



Veni, vidi, vici: The impact of social media on virtual acculturation in tourism context



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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore how social media usage can be leveraged to help tourists cope with acculturation when traveling aboard. Specifically, based on the findings of content analysis of the case company's chronicle posting on social media and in-depth interviews with its reviewers, we propose a theoretical process model to elucidate the major roles of social media in influencing the tourists' "virtual" acculturation process: an information source for destination selection, a learning center for cultural related skills for sociological adaptation, and a buffer of social support for psychological adjustment. This study contributes to the acculturation literature by extending the concept of "acculturation" to include indirect and intermittent "virtual" intercultural contacts and investigating the roles of social media in the various stages of virtual acculturation process. Additionally, it also enriches social media research in tourism literature as extant studies have mainly focused on social media application in destination branding. The implications of our findings will help tourism managers optimize their social media marketing efforts towards better trip experience with more positive acculturation outcome.

1. Introduction

Acculturation is the process of encountering and adjusting to a new cultural environment that involves changes to an individual's attitudes, behaviors, and cognitions (Tsai et al., 2002). Since Berry's (1997) seminal acculturation work that categorized assimilation, separation, integration and marginalization as an individuals' adoption of a new cultural environment, research inquiries on acculturation have spanned cultural, social, psychological and combined fields, covering mainly three key issues: the qualitative and quantitative dimensions of contact, the reciprocal nature of the cross-culture influence, and changes as a dynamic process and an outcome (Sam and Berry, 2006). While acculturation theory has been widely used to understand and explain migrant and sojourner adaptation (e.g., Berry et al., 2006; Ward and Ranadeuba, 1999; Wong and Musa, 2014; Yen et al., 2018), very limited studies have been conducted in the tourism context which might be the most common form of face-to-face intercultural contact (Berno and Ward, 2005; Rasmı et al., 2014; Ward, 2008).

With a few exceptions, studies investigated tourism acculturation have been focused on identifying subgroups of tourists who appear to vary in their preferences for host culture immersion and home culture maintenance (e.g., Cohen, 1972; Juan-Vigaray et al., 2013; Rasmı et al.,

2014). For instance, Cohen (1972) identified four tourist groups that differ in holiday activities and destination preference based on their familiarity with the host culture. Similarly, Ng et al. (2007) demonstrated that social contact and perceived cultural distance between tourists' country of origin and a foreign culture determine their destination preference. As it is recognized that intercultural contacts have the potential to influence a tourist's attitude, behavior and long-term perception towards the destination (Fan et al., 2017), existing studies have been concentrated on first hand face-to-face intercultural contacts and largely overlooked the indirect and intermittent "virtual" contacts through social media platforms, which are now gaining prominence in influencing tourists' destination selection and post trip evaluation (Buhalis, 1998; Croucher, 2011; Fan et al., 2017; Kim and Fesenmaier, 2017).

Widely known as information oriented business, tourism industry has undergone dramatic changes with the rise of social media becoming dominant tools for tourists to "search, organize and voice out" travel stories and experiences (Hua et al., 2017). While in the past, tourists mainly rely on tourism supportive infrastructure such as information centers, concierges, hotel help desks and guidebooks to navigate through unfamiliar environments (Berno and Ward, 2005), they can now, with the use of social media, achieve a faster cultural learning and

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adaptation by following others' digital footsteps of “seeing” and “experiencing” the host culture before traveling (Kim and Fesenmaier, 2017; Wang et al., 2012), and at same time retain closer contacts with their cultural heritage during the trip (Li and Tsai, 2015; Moon and Park, 2007; Park et al., 2014). With the wide recognition that social media has become a primary vehicle for media information and social support in the digital age (e.g., DeAndrea et al., 2012; Ye, 2006), it is surprisingly, however, that the important virtual acculturating functions of social media in tourism context has been largely untapped in the extant literature. To address such a research gap, using the qualitative case evidence from China, the objective of this research is to explore the various roles of social media in tourists' “virtual acculturation” process by extending Ward et al.'s (2001) ABC model of acculturation. Different from previous acculturation research that focus on direct and sustained contacts following cultural changes, we highlight the indirect and/or intermittent “virtual” contacts via social media in touristic intercultural contact which is often intense and packed into short-time periods. Our study contributes to the broad acculturation literature by extending the classical definition of acculturation with supported case evidence, and also enriches the social media research in tourism literature as extent studies have mainly focused on social media application in destination branding strategies and yet it's unclear how social media is tapped into the underlying tourism acculturation process (e.g. Hua et al., 2017; Kim and Fesenmaier, 2017; Oliveira and Panyik, 2015).

The reminder of the paper is organized as in follow. We first review literature on acculturation and social media with specific relevance to tourism context, and then introduce the case contextual setting, data collection and analysis process. Next, we report our key findings with a proposed theoretical framework of virtual acculturation process. Finally, we conclude the study with theoretical and managerial implications, as well as directions for future research.

2. Literature review and conceptual development

2.1. Acculturation

The concept of acculturation was first presented by anthropologists (Redfield et al., 1936), and then received growing attention in social and behavioral sciences, asking questions regarding the acculturating stressors, processes, and adaptational outcomes following intercultural contact (Berry and Sabatier, 2011; Makarova and Birman, 2015). When intercultural contact amounts to a major stressful life event that leads to “culture shock”, cross-cultural travelers may experience negative emotions, such as frustration, anxiety, anger and disorientation due to the loss of familiar social and environmental cues (Oberg, 1960), framing cross-cultural transition as a series of stress-provoking experiences that “tax adjustive resources and necessitate coping responses” (Berno and Ward, 2005). Overall, acculturation is a multifaceted construct, which involves intergroup contact, conflict and adaptation (Berry, 1997). The way in which individuals cope with acculturation stressors may influence their psychological well-being and life satisfaction (Berry et al., 1987; Sirin et al., 2013). According to Berry's (1997) classical acculturation work, the cross-cultural adaptation can produce four different types of psychological outcomes, namely integration, assimilation, separation and marginalization, contingent on the group's preferences in the adoption of mainstream culture. Studies show that better integration is achieved in culturally homogenous settings, and dealing less familiar culture is more stressful and results in increased psychological adjustment problems (e.g. Babiker et al., 1980; Berry et al., 1987; Dona and Berry, 1994; Sayegh and Lasry, 1993). Build upon Berry's work, Ward et al. (2001) integrated psychological coping and sociocultural adaptation theories by proposing an ABC framework of acculturation that offers a more comprehensive framework of how cross-culture travelers respond and adapt to a new culture. The ABC framework of acculturation combines three concepts: stress

and coping, culture learning, and social identification with three different aspects of cultural adaptation-affect, behaviour, and cognition, respectively.

As acculturation theories are widely used to understand and explain migrant and sojourner adaptations, tourist groups have been treated as a sub-category of sojourners in acculturation literature (e.g., Bochner, 2006). Despite many similarities among these groups, it can be argued that the nature and size of international tourists merits considerations as a distinct acculturating group (Rasmi et al., 2014). Typically, tourists have shorter, more transitory stays in the destination countries, and their purpose of travel set them apart from other intercultural contact groups (Fan et al., 2017). Tourist's decision to travel and choice of destination are made at their discretion and at desire of leisure. Tourists have immediate gratification for the novel and exotic cultures, and their choice of travel destination often fulfills the sensational seeking purpose of sight-seeing, culture consumption and relaxation. Due to the brevity and superficiality of their stay, tourists don't need to adapt to the local community and their relationship with hosts are often characterized by an orientation of immediate gratification because of the novelty of the host culture. Although they may experience culture shock, some tourists may find it to be exciting and stimulating as it fulfills their sensation seeking motivation for travel (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). In addition, tourists have “spatially-contained contact options and buffers (e.g., tour guides, information center support staff, and translators)”, which allow them to have more opportunities to observe and to scrutinize the host culture (Graburn, 1989; Pearce et al., 1998).

Despite the distinctive motivation and supportive context of tourism, the acculturation issues are still salient in the tourism context and the first-hand accounts of the tourist experience often “detail the comic outcomes of culture shock” (Berno and Ward, 2005). Studies show that many of the reactions that tourists experienced are not markedly different from those of other cross-cultural travelers, although they may be subtler due to the brief and distinctive nature of cultural contact between tourists and host society (e.g. Goeldner and Ritchie, 2007; Hottola, 2004; Pearce et al., 1998; Wei et al., 1989). In sum, tourism is a distinctive and significant context that worthy separate investigation in the process and outcomes of intercultural contacts. In the current study, specifically, not only do we examine the outcomes of first hand cross-cultural contact during international travels, and more importantly, we investigate the influences of indirect social contacts via social media and how they affects individuals' acculturation before, during and after the trip.

2.2. Social media and acculturation

As a multifaceted construct, acculturation involves not only intercultural contacts at individual levels, but also the influences from social and environmental changes on individuals' vales, beliefs, behaviors, and affect (Trimble, 2003). Globalization and its subsequent changes in economic, political, technological and societal dimensions are re-shaping the cultural transmission of ideas and goods, resulting a compelling reason to reflect “on the relevance of privileging direct and sustained acculturative contact over indirect and/or intermittent forms in acculturation theory” (Ferguson and Bornstein, 2012). While globalization can initiate a starting point of contact for acculturation, modern forms of globalization may give rise to the modern forms of acculturation (Berry, 2008). Indeed, the rapidly advancing new media (i.e. social media) have facilitated meaningful intercultural contact beyond direct face-to-face communication, and expanded a “new social neighborhood” for cultural transmission and acculturation (Ferguson and Bornstein, 2012).

Past studies have demonstrated accumulated evidence supporting the relationship between media use and acculturation in various contexts. For instance, Lee and Tse (1994) revealed that the use of host country's media is positively associated with immigrants' acculturation

to new social norms. Moon and Park (2007) showed that immigrants' exposure to host country's mass media had significant effect on host cultural adaptation, while the use of home media had non-significant impact on either home or host culture identification. The rapid developments of Internet and ICTs also shed new light on acculturation research and college adjustment studies. DeAndrea et al. (2012) argued that social media helps guide international students entering an unfamiliar social environment, because it serves as an important source for "informal, cultural learning of 'being' a student, with online interactions and experiences allowing roles to be learned, values understood and identities shaped" (Selwyn 2007, p. 18). In addition, online social networks offer unique opportunities to improve students' transition to college by helping them socialize to the new environment and establish a sense of connection with their institution (Yu et al., 2010), which is positively associated with social acceptance and academic competence (e.g. Pittman and Richmond, 2008). From the social cognitive perspective, internal cognitions and environmental factors work in conjunction to shape self-beliefs, which are central determinants of human cognition, affect and behavior (Bandura, 1989). With social media, individuals are able to acquire a variety of important information and social support from others beyond the limitation of their immediate social environment, which is found to be positively associated with coping strategies that attempt to reduce stressors (Nes and Segerstrom, 2006).

The role of social media is being increasingly recognized in the tourism context, which is believed to be an information-intensive industry heavily relying on effective communication (Kim et al., 2017). Since tourism related products and services are relatively expensive and characterized as high-involvement products, tourists often collect and review a lot of information prior to travel to aid with planning and decision-making process. Opinions and recommendations shared on social media by other tourists who had prior experience with the destination are found not only the most preferred sources but also the most influential sources for potential tourists (Pan et al., 2007). As a result, touristic destinations do not constitute a structure of ontologically prearranged places, they are rather socially constructed, which are the outcomes of ongoing narratives among tourists through which content by large are constantly reproduced and nurtured on social media (Oliveira and Panyik, 2015). As tourists increasingly use social media to research, explore, plan, and ultimately share their travel experiences, they are also under the influence of social media of learning a new culture, shaping perception of the surrounding cultural milieu and subsequent acculturations. It is argued that the impact of social media on tourism experience can be best understood by considering the interaction between media and people, resulting interdisciplinary studies in the fields of psychology, sociology and communication (Kim and Fesenmaier, 2017). It is surprising, however, while the role of social media in tourism industry has become an emerging topic, most studies have focused on the nature and extent of social media usage for travel planning and destination selection (e.g., Fotis et al., 2011; Leung et al., 2013) as well as motivational factors of social sharing (e.g., Huang et al., 2010; Yoo and Gretzel, 2011), yet little is known about how social media actually influence the overall touristic experience in the tourism literature (Kim and Fesenmaier, 2017). It awaits to be explored how social media can be leveraged as cultural learning tools to facilitate acculturation affecting tourists' psychological attitude, sociocultural adjustment and eventually touristic satisfaction (Berno and Ward, 2005).

2.3. The roles of social media in virtual acculturation

In this paper, we propose the conceptualization of virtual acculturation, an extension of Ward et al.'s (2001) acculturation framework, which deems that acculturation can occur before the physical visiting of a foreign culture due to the "virtual" cross-culture exposure and remote cultural learning. Within the virtual acculturation

framework, we aim to capture the role and function of social media in the underlying pre-transitional and cultural adjustment process, which is of particular importance in today's tourism context.

2.3.1. Social media and cultural exchange

The classical acculturation theory views acculturative contact as direct and sustained encounters after exposure to a foreign culture. However, this assumption has been challenged recently by the accumulating empirical evidences of "remote" acculturation that shows individuals can and do adopt practices, values and identities of foreign cultures in which they have never lived (e.g. Cheung-Blunden and Juang, 2008; Ferguson and Bornstein, 2012). For instance, the case study of Jamaica society by Ferguson and Bornstein (2012) documented a possibility of acculturation to a geographically separate nonnative culture (European American) fostered by globalization forces, as evidenced in the increased accessibility of Internet and popular culture, influx of foreign goods, media, and tourism industry.

"Remote" acculturation occurs along with the cultural exchanges of ideas, products and people etc. (e.g. via media, food and tourism), which are promoted by the "pluralist–constructivist" perspective of globalization (Ferguson et al., 2015). Additionally, remote acculturation due to the exchange of ideas and values via media can be particularly salient, which we referred to as "virtual" acculturation, in that individuals' "virtual" exposure to a geographically distant culture has been largely accelerated by the advancements in modern information and communication technology. The psychological mechanism of virtual acculturation can be explained from the subjective reality perspective. According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), reality is socially constructed and embedded in the institutional fabric of the society. Alternatively, social reality might not be a social fact in its own right, but it is something derived in and through the systems of communication. In light of the cultivation theory, symbolic social reality serves as an input for individuals' construction of the underlying subjective world, providing basis for their attitudes and social actions (Liu, 2006), and such process also consists of part of the acculturation journey (Berry, 1997). Similarly, from the social cognitive perspective, human beings operate within the socio-structural network that they are products of. In the tourism context, this process of constructing the subjective social reality determines the cognitive and perceptual image of the destination, and thereby dictates the choice of a touristic destination and the discrepancy between the expected and actual intercultural experience. Specifically, the extent to which an individual's constructed reality is under the media influence is dependent on the degree of one's exposure to and dependence on the media as a source of information (Allen and Hatchett, 1986). Therefore, virtual acculturation through social media might be particularly prominent in the tourism context because as suggested in the extant tourism literature that social media was the most preferred and influential information source for potential tourists (Pan et al., 2007), due to its fulfilling contextual dimensions consisting both systematic and heuristic cues and its facilitation of an interactive and collaborative knowledge production environment (Kim et al., 2017).

2.3.2. Social media and cultural learning

The behavior aspect of Ward's acculturation framework concerns the culture learning theory, which focuses on the salient behavioral and interactive aspects of intercultural contact (Berno and Ward, 2005). The cultural leaning approach posits that people need to acquire culturally relevant skills to survive and thrive in the new environment. In addition to the most obvious language barriers, cross-cultural variations in social situations such as roles, repertoires, norms, behavioral sequences, cognitive interpretations, and environmental settings further affect intercultural encounters (Pearce et al., 1998). Practical knowledge and an adequate repertoire of new skills for cross-culture travel, such as buying tickets or using local transportation systems, are essential for tourism sociocultural adaptation, which, in turns, relates to the travel

satisfaction and post trip evaluation. In the extant literature, the culture learning approach underpins intercultural training and training tools as the basis of cultural assimilator, however the effectiveness of training and tourism awareness of training as moderators have not been thoroughly evaluated. Additionally, as it is a widely accepted sentiment that the tourism industry has institutionalized various ways of culture learning such as guidebooks, brochures, phrase books and tour guides, the extent to which, however, they are used and affect tourist socio-cultural acculturation are relatively understudied in the literature (Berno and Ward, 2005).

The sociocultural aspect of tourists' "virtual" acculturation via social media can be built upon social learning or vicarious learning theory. Originally coined by Bandura (1962), vicarious learning has been widely applied in child education research, yet rarely studied in tourism literature. Basically, vicarious learning is an instructional method referring to the learning of a behavior, like aggressions, from watching videos of such action and with no real interaction with the observed learner. Research suggests that instead of exposing them to trial on such behaviors, learning takes place in a better way where learners are first given the opportunity to observe professionals exhibiting the same (Rosenthal and Zimmerman, 1978). Relying on Bandura's theory, culture learning can take place as the result of four sub-functions of social media: attention (observing), retention (storing of constructs), production (acting out), and motivation (rewards) (Bandura, 2002). Specifically, after social media being selected as information source, tourists determine "what is selectively observed in the profusion of modeling influences and what information is extracted from ongoing modeled events" from user generated content through the attention process (Bandura 2002, p. 127). In the second process of retention, tourists actively transform and restructure information previously extracted to form new rules and conceptions of the symbolic social reality. And based on what they've learned, tourists interpret, apply and evaluate the constructed rules and conceptions to similar cultural situations until finally the culture learning and newly formed symbolic reality becomes reinforced with pleasant encounters. After all, human nature is consistently shaped by direct observable experience through various processes that encompass "intrinsically human, symbolizing capabilities, self-regulatory capabilities, self-reflective capabilities, and vicarious capabilities" (Mbatia, 2013).

2.3.3. Social media and social contact

The most salient issues arising in sociocultural adaptation are linked to the matters of cultural identity and intergroup relations, which have been extensively studied by using social identification theories (Berno and Ward, 2005). The basic assumption of social identification theory is that social identity is part of self-concept, which includes awareness of group membership that rests on social categorization and social comparison, resulting the inevitable consequence of ethnocentrism. In acculturation literature, differences in perceptions of one's own group and the other are usually manifested in stereotypes and causal attribution, and the classic stereotype of tourists is rich, loud, self-serving and insensitive to the host community (Yvette and Turner, 2003). Alternatively, social contact is often studied in conjunction with perceived cultural distance, which refers to the extent to which a home culture of the origin differs from that of the host region. The perceived cultural distance, as one important factor within acculturation, is also influenced by one's affective judgment. In some situations, even if tourists and hosts share similar culture value, the attitudinal differences between leisure and residence may also create social bias reflected in "communication style, patterns of behaviors, and standard of service quality" (Fan et al., 2017).

Research shows that increased intercultural contact will, at least under some conditions, produces more positive intergroup perception and relation, and reduces tension and prejudices between group members (Amir, 1969). Properly managed contact leads to better interaction outcomes in that prejudice and stereotype may be reduced as

one learns more about other group members (Wright et al., 1997). Based on the subjects they are interacting with, the social contact rendered by social media can facilitate both inter and intra-group interactions. Studies found that the use of social media focusing on communication with the host culture is associated positively with sociocultural acculturation, while the communication focused on home culture is associated positively with the maintenance of ethnic identity (Park et al., 2014). The intragroup social contact with home culture also increases tourists' psychological acculturation as the social support felt from interpersonal communication further decreases their stress from intercultural contact.

3. Methodology

3.1. Case selection

In this research, we aim to explore how social media provides a new context to facilitate tourism virtual acculturation by alleviating cultural shock and lending social support for acculturating tourists. By definition, acculturation is a dynamic and longitudinal process, which is subjective in nature and within the interpretative paradigm (Oliveira and Panyik, 2015). In literature, acculturation has been studied extensively at the individual level in anthropological context using inductive approach (Lakey, 2003), and qualitative methods have been suggested as better approaches for interpretivism in tourism related studies (Decrop, 1999). For example, content analysis has been used to examine words and expressions contained in online reviews to investigate tourists' perception, interpretation and post-evaluation of destinations (e.g. Xiang et al., 2017; Milman et al., 2010; Lu and Stepchenkova, 2015; Sparks and Browning, 2011;) in-depth interviews have been used in acculturation studies to better understand the psychological outcome of coping and stressing, as well as the sociological adaptation under the influence of cultural specific variables such as social norms, rules, conventions, and verbal and nonverbal components (e.g. Anantamongkolkul et al., 2017; Fan et al., 2017; Grabowski et al., 2016). Thus, in line with the methodology of prior studies that focus on acculturation and social media application, we employed a case study with mixed methods of content analysis and semi-structured interviews to allow maximum degrees of freedom for the extraction of important interpretation and contextual attributes.

Because of historical reasons, Chinese did not have much opportunity for extensive international travels until the past decade, due to the rising disposable income and the relaxation of government restrictions on foreign travels (Jin and Wang, 2016). For cultural and language factors, Chinese visitors like to travel in groups and use packaged tour services offered by travel agencies for the ease and convenience, which is also partially derived from the fact of long hours work culture and short vacation times in China (Liu and Mc Kercher, 2016). Under such background, it is meaningful to investigate Chinese tourists' acculturation process with special consideration paying to their "virtual" interactions with the tour agency companies.

In our study, the case company HUANYI (Voglia d'Italia Tour) is an international travel agency specialized in providing customized tourism services for Chinese travelers in Italy. It is officially established in 2009 in Rome, and now rises as a leading local tour service supplier serving a substantial share of China-Italy travel market. During the Milan expo 2015, HUANYI served more than 70% Chinese customers who attended the event from China. Different from a typical Chinese travel agency that often lacks innovation or differentiation (Lui et al., 2012), HUANYI has established its brand image as a modern and agile international travel agency company along the way of its growth. Among a series of destination branding efforts, HUANYI has made a viable presence on Wechat and Weibo - China's most popular social media platforms. Particularly, the content of its social media posts are exclusively based on China-Italy tours, including extensive information of culture, history, weather, attractions, transportations, travel tips and so on, which

attracted more than 400,000 viewers. Thus, the richness and exclusiveness of its social media content offers a unique opportunity to explore the relationship between social media usage and its effect on acculturation.

3.2. Data collection

We adopted mixed approach for data collection in this study to ensure better validity and reliability of our qualitative analysis. We first applied a textual content analysis analyzing the social contact between HUANYI and its subscribers/travelers on Wechat platform during the period of Mar. 2016–Nov. 2017. Content analysis is suitable for data collection in our study because it provides a real time view of how HUANYI communicate the destination image to potential customers, and how tourists comment on the destinations they visited. The sentimental cues in travelers' comments also help us to look into their post evaluations and acculturation outcomes. Specifically, we extracted all texts from 336 posts on HUANYI's Wechat service account during that period together with 11,788 comments generated by reviewer travelers to sort out the high frequency words, which later were used in conjunction with the interview results to derive inductive abstraction.

Our preliminary textual content analysis has noted a considerable amount of user interactions after each post being published, which also shed light on tourists' attitudes and perceptions of the travel destinations. Table 1 presents 40 selected high frequency words after textual content analysis, with particular emphasis given to the reviewer/

traveler-generated content in the comment section.

Overall, the textual content analysis results indicate that tourists proactively sought out and were able to adapt comfortably in a different culture, showing no signs of negative sentiments or psychological stresses in their comments. As seen in Table 1, the high frequency keywords are “happy”, “smile”, “paradise” “inspiring” and etc., offering a glimpse to travelers' psychological well-being and post evaluation after their trip in Italy, which is considered as the manifestation of their acculturation outcome. In spite of the cultural difference and language barrier, it appears that most reviewers found their Italy trip to be overly pleasant, with effortless acculturation.

Under such premise, using the content analysis results as inputs of tourists' psychological well-being after cross-culture travels, we further explore the roles of social media in the various stages of the acculturation process. In the subsequent semi structured interviews, we ask participants a series of “why” and “how” questions to gain a deeper understanding of the holistic nature and subjective perspective of their psychological and sociological acculturation: Why and how often do they engage with HUANYI on the social media platform before, during and after the trip? How do these engagements influence their travel experience to Italy? How do they perceive the culture similarity before traveling and how do they feel about the cultural shock when traveling in the destination country and etc. In total, we conducted 14 semi-structured interviews with HUANYI's individual and group tourists to complement content analysis results, from Sep 2017–Dec 2017. The participants are the subscribers of HUANYI's Wechat service account and also have traveled to Italy for leisure purpose within the past three years. The profile of interviewees is provided in Table 2. On average, each interview lasted 45 min during which participants were asked to share their recent travel experiences to Italy and to recall their attitude and perceptions of the host culture before, during, and after the trip, as well as the purpose, determinant, intensity and impact of media consumption of HUANYI's Wechat subscription channel. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin and then selectively translated into English when constructing this study. Triangulation and peer debriefing were applied to ensure the trustworthiness of a qualitative study.

4. Findings and discussions

Based on our primary data analysis, we conducted in-depth personal

Table 1
Selected high frequency keywords from HUANYI's Wechat account.

Keywords	Frequency score
Rose	0.9806
Fashion	0.8802
Rome	0.8551
Ancient City	0.7504
Auditorium	0.7287
Coffee	0.7255
Milan	0.7233
Florence	0.7071
Beauty	0.6919
Happy	0.6902
Art	0.6885
Creativity	0.6752
Journey	0.6742
History	0.6655
Photography	0.6525
Smile	0.6421
Holiday	0.6383
Wine	0.6375
Magazine	0.636
Weibo (MicroBlogs)	0.6349
Paradise	0.6339
Design	0.6308
Destination	0.6255
Spirit	0.6217
Europe	0.6187
Capri	0.6173
Scenery	0.6162
Champion	0.6132
Moon	0.6131
Film	0.6115
Tranquility	0.6115
Culture	0.6106
Wisdom	0.6099
Luxury	0.6062
Pursuit	0.6049
Inspiring	0.6032
Shopping	0.6003
International	0.5982
Taste	0.5961
Cultural Heritage	0.5944

Table 2
Demographic characteristics of the interviewees.

Variable	Value	n	%
Gender	Male	24	49%
	Female	25	51%
Age	18–25	5	10%
	26–35	7	14%
	36–45	24	49%
	46–55	10	20%
Education	56 and above	3	6%
	High school diploma or equivalent	4	8%
	Some College or Associate's degree	10	20%
Marriage Status	Bachelor's degree	24	49%
	Post-graduate degree	11	23%
	Single	11	23%
Employment	Married	35	71%
	Other	3	6%
	Student	2	4%
	Employees	24	49%
Annual Income (rmb)	Self-employed	14	29%
	Government workers	0	0%
	Others	9	18%
	Below 100,000	4	8%
	100,000–199,999	10	20%
	200,000–299,999	15	31%
	300,000–399,999	12	25%
	400,000 and above	8	16%

interviews with key informants from HUANYI's customer database. Three key themes emerged in our interview results, aligning with previous conceptual development in theoretical foundation.

4.1. Social media as an information source

The first theme we identified is that travelers often use social media as important information source during company-customers and customers-customer interaction process. With extensive arrays of online channels providing travel related information, the networked platform of social media has completely changed the dynamics between destinations and visitors. *ITB World Travel Trends (2013)* reported that 50% of travelers based their travel plans on other people's reviews and experience. In fact, it is now the tourist travelers who generated contents determine what is being communicated about a particular destination, a significant shift towards the empowerment of travelers (Niu et al., 2016; Oliveira and Panyik, 2015). In our interviews, informants expressed social media as their most preferred information source to explore, research and plan for international travels. They followed HUANYI's subscription account and constantly got inspirations from the posts for their travel plan for next destination.

"I like to read posts on Wechat Moments, especially travel stories shared by friends or subscribed service accounts. The pictures, histories or anecdotes about attraction sites, people's interpretation and post-trip experiences... All allows me to discover and fall in love with so many new places that I've not known of before, for which I aspire to explore." "I subscribed to many travel bloggers. Social media is a window to see the world, which also helps me to determine my next travel destinations."

-Mr Xiao, Informant 2.

"HUANYI's Wechat posts helped me to get extensive knowledge about Italy and changed my initial perception of it."

-Mr. He, Informant 10.

Within the tourism industry, a destination image is "the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person has of a destination" (Crompton, 1979 as cited in Jenkins, 1999, p.2). When our informants were asked about their perception of Italy as in the destination image, many of them expressed "symbolic" words such as "fashion" "ancient" "paradise" "beauty" "art" that coincide with the message content delivered by HUANYI's social media account. In the deeper probe, our informants remained consistent in their evaluation of destination image before vs. after the trip. Social media therefore increasingly contributes to the construction of individual's symbolic social reality and influences the choice of tourist destination that initiates an acculturation journey and associated post evaluations.

4.2. Virtual acculturation though social learning

The second theme we expected in our study is that social media becomes an important vehicle for social learning or vicarious learning to achieve sociocultural acculturation. In general, people become more accustomed to a new culture that is homogeneous in contrast to heterogeneous with their previous culture values (Moon and Park, 2007). Due to the differences in history, religion, political system and economic development, there is a deep culture disparity between East and West. However, in our case, informants showed great appreciation of the Italian culture, steeped in arts, architecture, music and foods. They all expressed pleasant experience while traveling in Italy, as demonstrated in the following interview excerpts.

"We traveled to Italy on a 14 days trip using HUANYI's independent travel package service. We went to Venice, Florence, Pisa, Rome and Naples. We did some research online beforehand and people suggested buy Europass tickets and they also shared experience how to buy it. We've studied many blogs, photos and clips, and we had no problems when navigating there. Everything has been planned, and it unfolds

exactly like what we've expected for, expect for even better!"

-Ms. Wang, Informant 9.

"My best experience was with the stay in those small towns in Southern Italy. I subscribed to HUANYI and many other travel service accounts on Wechat and I've seen how people traveled there and enjoyed living there for a short time. So when that day came I could finally pack up and go, I flew there and adapted to the local culture immediately. I didn't feel the culture shock at all. I love the simple pizza, and I tried the tagliatelle, cannoli, and pistachio ice cream others recommended, which are delicious. I drank espresso in the shades in early afternoon, and I already knew latte means milk in Italy. Sometimes, when I sat at the outdoor seating of a restaurant, I felt like I've been to this place so many times and it felt so familiar... It really feels like dreaming. Maybe it's just a reflection of what I've seen others being doing all the time."

-Ms. Yang, Informant 3.

"Social media has everything you'd like to know when it comes to travel. So many sharing, tips, notes, make travel so easy. Yes, I was a bit stressful when I was searching information when planning the trip, but I completely enjoyed my relaxation when I arrived there."

-Mr. Yan, Informant 12.

Through the learning via social media, cross-culture travelers are able to acquire cultural relevant skills that are necessary to navigate through a new environment in the trip. As mentioned by informants, they learned from social media: where to shop and how to use local transportation systems; how to order foods and enjoy leisure time like locals do; how to be aware of the implicit cultural norms and conventions and so on. After the social learning, they felt confident about the ability to deal with cross-culture travel, and experienced more ease and great enjoyment from actual intercultural encounters, as they "completely enjoyed [the] relaxation". Therefore, it confirms that the vicarious learning through social media in the "pre-transition" stage before trip can act as a buffer to the "culture shock", resulting in a sense of "familiarity" experienced by travelers when exposed to the new cultural stimuli. In sum, while their differences in personalities, background, and experiences also affect acculturation, the vicarious or observational learning through social media overall influences tourists' perceptions and reinterpretations of the host culture, which leads to a greater cultural understanding or appreciation as well as enhanced capability of problem solving during intercultural travels.

4.3. Virtual acculturation though social contact and support

The third theme we look for in this study is the functions of social media in creating additional social contact opportunities for aiding psychological acculturation. Because of the short period of their visit, tourists usually have limited opportunities of cross-culture face-to-face intercalation. However, with the development in the ICTs by means of social media, interpersonal interactions are not distance restricted anymore as in the past. With social media, tourists can rent rooms and cars as well as chat with local hosts and tour guides before the departure of trip; they can also remain contact and share their trip experience with family and friends at home during their traveling aboard. To sum up, social media facilitates tourist acculturation by creating more virtual opportunities for intra and inter group social contact. On one hand, tourists remain contact with their cultural heritage and get emotional support from home country while traveling abroad; and on the other hand, they are provided with more opportunities to engage with the host group in the local community.

"At night, after a whole day attraction visit, I still feel excited when get back to the hotel room. I chat and share my travel stories with friends back in China, and post pictures and texts on Wechat Moment. I love to review their posted comments, which makes me feel a more rewarding travel experience."

-Ms. Li, Informant 5.

“We made a few friends there whom we know from a Facebook group. We also taught them how to use Wechat to stay in contact after we return to China. Plan to revisit next time.”

-Ms. Wang, Informant 22.

“During our trip, whenever I had a question about restaurants, hotels, transportations etc., I could easily find an online community to ask and be able to get quick answers, no matter they are from China or aboard. People are very nice and willing to share and help online.”

-Ms. Zhang, Informant 15.

The social contact with intra and inter group is a key to reduce negative emotions, such as anxiety, loneliness, distrust, and cultural sensitivity. In the case of tourism acculturation, maintaining social contact with the intragroup might be of more importance due to the brevity and superficiality of tourist’s stay in the destination. The interviews with our informants also suggest that sharing their travel experiences with friends back home on social media, including highlighted positive or negative emotions, help them get more emotional support and self-affirmation. That is, sharing experiences and receiving feedbacks helps regenerating more mentally mediated responses towards the previous experience, buffering negative acculturative emotions, and finally improving their post trip evaluation and satisfaction. To most of them, social media is a significant mediator that helps in co-creating the tourism experience, leading to “a more rewarding travel experience” and “revisit [plans]”.

4.4. Towards a theoretical framework of virtual acculturation

Based on above findings, we propose a virtual acculturation theoretical process framework that extends Ward et al.’s (2001) acculturation model by identifying the roles of social media in facilitating the tourism acculturation process (see Fig. 1).

Different from the work of Ward et al. (2001), our proposed virtual

acculturation framework highlights a pre-transition stage with possible “virtual” cross-culture exposure and remote cultural learning before the physical visiting of travel destination. Within the virtual acculturation framework, we further capture the roles and functions of social media in the destination selection, pre-transition and cross-cultural encountering process, respectively.

First, the pinpoint of destination is of great importance to the acculturation outcome because it is the starting point that initiates a cross-culture journey. Compared to other sojourners and immigrants who are forced by necessity into involuntary interactions (e.g., refugees and expatriates), tourists seek out information for the destination and make decisions voluntarily. In other words, tourists have more flexibility in choosing a travel destination, which also highlights the importance of destination marketing in influencing traveler’s destination selection process. Compared to the information provided by tourism marketers and suppliers, the content generated by social media is often extremely rich, reflecting the idiosyncratic nature of destinations as well as heterogeneous needs of travelers (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). Besides the rich content, the easy accessibility and transmission of social media content also make it a preferred source for traveler’s information searches. Social media, in this sense, serves as an important information source for tourists to discover and to determine the destination they’re going to acculturate to, and more importantly, provides basis for their cognitive and perceptual image of the destination. With intercultural contacts, acculturation occurs when individuals experience “culture shock” or “transition shock” during their cross-culture travel, resulting in psychological and sociological changes of individuals in their coping and adaption process. Thus, the extent of how much they appraise a novel cultural setting affects the subsequent psychological outcome, and the consistency between the expectation and actual experiences is of particular importance in such cultural evaluation process (Berno and Ward, 2005). The issues of discrepancies between expected and actual experience of a vacation have been linked to increased vulnerability to stress and greater psychological problems

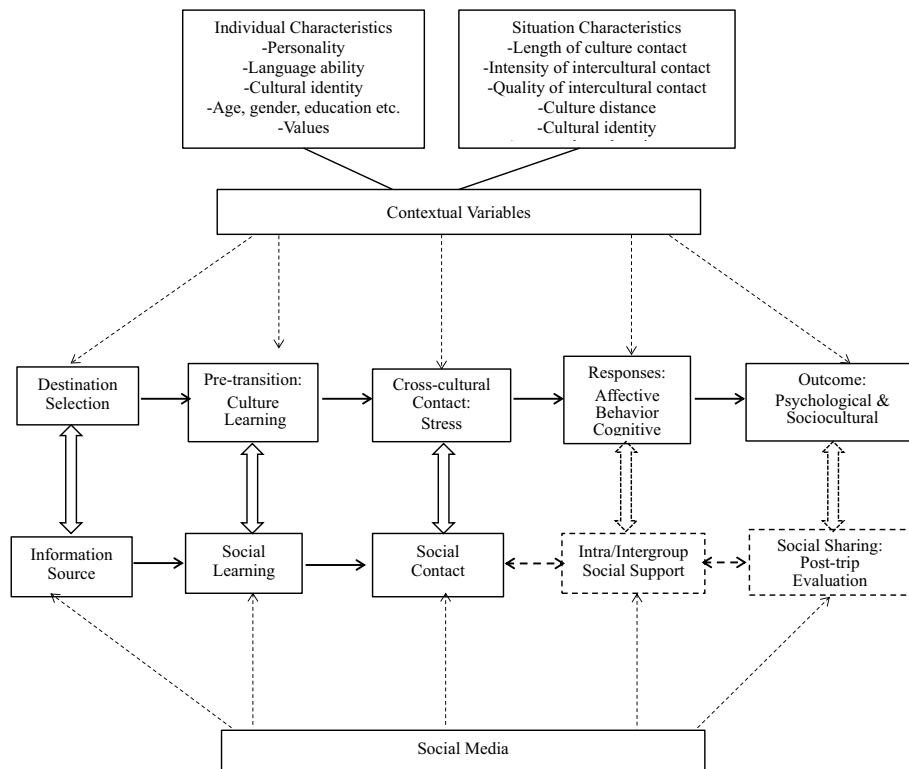


Fig. 1. Social media and virtual acculturation process in tourism context. (Adapted and extended from Ward et al., 2001).

(Utecht and Aldag, 1989). But how do tourists form expectation of the destination? It is based on how they are under the influence of social media of learning a new culture, of shaping their perception of the surrounding cultural milieu. Therefore, in those regards, social media as an information source in destination selection process has important roles in tourism acculturation because it sets the tone for the acculturating journey and is of central determinant of shaping the tour expectation.

Second, the prevalence of social media has increased individuals' "virtual" exposure to a geographically distant culture, resulting in a buffer of pre-transition stage of acculturation. From the behavioral and interactive perspective of intercultural contact, tourists need some new skills for sociocultural adjustment, which, in turns, relates to the travel satisfaction and post-trip evaluation. For instance, the obvious language barriers, cross-cultural variations in social situations such as roles, repertoires, norms, behavioral sequences, cognitive interpretations, and environmental settings, all highlight the necessity of new culture-specific skills acquisition for stress coping strategies. Consequently, blogs, reviews, wikis, social networks, virtual communities, and media files shared on social media sites such as YouTube and Instagram etc., are forming the new "collective intelligence" consisting of "a mixture of fact and opinion, impression and sentiment, founded and unfounded tidbits, experiences, and even rumor" (Blackshaw and Nazzaro, 2006), based on which travelers can achieve social learning or vicarious learning for better acculturation outcomes. Particularly, the new technology of virtual and augmented reality with the help of touch or feeling sensors enables even a more effective pre-transition social learning for "virtual" acculturation.

Third, social media creates more social contact opportunities for intra and intergroup communications, as interpersonal interaction is no longer distance restricted as it was in the past. On one hand, the contact via social media with intergroup members generates positive intergroup relations, as increased contact influences affective judgment and reduces tension and prejudices among groups, thereby accelerating tourists' psychological acculturation. On the other hand, the virtual contact with intragroup members via social media during their intercultural visit also provides tourists with emotional support, which positively influences their stress coping responses to skill deficit anxiety, loneliness, distrust and cultural sensitivity etc. In addition, rather than mediated communication, social contact indicated by the degree of intra and intergroup contact may also jointly or separately influence a tourist's acculturation attitudes. Individuals who are actively engaged in interpersonal communication with the intergroup of a host country are more likely to adopt an integration orientation; whereas tourists who remain close contact with their own ethnic group tend to adopt a separation attitude (Fan et al., 2017). The sharing of travel experience after the trip by elaborating on the details and purposes of the trip, which in turn, also results in more intense emotions or emotional stabilization, leading to a more meaningful interpretation and satisfaction of the trip (Harris and Baron, 2004).

5. Conclusion

The rapid developments in information and communication technologies (ICT) by means of social media have provided a new context for acculturation (e.g. Li and Tsai, 2015; Park et al., 2014; Ye, 2006). Indeed, as social media becomes an indispensable tool in marketing communications between company and travelers and among travelers' social networks (Niu et al., 2016), it has opened a new venue for "virtual acculturation" through which process travelers/potential travelers are able to make pre-transitional adaptation even before their physical visiting of a foreign country. A key contribution of this study is to systematically elucidate the roles of social media usage in the virtual acculturation process in the tourism context. Social media are found to be significant forces in shaping users' cultural orientation and identification, and thus they need to be included in future acculturation models

as a key factor. Specifically, our study extended the classical definition of acculturation from "continuous first-hand contact" to include "indirect and/or intermittent virtual contacts" that result from social media. First, as tourists increasingly use social media as information source to research, explore, plan, and ultimately share their travel experiences, they are also under the influence of social media of learning a new culture, of shaping perception and expectation of the surrounding cultural milieu and subsequent acculturations. Second, culture learning takes place as the result of four sub-functions of social media, which allows tourists to acquire necessary culturally relevant skills to survive and thrive in the new environment in the pre-transition stage. Lastly, the social contact rendered by social media facilitates both inter and intra-group interactions of tourists, which is positively related to psychological and sociological acculturation. Theoretically, the present study offers deeper insights into a process framework of virtual acculturation, with its linkage to social media usage. Pragmatically, such information can be used for designing better destination marketing strategies to enhance positive and favorable tourism experiences for different segments of tourists. For example, our case findings offer important implications by suggesting taking cultural related factors as inputs for content marketing. The destination managers and other tourism-related business should optimize social media marketing efforts to facilitate a co-creational process of destination communication by encouraging travelers to consume contents and share their experiences on social media before, during and after their visits. Providing a platform for tourists to have meaningful interpretation of the social context of the destination could result in a memorable and unique acculturating experience in the mind of the tourists.

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