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Chapter 1

General Introduction

“Facebook’s mission is to give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together. People use Facebook to stay connected with friends and family, to discover what’s going on in the world, and to share and express what matters to them.”

- Facebook, 2017

The mission statement above published on the company’s website encapsulates the goals of Facebook, a social network site (SNS). SNSs are one of the several forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC), that became increasingly popular in recent years (“Social Media Statistics”, 2018). Since its public inception in 2006, Facebook has become a big commercial success (Press, 2018). It has diversified from simply being a network communication channel to an advertising platform and, controversially, a big data vendor (Monnappa, 2018; Singer, 2018). Despite ethical concerns and actual privacy risks for its users, Facebook remains the most popular and most regularly-used SNS worldwide (Ahmad, 2019; Smith & Anderson, 2018; “Social Media Statistics”, 2018). Consistent with Facebook’s publicly-declared mission, its users still value the platform primarily for networking and messaging purposes (Ahmad, 2019).

Although Facebook’s mission statement is meant for everyone who uses the platform, the specific goals mentioned – such as building community, bringing the world closer together, staying connected with family and friends – could be particularly relevant to international sojourners. International sojourners are individuals who leave their home country “to achieve a particular goal or objective with the expectation that they will return to their country of origin after the purpose of their travel has been achieved” (Safdar & Berno, 2016, p. 173). Despite the prospect of achieving important personal goals in the host country, the experience of sojourn entails leaving behind the familiarity of home and being separated from family and friends. Facebook’s mission statement reflects international sojourners’ hopes that with

¹ In this dissertation, CMC is defined based on the common understanding as multi-modal communication that takes place between humans via the Internet (Herring, 2005).

communication technology such as SNSs, sojourners may still feel close to family and friends, and home may seem never too far away.

While abroad, it is important for sojourners that their communication and social interactions help them accomplish two concurrent social goals: The maintenance of existing, meaningful relationships from home, and the establishment of social relationships in the host environment (Berry, 2006; Berry & Sam, 2016; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001; Ye, 2006). These social relationships could be helpful for sojourners as these are sources of sense of support and belonging, comfort during homesickness, and practical information in navigating their host environment, among others (Adelman, 1988; English, Davis, Wei, & Gross, 2017; Van Vliet, 2001; Ward et al., 2001). Ultimately, stable and positive significant social relationships are crucial to one's wellbeing and adjustment (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). It is a relevant concern, therefore, to know whether or not social interactions via SNSs (such as Facebook) contribute to sojourners' psychosocial adjustment. The role of SNSs in the relation between social relationships and international sojourners' adjustment is still an understudied topic. This gap in scientific knowledge is where this current dissertation intends to contribute.

The overall goal of this dissertation is to contribute to a better understanding of the relevance of SNSs in sojourners' experiences. This dissertation aims to illuminate the roles of SNS social interactions particularly in sojourners' adjustment. The overarching question that this dissertation project endeavors to answer is:

RQ: How and to what extent do SNS interactions relate to sojourners' adjustment?

Sojourners' adjustment has been widely studied before. However, much of the previous research focused on face-to-face interactions, particularly with the host-country network (Adelman, 1988; Berry, 2003, 2006; Kim, 2017; Safdar & Berno, 2006; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Ward et al., 2001; Zhang & Goodson, 2010). Previous studies have established that face-to-face interactions with the host-country network had a positive impact on relevant experiences

of sojourners while abroad. In particular, face-to-face interactions with the host-country network increased sojourners' adjustment via intervening social processes such as increased perceived social support, as well as lowered feelings of homesickness (Adelman, 1988; Berry, 2006; Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011; Pedersen, Neighbors, Larimer, & Lee, 2011; Thurber & Walton, 2012; Ward et al., 2001).

With the advent of the Internet and CMC, forms of communication and social interactions have rapidly diversified over the past years. International sojourners now use face-to-face and CMC channels, such as SNSs, concomitantly with the home and the host-country networks and specific relationships (Cemalcilar, 2008; Hofhuis, Hanke, & Rutten, 2019; Kim, 2017; Rui & Wang, 2015; Sleeman, Lang, & Lemon, 2016). A systematic investigation of these various social interactions (i.e., face-to-face and SNS) that could aid adjustment for sojourners is warranted. Thus, in answering the research question, it is important to investigate the interplay of SNS, and face-to-face social interactions, and their relative impacts on sojourners' adjustment. Relationships, online and offline, are dynamic processes that develop over time. Consequently, it is important to examine why, how, and for whom SNS and face-to-face social interactions relate to adjustment. Corollary to the research question therefore are issues on possible intervening factors, directionality of association, and temporal precedence. Thus, this dissertation also aims to investigate the long-term and short-term effects of the relations of social interactions and adjustment using a model that accounts for intervening processes. Specifically, I will investigate the intervening roles of perceived social support and homesickness in the relation of social interactions and adjustment. Perceived social support and homesickness are two of the factors that are considered highly relevant in sojourners' experiences (Adelman, 1988; Berry, 2006; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Stroebe, Schut, & Nauta, 2015a; Thurber & Walton, 2012; Ward et al., 2001; Van Tilburg, 2005).

To address the research question and the related issues, I present four empirical chapters that clarify the relevance of SNS use among international sojourners both in a broad relational context (Chapters 2 & 3: Family and friends), as well as in a more specific, intimate relational context (Chapters 4 & 5: Romantic relationships). In the first two empirical chapters, I tackle the issue of directionality and demonstrate the long-term and short-term differential impacts of three types of social interactions (i.e., SNS interactions with the home-country network, SNS interactions with the host-country network, and face-to-face interactions with the host-country network) on adjustment via perceived social support (Chapter 2) and homesickness (Chapter 3). In the last two empirical chapters, I compare the use of SNS for relationship maintenance in long-distance (LDRR) and geographically-close romantic relationships (GCRR, Chapter 4), and its implications for romantic relationship quality, via access to network relationship support (Chapter 5).

In the remainder of this chapter, I will clarify the main concepts, discuss relevant frameworks and theories on international sojourners' adjustment from various disciplines, present the rationale behind a focus on SNSs, discuss the roles of SNSs in intervening variables such as: perceived social support, homesickness, relationship maintenance, romantic relationship network support; and provide a conceptual integration of the various models tackled in this dissertation project. I will conclude this introductory chapter with a brief overview of the remaining chapters of this dissertation.

Migrants and International Sojourners

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2016), migration is a process in which individuals and groups of people leave their homes for various reasons. Many migrants leave voluntarily but many are forcibly displaced due to persecution, conflict, violence, and human rights violation. In the year 2018, there were about 1 billion people in the world living away from their homes (IOM, 2018). This number includes international migrants

(people residing in a country other than their country of birth) and internal migrants (migrants inside of their country of origin).

Among scholars, there is a general distinction between two types of migrants: Those who intend to relatively permanently settle in the new location (*long-term migrants*) and those who plan to stay for a limited period of time (*short-term migrants, temporary migrants, sojourners*) (Dustmann, 1999). This dissertation will focus on international short-term migrants or sojourners.

International Sojourners

Sojourner is a label used to emphasize the temporary nature of stay of an individual in the new location. Sojourners expect to return to the place of origin once the purpose of stay has been achieved (Ward et al., 2001). This conceptualization suggests that there is a need for sojourners to maintain relationships with people back home because of the expectation of eventually returning (Ye, 2006). Sojourners may include contract or guest workers, asylum seekers, students, and even tourists (Safdar & Berno, 2006). Due to the diversity of goals and experiences of the various types of sojourners, this dissertation limits the coverage of “international sojourners” to those whose purpose of sojourn is either work or study (e.g., overseas workers, expatriates, and international students) in line with the current research literature (Bierwaczzonek & Waldzus, 2016; Hofhuis et al., 2019; McNulty & Brewster, 2017).

The past recent years have seen an increase in the number of international sojourners (United Nations, 2017). More and more, individuals are going abroad to pursue occupational or academic careers, either based on personal goals or in accordance with their organization’s (such as multinational corporations or universities) development programs (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Hippler, 2009; Scullion, Collings, & Gunnigle, 2007). In 2017, there were about five million students who were studying outside of their home countries. The number of international students is expected to reach eight million by 2025 (ICEF monitor, 2017).

Considering the global implications of these current and projected developments, there is a growing need for a better understanding of the factors that could facilitate a smooth transition and adaptation for international sojourners (Alghamdi & Otte, 2016; Safdar & Berno, 2016).

Understanding Sojourners' Social Interactions and Adjustment

To provide a comprehensive and holistic theoretical grounding of sojourners' experiences, the present dissertation builds on knowledge from theories, models, and research from various disciplines such as media and communication, cross-cultural psychology, acculturation psychology, clinical psychology, social psychology, and migration studies. This multidisciplinary approach reflects the development of theorizing in the study of migration, as more recent research takes into account how modern communication technologies impact sojourners' experiences.

Much of the earlier research in sojourners' experiences was done in domains such as cross-cultural psychology, particularly in a subspecialty field acculturation psychology. Seminal studies in these disciplines characterized international sojourn primarily as an acculturation or a cross-cultural transition (Berry, 2003, 2006; Berry & Sam, 2016; Ward et al., 2001). Generally, transition is the process of change between one previously established context and another (Mikal, Rice, Abeyta, & De Vilbiss, 2013). This entails adaptation to contextual norms and outcomes in the new context. Specifically, in cross-cultural transition, international sojourners face the challenge of adapting to a new country with a cultural background that might vary slightly or tremendously from that of their home country. Therefore, the main goal in cross-cultural transition is to achieve adaptation or effective adjustment in the new cultural context² (Berry, 2003, 2006; Berry & Sam, 2016).

A General Framework of Social Interactions and Sojourners' Adjustment

² The two terms, adaptation and adjustment have been used in the literature interchangeably. For this dissertation, I will use adjustment for consistency.

Berry (2003, 2006) provided a summative framework to integrate the numerous earlier studies on cross-cultural transition adjustment. According to Berry (2003, 2006), there is a broad agreement that the process of dealing with cross-cultural transition begins with intercultural contacts and social interactions. Most of the time, sojourners have to deal with two cultures in contact (i.e., sojourner's own culture and the host country culture), and have to participate to various extents in both of these cultures. In this process, sojourners evaluate the meanings of and react to these contacts and social interactions – and the *subjective outcome* (i.e., psychological change) of the social interactions could be that they are benign, or sources of stress or threat, or opportunities. When social interactions with individuals from the host-country are perceived to pose no problem or threat, or even be beneficial (e.g., source of support) to sojourning newcomers, adjustment is likely to follow smoothly. Transition is likely to be rather easy and behavioral shifts are likely to facilitate adjustment. On the other hand, when social interactions are perceived to be sources of stress (e.g., homesickness), these acculturative stress reactions when not effectively dealt with, could impede sojourners' adjustment in the host country (Berry, 2003, 2006). Thus, sojourners' perception of, and reaction to an interaction as a source of opportunities or stress (i.e., subjective outcomes) mediate the association of social interactions and adjustment.

Ward and colleagues (Ward & Kennedy, 1994; Ward et al., 2001) also presented an integrative framework on cross-cultural transition adjustment adapted from stress and coping literature and social learning-social cognition frameworks. The main assumptions of this framework are similar to Berry's (2003) model, particularly in pinpointing intercultural contacts and social interactions as a key factor in adjustment, and the intervening roles of positive and negative subjective outcomes of these intercultural contacts and social interactions. However, the main contribution of Ward et al.'s (2001) framework is in explicating the dimensions of adjustment. According to Ward and colleagues (2001), adjustment has two conceptually

distinct but interrelated domains, namely: Psychological and sociocultural adjustment. Psychological adjustment is defined as one's optimal psychological functioning or wellbeing, and involves effective coping with stress and depression (Ward et al., 2001). In previous investigations, depression was often used as a primary indicator of psychological adjustment (Ward et al., 2001; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Sociocultural adjustment is defined as one's "ability to fit in, to acquire culturally appropriate skills, and to negotiate interactive aspects of the host environment" (Ward & Kennedy, 1999, p. 60). In other words, sociocultural adjustment refers to how a sojourner is able to manage and handle challenges in daily life in the host country (Berry, 2006).

The combined general assumptions of Berry's summative framework on cross-cultural adjustment (2003), and Ward and Colleagues' integrative framework on cross-cultural transition and adjustment (2001, 1994) will serve as the overarching theoretical framework in this dissertation (see Figure 1). This general framework provides a way of understanding the roles of social interactions in sojourner's adjustment as a process resulting from the intervening effects of subjective outcomes.

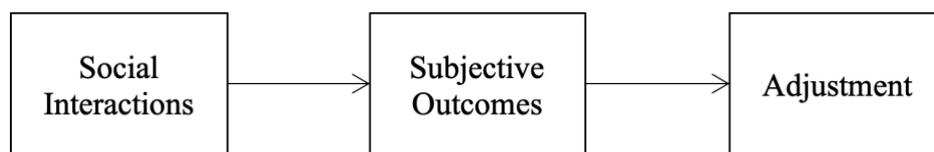


Figure 1. A general framework for understanding the relations of social interactions, subjective outcomes, and sojourners' adjustment

The Pivotal Role of Social Interactions

A common assumption in earlier cross-cultural transition adjustment models is the pivotal role that social interactions play in sojourners' adjustment (e.g., Berry, 2003, 2006; Kim, 2017; Ward, 2001). Social interactions, in the form of intercultural contacts and communication, are characterized as a primary component of the transition process, and a

“causal agent that places a load or demand on the individual” (Berry, 2006, p. 46). Thus, social interactions are a crucial starting point when it comes to investigating sojourners’ adjustment.

The conceptualization of social interactions in the earlier models of international sojourners’ adjustment emphasized the importance of face-to-face interactions with the host-country networks in the adjustment process (Berry, 2003, 2006; Ward et al., 2001). This was largely due to the fact that the communication of early migrants with family and friends in the home country was limited, mostly via postal mail (which could take long intervals), and costly long-distance telephone calls (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014). However, with the development of the Internet and communication technologies in the past years, the opportunities of social interactions have expanded. CMC has provided possibilities of maintaining social relationships beyond geographic locations and temporal boundaries (Hiller & Franz, 2004). The notion of an uprooted migrant has given way to the concept of a connected migrant (Diminescu, 2008). One of the anticipated implications of CMC use among sojourners is that being away from home no longer meant the severance of ties from existing social networks. Moreover, CMC use meant greater opportunities for strengthening new networks with the members of the host environment (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014). In this dissertation, I am using “networks” (i.e., host- and home-country networks) to collectively refer to international students’ significant social relationships; specifically, family, friends, and, in some cases, also a romantic partner.

A Focus on Social Network Sites (SNSs)

Among the various forms of CMC, this dissertation will focus on the use of SNSs for social interactions among international sojourners. SNSs fall under the category of social media CMC in which “user-participation, content-sharing and social networking in (semi-open) network infrastructures is central” (Dekker, Belabas, & Scholten, 2015, p. 452). Thus, as a social medium, SNSs enable users to publicize their social networks (boyd & Ellison, 2007). What is unique about SNSs compared to other social media (such as YouTube, Weblogs or

forums) is that SNSs are organized around personal networks (Dekker et al., 2015). The use of SNSs is primarily for communicating with people who are already a part of one's extended social network. SNSs use may allow users to meet new contacts but these are usually people who are already a part of their SNS contacts' network. Also, users have a way to verify how they are connected with strangers who contact them via the list of their common friends on SNS. Furthermore, SNSs have most of the features of other forms of CMC (e.g., email, video call, instant messaging, etc.) and social media (e.g. YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, etc.) in a single platform (e.g., website or app). Compared to other forms of CMC, SNSs enable private (e.g., messaging, chatting, video telephony) and public interactions (e.g., group messaging, posting), and can be used both in a synchronous (real-time) and asynchronous (with time lag) manner. In addition, they allow unobtrusive observation of other's online activities. SNSs include both interpersonal and group interactions. The use of SNSs to communicate with their network enables sojourners to maintain geographically-close and distant relationships, and manage social resources (Dekker et al., 2015; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Thus, SNS-based social interactions are relevant to investigate in the context of sojourners.

Currently, SNS use is one of the most popular Internet activities, and Facebook is the most popular SNS globally (Ahmad, 2019; Smith & Anderson, 2018; "Social Media Statistics", 2018). Among migrants, Facebook is the most popular and most frequently used SNS (Cassar, Gauci, & Bacchi, 2016). It is also widely used by university students in general (Ellison et al., 2007; Sleeman et al., 2016). For these reasons, this dissertation will focus on SNS use, and more specifically the use of Facebook, by international sojourners instead of general CMC or social media use.

Home versus Host-country Networks, Face-to-Face versus SNS

With SNSs, regular and sustained social interactions during sojourn are no longer limited to geographically-close host-country networks, but also now include established,

although distant, home-country networks. Alongside face-to-face interactions with the host-country network, SNSs are used to interact with both the home- and the host-country networks. Most studies so far have investigated the relevance of the host- and the home-country networks and the roles of face-to-face and CMC channels in sojourners' adjustment separately (Berry, 2006; Cemalcilar, 2008; English et al., 2017; Hofhuis et al., 2019; Mikal & Grace, 2012; Rui & Wang, 2015; Sleeman et al., 2016; Ward et al., 2001; Ye, 2006). However, these country networks and communication channels may have complementary influences on international sojourners' adjustment processes (Dienlin, Masur, & Treppe, 2017; English et al., 2017; Hofhuis et al., 2019; Rui & Wang, 2015). Whether CMC reinforces or displaces face-to-face interaction has been an ongoing debate in communication research (Dienlin et al., 2017). Current scholarship provides greater evidence for the reinforcement argument, which states that those people who communicate via one channel (e.g., SNS) also communicate actively via other channels (e.g., face-to-face, email) (Dienlin et al., 2017). Thus, the use of SNS does not displace face-to-face interactions. It is also possible that people communicate with the same set of people using different channels. This dissertation is premised on the reinforcement argument, and presupposes that international sojourners use various communication channels concomitantly.

Concurrent Communication Model

To extend current theorizing, in this dissertation, I aim to investigate the impacts of the concurrent use of face-to-face and SNS communication channels on sojourners' adjustment. I propose a concurrent communication model (see Figure 2) which extends the general framework shown in Figure 1. A concurrent communication model extends the earlier model of sojourners' adjustment by including three types of interactions, namely: Face-to-face interactions with the host-country network, SNS interactions with the host-country, and SNS interactions with the home-country networks) in international sojourners' adjustment processes.

With this proposed model, the conceptualization of social interaction is no longer limited to face-to-face interactions with the host-country network as described in the earlier theorizing shown in Figure 1. By using a concurrent communication model, I investigate the relative importance of these three social interactions in adjustment, via subjective outcomes.

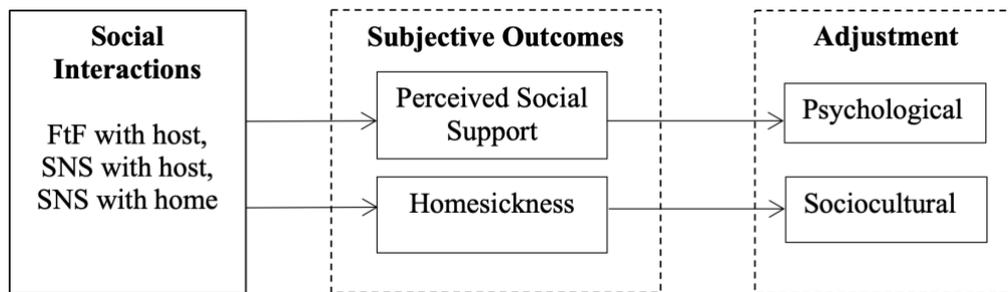


Figure 2. A concurrent communication model of sojourners' adjustment

Moreover, as indicated in Figure 2, this dissertation focuses on two possible subjective outcomes. The first empirical chapter (Chapter 2) of this dissertation focuses on the relative impacts of three social interactions (face-to-face interactions with the host-country network, SNS interactions with the host-country, and SNS interactions with the home-country networks) on a positive subjective outcome (i.e., perceived social support) and, in turn, its impact on psychological adjustment. The second empirical chapter (Chapter 3) presents the relative impacts of the same social interactions on a negative subjective outcome (i.e., homesickness), and in turn, its impact on sociocultural adjustment. In the succeeding sections, I provide the rationale for the various predictions summarized in Figure 2.

The Mediating Roles of Perceived Social Support and Homesickness

Earlier models of sojourners' adjustment emphasized the important roles of subjective outcomes as mediating factors between the relation of social interactions and adjustment. In this dissertation, I focus on two relevant indicators of subjective outcomes of social interactions: Perceived social support (positive subjective outcome) and homesickness (negative subjective

outcome). Perceived social support and homesickness are considered two of the most crucial factors in sojourners' adjustment (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Stroebe et al., 2015a; Van Tilburg, 2005).

Defining Perceived Social Support

Perceived social support is defined as the belief that support is available if needed (Mikal et al., 2013; Trepte & Scharkow, 2016). Compared to other forms of social support (e.g., face-to-face and SNSs-based received support), perceived social support has been shown to predict psychological adjustment (Li, Chen, & Popiel, 2015; Trepte, Dienlin, & Reinecke, 2015; Trepte & Scharkow, 2016). Moreover, in the context of international sojourn, the belief that there are others that one can turn to in times of need could be relevant considering that sojourners are still in the process of building support networks in the host country, and established networks are geographically distant to provide actual support.

Social Interactions Predicting Perceived Social Support. Adelman's (1988) social support theory on cross-cultural adjustment is consistent with the general framework based on the models of Berry (2006) and Ward et al., (2001). In this communication theory, Adelman (1988) argued that communication processes foster social support, which, in turn, promotes adjustment. Communication and social interactions help sojourners cope with adjustment difficulties by reducing the uncertainties experienced during cross-cultural transitions (Adelman, 1988). As with other early models, the social interactions described by Adelman (1988) were largely based on face-to-face interactions. Moreover, earlier studies often described access to social support of sojourners being mostly limited to the host-country network (Ward et al., 2001).

Research on the role of SNSs on perceived social support in the context of international sojourn is scarce. As for CMC in general, Mikal and colleagues (2013) proposed a framework that shows the potential role of CMC in life transition experiences, including cross-

cultural transitions. They theorized that transition experiences (e.g., sojourn) may lead to social disruptions (e.g., loss of social support), and that CMC may play a role in facilitating both perceived and enacted social support. They argued that CMC-based social support may mitigate possible negative transition outcomes (e.g., poorer adjustment). A cross-sectional study of Cemalcilar, Falbo, and Stapleton (2005) showed that CMC use of international students with the home-country network facilitated perceived social support, which, in turn, enhanced psychological adjustment. Moreover, the findings of Hofhuis et al.'s (2019) cross-sectional study also showed that SNS contacts with the host and the home-country relations were positively associated with sojourners' online social support. Looking at previous studies on SNS use and perceived social support among individuals from the general population, findings yielded inconsistent results (Li et al., 2015; Meng, Martinez, Holmstrom, Chung, & Cox, 2017). Several studies showed that SNS use is positively associated with perceived social support (Burke & Kraut, 2016; Olson, Liu, & Shultz, 2012; Meng et al., 2017; Seo, Kim, & Yang, 2016). However, there were studies that failed to establish the association of SNS use and perceived social support (Li et al., 2015; Seo, Harn, Ebrahim, & Aldana, 2016). The inconsistencies in previous findings were attributed to the diverse ways SNS use was measured. Informed by the study of Burke and Kraut (2016), which argued that it is active communication with significant others on SNS that is associated with perceived social support, in this dissertation, I defined SNS use as (active) interactions with significant others in their networks.

Given the limitations of previous studies, this dissertation aims to contribute to existing theorizing by comparing the relative impact of three types of social interactions (i.e., face-to-face interaction with the host-country network, SNS interactions with the host- and the home-country networks) on perceived social support (Chapter 2).

Perceived Social Support Predicting Psychological Adjustment. Thus far, the various models and theories presented are consistent in predicting the positive influence of perceived

social support on psychological adjustment (Adelman, 1988; Berry, 2006; Mikal et al., 2013; Ward et al., 2001). Moreover, previous research on cross-cultural adjustment provided strong support for this prediction (Adelman, 1988; Berry, 2006; Cemalcilar, 2008; Li et al., 2015; Mikal & Grace, 2012; Mikal et al., 2013; Trepte & Scharkow, 2016; Ward et al., 2001; Ye, 2006).

Many studies investigated either the relationship between social interactions and social support, or that between social support and psychological adjustment (Trepte & Scharkow, 2016). In Chapter 2 of this dissertation, I investigate in one model the mediated effects of social interactions on adjustment via perceived social support (as shown in Figure 2).

Defining Homesickness

Homesickness is a negative psychological state primarily due to separation from significant others and familiar surroundings (Archer, Ireland, Amos, Broad, & Currid, 1998; Stroebe et al., 2015b). Homesickness includes negative emotions and constant thoughts about home, or ruminations about wanting to go home. It may even include somatic symptoms (Van Tilburg, 2005). It can manifest in different levels for different individuals. For some, it can be mild; while for others, it can be severe and debilitating (Furnham, 2005; Stroebe et al., 2015b; Thurber & Walton, 2012).

Social Interactions Predicting Homesickness. Social interactions may have a direct effect on one's experience of homesickness (Berry, 2006; English et al., 2017; Van Vliet, 2001). Although, in a few cases, face-to-face interactions with the host-country network may intensify longing for home among international students (Hannigan, 2005), so far there is a stronger support for the prediction that face-to-face interactions with significant others in the host country is negatively associated with homesickness (Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011; Pedersen, Neighbors, Larimer, & Lee, 2011; Thurber & Walton, 2012; Ward et al., 2001).

Research on the association of SNS interactions and homesickness is still lacking (Stroebe et al., 2015a). Turning to previous studies on SNS use and similar psychological states, such as loneliness and (dis)connectedness, again the findings yielded inconsistent results (Verduyn, Ybarra, Résibois, Jonides, & Kross, 2017). On the one hand, SNS use was associated with increased sense of connection and bonding social capital, and lowered loneliness (Burke & Kraut, 2016; Verduyn et al., 2017). On the other hand, Facebook use was associated with decreased wellbeing (Kross et al., 2013; Shakya & Christakis, 2016). A study on friendsickness (homesickness experienced specifically for friends) and SNS use showed that increased friendsickness is associated with greater SNS use (Klingensmith, 2010).

The differential impacts of home and host-country network social interactions on homesickness have not also been explored in previous research. According to English et al. (2017), differentiating various types of social interactions with the home- and the host-country networks is important in the study of homesickness. In this dissertation, I examine the relative impacts of various types of interactions, namely face-to-face and SNS with the home- and the host-country networks, on homesickness (Chapter 3).

Homesickness Predicting Sociocultural Adjustment. Homesickness has been theorized as a predictor of sociocultural adjustment (Berry, 2006; Stroebe et al., 2015a; Van Tilburg, 2005; Ward et al., 2001). According to the Dual Process Model of Homesickness (DPM-HS) (Stroebe et al., 2015b), homesickness is a “home factor”, whereas adjustment is a “new place factor”. Homesickness is fundamentally a negative psychological state due to separation from home. This is conceptually different from (new place) adjustment experiences, which are “the demands that are made on the person in the new environment” (Stroebe et al., 2015b, p. 4). Consistent with the theoretical predictions, previous research provides evidence that poor adjustment in the host country could be a consequence of homesickness (English et al., 2017; Constantine, Kindaichi, Okazaki, Gainor, & Baden, 2007; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). Therefore,

in this dissertation, I predict that homesickness lowers sociocultural adjustment. In Chapter 3, I examine the relative impacts of social interactions on sociocultural adjustment via homesickness (as shown in Figure 2).

The Question of Directionality

Reciprocal Effects of Social Interactions and Subjective Outcomes

One important issue to address is the directionality of associations. For instance, social interactions, support, and adjustment are often discussed together in theory, but their reciprocal interactions are rarely tested empirically (Treppe & Scharnow, 2016). Meng et al. (2017), in their narrative review, stated that “it remains unclear as to whether SNS impacts social support..., or if social support shapes use of SNSs, or both” (p. 49). Thus, the direction of influence between SNS use and social support remains a critical gap in research.

In the case of social interactions and homesickness, directionality is also an issue. There are findings in the literature showing the possibility that not only does social interaction impact homesickness, homesickness also impacts social interactions: Either homesick individuals seek company (Brewin, Furnham, & Howe, 1989; Thurber & Walton, 2012) or avoid social situations (Thurber & Walton, 2012; Van Tilburg, 2005).

When it comes to SNS interactions, one important assumption of media use is that the effects are transactional (Slater, 2015; Valkenburg et al., 2016). This means that media use (e.g., SNS use) and its outcomes (e.g., subjective outcomes) have reciprocal causal relationships. These predictive paths imply that one process (e.g., media use) affects the other (e.g., outcome), which, in turn, affects the one in the beginning (e.g., media use). In this dissertation, I aim to test the transactional effects between social interactions and subjective outcomes (i.e., perceived social support and homesickness) using a longitudinal design (in Chapters 2 and 3, respectively). Figure 3 shows a concurrent communication model of sojourners' adjustment accounting for transactional effects. The transactional effects are

indicated by the reciprocal arrows between social interactions and subjective outcomes, and between subjective outcomes and adjustment.

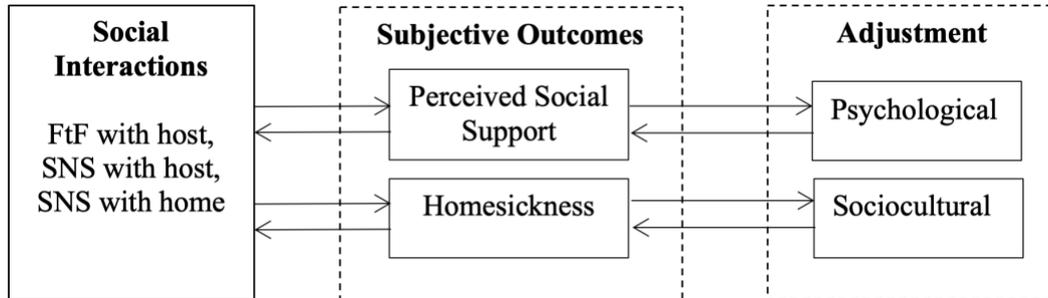


Figure 3. A concurrent communication model of sojourners' adjustment accounting for transactional effects.

Reciprocal Effects of Subjective Outcomes and Adjustment

As indicated in Figure 3, the reciprocal associations between perceived social support and psychological adjustment, as well as homesickness and sociocultural adjustment are also included in the model. Research on social support and depression provides evidence on their possible reciprocal associations (Burns, Deschênes, & Schmitz, 2015; Pettit, Roberts, Seeley, & Yaroslavsky, 2011). As for homesickness and sociocultural adjustment, Stroebe et al. (2015b) theorized that the two are parallel reactions to being in a new environment and they may trigger each other, "causing incremental difficulties" (p. 6).

This dissertation aims to contribute to existing literature by investigating the reciprocal causal associations of these sojourn-relevant subjective outcomes and adjustment. In Chapter 2, I examine the reciprocal causal effects between social interactions and perceived social support, as well as perceived social support and depression. In Chapter 3, I focus on the reciprocal causal associations between social interactions and homesickness, as well as homesickness and sociocultural adjustment.

Long-term vs. Short-term Effects

One crucial factor to consider in testing the proposed general framework with the hypothesized reciprocal effects is the time lag and the question whether effects occur over a long period of time or within a short span of time. As of yet, there are neither established nor compelling theoretical bases for the timing of effects of social interactions and outcomes. In Chapters 2 and 3, I make use of a longitudinal design with an interval of three months in-between measurements, consistent with a previous longitudinal study on student sojourners (Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen, & Van Horn, 2002). According to Hechanova-Alampay et al. (2002), student sojourners might experience varying levels of stress over the period of 6 months. They found that the highest level of stress was 3 months into the academic year, and then 6 months after the start of the academic year. The differences in stress levels coincided with important class requirements. For example, the preparations for the final exams are usually scheduled 3 months into a term.

In this dissertation, I investigate both the patterns of associations between social interactions, subjective outcomes, and adjustment of international students both within a short period of time (short-term), as well as over time (long-term). Long-term associations are based on the effects predicted over a three-month time interval. Meanwhile, short-term associations, are based on the effects predicted at the same time point or wave. This is not to say that the effects are instantaneous, but rather that the causal lag for the effects is short relative to the time elapsed (i.e., three-month interval) between waves of measurement (Finkel, 1995). The longitudinal design employed in Chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation is helpful in examining the temporal order and the immediacy of effects by testing both long-term and short-term reciprocal causal associations.

International Sojourners' Adjustment in a Romantic Relationship Context

For some international sojourners, leaving home means leaving behind not just family and friends but also a romantic partner. One of the factors that poses difficulty in maintaining a

romantic relationship is geographic distance ((Aylor, 2003; Mok, Wellman, & Basu, 2007). Geographic distance limits daily physical togetherness and hinders partners from seeing each other as much as they would like (Pistole & Roberts, 2011). Due to the lack of physical togetherness, long distance relationships (LDRR) often require more effort to maintain compared to geographically-close relationships (GCRR) (Aylor, 2003). Previous studies comparing LDRR and GCRR in terms of these relational adjustment processes showed mixed results: LDRR couples were less satisfied in their relationship than GCRR couples, according to Holt and Stone (1988); LDRR couples showed greater levels of satisfaction and stability than GCRR couples in a study by Stafford and Reske (1990); and several studies showed comparable levels of relationship satisfaction among LDRR and GCRR couples (Govaerts & Dixon, 1988; Guldner & Swensen, 1995; Roberts & Pistole, 2009). Given that LDRR can potentially be as satisfying as GCRR despite distance and reduced physical togetherness, communication should play a key role in relationship maintenance. According to Dindia (2003), “the quality of a relationship is determined by the quality of the communication in the relationship . . . Communication is central to relationship maintenance” (p. 24). Thus, it is important to examine how communication processes can mitigate the impact of distance.

Despite the ubiquity of SNS, limited research has been done to investigate its implications for LDRR (Fox, Warber, & Makstaller, 2013; Marshall, Bejanyan, Di Castro, & Lee, 2012). Earlier research on CMC in relationship maintenance focused extensively on LDRR; while studies on the use of SNS in romantic relationships are generally on GCRR (e.g., Fox et al., 2013; Marshall et al., 2012; Muise, Christofides, & Desmarais, 2009; Papp, Danielwicz, & Cayemberg, 2012; Tokunaga, 2011; Utz & Beukeboom, 2011). To my knowledge, no study directly investigated the use of SNS in LDRR. This dissertation project aims to contribute to existing literature by comparing SNS use for relationship maintenance among international sojourners in LDRR from individuals in GCRR (Chapter 4).

Romantic Relationship Network Support

So far, research on perceived social support among sojourners focused on one's appraisal of personal outcomes (Adelman, 1988; Berry, 2003, 2006; Ward et al., 2001). I argue that the impacts of social interactions can also be extended to one's relational outcomes, as in network support for one's romantic relationship. Aside from perceiving social support for personal benefit, it is also possible to perceive or receive support directed to one's romantic relationship. In this dissertation, I also investigate the impact of social interactions on relationship support (a positive subjective outcome) and, in turn, its impact on relational adjustment (Chapter 5).

Social network perspective on relationship support. A social network perspective on romantic relationships is based on the premise that romantic couples' social networks have a substantial influence on the outcome of the relationship (Felmlee, 2001). Social networks may facilitate or lower relationship stability and intimacy via relationship-related support (Cox, Wexler, Rusbult, & Gaines, 1997; Felmlee, 2001; Visser et al., 2017). This dissertation focuses on a perceived positive influence of a couple's social network, such as relationship support, in line with personal level perceived social support.

Drawing from communication as well as social network perspectives of relationships (e.g., Albrecht & Adelman, 1987; Felmlee, 2001), SNSs relationship support is defined in this dissertation as relationship-related supportive communication that couple members may access and receive from their networks via SNSs. A few studies have established that individuals may also obtain and receive relationship-related information and emotional support from their networks via SNS (Muisse et al., 2009; Tokunaga, 2010; Utz & Beukeboom, 2011). Social network affordances via SNS may be relatively more relevant for couples in LDRR, considering GCRR couples have relatively more geographically-intact social networks (Weiner & Hannum, 2012). However, given that SNSs are deliberately used in both LDRR and GCRR

(Dainton & Stokes, 2015), it would be useful to compare these two types of relationships. Thus, in this dissertation, I will compare the impact of SNSs use in LDRR and GCRR on the access of network relationship support, and in turn, its influence on relationship closeness and stability (Chapter 5).

OVERVIEW OF THIS DISSERTATION

The following chapters of this dissertation are four research papers that examine the roles of SNSs in two contexts: a broad relational context (Chapters 2 & 3), and a more specific context, romantic relationships (Chapter 4 & 5). To provide a summary of the various components and predictions of this present dissertation, I present a schematic overview of the dissertation structure (Figure 4).

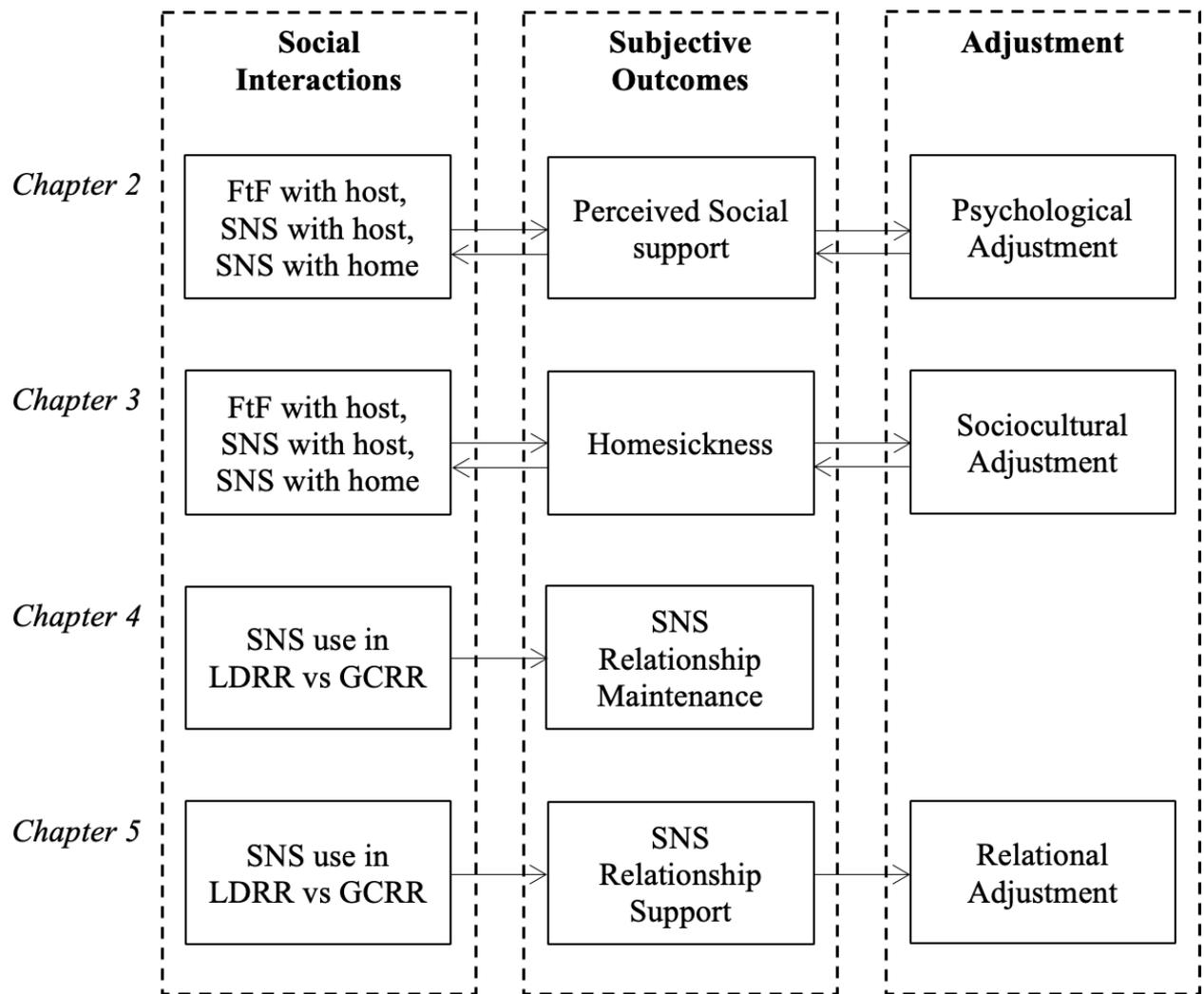


Figure 4. Schematic overview of the dissertation structure

In Chapter 2, I aim to tackle the varying contributions of three types of interactions with family and friends (face-to-face interactions with the host-country network, SNS interactions with the host- and the home-country networks) on a positive subjective outcome (i.e., perceived social support), and, in turn, its impact on psychological adjustment of international students. This chapter also deals with the temporal lag and directionality issues by investigating the long-term and short-term reciprocal effects of the types of social interactions, perceived social support and psychological adjustment using a longitudinal panel survey design gathered online. Since previous studies used depression as a primary indicator of psychological adjustment (Ward et al., 2001; Zhang & Goodson, 2011), I conceptualize greater psychological adjustment in this dissertation as indicated by lower depressive symptoms. This study contributes to the body of knowledge by providing an empirical investigation of the theorized reciprocal interactions of social interactions, support, and adjustment (Meng et al., 2017; Trepte & Scharkow, 2016).

Chapter 3 aims to test the differential influences of the same three types of social interactions with family and friends (face-to-face interactions with the host-country network, SNS interactions with the host- and the home-country networks) on a negative subjective outcome that is highly relevant to sojourners' experiences (i.e., homesickness), and its eventual effect on sociocultural adjustment. Chapter 3 clarifies the long-term and short-term reciprocal effects between social interactions and homesickness, as well as homesickness and sociocultural adjustment. Current theorizing in this area of study suggests these reciprocal associations (Stroebe et al., 2015a&b), but to my knowledge, no study has been conducted to investigate these predictions in one model. This dissertation aims to fill this gap in the current literature.

In Chapter 4, I limit the context of investigation to a more intimate relational context, romantic relationships. This empirical chapter aims to compare the use of SNSs in the maintenance of (international sojourners') LDRR and GCRR. This study contributes to

existing theorizing by investigating the relative importance of SNS in maintaining **LDRR** compared to **GCRR**, specifically in the use of SNS to express involvement and to gauge a partner's involvement in the relationship. I test the hypothesis that SNS is used more by those in **LDRR** than individuals in **GCRR** for relationship maintenance.

Chapter 5 aims to extend the application of the general framework of social interactions, subjective outcomes, and sojourners' adjustment to a more intimate relational context, such as a romantic relationship. Following the same assumptions as in personal perceived social support, I propose a mediation model which predicts that SNSs use impacts relational adjustment via relationship support. I define relational adjustment on the basis of relationship quality indicators that are compromised in cases of geographic separation between romantic partners (Vitak, 2014). These relational adjustment indicators are: Relationship stability (continuation and survival of the relationship) and satisfaction (positive feelings about the relationship) (Felmlee, 2001; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). In this study, I compare the proposed mediation model among international sojourners in **LDRR** and individuals from the general population in **GCRR**.

The last chapter of this dissertation, Chapter 6, provides a general discussion by highlighting and integrating the key findings of the four empirical chapters, as well as addressing the theoretical, methodological, and practical contributions of this dissertation. This chapter also describes the limitations and proposes future direction for research.

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