Social network sites and acculturation of international sojourners in the Netherlands: The mediating role of psychological alienation and online social support

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ABSTRACT

Acculturation of short-term international sojourners, such as expats and international students, has received considerable attention from scholars in the past decades. Acculturation is commonly defined as the interplay between cultural maintenance, the sojourner's desire to maintain their home culture identity, and host country participation, their desire to initiate contact with members of the host society. The present paper focuses on the role that Social Network Sites (SNS) play in the acculturation process of this group. Through a survey, we examined how 126 short-term sojourners in the Netherlands use SNS to interact with relations in both home and host country, and how this affects their cultural maintenance and host country participation. Furthermore, we examined psychological alienation and online social support as possible mediators. Our results show that on the one hand SNS contact with home country relations is positively related to online social support. On the other hand, it is also related to psychological alienation, which in turn is related to cultural maintenance. This shows that sojourners who keep in touch with friends and family at home also experience more loneliness and homesickness, and place more emphasis on their own cultural heritage. Finally, we found that SNS contact with host country relations predicts host country participation. Through online activities, sojourners are able to foster social interaction and strengthen friendships with locals.

Introduction

With the recent increase in globalization and international mobility, sojourning abroad for purposes of work or study is now more commonplace than ever before. It has been estimated that there are currently 50 million expatriates, and upwards of 5 million international students worldwide (ICEF Monitor, 2017; United Nations, 2017). In the Netherlands alone, there are an estimated 57,000 expatriates and 48,000 international students, and these number are expected to keep on rising (CBS, 2018; Nuffic et al., 2018). International sojourners distinguish themselves from traditional migrants, in that their stay abroad is intended to be temporary. However, it has been shown that, as with other forms of migration, the process of acculturating into the new environment is essential for working or studying abroad (Geeraert & Demoulin, 2013; Hechanova, Beehr, & Christiansen, 2003).

Reviews of the literature on adaptation of international sojourners emphasize the importance of social relations, including

interaction with both home- and host-country nationals, for the success of the sojourn (Bierwiaczonek & Waldzus, 2016; Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). A new research field that has come into focus in the past few years is the role of digital media, and specifically the use of Social Networking Sites (SNS) in this particular context. So far, however, the literature on social networking and sojourner acculturation has remained relatively compartmentalized. Studies situated in the fields of digital media and computer-mediated communication have focused on SNS's influence on adaptation (e.g. Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011; Li & Tsai, 2015; Rui & Wang, 2015), stress (e.g. Park, Song, & Lee, 2014; Ye, 2006), and psychological well-being of sojourners (e.g. Pang, 2018). Simultaneously, scholars in the fields of cross-cultural psychology have examined whether existing models of acculturation can be applied to international students and expatriates (Adams & Van de Vijver, 2015; Bierwiaczonek & Waldzus, 2016; Smith & Khawaja, 2011), but have not studied the effects of digital and/or social media on these processes in great detail (Jackson, 2018; Shuter, 2012). The first aim of this paper is to integrate these streams of research, and investigate how social media use relates to sojourner's acculturation in terms of the two dimensions of the seminal framework by Berry (2005) - cultural maintenance and host country participation – and to their well-being. We will focus on SNS contact that international students and expatriates have with both home and host country relations separately.

Furthermore, it remains unclear through which processes the use of social network sites influences acculturation and well-being among these individuals. The second aim of the present study, therefore, is to examine possible mediators of these relationships. Based on earlier studies, we specifically focus on two variables which have been shown to play an important role in sojourner acculturation: psychological alienation and online social support.

Theoretical framework

The term *international sojourners* was originally used to describe any individual who pursues on an extended sojourn to a country other than their own (Church, 1982). A later taxonomy by Berry (1997) makes a distinction between individuals who move abroad with the intent to stay for a limited period, versus individuals who intend to stay abroad indefinitely. In line with the recent literature (see also Bierwiaczonek & Waldzus, 2016; McNulty & Brewster, 2017), the present study employs the term international sojourners to reflect the former group, but only including those who sojourn for the purpose of work or study, such as expatriates and international students. The definition, therefore, excludes those who travel internationally for leisure (e.g., tourists) or with the intent to become more permanent residents of the host country (e.g., migrants or refugees).

As a result of globalization and increased international labor mobility, the number of international sojourners is growing (United Nations, 2017). Organizations are increasingly likely to pursue a global strategy, and send their employees on assignments abroad (Scullion, Collings, & Gunnigle, 2007). The number of individuals who choose to self-initiate a cross-border move has also risen (Hippler, 2009). Additionally, during the past decades, the global academic environment has internationalized at a rapid pace, which has led to a much larger number of university students who complete (part of) their education in a country other than their own (Altbach & Knight, 2007; OECD, 2018). These developments warrant further study of the processes that could influence the psychological well-being of individuals who have moved abroad (Demes & Geeraert, 2015). One of the major factors that emerges from the literature is the sojourner's acculturation process.

Models of acculturation

Acculturation research is rooted in anthropology, where it is defined as a bidirectional process of cultural change when people from different cultures come into contact (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936). One of the many challenges for sojourners is to adapt to a new environment, which may differ tremendously from where they lived before. In order to create a sense of connectedness to the host society, a successful adaptation process is of the utmost importance (Spoonley, Peace, Butcher, & O'Neill, 2005). Finding one's place in a new country is no sinecure, and in some cases hostile attitudes in the host society, for example at school or in the labor market, can make the adaptation process even more difficult (Bourhis, Moise, Perreault, & Senecal, 1997).

The migrants' perspective on acculturation is captured by the theoretical acculturation framework by Berry (1997, 2005), which differentiates between the individual's desire to maintain one's own culture (*Cultural Maintenance*) and the desire to participate in and engage with the host society (*Host Country Participation*). Crossing these two dimensions leads to four possible acculturation strategies: (a) integration, in which both the own culture and engaging with the host society are important, (b) separation, in which only the own culture preservation is important, (c) assimilation, in which only being a part of the host society is important, and (d) marginalization, in which contact with neither of the two cultures is important. These four acculturation strategies were shown to predict different socio-psychological and behavioral outcomes. Integration is generally deemed the most functional acculturation strategy, as it is related to better adapted individuals in the host society (e.g., better psychological well-being); assimilation and separation are associated with moderate levels of adaptation to the host society and marginalization with the lowest levels (Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001). There is a large body of empirical evidence pointing to the benefits of combining cultural maintenance with host country participation for permanent migrants, such as lower distress (Scottham & Dias, 2010), more pro-social behaviors (Schwartz, Zamboanga, & Jarvis, 2007) as well as reduced likelihood of substance abuse and aggressive behaviors among adolescent migrants (Fosados et al., 2007; Sullivan et al., 2007).

It is important to note that the acculturation dimensions were initially formulated to form four acculturation 'strategies', implying a causal relationship in which migrants choose to which degree they will relate to home or host country, which in turn affects well-being and other outcomes. More recently, however, scholars have argued that the acculturation dimensions should be seen in a more dynamic light; they can be viewed as outcomes as well as antecedents of the adaptation process. For example, Kim (2001) and Ting-

Toomey (2005) define cross-cultural adaptation in terms of growth, in which stress and adaptation processes need to be balanced, and identities are renegotiated multiple times during a sojourn abroad. In a similar vein, Ward and Geeraert (2016) propose a process model of acculturation, in which an individual's orientation towards both home and host cultures change over time as a function of, for example, different contexts, personal characteristics, and external stressors. In line with this thinking, in the present study the degree of cultural maintenance and host-country participation of sojourners are seen as independent process variables, with different antecedents and consequences.

Acculturation of short-term sojourners

Much of the literature on acculturation focuses exclusively on long-term migrants and refugees. For short-term sojourners, the effects of the different acculturation strategies are less clear. Smith and Khawaja (2011) provide a comprehensive overview of acculturation of international students and how it relates to existing acculturation models. For expatriates, a similar review is provided by Adams and Van de Vijver (2015). Both conclude that more research is needed that explicitly links and compares acculturation of these distinct subgroups to existing models. This is confirmed through a review by Bierwiaczonek and Waldzus (2016), who find that the literature on expatriates, international students, and traditional migrants is quite divergent, and that the different groups are associated with different predictors and outcomes.

Some scholars have argued that the ecological context of international students and expatriates' acculturation process may be different from that of traditional migrant groups. For example, the temporary nature of the sojourn may impact the degree to which sojourners are motivated to seek contact with host country relations; because the stay is only temporary, participation in the host society may be less important to this group (Bochner, 2006). Similarly, others have argued that expats and international students may be more likely to maintain their cultural heritage, because they may intend to return home within a relatively short period (Fantini, 2018; Findlay, Stam, King, & Ruiz-Gelices, 2018). Furthermore, the fact that short-term sojourners traditionally belong to high-status groups, and often already have an occupation in the host country (either work or study), provides a different experience than refugees or economic migrants have (Sherry et al., 2010; Shim, Freund, Stopsack, Kämmerer, & Barnow, 2014).

Nevertheless, although the dimensions of the acculturation model by Berry (2005) may have different levels of importance for sojourners than for migrants, the majority of studies show that both do play an important role in their adaptation experiences (Bierwiaczonek & Waldzus, 2016). The dimension of cultural maintenance, which can be operationalized as identification with the home culture, has been associated with both positive and negative outcomes for sojourners. Kim (2015) explains that in order to fully acculturate into a new environment, a sojourner must first 'deculturate', and unlearn some of the elements of the home culture. According to this approach, strong cultural maintenance may inhibit adaptation and reduce the well-being of the sojourner. Other studies, however, have reported favorable outcomes of cultural maintenance for well-being, life satisfaction and stress levels of sojourners (Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009; Outten, Schmitt, Garcia, & Branscombe, 2009; Sellers, Caldwell, Schmeelk-Cone, & Zimmerman, 2003). In these studies, identification with the own cultural group is seen as a buffer against intergroup anxiety; it enhances the feeling of belonging and perceived social support, which facilitates coping (e.g. Schmitt, Spears, & Branscombe, 2003).

The second dimension of Berry's framework, host country participation, can be seen as an indicator of initiating intercultural contact and searching for social identification with the culture of the host country (cf. Li & Tsai, 2015), which in turn has been shown to be a relevant predictor of (sociocultural) adaptation and well-being (Demes & Geeraert, 2014).

In sum, despite the fact that the processes that influence acculturation dimensions may be different for short-term sojourners than for traditional migrants, the general consensus appears to be that, for both international students and expatriates, the dimensions of *Cultural Maintenance* and *Host Country Participation* both play a positive role in their adaptation (Bierwiaczonek, Waldzus, & van der Zee, 2017; Pang, 2018). In line with these findings, in this study we also expect to see positive relationships of both dimensions with *Well-being* during the sojourn.

Hypothesis 1. Cultural Maintenance is positively related to Well-being

Hypothesis 2. Host Country Participation is positively related to Well-being

SNS contact with home country relations

As mentioned above, one of the more recent developments that have changed the acculturation experience of international sojourners is the creation and popularization of online Social Network Sites (SNS), which were defined by boyd and Ellison (2007) as online systems which allow individuals to create profiles, view others' profiles with which they share a connection, and interact with others in the system. Well-known examples of SNS that fit this definition are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, Youtube, and WeChat. The definition of SNS lays the foundation for how they function: they allow individuals to easily create and maintain social interactions with others, regardless of distance or time zones. Since their inception in the early 2000's, SNS have taken a prominent place in individuals' social lives and have evolved to include interaction based on audiovisual communication (photographs and video) as well as interaction based on shared interests and hobbies (Antheunis, Schouten, & Krahmer, 2016; boyd & Ellison, 2007; Cheung, Chiu, & Lee, 2011; Lin & Lu, 2011; Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012).

For international sojourners, in particular, technological advances have opened up many new possibilities for social interaction. Firstly, whereas only a few decades ago, an international move would involve prolonged disconnection from friends and family in the

home country, SNS (and other forms of digital media) now allow us to have instant long-distance communication and stay in close touch with others across the globe. Recent studies have shown that international sojourners make extensive use of available channels to remain in contact with the home country and that they receive social support from online relations (e.g.Billedo, Kerkhof, Finkenauer, & Ganzeboom, 2019). Social support has been studied extensively in the context of acculturation and generally has been shown to positively affect the adaptation and well-being of migrants and sojourners (Podsiadlowski, Vauclair, Spiess, & Stroppa, 2013; Vega & Rumbaut, 1991). We predict that the extra support that sojourners receive from online relations, specifically termed *Online Social Support,* will play a similar role in their acculturation process.

Furthermore, aside from these positive effects, there may also be a downside to staying in close contact with relations back home. A study by Hendrickson et al. (2011) has shown that many international sojourners experience homesickness, which may lead them to feel alienated and lonely, a major component of culture shock (Demes & Geeraert, 2015; Geeraert & Demoulin, 2013). Being in frequent contact with home country relations through SNS may intensify these feelings: being reminded of the life back home by viewing posts, pictures and messages of friends and family in the home country may further increase their sense of psychological alienation (Hendrickson et al., 2011), which in turn may reduce well-being.

Finally, we predict that both of the processes explained above may also affect the acculturation dimensions of short-term so-journers, regarding the framework by Berry (2005). Earlier research into SNS use has shown that contact with home country relations can strengthen social identification with the cultural in-group among migrants (Croucher & Rahmani, 2015). We predict that for short-term sojourners, a similar effect will be found: those who frequently communicate on SNS with friends and family back home retain strong social and psychological ties with the home culture, and as such may display a higher degree of cultural maintenance. Furthermore, we predict that this relationship may be explained by the extent of social support from home country relations, which in turn may increase the need to maintain and identify with that cultural group (Oh, Ozkaya, & LaRose, 2014). Secondly, when so-journers experience psychological alienation and feel excluded from social relationships, the resulting sense of threat may raise their need to seek contact with the own cultural group, further enhancing cultural maintenance (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1990; Haslam et al., 2009). In sum, we predict that SNS contact with home country relations increases sojourners' degree of cultural maintenance, mediated through online social support and psychological alienation.

Hypothesis 3. SNS contact with Home Country Relations is positively related to Online Social Support.

Hypothesis 4. SNS contact with Home Country Relations is positively related to Psychological Alienation.

Hypothesis 5. There is a positive relationship between SNS contact with Home Country Relations and Cultural Maintenance, mediated through Online Social Support and Psychological Alienation.

SNS contact with host country relations

Aside from using them to stay in contact with friends and family back home, sojourners may also use SNS to initiate new contacts in the host country. When an individual moves abroad, even with the intent to stay only for a limited time, the amount of new social interactions they are able to initiate predicts their life satisfaction, as well as their success in work or study (Bierwiaczonek & Waldzus, 2016). Earlier research shows that SNS fulfill a role of complementing and enhancing offline friendships, and are able to strengthen initiatives in making new social connections (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Sheldon, Rauschnabel, Antony, & Car, 2017; Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006; Zhang & Leung, 2015). In earlier studies among international students specifically, SNS have been shown to contribute to the finding common interest groups, strengthening new social relations in the host country, and reducing acculturative stress (Hendrickson & Rosen, 2017; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). As a result, we predict that SNS contact with host country relations will enhance host country participation, the second dimensions of the acculturation model (Berry, 2005).

Furthermore, we argue that this relationship may also be mediated through online social support. Research shows that as so-journers receive less support from existing friends and family, they may turn to local contacts for social interactions (Abdul Malek, Budhwar, & Reiche, 2015; Podsiadlowski et al., 2013; van Bakel, van Oudenhoven, & Gerritsen, 2015). Using SNS to initiate such contacts would thus logically lead to an increase in online social support, which in turn increases host country participation (Ye, 2006).

Furthermore, such contacts may also reduce the psychological alienation that sojourners experience. Whereas above we argued that SNS contact with the home country might increase feelings of homesickness and/or loneliness, we predict that online contact with individuals in the host country may actually reduce these feelings, by providing distraction or filling a need for social belonging which sojourners are lacking after moving abroad (Oh et al., 2014). This, in turn, may increase the sojourners' tendency to seek out more contact with the local host. As such, we predict that the influence of SNS contact on host country relations is mediated through both an increase in social support, as well as a reduction in psychological alienation.

Hypothesis 6. SNS contact with Host Country Relations is positively related to Online Social Support.

Hypothesis 7. SNS contact with Host Country Relations is negatively related to Psychological Alienation.

Hypothesis 8. There is a positive relationship between SNS contact with Host Country Relations and Host Country Participation, mediated through Online Social Support and Psychological Alienation.

Methods

Respondents

The hypotheses outlined above were tested among a sample of individuals working or studying in the Netherlands on a temporary basis, who did not possess the Dutch nationality, and who were not born there. Respondents were contacted through different online and offline communities. For example, international students were recruited through the Dutch chapters of the international association of students in economics and management (AIESEC) and the Erasmus Student Network (ESN), who invited participants through their digital platforms. Expats were recruited through local expat organizations and a number of community forums and social network sites on the topic of being an expatriate in the Netherlands. No compensation was given for participating. Due to external time constraints, the digital survey was available online for four weeks, after which recruitment was ended.

After removing respondents who did not complete the full questionnaire, the final sample used in this study consisted of 126 short-term sojourners, including 64 international students and 62 expatriates. They include nationals of 36 different countries, of which 19.8% were non-western. Of the western countries, the most represented were Germany (18.1%), UK (9.4%), USA (9.4%) and Russia (5.6%). Of the non-western countries, the most represented were Iran (3.9%), Brazil (3.1%), Turkey (3.1%) and India (2.4%). Respondents had spent, on average, 40.3 (SD = 25.6) months in the Netherlands. Mean age was 28.2 years (SD = 6.5; Range = 19–60), 73% was female. Respondents were generally highly educated (Master's: 46.9%; Bachelor's: 32.1%), which is typical for the population of short-term sojourners. Respondents reported using several Social Network Sites, including Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and YouTube. However, by far the most common and most-used network was Facebook; 90.4% of the sample reported using it several times a day.

Measures

Because Facebook was the most commonly used social network in our sample, as well as the only being used by a large percentage of respondents, we decided to define SNS use by the degree of communication that respondents engage in on this platform only. Scales for *SNS Contact with Home Country Relations* were based on an existing scale for measuring online media usage (Rosen, Whaling, Carrier, Cheever, & Rokkum, 2013), which was reformulated to reflect Facebook use only, and directed towards a specific target group. The items included 'How often do you use Facebook to interact with social contacts in your home country' and 'How often do you view content which was posted by social contacts in your home country' (4 items, α = .80). For *SNS Contact with Host Country Relations*, we used the same four items, reformulated to ask about communication with 'social contacts in the Netherlands' (4 items, α = .81).

Psychological Alienation was measured using a selection of 8 items from a scale intended to measure psychological adjustment (Demes & Geeraert, 2014). An example of an item is 'I'm sad to be away from my home country' (α = .82).

Online Social Support was measured using 4 items from the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Tonsing, Zimet, & Tse, 2012), adapted to reflect support by online relations only. The item were 'My online relations really try to help me', 'I can count on my online relations when things go wrong', 'I have online relations with whom I can share my joys and sorrows', and 'I can talk about my problems with my online relations'. The items together formed a reliable scale (α = .92).

Acculturation was measured using two separate scales, based on earlier work by Berry (2005). Our measure of *Cultural Maintenance* included items such as 'I like to take part in the events and traditions of my home culture' (4 items; α = .77). *Host Country Participation* was measured using items such as 'I like to take part in the events and traditions of the Netherlands' (4 items; α = .79).

Finally, *Well-being* was measured using 5 items by Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin, (1985), such as 'I am satisfied with my life' (α = .82).

All items mentioned above were combined with a Likert scale, ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree).

The respondents' *Age*, *Gender*, and *Time in the Netherlands* (in months) were included as control variables. Furthermore, because

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations.

Variables	α	M	S.D.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
1. SNSHome	.80	4.18	1.22	–	.49***	.26**	.20*	.21*	.13	.09
2. SNSHost	.81	4.50	1.34		–	.25**	.13	.07	.44***	.04
3. Online Social Support	.92	5.28	1.00			–	.03	.15	.11	.08
4. Psychological Alienation	.82	1.98	1.07				–	.18*	.14	−.28***
5. Cultural Maintenance	.77	4.01	1.34					–	.15	.26**
6. Host Country Participation	.79	4.73	1.21						–	.28***
7. Well-being	.82	5.18	1.09							–
Age		28.2	6.5	.12	.04	−.26**	−.14	.14	−.17	−.03
Gender				−.07	−.02	−.10	−.06	−.01	−.07	−.07
Time in NL (months)		40.3	25.6	.08	.12	−.10	−.01	−.15	.26**	.05
Occupation				.10	−.01	.29***	.06	−.09	.12	.02

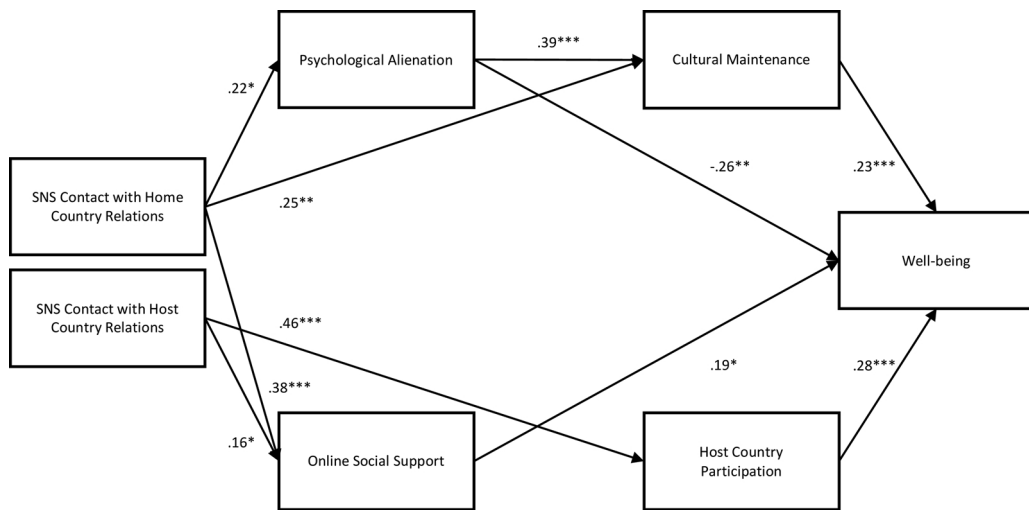Note: * *p* < .05, ** *p* < .01, *** *p* < .001; *n* = 126.

Fig. 1. Structural Model of the relationships between SNS Contact, Acculturation and Well-being, mediated through Psychological Alienation and Online Social Support.
Note: Only significant paths are displayed (* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001), all reported estimates are standardized, and have been controlled for Age, Gender, Time in the Netherlands, and Occupation. Model Fit: $\chi2(13)$ = 16.651; p = .216; CFI = .986; TLI = .940; RMSEA = .047; n = 126.

the present study includes both international students as well as expatriates, respondents were asked to provide their main *Occupation,* which was recoded as 0 (expatriate) or 1 (student). This dummy variable was also included as a control variable. Table 1. provides an overview of descriptive statistics of and correlations between all the constructs and control variables in the study.

Results

Model fit and estimation

A structural equation model was constructed (AMOS 22.0; Arbuckle, 2013) based on the hypotheses outlined above. Ideally, all latent constructs would be estimated based on the individual items in the survey. However, the size of the sample was not sufficient to ensure reliable estimation of effects in a model with the resulting complexity. To circumvent this problem, mean scores were calculated for each construct, which were subsequently entered into the structural model as manifest variables. Age, Gender, Time in the Netherlands, and Occupation were included in the model as control variables, predicting both acculturation dimensions and well-being. The resulting model provided an acceptable fit with the data ($\chi2(13)$ = 22.187; p = .016; CFI = .932; TLI = .808; RMSEA = .081).

As a tool for constructing structural models, AMOS 22.0 (Arbuckle, 2013) provides modification indices that suggest which paths can be added to the model to significantly increase model fit. In this case, it suggested adding direct paths from Psychological Alienation and Online Social Support to Well-Being. These paths were not hypothesized explicitly but were expected to be mediated through both acculturation dimensions. However, as part of the hypothesized mediations, the relationships between these constructs are based on theoretical foundations that were already outlined in the theoretical framework above. As such, we felt it was warranted to add these paths to the model. The resulting structural model provided a much better fit with the data ($\chi2(13)$ = 16.651; p = .216; CFI = .986; TLI = .940; RMSEA = .047). Fig. 1. shows all the estimates that were found to be significant. For clarity, non-significant paths were removed from the figure, but remained in the tested model.

Testing path direction

Because our data are cross-sectional, it is not possible to directly test for causality in the relationships between variables. However, it is possible to provide some indication of the direction of the estimated paths, by contrasting the model with another model in which predictors are entered in reverse order. We constructed this reversed model by estimating SNS contact with Home/ Host Country Relations from Acculturation dimensions through Social Support and Psychological Alienation, instead of vice versa. The reversed model provided a worse fit than the hypothesized model ($\chi2(13)$ = 37.842; p = .001; CFI = .912; TLI = .676; RMSEA = .110), which provides indirect evidence for the direction of the hypothesized paths. Although not inconclusive, we can state that it is more likely that SNS use predicts online social support, psychological alienation and acculturation, than vice versa, which is in line with existing literature showing that media use influences acculturation more than the other way around (Moon & Park, 2007; Stilling, 1997). Nevertheless, the relationships are likely to be reciprocal to a certain degree.

Acculturation dimensions and well-being

Below, we will outline the different paths in the model individually, and test our hypotheses. Firstly, our results confirm the widely established notion that both acculturation dimensions are important for a successful sojourn: Cultural Maintenance ($b*$ = .23; SE = .08; p = .013) and Host Country Participation ($b*$ = .28; SE = .20; p = .008) both positively predict well-being among international sojourners, thereby confirming hypotheses 1 and 2.

SNS contact with home country relations

Hypothesis 3–5 predicted an indirect effect of SNS Contact with Home Country Relations (SNSHome) on Cultural Maintenance, mediated by Online Social Support and Psychological Alienation. Our model reveals a positive relationship between SNSHome and Online Social Support ($b*$ = .38; SE = .07; p < .001), confirming Hypothesis 3. The relationship with the other mediator, Psychological Alienation, is also confirmed to be positive ($b*$ = .22; SE = .04; p = .025), confirming Hypothesis 4. Furthermore, Psychological Alienation is significantly related to Cultural Maintenance ($b*$ = .39; SE = .22; p < .001).

Direct and indirect effects were estimated with bootstrapping (5000 iterations) using 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals. A significant direct effect was found between SNSHome and Cultural Maintenance ($b*$ = .25; 95% C.I.[.11, .39]; p = .009). Mediation analysis showed an indirect effect through Psychological Alienation only ($b*$ = .19; 95% C.I.[.06, .31]; p = .034), which partially confirms Hypothesis 5. Sojourners who have more contact with friends and family back home also feel more alienated in the new country, which partly explains why these individuals also display higher cultural maintenance.

SNS contact with host country relations

Hypothesis 6-8 predicted an indirect effect of SNS Contact with Host Country Relations (SNSHost) on Host Country Participation, mediated by Online Social Support and Psychological Alienation. We tested this hypothesis using the same method as above.

Firstly, a small positive effect was found between SNSHost and Online Social Support ($b*$ = .16; SE = .08; p = .046), which confirms Hypothesis 6. No effect was found with Psychological Alienation, which prompted us to reject Hypothesis 7.

A strong direct effect was found between SNSHost and Host Country Participation ($b*$ = .46; 95% C.I.[.30, .62]; p < .001). However, contrary to predictions, no direct effect was found between Online Social Support and Host Country Participation, nor an indirect effect of SNSHost through the mediator. Hypothesis 8 is therefore rejected. Although SNSHost relates positively to Online Social Support, this does not seem to have an effect on Host Country Participation. Instead, SNSHost by itself displays a strong effect on this acculturation dimension.

Direct effects of mediators on well-being

As explained above, two more paths were added to the model, from the mediators directly to well-being. We found a negative direct relationship between psychological alienation and well-being ($b*$ = -.26; SE = .11; p = .010). Sojourners who experience homesickness or loneliness also experience less overall well-being during the sojourn. Finally, there is a small but significant direct positive effect of Online Social Support on well-being ($b*$ = .19; SE = .09; p = .040)

Discussion

The acculturation process of short-term sojourners has been shown to be one of the major predictors of their well-being and life satisfaction (Demes & Geeraert, 2015; Phinney et al., 2001). Earlier research has provided evidence that interpersonal relations play an essential role in shaping acculturation strategies and overcoming acculturative stress (Bierwiaczonek & Waldzus, 2016). In recent decades, however, that way in which international migrants and sojourners interact with peers has changed drastically, through the invention and popularization of the internet, and social network sites (SNS) in particular (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Whereas a cross-border move would previously entail a long-term disconnect from friends and family at home, advances in online networking now allow international sojourners to easily remain in contact with social relations.

Furthermore, SNS have become a useful tool for connecting with those in the new country who share common interests (e.g. Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009). Despite existing research on the effects of SNS on acculturation of long-term migrants, studies which examine these processes among short-term sojourners remain scarce. This paper aims to contribute to the literature by examining the influence of SNS on acculturation dimensions of short-term international sojourners who moved to the Netherlands for purposes of work (expatriates) or study (international students). We examined how the degree of SNS contact with home and host country relations affected cultural maintenance and host country participation, and how these in turn related to well-being. Moreover, we tested whether the effects of SNS use on acculturation may be mediated through the social support that sojourners receive from online relations, as well as feelings of psychological alienation that they experience.

Overview of findings

Firstly, our results are in line with existing literature that states that both cultural maintenance and host country participation relate positively to well-being of international sojourners (Bierwiaczonek & Waldzus, 2016; Pang, 2018). Furthermore, we show that

the use of SNS may have an influence on these individuals' acculturation dimensions. In our analyses, we made a distinction between sojourners' SNS communication with both home and host country relations. Our findings show that sojourners who report more SNS contact with home country relations, i.e. the friends and family members that they left behind in the country of origin, report higher levels of cultural maintenance. This suggests that increased contact is related to a higher need to identify with and maintain habits and traditions of the home culture. We have also shown that this relationship is partly mediated through psychological alienation: SNS contact with home country relations is related to sojourner's feelings of homesickness and loneliness, which in turn is related to a higher need for cultural maintenance. Simultaneously, psychological alienation has a negative direct effect on well-being during the sojourn.

We also examined the effects of SNS contact with individuals from the host country. As predicted, this strongly relates to host country participation. This finding confirms the notion that SNS can be a valuable tool in initiating new social interactions and establishing a new social network in the host country. In similar vein, SNS communication with host country relations also related positively to online social support. Surprisingly, however, this did not mediate its relationship with host country participation. Although respondents reported experiencing social support of online contact with host country members, this was not a predictor of their intent to participate in the host society. It did, however, directly predict their well-being.

Theoretical implications and future directions

Putting these results together, three interesting patterns emerge. Firstly, with regard to contact with the host country, the results were not surprising. In line with other studies (e.g. Croucher, 2011; Li & Tsai, 2015; Pang, 2018), sojourners in our sample use social media to enhance contacts with locals, which provides social support and helps them participate in the host country. This, in turn, enhances overall well-being (cf. Bierwiaczonek & Waldzus, 2016).

Secondly, with regard to contact with the home country, the results are more complex. In line with earlier findings (Hendrickson et al., 2011), it appears that sojourners who maintain contact with friends and relatives in the home country experience a higher degree of loneliness and homesickness. This sense of psychological alienation has a negative effect on their well-being. On the other hand, feeling isolated seems to enhance cultural maintenance, which in turn is positively related to well-being. This finding is difficult to interpret since alienation now appears to have both a negative (direct) and positive (indirect, through cultural maintenance) effect. We believe this may be explained by considering cultural maintenance to be a coping strategy for those who experience alienation. Actively maintaining the culture and traditions of the home country may help to alleviate loneliness and/or homesickness, and enhance a sense of belonging (cf. Haslam et al., 2009). This type of reaction has been shown in previous literature, among traditional migrants (e.g. Outten et al., 2009) and minority employees (Hofhuis, Van der Zee, & Otten, 2012). Other scholars, however, argue that this type of cultural maintenance reaction may be detrimental to the adaptation process of sojourners, because it may reduce their ability to gain new intercultural identities (Kim, 2015). Based on our own results, we can conclude that cultural maintenance seems to positively relate to well-being, but more research is needed to understand how exactly it impacts adaptation and what role other social identities play in this process. In sum, SNS contact with home country relations appears to relate to psychological alienation, which reduces well-being. Simultaneously, alienation enhances cultural maintenance, which increases well-being, and thus overcomes some of the negative effects.

Finally, online social support was also tested as a mediator of the effects of SNS use on acculturation dimensions. SNS contact with both home and host country relations appears to provide social support, which in turn has a positive relationship with well-being. Surprisingly, online social support did not relate to host country participation. This contradicts earlier studies (e.g. Ye, 2006) which suggest that having an online social support network enhances the degree to which sojourners feel comfortable interacting with an participating in the host society. This unexpected finding may be explained by the fact that online social support was measured as a single overall construct. For example, examining the effects of emotional and informational support (Wright, 2002) separately could reveal new relationships with host country participation, as well as distinguishing between support received from home or host country relations (Ye, 2006). We believe that further teasing out the nuances of online social support in sojourner acculturation would be an interesting next step in this research line.

Limitations

As with all research, the present study has some limitations. The most important is its reliance on self-reported data. Respondents' own estimation of the time or frequency of SNS use can be inaccurate (Shuter, 2012). To circumvent this problem, the present study made use of a more objective measure of SNS use, based on a Likert scale. In future research, however, a direct measure of online contact with home and host country relations, for example through a content-analysis of SNS, would provide a more robust measure of SNS use.

Another major limitation is that the results presented in this paper are based on cross-sectional data, which means we cannot directly test for causal effects. Through testing a reversed model, we provided indirect evidence for the assumption that SNS use influences acculturation more than vice versa. However, it is quite likely that a reciprocal relationship exists. Future studies could use a longitudinal design to assess the causal nature of the relationships, by evaluating the interplay between SNS contact and acculturation dimensions over several time points.

Furthermore, the sample of this study affected the generalizability of our findings in four specific ways. Firstly, we measured SNS use and acculturation of international sojourners in the Netherlands only. Although respondents were from more than 30 different nationalities, the characteristics of the host country, as well as the attitudes of the host country nationals, will affect the general

process of acculturation and well-being (Bourhis et al., 1997; Navas, García María, Rojas, Pumares, & Fernández, 2005). To increase confidence in our findings, it is essential first to replicate them in different national contexts, using different types of short-term sojourners.

Secondly, our sample included individuals who sojourned for the purpose of work (expatriates) as well as those who sojourned for study (international students). Although these groups are similar in many ways, they also differ on several key variables. For example, expatriates are generally older, and more likely to sojourn with a spouse and/or children, whereas international students are more likely to be young, single, and generally sojourn for a shorter time (Bierwiaczonek & Waldzus, 2016; McNulty & Brewster, 2017). We included the occupation of the sojourner as a control variable in our model, which had no major impact on the model: we only found an effect on online social support (this being higher for international students than for expatriates), but none of the hypothesized paths differed significantly between the groups. This provides some indication that the processes of acculturation and the effects of SNS are similar across sojourners, but more research is needed to confirm this.

Thirdly, we assumed that the international students and expatriates that were recruited for this study were in the Netherlands for a limited period, with the intent to move away after their sojourn. However, many individuals who move abroad for a short-term sojourn change their mind and decide to stay for a longer period, or even indefinitely (Fantini, 2018). As such, for future studies, we recommend including a measure of the intent to stay in the host country, as a control variable.

Fourthly, the size of the sample limited us in the way our model could be tested, and only mean scores were included in the structural equation model as manifest variables. As such, we were not able to account for the effects of the individual items in the survey, which would have provided higher resolution in finding relationships between the variables.

Finally, the operationalization of the variable SNS Contact with Home Country Relations was done in such a way that it referred only to contact that the respondent had with friends and/or family living in the home country. However, it is not unlikely that international sojourners seek out members of their home country within the host country, and that this group may be an important source of identification and/or social support (Rui & Wang, 2015). As such, we recommend that future scholars include a distinction between home country relations who live in the home country, versus those who live in the host country, to tease out possible different effects that these groups may have on the acculturation process.

Conclusions

Earlier research has established the importance of social relations, including interaction with both home- and host-country nationals, for the well-being on international sojourners (Bierwiaczonek & Waldzus, 2016). An area that has been understudied, however, is the role of the internet, and specifically the use of Social Networking Sites on acculturation of these individuals. This study presents evidence that SNS play a prominent role in this regard. Firstly, our findings confirm that SNS use with home and host country relations is related to cultural maintenance and host country participation, respectively. Both acculturation dimensions increase well-being. However, the effect of SNS contact with home country relations is mediated through psychological alienation: it enhances feelings of loneliness and homesickness, which reduces well-being. Cultural maintenance appears to be a coping mechanism for overcoming these emotions. On the other hand, SNS contact with host country relations has a positive impact on online social support and host country participation, and appears to enhance well-being of sojourners.

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