indonesia, an American who had lived and worked in Indonesia for several years, and two Americans who had friends or classmates who had studied abroad. A total of 43 students (28 women, 15 men) participated in the study, with a majority, 28, contacted personally, and a minority, 16, through the call.

For the purposes of this study, interviews conducted with 23 of the 43 students were chosen for analysis. This excluded seven conducted with students preparing

Table 1. Research Participants: Aggregate Demographic Characteristics.

Home Country	Total	Male	Female	Age	Average Degree			Program Status			Program Location			Program Duration in Months		
					UNDER	GRAD	Complete	Ongoing	USA	Europe	Asia	Other	1-4	5-12	>12	
USA	7	1	6	21	7	0	6	1	0	0	5	1	1	5	2	0
China	6	2	4	24	4	2	2	4	5	1	0	0	0	0	4	2
Indonesia	4	1	3	32	2	2	1	3	2	0	2	0	0	0	1	3
Other	6	1	5	25	2	4	0	6	6	0	0	0	0	0	2	4
Total	23	5	18	25	15	8	9	14	13	6	3	1	1	5	9	9

Table 2. Research Participants: Individual Demographic Characteristics.

Participant Number	Home Country	Host Country	Gender	Age	Degree Program	Language of Program	Program Status	Time on Program Months
1	USA	England	Female	21	UNDER	English	Complete	2 Months
2	USA	England	Female	22	UNDER	English	Complete	1 Month
3	USA	England	Female	21	UNDER	English	Complete	2 Months
4	USA	Mexico	Female	22	UNDER	Spanish	Complete	1 Month
5	USA	China	Male	20	UNDER	Chinese	Ongoing	2 Months
6	USA	Spain	Female	22	UNDER	English/Spanish	Complete	7 Months
7	USA	Austria	Female	20	UNDER	English/German	Complete	5 Months
8	CHINA	USA	Female	21	UNDER	English	Ongoing	9 Months
9	CHINA	USA	Male	21	UNDER	English	Ongoing	32 Months
10	CHINA	USA	Female	22	UNDER	English	Ongoing	8 Months
11	CHINA	USA	Female	22	UNDER	English	Ongoing	11 Months
12	CHINA	GERMANY	Male	23	UNDER	German	Complete	12 Months
13	CHINA	USA	Female	36	GRAD	English	Complete	24 Months
14	INDONESIA	SINGAPORE	Male	29	GRAD	English	Complete	48 Months
15	INDONESIA	USA	Female	?	GRAD	English	Ongoing	12 Months
16	INDONESIA	USA/AUSTRALIA	Female	34	GRAD	English	Ongoing	13 Months (Not including previous study in Australia)
17	INDONESIA	JAPAN	Female	33	GRAD	Japanese	Ongoing	14 Months
18	S KOREA	USA	Female	23	UNDER	English	Ongoing	9 Months
19	BULGARIA	USA	Male	20	UNDER	English	Ongoing	9 Months
20	JAPAN	USA	Female	24	GRAD	English	Ongoing	13 Months
21	CAMBODIA	USA	Female	26	GRAD	English	Ongoing	13 Months
22	IRAQ	USA	Male	29	GRAD	English	Ongoing	14 Months
23	TURKEY	USA	Female	28	GRAD	English	Ongoing	25 Months

for study and 13 that had not yet been transcribed. Nationalities of the 23 participants included seven Americans, six Chinese, four Indonesians, and 6 from other countries—one each from South Korea, Japan, Cambodia, Iraq, and Turkey. All but one of the American students completed their program of study, and all attended a short-term study ranging from one to seven months (average three months). Five studied in Europe, one in Mexico, and one—at the time of the interview—in China. All were undergraduate students. The international students had either completed a program or were studying at the time of the interview; their period of time abroad ranged from 8 to 48 months (average 17 months); two studied in Asia, one in Europe and 13 in the United States. Eleven of the international students were pursuing or had completed an undergraduate degree program and eight were engaged in (or had completed) a graduate program. The average age of all participants was 23. American students were the youngest, 21 years old, Chinese 24, Indonesians 32, and the others 26 years. Tables 1 and 2 describe the demographic characteristics of research participants.

After signing an Informed Consent document, all participants answered questions about their experience (or preparation) in an open-ended interview that ranged in length from 10 to 64 min, with the average 38 min. Most interviews (27) were conducted face-to-face at the university in the United States; others were conducted face-to-face at two locations in China (11), and the remainder (6), were conducted via Skype with students who lived in Asia.

Interview Protocol and Procedures

The method used in this study was in-depth interviewing. Participants responded to questions from a researcher-developed protocol; they were also encouraged to elaborate upon and narrate personal experiences. The aim was to create what Lofland and Lofland (1995) call a “guided conversation” (p. 85), with participants speaking freely about the experiences that they find most meaningful. All members of the research team had experience living and studying in a “foreign” context, and without taking either a positive or negative stance, they encouraged participants to share both the pleasures and pains of their experiences. This helped create a communicative situation of “empathic neutrality” (Swagler & Ellis, 2003) that let participants feel that the interview was a time and place to express themselves to an interested and non-judgmental listener. To put it in more practical terms, after a student returns from a time of study in another country and is asked, “How was X country?” most often the listener wants only a 60-s response. The interview was a time when the participant could talk at length about their experience and give more than the superficial and quick response.

Interviews were based upon a common protocol, with questions revised depending upon the participants’ status (preparing, currently studying, or completed), and conducted by the author or one of the five graduate students. Content areas of the interview protocol included: (1) demographic questions, (2) the academic

program, (3) the participant's social contacts with host nationals, (4) knowledge of the host community/country, (5) the use of social networking sites, online activities, and media consumption, and (6) perceived challenges and changes.

Demographic questions included items such as the participants' country of origin, age, and major; academic program items probed matters such as the duration of the program, the educational focus, language(s) learned, faculty, and perceptions of the program's quality; social contacts queried participants' number and quality of friendships, languages used with friends, and mediated communication with host nationals. Questions about knowledge of the host community asked participants how much they knew about the community or country where they were living, and how they learned it; the use of social networking sites, online activities, and media, asked for which sites participants used, how much time they spent on these sites, how they communicated with friends/family from the country of origin, and their evaluation of online and mediated communication when using it and/or contacting distant friends/family. Finally, questions probed challenges and changes students encountered during their time of study: How did they overcome challenges? Did they perceive changes to the self? Did others perceive changes to their mood and emotional state, food consumption, and sense of health and well-being? Questions were designed, in the phenomenological tradition, to elicit the "lived experience" of the participants, asking them to describe their experiences and to reflect upon their emotional state at the time (Swagler & Ellis, 2003).

Interviewers were trained to ask questions in a conversational, open-ended manner, allowing participants to elaborate, provide examples, and explain and interpret their experiences. Most interviews were conducted in English; some were conducted in the participants' native languages of Chinese and Indonesian with members of the research team who were fluent in these languages.

Data Analysis

For this paper a portion of the interviews, 23, were selected for data analysis. Students preparing for a study abroad experience (10) are not included. Also not included are participants who spoke Indonesian during the interviews, as these interviews have not yet been transcribed. (Some Indonesian participants, however, spoke English and their interview data are included.) These data are representative of students who come from a number of different countries, attended different types of programs, and studied in different locations.

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim in the original languages. Transcripts were checked for accuracy by a second person. (Except for six interviews conducted in Chinese all those included in this analysis were conducted in English; Chinese language interviews were read and analyzed in Chinese, with excerpts translated by the author.) Data were analyzed qualitatively. This included writing and collecting field notes on each interview and explaining how each participant was contacted, the tone of the interview, and any memorable

comments made by the participant. During the period of data collection the author met regularly with research assistants to discuss the progress of the study, taking notes on what was learned from research, and making revisions to the interview protocol and/or recruitment procedures as needed. The aim was to achieve what Fitch (1994) calls “balance” between the status of participant and observer.

The 23 verbatim transcripts included for analysis in this study constituted 293 pages of single-spaced text, and were read by the author. Excerpts were copied from transcripts into a Word document of 102 single-spaced pages based upon the following items: (1) Friends and contacts with host nationals, (2) friends, family, and contacts with co-ethnics (co-nationals), (3) Online and social media use including platforms, for example, Instant messaging, Facebook, Skype, *Renren* [人人, or literally “person person” in Chinese], and time spent using each, (4) Evaluations of social media/online communication, (5) Perceived emotional state and health, and (6) Statements indicating psychological and sociocultural adjustment (see Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999). These were based primarily on participants’ responses to questions about perceived changes to oneself, or changes others saw in the participant. Summaries of these excerpts, including demographic information, were transferred to an Excel file for comparison and analysis across all participants. The end result is a descriptive representation of the experiences, perceptions, activities, and identities of students from a range of national backgrounds and study abroad programs.

Findings

Perceived Online Communication Patterns: Time and Uses

Research questions one and two of this study seek to understand the perceptions of online and mediated communication activities by students, and to understand if these vary among students and across different contexts. Comparisons are made between responses by American students—who attended short term programs ranging from one month to a semester—and non-American international students—most of whom attended long term, degree-seeking programs. Students were asked how much time they spent communicating with family and friends via such platforms as Facebook, Skype, cell phones, or instant chat. The amount of time ranged from 10 h to 10 min, with the average slightly over two hours (144 min), and most one hour per day.

One caveat, as explained by some students, is that it is difficult to know exactly how much time per day is spent on Facebook. When asked, an Indonesian graduate student said,

Now I work a lot on my computer and I always have the Facebook on. ... I don’t always sit in front of my computer but ... in terms of hours I don’t know, maybe 24 h in a day is like 15 h, but again I do not sit in front of the computer and respond to the Facebook for 15 h straight. I just leave it on there.

Likewise an Iraqi student said that the time he spends on Facebook varies greatly. When school is in session “I probably spend something like no more than, I’m pretty sure no more than 20 min all the day. I log in twice or three times a day but just very quickly and I never make myself available during semesters for chat.” However, during breaks and holidays he spends more time online:

If I’m during the breaks I might spend something like between two to five hours on Facebook because I have a lot of friends back [home]. And when they ask me about, “How’s life going there? How’s education in America? How’s blah blah? How can I apply? How can I? What stages do you go through?” things like that.

American students reportedly spent more time online or using mobile technology (average = 188 min) than non-Americans (average = 125 min) and ranged from 10 h per day to 10 min. (The latter was a student in China who was limited in time online because of access and hardware issues.) All students had a Facebook account and used this more than any other technology or platform. Other platforms and technologies mentioned included: Skype, Twitter, cell phones—chat and voice—and email.

Non-American students spent less time online per day than Americans, ranging from four hours to 15 min (with the caveat that time online varies). The technologies and platforms they used were similar with Americans: All had an account in a social media website such as Facebook, cited by most, or the Chinese equivalent, Renren. (While most Chinese students were aware of and/or had a Facebook account, they did not use Facebook often and instead used Renren—China’s version of Facebook—or QQ, a popular Internet-based chat/email function.) In addition to Facebook, other platforms included: Skype, Twitter, Google-talk, Yahoo Messenger, MSN, Cricket, cell phones, and platforms popular in countries outside the United States including Cyworld (South Korea), Mixi (Japan), and WhatsApp (Singapore).

Patterns shaped by cost, access, and technology. Social media patterns were shaped by problems of cost, access, and technology. For instance, Facebook is blocked in China by the government. American students in China can access Facebook by using a VPN (virtual protocol network), or as reported by one student, through an international data plan on a cell phone. However, because of such difficulties American students spent less time on Facebook than their counterparts in the United States or other parts of the world. Chinese students, even those in the United States where Facebook is available, used China-based and unblocked programs such as Renren and QQ. One Chinese student said that both Renren and QQ are important for keeping in touch with family and friends in China:

Because it is just one kind of interaction, learning. The learning environment of them in China is different from yours [in the U.S.]. So we will discuss what it’s like for you over there, what it’s like for you to learn there, and then, we we’ll chat with our friends, and have the communicating feeling. [Chinese language excerpts are translated by the author.]

Students explained that because their friends in China used Renren and QQ, they are used to keep in touch, share information, and receive emotional support.

For Americans studying in Europe, the high cost of cell phone plans was a challenge worked around via social media. An American who spent half a year in Austria explained:

Facebook was a technological tool used to get around problems of phone service and cost ... It's like, especially when you first get there, because like nobody has a phone yet, like nobody has an Austrian number, everybody's just like, "What's your name on Facebook?" "Oh, I'm going to add you on Facebook." So you get this in rush of new Facebook friends, and then you get people's numbers.

This resulted in different understandings of what it means to look up someone's profile on Facebook. In the United States friends would first exchange a cell phone number and then "stalk you on Facebook." But in Europe, "Whereas there [Austria] it was like, "No, I need you to get you on Facebook because that is the only way I will be able to get in contact with you." Likewise an American studying in Spain used Facebook to "get around" using a cell phone:

[We developed a] cell phone language. Yeah. It actually didn't take all that long, and actually it's kinda funny, they have ... a cell phone language. Because it's so expensive, if the call actually connects, and so that what they will say is, "Give me a missed call." And you call someone and you ... just let it ring, so you call and you give 'em a missed call.

Facebook for friends, Skype for family. While there were regional differences in social media and mobile technology use due to cost and government censorship, one pattern common to all was that Facebook tended to be the means to communicate with friends, while Skype was preferred for family and close friends, such as boyfriends or girlfriends. One student said that Facebook was a way she could share information with friends about events happening in her city in Europe:

Yeah, I guess like it would be through going out and like sometimes the city would have events, and they would usually have Facebook events, for them, and so like friends would hear about them and then tell me about them. It's kind of a grapevine type thing. Or you just like walk to the center of town, and something would be happening.

An Indonesian graduate student in the United States likewise used to Facebook to gather information from "local friends," that is, other American students.

Well most of the time I use Facebook with my local friends is when I need information. ... I will send messages to one of them. Just like last night I read my friend's status, local [American] friend talking about the general exam she is taking. And then she updated the status about the committee members and like that. ... I inbox her asking about what to do to form my committee. ... "Do you think I should contact my adviser in this one?" "I am going to choose these five people in my committee, "What do you think about this?" and "How many credit hours?" ... And she really helps me a lot.

Information could also be shared via Facebook with friends from home, as this American student explained:

[Facebook] just kept me in touch like a lot of times if I knew I couldn't Skype or call my parents or something like that or my boyfriend then I would just like send them a little Facebook message like, "Hey this is what we're doing today. So I'll be out all day." Or like, you know, just kind of let them know what I'm up to and sometimes just that I'm okay.

The preferred platform for communicating with family and close friends was Skype. One American studying in Europe related that she and her mom "can Skype whenever we want it." Her mother reportedly said, "Skype is the greatest thing in the entire world." An American who went to England said she talked to her parents "every other day or so" on Skype and exclaimed, "I think I talked to my parents more when I was over there than I do here." A graduate student from Cambodia used Skype on a regular basis for communicating with her mother and boyfriend:

Sometime I call him, sometime he calls me. It depends. And sometimes over the weekend he also Skype with me because we want to really have a talk and use our cameras and stuff, that's for my boyfriend alone. For my mom, last time during the holiday, every day I talk to her at least an hour or two hours, every day through Skype.

Evaluating Online and Mediated Communication

The third research question queried how students evaluated online and mediated communication. The above answers this question in part as we see the uses associated with different media, such as Facebook, for gathering information and maintaining contacts with friends, or Skype, to communicate with family and close friends. In addition, participants were asked to comment on both positive and negative aspects of using social media.

Perceived problems: Time and inappropriate Facebook posts. Participants expressed a range of problems associated with mediated online or cellphone communication. Some talked about problems such as time zone differences, technology issues, or problems accessing the web. Time zone differences had greater saliency for those who used Skype to contact loved ones at home, like this American in Europe:

Cause, I would be having to be like, staying up really late, to catch someone when they were free. So it would be like if I had anything going on the next day, it was really difficult. So sometimes I would be just like, well, "We'll just do it another time." Then also just sometimes it's like, you know, technical problems, like Skype would just like, mess up, and, couldn't have a conversation.

A few said too much time was spent online. For instance a Chinese student said her classmates spent too much time, even during class, communicating with their boyfriend or girlfriend.

Most comments, however, were relational and emotive in nature. A Korean student said that she does not like to talk “in front of the computer. I mean I’m not making my relationship, build more closer relationship with the social media.” She believed it inferior to face-to-face contact; this was also voiced by an American who said:

I think the bad thing is that maybe it could be like a little bit impersonal. It’s just not the same as face-to-face. Like I think Skype is a little more personal cause you can see their face. It’s a video rather than just like Facebook chatting. So I think it’s the like, the richness of the channel is like maybe bad.

Others observed that their friends would post too much personal information on Facebook, as this Japanese student described her American friends:

One of my friend updates every single, her action to Facebook. “I’m going with you somewhere. I’m going to somewhere.” And I feel like, “Oh my gosh. They are, you know, spending too much time on Facebook.” So, I try not to spend my time on Facebook. But I think they, everyone use Facebook, they all from here [Americans]. I think it’s crazy. ... Some people put too personal status on Facebook. And it makes other people feel like it’s, you put up too much information or too much, you know, complain about specific something on Facebook; and it’s kind of you know, no privacy for other people.

A few commented on the problem of swearing or inappropriate verbal expressiveness. An Indonesian said some people “swear on Facebook” and “always complain about something” and this impacts how she sees them:

I have some friends who—They are educated, they are handsome and beautiful, and I think they behave; when I meet them personally, when I met them in Indonesia they are fun people. But when it comes to update their status in Facebook, I just cannot imagine that *that* person or those people wrote that kind of thing in Facebook, and Facebook is also public place. ... If they are not swearing, every time they update [their] status they swear, like not very good words. And if not, they will complain; every time they update their status it’s something bad about something. ... I don’t like it, because it really affects the way I see people. Especially that person.

When asked to comment on what are the downsides of Internet use, a Chinese student said, “If you do not look [go online], you will not think too much of your family and friends. Therefore, if you put it down [do not go online] you will be better able to blend into the feeling of the local.” A similar feeling was expressed by an American who said that while Facebook was a good way to know what was happening in the lives of family and friends at home, sometimes it enhances the feeling of homesickness: “The Fourth of July was kind of rough. You know, just ‘cause my family does stuff for the Fourth of July and people go out to our ranch, and so it was just knowing you were missing that. [It] was kind of a bummer.” Finally, one Chinese student said there was an incident when people fell victims to online scammers who were told that a friend had been kidnapped, and to get that person released they had to send money.

Perceived benefits: Bridging the distance and bonding with others. Participants expressed a range of positive evaluations of online and mediated communication; most were emotive and relational. Common was a feeling that Facebook and other technologies shrink the sense of distance. A Chinese student expressed this most eloquently:

I feel that they [social media] make me feel as though I'm not studying abroad. ... It's like that age portrayed in [the television series] *A Native of Beijing in New York* [*Beijing ren zai Niu Yue* 北京人在纽约], I feel that was a time when you really left your country. I just feel in fact that I've simply come to a place where the foreigners are a bit more [in number] than Chinese people. That's all. It doesn't feel at all like a foreign place. ...

Because they [social media] make you feel as the distance has shrunk to zero.

This student contrasted her experience as an international student in New York with the television program, *A Native of Beijing in New York*, a popular show broadcast in the mid 1990s that may now be viewed online. To go from China to New York in the 1990s was a long journey, meaning you left home. But for her, in 2011, there is almost no distance, and the feeling is not strange or foreign.

A similar comment was made by an American who went to Mexico. During high school, she went on a study trip to Spain without access to Facebook or other such communication:

I think in a way it enriched it. I remember when I was in Spain I was 17 and they, I didn't have Facebook. I didn't really get on, I didn't even have a laptop, and I felt why I, I stayed there for two months. I didn't get to talk with my family or my friends, hardly at all. So I didn't really know what's going on back home and they didn't know what's going on at me. Now this time [in Mexico] I felt, ... comforted me knowing that I could talk to them and they're okay. You know I can give them pictures on Facebook so they can see what I'm doing. And, you know it helped it because it because gave me a peace of mind knowing that, you know they were there.

The two experiences were qualitatively different. A trip to Spain in the past was fun, but it fostered a sense of anxiety because she could not contact her family and friends. With access to Facebook, there was less anxiety, and she could enjoy her time in Mexico even more.

Positive feelings attributed to online communication were not limited to the sojourning student. Skype fostered a sense of immediacy between students and their parents, as explained by a Bulgarian student: "Is like uh, good because with one touch of the button of the mouse you can talk with your mother like, 7000 miles away. And it feels like, really close. And you can see [the] camera and you can have like, you can see her, she can see me." An American in Austria said that this was comforting to her mother:

Skype is how I kept in touch with people at home and that was like, very, very good. I mean my mom is the best example because like, she's very attached to me, like I'm very attached to her but I had a very easy time being there, like

somehow like, it was like “Oh, I’m here!” And it didn’t seem like a big deal, whereas like, she was just like “God.”

The student had a “very easy time being there” and did not feel anxiety; Skype was more important to her mother to alleviate feelings of anxiety when they were apart.

A different kind of closeness was expressed by a Japanese student who said that Facebook was a way to build relational closeness with people she did not know well. When asked why Facebook is important, she replied:

Because I feel like even if we just, if I met just one friend once, once but, if I see the Facebook what he or she’s doing on Facebook and we know that, what they are doing in daily life, like I feel very close to them and next time when I meet them I’m like, “Hey I know you are doing something.” Maybe they feel like I am close. They know each others’ life. So I think Facebook or media is important

Finally, these online technologies were ways to alleviate pressure and feelings of homesickness that can arise when a student is alone and far from home. A Cambodian student was asked if she felt happy when she talked with her boyfriend in Cambodia: “No, in fact I talk to him most of the time. The time that I need to talk to him was the when I stressed, it’s not when that I’m happy. When I’m happy I spend my time watching movie, I now forgot about him completely.” She needed to feel his presence when she felt stress, not when she was happy. Similarly a married Indonesian woman studying in Japan was asked how she felt when watching Indonesian television shows online. These shows helped her: “Well it’s, whenever I feel, I miss Indonesia, and I want to go back, it cure[s] my feelings.”

Adaptation and Cultural Adjustment

The final research question examines students’ adaptation and cultural adjustment in a new environment. As discussed earlier, adaptation includes both psychological (identity issues, sense of well-being) and socio-cultural (cultural-specific skills, language proficiency) challenges (e.g., Berry, 2009; Ward, 2013). The last set of questions in each interview was designed to tap into these issues by asking students to comment on their emotional condition: When and why did a student feel happy? When and why did they feel sad or depressed? And when a student felt happy, what did he or she do to change the emotional condition? Responses indicate that online and offline activities are intertwined, and that adaptation is impacted by a range of relationships that are developed and/or maintained through both social media and face-to-face interactions. These in turn are related to students’ psychocultural and sociocultural adaptation. We begin by discussing how mood was affected by relationships.

Face-to-face and online relationships: Buffers in times of stress. The issue of relationships has been alluded to above. Students turned to Facebook and social media to gather information from classmates and friends for school and/or personal matters. They also used such platforms such as Skype to communicate with

family and close friends living far away. Yet mediated friendships should be understood in the context of challenges of making friends FtF with co-nationals in the place of study. These were challenges for both Americans and non-Americans, with areas of both similarity and contrast.

American students' friendships. Most American students who spent only a month or two on a summer study abroad program made few local friends. They had limited contact with host nationals during the structured portions of their programs. However, the semester-long study programs were less structured and allowed more freedom for the students to befriend host nationals and interact less with Americans. Yet sometimes it took a conscious effort to build such friendships. As noted above, the student in Austria improved her German speaking ability by changing her circle of friends. "The first half I made a bunch of friends who spoke English. We all spoke English to each other." The second half she became close friends with several Austrians, and invited one, who came to the United States, to spend the Thanksgiving holiday with her. The student in Spain said that she "didn't interact with any American people hardly" and that she had time to engage in social activities with Spanish friends and classmates from other European countries: "As soon it got warm, it was every day, just going to the beach and playing volleyball, stuff like that; and then, other than that, we had a lot of family style type dinners with each other, and then typical, just going out to like the clubs and different bars." She developed a close friendship with one Spanish male, and said that, using Spanish, since returning to the United States she emails him on a daily basis.

Using Facebook and other social media to exchange messages with American friends at home was an important activity for students in Europe. Via Facebook's "wall post" one student received comforting messages from friends and felt that the relationship was still intact:

If I would get a wall post from somebody I wasn't super close with, and they just be like "Hey, I miss you." And I'd be like, "Thank you. Like, I miss you, too. And that was really sweet of you to say." Or like my last like gushy, emotional friend to be like "Hey, we need Skype, because I miss you a lot." And that was ... nice to hear that, because as a student who studies abroad, ... the biggest worry is that your friends are going to forget you and replace you.

Facebook was a way to share pictures with friends: "Pictures are very much a big deal of your time there and I mean that was where everybody put them." Yet pictures conveyed dual messages. One was that her friends in the United States were "hanging out with new people" and making new friends; the other was that she was having a separate experience in Austria, having fun with others: "And then it's bad for them because I'm posting like, 'Oh, my god I've got all these friends. And I'm going out getting drunk and partying and having a great time.' But you're not with me."

International students' friendships. Most international students at American universities said they had problems making friends with Americans. A Korean said she was matched with a "university cousin" with whom she was supposed to

develop a friendship. But whenever she would call this person, the other person would say, “I am busy now. So call me more call me later” or, “I think I could not do something now.” Later she moved to another part of the campus where more international and Korean students lived and developed friendships with them. An Indonesian graduate student in education said that she met Americans in the classroom only and did not “hang out” with them. It was “not because we don’t want to, I think they’re busy. We only meet in the afternoon and they’re always busy in the morning because they have full time jobs as teachers so we never go out.” A Cambodian graduate student in petroleum engineering said that she had no American friends except her “housemother.” She said that she likes Americans and finds them “kind of open; they in fact very open-minded. ... And I like the way, I like American people.” The problem for her was that in her program there were very few American students: “It’s just that there are so few, Yeah, they’re so few.” A Turkish woman said that Americans are “very individual.” Therefore, “They sometimes do not bother to ask you, ‘Hi, how are you?’ You know, but I think it’s up to the person that you are interacting. Some of them are very nice, they want to know what you’re doing; they want to talk. And some of them are just eh. But you know it’s similar in Turkey; some people are really nice some people are not.”

Chinese students found Americans to be friendly, but perceived the sense of cultural difference too great to become friends. One exception was a graduate student in her 30s who came to America with her family. She said that while she received some help from other Chinese, she made better friendships and received greater support from Americans and other international students. More often the experience was like that of a Chinese undergraduate who said that support from other Chinese students was important:

When I first came here all my friends were new, everything was a new beginning. And then I just started to think of the old [homesickness]. ... “Why did I choose to come here? Why did I come to a strange environment? Why did I want to know all these new people?” And then, you discover that there are many things that you are willing to share with them; and then they will give you very good advice; they will boost you, encourage you. And then, of course there are some things you don’t want to share with your mother and father, because you are afraid they will worry.

Unlike other students who through Skype and social media shared experiences with their parents, and thus lessened their parents’ anxiety, this student turned to her co-national friends to share concerns that she wanted to keep from her parents. By not telling them she felt her parents would worry less.

International students perceived social media to be important to contact co-national friends and family, and this often helped relieve stress and raise their mood. An Iraqi student said that he came from a large family; his father has two wives and he has 15 siblings. In his home environment he “talks all the time” because he is surrounded by family and friends. But in the United States he was sad because he is “not talking to enough people. I believe human are

connected really, really closely to each other, unless a guy is crazy otherwise he has to speak with people.” The way to overcome this sadness was to talk with an Iraqi friend, via Skype, who lives in a nearby U.S. city. Likewise an Indonesian in the United States said that what makes her sad is “loss of contact with friends from Indonesia. And away from family that is hard for me. Sometimes I miss them but it’s just too far away. I cannot just go back to Indonesia.” She felt better by talking to a number of people, her family and friends in Indonesia and her American doctoral adviser: “Usually talked to my friends and to get solution from them. And also talk to my family is very releasing, relieving. And also talk to my adviser, she also give me a broader view about the study and the plan of the study.” An Indonesian woman studying in Japan felt lonely and depressed because she was in Japan without her husband and child. What helped was to go on Facebook and communicate with her family and friends in Indonesia. Finally, a Chinese student in the United States said that his mood was related to friendship relationships.

After coming here the most depressing thing, it’s just that in the final analysis, I feel that my circle of friends was reduced a lot, that is in comparison with the friends I have in China. ... And so that whenever there is a misunderstanding with a friend I feel very depressed. Really. And then I don’t want to lose every friend.”

Developing sociocultural skills and self-confidence. Gaining greater language fluency in the new environment—a sociocultural skill—was a concern of most international students. A Japanese student said that if she felt her English ability on a given day was not good, she would go home at night feeling “disappointed.” A Turkish student said that in her first year she lacked confidence in her speaking ability, and in her second year she addressed this by exerting extra effort to pay attention to how others spoke English, and then adopted what she learned in her own speech. Some American students also spoke of language learning challenges. An American in Austria made a conscious effort to improve her German by reducing contacts with other Americans and spending more time with German-speaking friends; she said her German improved greatly after she did this. These comments indicate that language acquisition is a skill related to the quality and amount of time spent in face-to-face communication with people in the new context; and while not stated explicitly, language acquisition may be negatively impacted by social media ties with family and friends who communicate using the student’s native language.

In addition to language learning, students also spoke of learning such skills as navigating in a foreign country. While unrelated to mediated communication activities, the acquisition of such skills was seen as important and related to a sense of greater self-confidence. An American who spent a summer in England, when asked if others have seen changes in her since returning replied: “I think they just laughed at the fact that we were more confident in the fact that, if I could get through Europe and not lose, uh, I lost a lot of things but not you know, end up in the wrong place at the wrong time, travel and get home.” An American who studied in Mexico said that she learned how to get information from asking cab

drivers. Another American who went to London said that she sees herself “more culturally diverse” and “more open-minded maybe, um and then also like a little bit more independent just knowing that like I can travel by myself all over Europe and I know how to navigate different ways of traveling and um even just like booking hotels and like paying for things myself.” Finally, an American who spent a semester in Austria said that her mother told her she was impressed: “I could never have done that; I could have never just like gone and lived.”

International students did not talk about navigation as an important skill, perhaps because this was less likely to be an important component of their study. They did, however, speak of other sociocultural that impacted their mood such as stress due to performance in coursework. An Indonesian in Singapore who completed his doctorate, said that his negative moods were related to work (as a graduate student researcher); when the results of his experiments were unsuccessful, he was unable to produce publishable work, and this caused a lot of stress. An Indonesian in the United States said that if she fails to get an A in a course this makes her depressed. A Chinese student said that when she has a lot of homework and feels pressure, she cries. Yet like American students who felt more confident after their experience, international students likewise said that meeting these challenges taught them to “persevere” and in the end helped them to feel “more independent” and “self-confident.”

The adapting psychological self. Finally, students, both American and international, said that through their experiences living and studying in a foreign environment they saw themselves differently. This indicates an evolving sense of self, a personal realization that if they can successfully navigate life in a foreign environment, they can handle other challenges.

The American who spent a semester in Spain said she now feels “more confident ..., I think just probably more, cause I’m usually pretty good at like I was pretty good in the past at like, faking it. But I always felt way more anxious, like inside, and now it’s kind of like, ‘Whatever.’” However, she also said the return from Spain to the United States was a challenge, and this led her to see her home in a new way:

I don’t know. I guess it was worse coming back, because when I went there it was definitely culture shock, but I was like, excited about it. Cause I’ve always been like, I want to learn about, different cultures and everything like that. So I was like, it was definitely new, and kind of scary, but it was like in a kind of positive way. When I came back I was just like, “Oh, crappy, [name of U.S. state].” You know I’ve been here all my life, I love [name of state]. But just in comparison it was kind of depressing.

Similarly, the American who went to Austria said that she gained a new perspective when she returned to the United States; she noticed many things that were different, such as the size of a quarter (USD 25 cents) and differences in counting floor levels:

They have like a ground floor and then the first floor and the second floor, and I have a friend who lives in the dorms who lives on the second floor, so I went up two flights of stairs and I opened up the door and I was like, “Why am I on

the third floor?" I was like, "Legitimately confused!" ... [A]nd that's when I still struggle just like you should go up two flights of stairs to get to the second floor, it makes so much sense. They've got it right over there. There are certain things that they have correct that I think we have wrong.

This student's sense of what counts as "right and wrong" apparently changed, supporting Kim's (2006) claim that adjustment involves "reorganization" of the person's identity in response to the stresses of a new environment. But this reorganization was felt more strongly upon returning to the home environment and may be the reason why reentry is more difficult.

Non-American international students also perceived a changing sense of self. An Iraqi said that he is more open and willing to talk to people of different sexual orientations. He cannot tolerate corruption and when he returns to Iraq wants to speak out openly about this problem. It seems that he is incorporating American cultural perspectives into his identity of greater openness and adherence to the law. A Turkish woman said that when Americans criticize her personally, or her culture in general, she can "get very angry and I say those American people are not civilized and they say that we are not civilized."

Other international students voiced changes in response to acculturative stresses that appear to reflect a distinctly non-American identity. A Korean in the United States said:

I am, thinking about by myself, I'm thinking about my perspective [my] personality about a lot. I find some new aspect of mine and it was good experience because there is nobody. I mean I did not know my family's value, about my life. But now I can tell how much they are so important—precious for me. So I want to be more good daughter for my parents.

Her thoughts sound Confucian, seeing herself as linked to her "family's value" that she is precious to them and thus wants to be a "more good daughter for my parents." Likewise, a Japanese student said that she has learned to be more "patient" when facing challenges. Expressing a focus on the group, or collective orientation, a Cambodian said that her academic challenges were overcome when she found a partner and formed a study group. An Indonesian in America said that he has learned "to share my problems with friends, and my adviser." Finally, a Chinese student in the United States said that when he was in China he was less ambitious and did not have to struggle—perhaps due to the strong collective guidance of his family and school. Now that he is in the United States he has more personal thoughts and plans. But his response is not to become a more outspoken individual, but to become "more introverted" and less willing to speak out.

Conclusion

The present study examined how border-crossing students in the age of Facebook and other social media perceive and experience a time of "study abroad." Research questions one and two inquired what are the perceived uses and patterns of online mediated communication, and whether they vary by site, nationality and/or culture

of the student, type and duration of educational program. Findings indicate that all students, regardless of national background, location, type, and duration of study abroad program, use online and mediated communication on a routine and regular basis. These technologies are used to communicate with both host nationals, (e.g., teachers and classmates, and co-nationals)—family and friends, who may live thousands of miles away. Likewise, a pattern emerged across a range of contexts and among students from different countries: Facebook was used more often for communicating with friends, while Skype was preferred for family and close friends. Differences also emerged, some due to cost and governmental restrictions. For example, the high cost of cell phone service in Europe led to work-arounds, such as using Facebook and Skype to talk with friends living in the same dorm, and the rise of a “cell phone language” as a person would tell someone else to “Give me a missed call” to signal an intent to communicate. Chinese students in the United States continued to use Chinese platforms Renren and QQ, even though Facebook is not blocked in the United States.

The third research question probed students’ evaluations and interpretations of online and mediated communication. Consistent with findings by Kim, Yun, and Yoon (2009), students described informational and emotive activities that correspond with the “bridging and bonding” functions of social capital theory. For example, Americans in Europe used Facebook as “a kind of grapevine” to find out what events were happening in town, and an Indonesian graduate student in the United States used Facebook to learn how to form her doctoral committee. Bridging activities were more often described as happening with friends or host nationals than family or close friends. Emotive and relational activities—bonding—more often transpired with family and close friends, a boyfriend or girlfriend at home, or a co-national in the same culture. For example, an American studying in Austria said that talking with her mother on Skype eased both her mother’s and her own anxiety and a Cambodian in the United States said that she talks with her boyfriend in Cambodia regularly, and feels a greater need to talk with him when she is stressed.

Students also perceived problems with online communication. Some were technical, such as frustrations with Internet connections or the challenge of communicating with someone in a different time zone. More were relational, such as a Korean who said that developing a relationship with someone online is inferior to a face-to-face encounter, or the Chinese student who said that by not going online, you are less likely to think of your family and friends in China—and “be better able to blend into the feeling of the local.” These support the argument of cross-cultural adaptation theory that successful adaptation is the process of leaving the former culture and getting closer to the new, host environment.

Another perceived problem of online communication may be influenced by cultural expectations of communication styles from the FtF environment. Studies of collectivistic cultures indicate a preference for indirectness and restraint in communication (e.g., Gudykunst & Nishida, 1986; Park & Kim, 2008). Facebook, however, may alter the style of communication, as the Indonesian student perceived in the postings of his friends who were “complaining” or “swearing.” It

may also bring students from one cultural background into close contact with students of another, and cause a feeling of discomfort, as we saw from the Japanese student's response to her American friends' Facebook postings, believing they revealed too much personal information.

The fourth research question examined the adaptation process, probing students' sense of psychological well-being, identity, and sociocultural behaviors. Building upon insights from Berry's and Ward's work (e.g., Berry, 2009; Ward, 2013), we find that today's students on international and study abroad programs are adapting psychologically and socioculturally. Students gained greater language competencies and socio-cultural skills, such as being able to navigate in a foreign city. The ability to master such skills was often linked with greater confidence, a psychological sense of well-being, supporting the claim that these are linked (Ward, 2013). The inability to master a skill well, or for some struggles with language learning, negatively impacted their mood—identified in many studies as a “major acculturative stressor” (Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

When comparing Berry's (2009) and Ward's (2013) model of acculturation with Kim's (2006) theory of cross-cultural adaptation, there appears greater support for the former. Kim's theory posits a push-pull movement away from the former culture to the new one, with it the responsibility of the sojourner to adapt to the host culture. Berry's model posits a dynamic, dual interaction between the ethnic group and larger, host culture. The strategies of both sides impact the process of acculturation; if the host does not follow the strategy of multiculturalism, then the ethnic group's strategy of integration—claimed to be the best strategy (Berry, 2005)—cannot be achieved. We see evidence of the host group's strategy influencing acculturative processes when we consider the problems most international students in the United States had making friends with American students. While this study did not measure Americans' attitudes towards international students, it seems many host Americans were not “multicultural” in their interactions, thus thwarting the possibility of integration. In contrast, Americans in Europe seemed to find it easier to make friends with Europeans, perhaps due to a multicultural strategy of Europeans. (It may also be that the cultural inclinations of the Americans abroad—paying less attention to social hierarchy and acting and treating others as individuals—may have made it easier for them to integrate with others.)

Another finding that diverges from Kim's theory is that the sojourning student's level of adaptation is not dependent upon adopting the beliefs and attitudes of the host culture. Some, such as the Iraqi who felt he was more open-minded, or the American who felt that Austrians had the counting of floors in a building right, did become more like the host culture. Yet others, such as the Korean student who felt more appreciation for her parents, or the Chinese student who felt more introverted, or in a different way, the Turkish woman who raised objections when she felt Americans were criticizing her or her culture, these people moved from an American cultural norm and toward that of their respective home cultures. In other words, achieving a higher level of satisfaction does not mean becoming more like the host culture. This resonates with both Ward's (2013)

study of Asian Muslim youth and Lee et al.'s (2012) study of international students who went to the United States on a high school exchange program and “held on to their native cultural identities and were not afraid to defend themselves when challenged” by other Americans either face-to-face or online (p. 73).

Findings from this study demonstrate the role of online communication for relationship building, or bridging and bonding, that transcends time and space. While there are some perceived problems, such as “swearing” on Facebook, spending too much time online and not being physically present with others, these students perceive Facebook, Skype, and other platforms to “enhance” their experience. They are able to share information with family and friends, alleviate their parents’ anxieties, and receive emotional support and encouragement in times of stress. This support may come from a boyfriend living far away in Cambodia, or it may come from a Facebook posting from a classmate who lives in a nearby dormitory. The physical and virtual worlds are intertwined and interconnected for today’s students. Perhaps what is most important for each student’s adjustment is the sense of connection, just as Swagler and Ellis (2003) found in their study of Taiwanese students in the United States. The students with the most problems were not those with the poorest English abilities, but those who were socially disconnected. Thus, international and study abroad students today have more opportunities to connect with others, and perhaps have a better experience than those in the past.

Limitations and Future Directions

Finally, limitations of the present study must be acknowledged. First, since female participants heavily outnumbered males (see Tables 1 and 2), a gendered understanding of the use of social media during a period of study abroad is inadequately explored. Future analysis may explore these differences. Second, the methods used by this study—in-depth interviewing—limit our understanding of how observable and perceived practices may differ. As noted by Warren and Karner (2010), there is an ongoing debate regarding interviews as a valid means to discover what is “true” and “objective” (pp. 172–173) about life’s experiences. Future work may benefit from observing actual interaction and take advantage of the ability to record virtual communication, such as observations of Facebook used by Lee et al. (2012). Finally, some themes and theoretical issues implied by this study remain unexplored. One is how different cultural orientations, such as individualism-collectivism (e.g., Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Triandis, 1995), may impact the use and perception of social media use. As noted above, the stress of living in a foreign land led a South Korean woman to think of her obligations to her family and how precious they are to her. This indicates that the perceived adaptation of some international students is guided by a collectivistic orientation and differs from that of American students. Finally, the study did not explore the concept of homesickness (e.g., Jibein & Khalid, 2010; Swagler & Ellis, 2003), and how students’ use of

social media may be a means to remedy such feelings. Future research may explore this concept further.

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