



## Acculturation in the social media: Myth or reality? Analysing social-media-led integration and polarisation

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This special issue presents rich and robust research papers that examine and analyse social media's roles in promoting and/or inhibiting human acculturation to “others”. In so doing, the special issue expands on and advances the concept of acculturation and showcases scholarly works that investigate human interaction with “others” of different lifestyles, professions, political views, ethnicities and ideologies.

The Internet now enables people from most parts of the world to engage and interact with a wider populace that often goes beyond their own communities, without the need to physically travel abroad and/or meet in person. Therefore, in addition to focusing on ethnic minorities' acculturation experiences, strategies and outcomes as a result of their physical movement, the papers published in this special issue endeavour to redefine and recalibrate the concept of acculturation to conceptualise its varied applications in different contexts.

Acknowledging social media's paradoxes and idiosyncrasies, this special issue brings together conceptual and empirical works to further discuss how, why and to what extent social media enable, facilitate and/or inhibit our acculturation to “others”.

Cappellini, Kravets and Reppel, in their paper, argue that the ‘others’ that people often perceive are not a monolithic and stable category, but can well be a complex articulation of disparities generated through an array of different encounters, made possible through social media. Their paper explores the concept of borderscapes through the role of hashtags – a social media content sorting device – in organizing public conversations on important social issues. Their findings show how a hashtag denotes the contours of diverse “us” and “other” positions around a contested sociopolitical issue. In particular, their study reveals that hashtags are lines that denote competitive views but also fluid spaces, wherein diverse points are articulated, contested and consolidated. Although Cappellini, Kravets and Reppel suggest that polarisation is facilitated rather than dissolved by social media, their work demonstrates social media's role in enabling consumers to encounter “selected” social-cultural others.

The above issue is also central to Grover, Kar, Dwivedi and Janssen's paper, titled “Polarisation and acculturation in the 2016 US presidential election: Can Twitter analytics predict changes in voting preferences?” Their paper addresses one of the key issues discussed above by identifying and analysing how people from different political tenets and

ideologies interacted on social media in the wake of the 2016 US presidential election. Converting qualitative tweets into quantified data by using machine-readable algorithms, content analysis and network analysis, their paper argues that the election result was highly influenced by how the candidates used their Twitter handles and interacted and engaged with their followers. While polarisation is common amongst parties, its outcomes appear to be different. The Trump camp's success in this regard may indicate that polarisation can benefit, support and reinforce right-wing political views. Social media, instead of creating opportunities for the exchange of opinions, facilitates polarisation. These findings and their implications are somewhat in contrast to what Ali, Azab, Sorour and Dora have said in their paper, titled “Integration v. polarisation amongst social media users: Perspectives through social capital theory on the recent Egyptian political landscape”. The authors of this paper argue that the legacy of authoritarian government in Egypt suppressed people's expression, channelled through social media, which led to multiple political movements in post-2011 Egypt. As such, social media encouraged interaction amongst various polarised groups and caused tension and conflicts. The paper also expands on acculturation concepts by categorising various political parties and their ideologies in light of their levels of integration/separation with more liberal and progressive values.

Mitra and Evansluong's paper on “Narratives of integration: Liminality in migrant acculturation through social media” attempts to deconstruct the digital narratives of migrant journeys to explore how they may lead to a meaningful assessment of migrants' acculturation and consequent integration in their host societies. Their data provide evidence on social media use amongst migrants living in major cities in Sweden and suggest that the social-media-based interaction of migrants does not encourage integration. Their findings broadly resonate with those of Choudhary, Nayak, Kumari and Choudhury, whose paper, titled “Analysing acculturation to sustainable food consumption behaviour in the social media through the lens of information diffusion”, suggests that there is a link between the integrated strategy of acculturation and information diffusion on social media which influences acculturation to sustainable food consumption behaviour amongst social media users. They conducted in-depth interviews with native Indian (Indians who live in India), British Indian (ethnic Indians who

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live in the UK), and white British (ethnic British living in the UK) respondents. Their paper also indicates ‘remote acculturation’ through social media, which is a nascent area and warrants further research.

Kizgin, Jamal, Rana, Dwivedi and Weerakkody's paper, titled “The impact of social networking sites on socialisation and political engagement: Role of acculturation” also juxtaposes acculturation and ethnic communities' socio-political interactions. In multi-ethnic settings, ethnic minorities' participation in and engagement with the mainstream political activities, as the authors argue, are influenced by their socialisation on online networking sites and moderated by their level of acculturation. Simultaneously, their level of enculturation, which denotes their desire to remain connected with their ancestral cultures, has a negative moderating effect on this relationship.

Polarisation and integration for sojourners such as international students can also be identified as an insightful area for investigation. Yu, Foroudi and Gupta's paper focuses on Chinese international students in the UK. They discuss how social media facilitates Chinese students' acculturation and thus affects their academic achievement. Their findings suggest that the more social media Chinese students use for general purposes, such as knowledge sharing, interaction and entertainment, the better they acculturate to the UK culture, from both psychological and behavioural perspectives. Furthermore, the more they acculturate to the UK culture, the better their academic achievement and their promotion of the UK studying experience.

Li, Guo and Wang's paper “Veni, Vidi, Vici: The Impact of social media on virtual acculturation in tourism contexts” also investigates social media's facilitating role in tourists' acculturation. Taking a qualitative approach to data collection, their study includes indirect and intermittent virtual intercultural contacts in discussing the concept of acculturation and discusses how social media enable such acculturation in various stages within a virtual acculturation process framework. Virtual acculturation refers to the acculturation that takes place in learning and acquiring cultural related skills for sociological adaptation prior to tourists' travelling abroad. By systematically elucidating the role of social media usage in the virtual acculturation process, their paper highlights the role of social media as key enablers of acculturation, going beyond “continuous first-hand contacts” to also include “indirect and/or intermittent virtual contacts”.

Wang and Abosag's paper on “The role of individual dialecticism in dual-focused cultural stimuli evaluation” taps into the debate as to whether social media can facilitate consumers' acculturation without the need to physically travel abroad. They propose to examine whether consumers' dialectical thinking has a significant impact on their evaluation of dual-focused cultural stimuli; and whether consumers' acculturation experience (physically moving abroad versus social-media based) moderates this relationship. Dialectical thinkers perceive reality as dynamic and changeable and take on a more tolerant view towards inconsistencies and contradictions. Using Chinese young consumers as respondents, their study shows that Chinese consumers' degree of dialecticism can predict their attitude towards advertising that contains dual-focused cultural stimuli. In specific, advertising appeals matching the target's degree of dialecticism are able to generate more positive attitudes. Wang and Abosag also show that the acculturation experience clearly differs between those who have physically moved abroad and those who are still based in China. Their findings show that Chinese consumers who have physically travelled to the UK are more acculturated to Western culture than are those who stays at home, as technology advancement may provide a platform for Chinese consumers to

understand the West – however, the West with which they choose to interact comprises those who share similar lifestyles, professions, political views and religiosities.

Taking on a positive view of social media as an enabler to acculturation, Fujita, Harrigan, Roy and Soutar's paper focuses on the affordances of social media in facilitating acculturation between institutions and their members. They discuss how social media enables institutions and members to negotiate and co-construct their identities, illustrating the two-way acculturation between institutions and members. Taking on a mixed method approach, Fujita et al. look at the relationship-building between universities and students in Australia, using data collected through netnography and survey. Their findings show that through the mediation effect of brand page identification and institutional image, a university's social media marketing content and effort can strengthen its students' engagement and together shape and develop an even more attractive university identity.

The following conclusions can be drawn from the above papers:

- 1) Acculturation goes far beyond the realm of national/global/ethnic cultural adoption, as we have noticed in this special issue that the concept can also be applied to interaction amongst and adoption of various types of political/ideological ethos which have received very little attention in academic works. As such, there is further scope for research to analyse the motivation, processes and outcomes of acculturation in different spheres of lives. Furthermore, acculturation strategies can at the same time be both an outcome and a moderator, indicating the multiple perspectives that researchers can assume in future research.
- 2) It is also understood from the papers that acculturation can have multiple layers and dimensions. It is not a binary continuum between “us” and “the other”, as the latter is not a monolithic entity. People can at the same time interact with various other communities and adopt their cultures – this perspective has not been properly spelled out in the previous literature. It can be argued that social media enables users to have the opportunity to mingle with multiple cultures through multiple platforms.
- 3) Virtual/remote acculturation has been mentioned in several papers in this special issue, indicating the strength of social media as a facilitator for cultural interaction and adoption. This potentially introduces a new dimension for future acculturation research. For instance, the research on acculturation to global consumer culture ought to take into account the role of social media.
- 4) However, the role of social media is not monolithic, as it involves significant paradoxes. While social media has been found to be a supportive vehicle for interaction, it appears on other occasions that social media also enhances in-group interactions and polarises different groups and communities. As such, future research can explore and analyse the factors that constitute and impinge upon social media's influence on integration and polarisation.
- 5) There is a common theme in all these papers that with the advent of social media, consumer culture has taken a new form. Consumers have more freedom with social media, which provides them with opportunities and options. At the same time, their identities are shaped, reshaped or transformed due to social-media-led integration and/or polarisation. This consumer culture in the digital marketplace needs further research for conceptual nourishment of wider consumer studies and information systems scholarships.