Social media discussion forums, home country and immigrant consumer acculturation: the case of Iranian immigrants in Australia

Sorush Sepehr
UTS Business School, University of Technology Sydney, Ultimo, NSW, Australia
Email: sorush.sepehr@uts.edu.au

Jamie Carlson
Newcastle Business School, University of Newcastle, Newcastle, NSW, Australia
Email: jamie.carlson@newcastle.edu.au

Philip J. Rosenberger III
Central Coast Business School, University of Newcastle – Central Coast, Australia
Email: philip.rosenbergeriii@newcastle.edu.au

Ameet Pandit
Newcastle Business School, University of Newcastle, Newcastle, NSW, Australia
Email: ameet.pandit@newcastle.edu.au

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Abstract

Purpose – Social media has transformed communication possibilities for immigrant consumers with their home country in their acculturation efforts. However, the acculturative outcomes of consumer interactions with the home country through social media is largely overlooked in previous research. This study investigates the acculturative processes and outcomes resulting from interacting with the home country through social media.

Design/methodology/approach – A netnographic approach is used to collect data from a social media platform that provides an interactive social context in which Iranian immigrants in Australia share their experiences of immigration with non-immigrants who are considering and planning to migrate to Australia.

Findings – Findings show how both immigrants and non-immigrant users via social media reflexively contribute to the formation of two competing collective narratives; namely, the dominant, romanticizing narrative and counter, pragmatic narratives. Findings highlight how notions of the home and host countries, and the idea of migrating from home to host, are constructed as the result of the circulation of the dominant and counter narratives. Further findings include how these two collective narratives come into play in the formation of three acculturative outcomes; namely, self-validating, ordinary experts and wellbeing. These insights extend consumer acculturation theory through highlighting the acculturative processes and outcomes of interactions with the home country via a social media platform. This includes, for example, how interacting with the home culture can take on assimilationist

properties through the construction of a romanticized representation of the hosting society (i.e., Australia) in the dominant collective narrative.

Practical implications – Implications for ethnic marketing practice, policy makers and NGOs are advanced, especially regarding using social media as a channel to communicate with current and potential immigrant consumers. Notably, policy makers can use social media to engage with immigrants before and after migration to reduce the potential for cognitive dissonance in recent arrivals. Managerially, brands can advertise on web-based forums, independent websites and social media platforms to target potential immigrants in order to sell relevant products immigrants needs after migrating to the host country.

Social implications – Findings broaden our understanding of the potential acculturative outcomes on social media by moving away from the traditional outcomes, which are restricted to the dichotomy between the home and host cultures.

Originality – Scholarly attention is deficient on the role of direct interaction with the home country in immigrant consumer acculturation, especially through social media, which is the focus of this study.

Keywords: immigrant consumer acculturation, social media, wellbeing, netnography, hermeneutics

Paper type: Research paper

1. Introduction

Given the growth in international migration in recent decades, a large population of first-generation immigrants now live in various host societies. Interacting within a different sociocultural environment, immigrants experience numerous challenges in their everyday life in the marketplace and beyond (Davis, 2018; Schau *et al.*, 2017). Past research has addressed

these experiences and challenges from different perspectives, and a robust body of knowledge has accumulated regarding immigrant consumers' identity projects, acculturation processes and outcomes (e.g., Askegaard *et al.*, 2005; Cruz and Buchanan-Oliver, 2017, 2020; Veresiu and Giesler, 2018), including vulnerability and wellbeing outcomes (e.g., Davis, 2018; Demangeot *et al.*, 2015; Visconti, 2014) in relation to market resources and consumption practices.

The increasing importance of the online world in the formation of the consumer subject (Belk, 2013; Kurylo, 2020; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; Talwar *et al.*, 2020) has added new dimensions to the study of immigrant consumer acculturation. This has sparked growing scholarly interest in investigating the role of online interactions, especially through social media, in relation to the concept of consumer acculturation. Scholarly knowledge is rapidly evolving in areas such as social media interactions, cultural adaptation and identity construction (Dey *et al.*, 2018, 2020; Mitra and Evansluong, 2019; Yu *et al.*, 2019) to enable marketplace navigation and consumer behaviour outcomes (Choudhary *et al.*, 2019; Schau *et al.*, 2017).

The rapid adoption of social media across the globe has also seen the facilitation of intercultural communications beyond physical movements (Croucher and Rahmani, 2015; Kent and Li, 2020; Shuter, 2012). The spatial and temporal properties of social media have transformed communication and acculturation possibilities with the home country for immigrant consumers. Despite this development, little critical scholarly attention has been devoted to the acculturative process that occurs as the result of migrants' interactions with the home country through social media, and how this affects their experiences in the context of immigration.

The important role of the home culture in immigrant consumer acculturation is well established in previous research, especially in a reciprocal relationship with consumption

practices – how consumption is used by immigrant consumers for ethnic identity construction and self-expression, and, reciprocally, how home-country-related consumption practices can affect immigrant consumers' acculturation processes and outcomes. However, the home culture in these studies is mostly reduced to interacting with the ethnic community in the host country (e.g., Cruz and Buchanan-Oliver, 2020; Luedicke, 2015; Peñaloza, 1994, 2018; Souiden and Ladhari 2011; Veresiu and Giesler, 2018), whereas interacting with the home country (i.e., country of origin), especially using social media, is largely unexplored in the previous immigrant consumer acculturation research. This is noteworthy, since social media enables individuals to engage with their own native cultures as well as host cultures online to generate social and cultural capital (Kizgin *et al.*, 2020).

Against this backdrop, there is a clear knowledge gap at the intersection of consumer acculturation and social media studies in relation to how communicating with the home country through social media affects immigrant consumer acculturation. In closing this gap, we investigate acculturative processes and outcomes arising from the social media interactions between Iranian 'immigrants' residing in Australia and 'non-immigrants' on a social media platform. In this study, we define non-immigrants as individuals who live in Iran and are considering and/or planning to migrate to Australia. The use of such a social media context in which these two groups of users come together and interact on migration-related topics provides a unique setting for studying the construction of acculturative processes on social media.

Accordingly, this paper aims to answer the following two research questions: 1) How do online interactions between Iranian immigrants and non-immigrants lead to the formation of acculturative processes in relation to the home and the host countries? 2) What are the acculturation outcomes of these processes for immigrants? Answering these questions is especially important given the recent calls for more empirical studies and theorisation on the

role of social media in the consumer acculturation process (Kizgin *et al.*, 2020; Yen and Dey, 2019). Such insights inform various fields, ranging from marketing practice and the better understanding of ethnic consumer behaviour through to public policy in the pursuit of consumer literacy, wellbeing and inclusivity in the marketplace. The study also directly aligns to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 10 – which seeks to reduce inequality within and among countries through empowering and promoting social, economic and political inclusion for all. In line with this, our study offers two key contributions.

First, it offers important insights into how social media can be appropriated to empower immigrant consumers to navigate and engage in the marketplace as consumers and citizens. A key finding of our paper is that wellbeing outcomes of online interactions with the home country provide opportunities to empower immigrant consumers in their everyday life in the host society. Second, this paper offers insights into how online interactions with the home country form the immigrant consumer subject. It is important for marketing researchers and practitioners to understand how immigrants configure their consumption practices through their online activities (Miocevic and Zdravkovic, 2020). This is especially important considering the potential cultural adaptations due to these online interactions (Colliander and Hauge Wien, 2013; Kizgin *et al.*, 2018, 2020), particularly since ethnic minority consumers are the fastest-growing segment of the population in many Western countries (Kizgin *et al.*, 2018).

To this end, the rest of this paper is organised as follows. In the next section, the literature on acculturation and social media is reviewed, followed by the methodological approach adopted. Next, the findings are presented. The concluding section discusses the theoretical and practical implications along with limitations and future research directions.

2. Literature review

2.1. Consumer acculturation

The concept of acculturation in previous research is mostly regarded as an outcome of offline interactions in the context of immigration (e.g., Askegaard *et al.*, 2005; Aung *et al.*, 2017; Cappellini and Yen, 2013; Cruz and Buchanan-Oliver, 2020; Lysonski and Durvasula, 2013; Min and Peñaloza, 2019). Two broad approaches to acculturation have been advanced in the literature: assimilationist and postassimilationist (Luedicke, 2011; Sam, 2006). The initial conceptualisation of acculturation held an assimilationist approach, centred on the idea that acculturation is a gradual process of change towards the host culture (Teske and Nelson, 1974). However, the 'melting pot' premise of the assimilationist approach was soon found to be insufficient in describing and conceptualising acculturative processes in host societies, wherein ethnic minority groups have been extensively forming and becoming an important agent in the immigrant acculturation process (Sam, 2006).

This evolution of the field has led to the rise of the postassimilationist acculturation approaches, which provide a broader theoretical lens by considering both host and home cultures as sources of cultural change (Luedicke, 2011). The postassimilationist approach to consumer acculturation is largely influenced by Berry's (1980) seminal work in which acculturation is conceptualised as the extent to which immigrants maintain relationship with larger society (i.e. host culture) and/or maintain relationship with the ethnic community and culture (i.e. home culture). This in turn can result in four acculturation outcomes; namely, assimilation, separation, marginalisation and integration. Berry's (1980) conceptualisation of acculturation and acculturation outcomes can be traced in many postassimilationist consumer acculturation studies (c.f. Askegaard *et al.*, 2005; Khan *et al.*, 2018; Peñaloza, 1994, 2018).

Previous postassimilationist studies have investigated how immigrant consumers negotiate the tensions between the home and host cultures through consumption and market resources (Askegaard *et al.*, 2005; Cruz and Buchanan-Oliver, 2017; Khan *et al.*, 2018).

However, their theoretical lens is mostly limited to the interactions with the ethnic community in the host country, whereas communications with the home country (i.e., country of origin) as a source of cultural adaptation are largely overlooked. This lack of attention to individuals interacting with the home country is also evident in more recent studies that investigate immigrant consumer acculturation on social media (e.g., Li *et al.*, 2019; Mitra and Evansluong, 2019; Yu *et al.*, 2019). These studies tend to adopt a linear assimilationist approach, focusing only on immigrants' interactions with the host society through social media.

Accordingly, there is a scarcity of conceptual understanding in relation to the role of social media in interacting with the home country and potential acculturative processes (i.e., how immigrants' interactions with the home country through social media affects cultural adaptations in the context of immigration) and outcomes, such as inclusivity and wellbeing of immigrants. An important consideration here is that such conceptualisations need to be based on an in-depth, theoretical understanding of social media, its social, spatial and temporal properties and how these properties affect the formation of the self in the online sphere.

2.2. Social media and the formation of the self

In line with its growing sphere of influence on social life, an emerging body of literature in marketing and consumer research has been forming around social media (Belk, 2013; Kurylo, 2020; Talwar *et al.*, 2020). These studies have addressed the social, cultural and economic aspects of social media across various areas, such as social media interactions and brand engagement (Confos and Davis, 2016; De Vries and Carlson, 2014; Tran *et al.*, 2020), value co-creation (Cheung *et al.*, 2021; Ferm and Thaichon, 2021), and the empowering and transformative aspects of online communities and social media (Cova and Pace, 2006; Jacobson *et al.*, 2020; Tian *et al.*, 2014; Yuksel *et al.*, 2016).

A common theme in many of these studies is how the social, spatial and temporal features of the social media context can affect the formation and expression of the self (Belk, 2013; Cappellini and Yen, 2016; Li *et al.*, 2017). On the one hand, it is argued that people are less constrained and have higher agency in constructing and expressing the self in social media. This can be explained through the concept of the 'disinhibition effect', which refers to the feeling of being less restrained by social constraints due to numerous factors, such as anonymity, invisibility and minimisation of authority (Suler, 2004). Similarly, Kozinets and Kedzior (2009) used the metaphor of 're-worlding' to describe the perceived lack of constraints, especially regarding space and time in the online world. This is particularly evident in virtual worlds, where users can hold 'god-like powers' in affecting the forces of nature and the construction of the self. Moreover, 'dematerialisation' of possessions in the online sphere and 're-embodiment' of the self via narratives and avatars create a context where a different form of agency is constructed in social media compared with the offline social context (Belk, 2013; Croft, 2013).

On the other hand, evidence indicates that people tend to disclose less in the online than the offline sphere because of larger potential audiences and the enduring nature of disclosing online (Emanuel *et al.*, 2014). Sociocultural processes, such as social conformity (van Dijck, 2013) and imagined surveillance (Duffy and Chan, 2019), may also force users to maintain a synergy in their construction of the self across various platforms – e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat and LinkedIn – and also the offline world.

Despite this paradoxical situation regarding expressing and constructing the self, it is argued that social media provides greater potential for being more reflexive through influencing cultural structures. This echoes Ritzer and Jurgenson's (2010) conception of 'prosumption', which refers to the shift from the earlier versions of capitalism characterised by the centrality of production, or, more recently, consumption (Baudrillard, 2012), to a new

form of capitalism, in which consumers can turn themselves into producers. This implies the construction of a new form of agency in the social media context that results from user-generated, online content (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010).

This form of agency differs not only from the earlier versions of capitalism, but also from agency in the offline sphere in the current time (van Dijck, 2009). In this view, individuals are more capable of being critically reflexive in social media, where they can go beyond self-consciousness and produce cultural content (Thompson *et al.*, 2018). In doing so, they are transforming themselves from consumers into 'prosumers' who can also influence sociocultural structures (Askegaard *et al.*, 2009; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010).

2.3. Social media, reflexivity and consumer acculturation

This view of the construction and expression of the self on social media is in line with a reflexive account of consumer acculturation, in which home and host are not only cultural contexts in which acculturation processes occur but also discursive outcomes of acculturative processes (Askegaard *et al.*, 2011). In this view, first, culture is a dynamic process of construction, rather than a collection of essential traits and practices (Askegaard *et al.*, 2009). Second, reflexivity does not merely refer to self-consciousness, but how this self-consciousness is exposed and expressed in answering the question, 'How shall I be?' (Giddens, 1991). In this sense, people are not only consumers of culture, but through reflexivity and becoming aware of the dynamics of social structures, they can affect culture and become producers of cultural meaning in their own right (Askegaard *et al.*, 2009).

Establishing the link between consumer acculturation theorising and social media research enables us to investigate both acculturative processes and outcomes in the social media context in the unified theoretical framework under investigation grounded on the findings of these two research streams. Therefore, our study is guided by the understanding of

how the social, spatial and temporal properties of a social media platform can frame its users' agency and reflexivity, especially in relation to the concept of immigrant consumer acculturation. In other words, this approach informs our understanding and facilitates unpacking of the acculturative process and outcomes of the interactions among immigrant and non-immigrant users on social media platforms.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data collection

Adopting an interpretivist approach to human inquiry, this study seeks to develop a deep and insightful understanding of acculturation processes in the social media context by using a netnographic approach. By observing participants' online interactions, netnography provides researchers with a robust tool to study social phenomena in the online realm (Kozinets, 2019). Netnography has been extensively applied by social researchers in recent years to study consumers' online interactions and experiences (e.g., Burgess and Jones, 2021; Colliander and Hauge Wien, 2013; Guèvremont, 2019; Kjeldgaard and Bode, 2017). Following Kozinets' (2002, 2019) guidelines, we adopted an observational approach, which allowed us to investigate participants' acculturation processes and identity projects in an uninhibited way.

Data were collected from an Iranian online forum (www.migranthelp.com) developed to provide Iranian immigrants in Australia with an interactive social networking platform to share their experiences and the norms of everyday life in Australia. This social networking platform has also become a primary source via which Iranians who are considering and planning to immigrate to Australia interact with Iranian immigrants in Australia to develop a better understanding of their (possible) future host country. Therefore, users of this platform

consist of Iranians who reside in Australia (immigrants) or Iran. The language of the posts in this platform is Persian, the first author's native language.

We adopted a purposive approach for selecting the site of data collection (Costello et al., 2017). We investigated various related online social networks (such as Iranian community groups on Facebook) to find the most suitable platform according to the research objectives and questions. After comparing these different sources of data, this social network platform was selected due to two reasons. First, the interaction between Iranian immigrants and non-immigrants on this platform provides a unique context to study acculturation processes through social media interactions beyond physical migration. This platform is especially relevant to this study considering that it is a social context formed around the notion of immigration. Second, comments on this platform are richer in nature, as they are usually discussed in more detail compared to similar comments that appear on a social media platform, such as Facebook. This enabled us to develop a more thorough and in-depth understanding of immigrants' experiences and their narratives of the self.

The platform consists of various discussion threads with different levels of user engagement, depending on the topic of the discussion. Each thread had a specific topic that administration users encouraged its users to post only comments related to that topic. Users were able to reply to each other's comments within a discussion thread. A brief profile of the user was presented next to each comment, which included information on, for example, when the user became a member of the platform, whether and when they have applied for or granted an Australian visa, and how many times other users have appreciated their comments – a feature that is similar to a 'like' on other social media platforms.

The nature of discussions on this platform centre around two broad areas. First, discussions focus on various aspects of life in Australia, including topics such as how to do shopping, how to deal with certain legal procedures and how to rent a house. Second,

discussions focus on how to immigrate to Australia, including topics such as which visa to apply for, what documents should be prepared for each visa application and different ways to reach the required number of 'points' for some of the visas. Our review of the discussion threads during the process of data collection indicated that the interactions amongst immigrant and non-immigrant users (which is related to the purpose of this study) could occur in both these types of topics. However, most of the collected data are from the first type of discussions, in which immigrant users talk about Australia and their experiences as an Iranian in Australia, especially in frequent comparisons with Iran.

The data collection was conducted between September 2016 and January 2018. Various discussion threads on this social media platform were investigated to select and include as relevant data for analysis and interpretation. In terms of selection, the two research questions guided us regarding which discussion threads to include or exclude. Accordingly, we specifically examined those topics that both immigrant and non-immigrant users were actively taking part in. These were particularly the discussions with richer sociocultural themes in areas such as 'Australian people and society', 'cultural shock', 'best ways to know Australian culture' and 'shopping in Australia'. The final data corpus consisted of 74 threads and more than 1,800 posts.

Whilst there is no consensus amongst scholars about covert or disclosed netnographic observation (Kozinets, 2019; Lugosi and Quinton, 2018), the public nature of the discussions on the platform, for which there is no need for a subscription nor a login to access the platform, suggested that a covert, observational approach was suitable. This is particularly relevant because of users' anonymity on this platform, considering that all participants use pseudonymous accounts.

3.2. Interpretation of the data

Our interpretive analysis followed a hermeneutic approach. Hermeneutics, or the art of interpretation (Kinsella, 2006), focuses on one's experience as it is lived (Thompson *et al.*, 1989) and puts the 'person in context' at the heart of the process of interpretation (Laverty, 2003). The use of a hermeneutic approach enabled us to develop an in-depth understanding of immigrants' experiences in relation to the context of the immigrant and the home and host cultures. In line with the theoretical stance of this study on the narrative structure of the self (Giddens, 1991), we focused on users' narratives of the self; for example, when an immigrant tells the story of her/his experiences of migration (Thompson, 1997).

In hermeneutics, the interpretation process primarily consists of the 'hermeneutic circle', which is an iterative process of back-and-forth between the part and the whole in interpreting a text. Each discussion thread was treated as a unit of text and was read in its entirety. The hermeneutic circle was applied at intratext (i.e., one discussion thread) and intertext (i.e., several discussion threads) levels and through a constant movement between reading and interpreting the discussion threads and the emerging theoretical themes. Accordingly, the interpretations in the form of emerging themes as the result of reading the texts informed the subsequent readings and interpretations. This is while the emerging themes were respectively updated as the result of further readings and interpretations of the texts (Thompson, 1997).

Epistemologically and methodologically, this study is conducted within the interpretivist approach to research in which the researcher is regarded as the instrument of research – i.e., the metaphor of 'researcher-as-instrument' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). In this research approach, trustworthiness of the analysis, interpretation and findings are primarily achieved through researchers' immersion in, and familiarity with, the background of the study (Thompson, 1997). In this paper, the contextual knowledge of the first author,

who is from Iran, a first-generation immigrant and has studied immigration and immigrant consumers and social media interactions for several years, assures the quality of interpretations and findings of this study. Further, self-reflexivity was used as another means for assuring the trustworthiness of the data analysis, interpretations and findings (Schwandt, 1994; Trent and Cho, 2020). This was conducted through a continuous process of reflexivity in the researchers' role during the data collection, analysis and interpretation, which included constantly reflecting on their beliefs, assumptions and biases about the issues under investigation.

4. Findings

Through interpreting the data considering the theoretical framework, we identified the formation and circulation of two collective narratives (i.e., the dominant and the counter narrative) regarding the home country (i.e., Iran) and the host country (i.e., Australia). Our findings show that these two collective narratives come into effect as acculturative processes through which immigrant users make sense of their pre- and post-migration experiences. In presenting the findings, we first start by elaborating the collective narratives. We then show how three acculturative outcomes are constructed as the result of immigrant users' interactions within this social media context.

4.1. Two competing narratives

4.1.1. The dominant, romanticizing narrative

Our analysis highlighted the formation of a dominant, collective narrative in relation to the concepts of immigration and the home and host countries. The findings showed that the circulation of knowledge (i.e., interactivity of information) on the social media platform produces a romantic depiction of immigration to Australia, in which it is portrayed as a panacea (solution) for the individual to every problem within the home country, Iran. In this

narrative, immigration has gained an emancipatory property that, interestingly, both immigrants and non-immigrants simultaneously contribute to in both its production and circulation.

An overarching theme that emerged in relation to this narrative is the comparison of the home and host countries at both the macro (e.g., social, cultural and economic) and micro levels (e.g., how to make money, how to have fun and how to feel happy). The outcome of such comparisons is the romanticising of the idea of immigration through emphasising the downsides of living in Iran and the upsides of living in Australia. This is, for example, reflected in Farzad's[1] expression of his experiences of his early days in Australia:

> Farzad (immigrant user): … in my opinion, don't even hesitate about coming here. Perhaps it is too early for me to say this, but, look, the wages here are very high but prices are almost the same as Iran. People are very polite and respect each other … here, when people notice you are a foreigner, they try to help you. To be honest, I was thinking if I say I am from Iran, they may not treat me well. But, they have a good understanding of Iran and there is no problem. Life here is extremely comfortable. When I was in Iran, I wasn't eager to walk, even for a short distance. But here, I love to carry my backpack and walk around.

Such depiction of immigration as an emancipatory project seems to even justify illegal immigration for some, despite the dangers of trusting their life to smugglers and the sea. One of the more unusual narratives that we observed came from Pasargard. In his answer to other

[1] Pseudonyms have been used for privacy reasons.

users, who were inviting him to focus on immigration through the skilled-worker scheme instead of illegal immigration, he replied:

> Pasargard (non-immigrant user): What would you do if you were in my shoes? I can only go to university next year. When am I going to graduate? [And I also need] work experience!! [Overall,] maybe ten years from now! Have a look at my signature [which is: 'migration might be a mirage, but for me it is a hope for a better tomorrow']. Maybe if I go to Australia [illegally], I will become an immigration lawyer by then  .

Another theme that emerged in relation to the dominant narrative of immigration was the way market-related stories are used by some immigrant users to make their experiences more tangible to others. These stories are mostly used in depicting an idealised portrayal of immigration; for example, by being focused on the diversity and availability of leisure and fun activities in Australia compared with Iran. This theme was also highlighted in Spark's comment in a discussion about the quality of brands and shopping in Australia, where he compared his experiences with the quality of products in the Australian and Iranian marketplaces:

> Spark (immigrant user): Basically, except Iran, all other countries supply their best products into their domestic markets. So, do not worry about whether Australian brands and products are good or not. Plus, even the same foreign brands have higher quality in Australia than Iran. This is for two reasons: first, it is more likely that they are not fake. Second, even if they are fake, they are still better than those fake brands in Iran. Honestly, everything we bought in

> Australia has been better than Iran. This includes food, clothing, appliances and everything else.

Spark's comment was not the only consumption-related story that was used to highlight the advantages of immigrating to Australia. This could also be observed in various discussion threads, especially those that pertained to life and culture in Australia. What makes these comments similar at a more abstract level is the depiction of the home and host cultures – an unromantic representation of the home along with an idealised representation of the host forms the meaning of immigration in this dominant, collective narrative. Because of these features, the dominant narrative tends to have assimilationist properties as the romanticized representation of the host country (i.e., Australia) can result in users' further interactions and engagement with the host culture.

4.1.2. The counter, pragmatic narrative

The second collective narrative was formed on this social media platform as a reaction to the dominant narrative, challenging the black-and-white depictions of the home and host countries. In other words, a group of immigrant and non-immigrant users questioned the simplistic representation of the home and host countries and the concept of immigration. For example, unlike the perfect depictions in the dominant, romanticizing narrative, Elahe (a non-immigrant user) tries to provide a more realistic understanding of the potential problems in the government and political system in Australia: "*Look, in Australia also humans run the country, and not angels, and all humans make mistakes!*" Similarly, Nima (an immigrant user) extends this discussion to the topic of gender equality: "*Even in a country like Australia that human rights and equality are claimed to be priories, women get paid 20% less than men in similar positions*".

This clash of narratives and how these two narratives are constructed in relation to each other could be observed in various discussion threads. A good example that shows the clash of the dominant and counter narratives is in a discussion thread labelled ‘why immigrate and what to expect’. This clash is illustrated by an exchange in this thread between Martin (a non-immigrant), Moonlight (an immigrant) and Shiraz (a non-immigrant):

> Martin (non-immigrant user): I have mostly been a reader, but I get irritated by these views and decided to write: why do you see immigration only as having fun? If you ask how living in Australia is, they only talk about having fun there! Maybe we can have even more fun in Iran. Maybe we should ask what we should look for in our life. I don’t mean to be rude. What I mean is that there are much more important reasons for immigration: to progress, to become more powerful, to prove our abilities, to enjoy more facilities, to develop our abilities ...
>
> Moonlight (immigrant user): I think the ultimate goal of ‘to progress, to become more powerful, to prove our abilities, to enjoy more facilities, to develop our abilities’ is to enjoy life and have fun … I personally have always liked to have the experience of living in places other than Iran, to experience new things, to see new people, to know new cultures, to have new fun activities; I mean, to experience a different world. Next, I also wanted to be equal to others, to have equal opportunities …
>
> Shiraz (non-immigrant user): … Friends, [my understanding is that] overall [Australia] is better than Iran, but we should not expect we are entering a utopia … even within our country if you want to migrate and live in another city you

> are going to have lots of problems, [such as] cultural differences … now that we are talking about a foreign country with very different culture and lots of other ethnic groups from very different cultures…

We thus refer to the second narrative in this paper as the 'counter, pragmatic narrative', as it can be described as a demythologising attempt to create a more 'accurate' and 'pragmatic' representation of immigration and the home and host countries. Therefore, a focus in this narrative is to also highlight the issues and difficulties of living away from 'home'. For example, an area that was specifically emphasised by some users was experiencing discrimination, such as Mantanha's story of her negative experience at an Australian airport.

> Mantanha (immigrant user): At Sydney airport, I was in the passport check queue behind an Aussie lady. We both forgot to complete the declaration form. When it was her turn, the officer treated her very warmly; a warm greeting and welcome, walked with her and guided her to the counter where she could find the form, asked her whether she had a pen, and then gave her a pen to fill in the form. When it was my turn, the officer looked at my black hair and noted my foreign accent. He humiliated me in front of tens of people by shouting at me that, 'If you haven't filled in this form, there is no reason for you to stand in this queue. Come back only after you have filled in the form.' I blushed and walked away.

For immigrant users, especially those who have stayed in Australia for a longer period of time, sometimes it takes on a nostalgic aura, as they end up reminiscing about their memories of Iran, and how they missed certain aspects of their 'old' lives in the context of immigration

to Australia. For example, Mantanha, who is an immigrant, uses a piece of Persian poetry as the signature on her posts, which is roughly translated as, '*It is a lovely house, but it is not my house. It is a beautiful country, but it is not my home country.*' This immigrant user's nostalgic reflections also reinforce the counter narrative by highlighting the emotional difficulties of living away from home.

Accordingly, many discussions on this social media platform become a confrontation between these two intersubjectively created narratives of immigration that produce specific representations of the home and the host countries. In the next section, we discuss how such representations come into play and form three acculturative outcomes amongst immigrant users.

4.2. Acculturative outcomes

Our analysis highlighted the formation of three acculturative outcomes amongst immigrant users. It is important to note that these outcomes are very situational and dynamic; they are constructed as the result of user interactions within the specific social, temporal and spatial features of this social media platform, and especially in relation to the identified dominant and counter collective narratives. As discussed in the following sections, each of these three acculturative outcomes are constructed as the result of conforming to and/or resisting against the two identified collective narratives.

4.2.1. Self-validating

The netnographic data revealed that, for some immigrant users, this social media platform provides a context through which they construct a sense of achievement. The dominant narrative particularly plays an important role in the formation of this sense of achievement. The idealised depiction of immigration in the dominant narrative attaches a meaning of

success to immigration in and of itself. For example, in answering the question, 'What are the upsides and downsides of living in Australia?', Albaloo replied, '*There isn't any downside. Just maybe that you miss your friends in the early days. But, after a while, you get used to it, and it is just fun.*' This view was disputed by others, however.

These forms of interactions enabled immigrant users to directly communicate with non-immigrant users, whose main priority appeared to be immigrating to Australia, and provided an appropriate social context for the formation of such an acculturative outcome. This finding was evident in various discussion threads, and sometimes include levels of 'showing off'. For example, we can see this in Aida's response to Leila's news of receiving her visa to Australia:

> Leila (non-immigrant user): Guys!! Just couple of minutes ago, I received my visa …
>
> Aida (immigrant user): Leila! Hurry up! Come here before 24 August and the first thing to do will be buying Bocelli's concert tickets  Wow, I can't believe that Andrea Bocelli, Italian tenor, will have a concert here in Sydney. Imagine, you can go to a concert like a human being [without all the fuss in Iran] and listen to his unworldly voice …

This outcome also appeared to be a quest of validation for immigrant users, especially from non-immigrant users, who were enthusiastic about immigrating to Australia. In this sense, participating on this social media platform for some immigrant users became an instrument for validating the self (Belk, 2013), their decisions and life, especially where immigration in itself is depicted as an achievement, a source of social status and a means of upward social mobility in the home country (Erel, 2010; Massey *et al.*, 1993). This social media platform

provided users with a social context in which they could see those aspects of the self that were reflected in the mirror of non-immigrant Iranians, a mirror that they may not have been able to access in their everyday lives in the offline world in Australia. For example, this can be seen in Sina's response to Shadi's worries about the delays in processing their visa application – a response that while aims to be comforting, it also highlights a status that is already achieved by Sina, and is being wished by Shadi:

> Sina (immigrant user): This reminds me of my own situation, when I was getting my visa before coming to Australia. Mine also took a while. But I am sure you will be fine. Don't worry. Sooner or later your visa will be granted. All the best things are expecting for you here [in Australia]!

In other words, Sina's comment can be interpreted as an effort to seek self-validation (Belk, 2013) and implies that he has already achieved "all the best things". Such approaches to self-validations tend to have two aspects, which are showing achievement and abilities and hiding failings and inabilities (Lawrence and Smith, 2017). In such a social space where the notion of immigration is portrayed as a success, especially as the result of functioning of the dominant narrative, certain situations in the discussions provide immigrant users with the opportunity to self-validate, and potentially forget about or hide the challenges they may have experienced in the context of immigration.

4.2.2. Immigrants as ordinary experts

The second identified acculturative outcome refers to the situations on this social media platform in which immigrant users acquire the status of an expert. Their familiarity with the immigration process and 'dos and don'ts' of life in Australia, and the status that they acquired

by immigration itself, leads to the creation of this outcome in various situations in the discussion threads. For example, Mehran, a non-immigrant user, created a discussion topic about manners and proper behaviour in different situations in Western countries (e.g., what is the appropriate behaviour for a party and what are proper table manners), or, as he labelled them, 'international manners'. But Muffin, an immigrant user, emphasised the casual and mateship aspects of Australian culture in his comments: '*Thanks for the detailed information, but Australians are different from Europeans. They are very casual and easy-going people. Don't worry [about these issues] at all!*'

Such expert-like recommendations cover a wide range of micro-level, ordinary, everyday life situations such as shopping, transportation, medical procedures, and legal and financial advice. For example, based on his own early day experiences of taking busses in Sydney, Hadi shares the importance of signalling bus drivers when waiting in a bus station. This is unlike the common procedure in Iran that there is no need to signal the driver as they stop in all stations: "*first time that this happened to me I got very annoyed. Only later I noticed why the driver didn't stop for me.*"

As another example, Shahin (immigrant user) initiates a discussion thread that is labelled as "going to a doctor in Australia" in which he discussed a few issues in relation to going to a medical examination including language barriers and those services that are not covered by the Medicare (i.e. publicly-funded universal health care insurance scheme in Australia). Saba (immigrant user) replies to this comment as: "*Shahin, I have bought a private insurance that even covers dentistry*". Saba's comment is followed by questions and discussions about what is the best private insurance company to cover extra medical procedures/items – a discussion that involves both immigrant and non-immigrant users.

In the sense that immigrant users can influence how other users create cultural content, this may resemble social media influencers. Here, product endorsement happens in

the case of Australia, Iran and immigration. However, the sociospatial structure of this social media platform does not quite allow users to adopt the role of influencers in its conventional conception. Conventionally, influencers are regarded as prominent social media users with a large number of followers with whom they develop a close relationship through creating and sharing content about their life, lifestyle and interests (Ki *et al.*, 2020; Tafesse and Wood, 2021).

Instead, these immigrant users create a sense of 'ordinary experts' (Lewis, 2010) of the self, by reflecting on the know-hows of ordinary everyday life in Australia. Playing the role of the ordinary expert also allowed some immigrant users to distance themselves from other users who offered a 'simplistic' image of life in Australia. Therefore, this outcome is particularly constructed as the result of conforming to the counter narrative and resisting the idealised depiction of immigration in the dominant narrative. For example, these group of immigrants used consumption narratives to demythologise (Arsel and Thompson, 2011) the hedonic lifestyle depicted in the dominant narrative of immigration. This was evident in several stories by Iranian immigrants who described how buying from second-hand and charity (thrift) shops was growing in Australia, yet it was still an issue that was a taboo to talk about in Iranian society. The anonymity provided in this online platform enables users to be less conservative in telling stories and disclosing the self. This was illustrated in Kayvan's narration of collecting products from the roadside in his early days in Australia [1]:

> Kayvan (immigrant user): I can remember when a couple of us [new Iranian immigrants in Australia] decided to rent and share a house. To get home appliances, we borrowed a friend's car and drove around the neighbourhood and found almost all the things we needed in the streets for free; almost all the items

> you mentioned, except the electric kettle … I think these things are good enough to start a bachelor life.

We borrow from Lewis (2010) in using ‘ordinary experts’ to describe this acculturative outcome, whereby ‘ordinary experts’ refers to the dynamic power relations on this platform that gives immigrant users the status to mentor and offer guidelines, especially to non-immigrant users. These guidelines could pertain to values and norms, and the dos and don’ts of life, or could concern legal procedures and career advice. These were in the form of advice regarding ordinary problems for ordinary people offered through social media. There is a similarity and relationship between ‘ordinary experts’ and ‘self-validation’ outcomes in the sense that they can both be constructed in relation to an achievement (i.e. immigration). However, being an expert is more based on a pragmatic understanding of experiences in the context of immigration and in relation to the counter collective narrative, whereas self-validation is formed mostly based on a romantic portray of immigration created by the dominant collective narrative.

4.2.3. Consumer vulnerability and wellbeing

Another acculturative outcome that emerged in our data analysis is related to the important topics of immigrant consumer vulnerability and wellbeing. The data revealed that some immigrant users share their memories of situations in which, as immigrants, they experienced vulnerability (Hill and Sharma, 2020). Similar to the previous outcome (i.e., ordinary experts), this theme can be discussed as the result of resisting the dominant narrative in the sense that some immigrant users try to demythologise the idealistic representation of immigration in the dominant narrative. But, at the same time, sharing their memories and stories of situations in which they experienced vulnerability seems to also serve as a coping

mechanism, with wellbeing outcomes for these users. This is, for example, reflected in Khatere's nostalgic elaboration of her feelings on a Sunday morning in Australia:

> Khatere (immigrant user): I felt a bit down, so I decided to write here. It is Sunday morning here now. All the Aussies had fun last night and are still in bed or hangover. The sun is up and everywhere is very quiet. And, my heart is not here now, but in the busy streets of Tehran and in my father's house. It is with my father and mother's kind hands! Family gatherings! Tehran taxies! Sangak bread, Tabriz cheese and the aroma of tea in a [traditional] teapot! I have a very prosperous life here, but I am still looking for those things in my life!

Here, nostalgia is used by Khatere to cope with the difficulties in the context of immigration (Stamboli-Rodriguez and Visconti, 2012; Kreuzer *et al.*, 2018). The social media platform creates a unique space that facilitates the construction of such nostalgic feelings and expressions.

There were also several examples of storytelling by immigrant users when they reflect on their experiences and life in Australia, especially about their challenges in the context of immigration. These comments mostly received supportive reactions from other users, which leads to the construction of a sense of a community amongst users. For example, this was the case when Mantanha's reflected on her discriminatory experience in the airport (see section 4.1.2 on the counter narrative), which received supportive comments from both immigrant and non-immigrant users. In this sense, immigrant users' participation on this social media platform sometimes resembled 'virtual community building' (Jackson, 2017; Sobré-Denton, 2016).

Expressing and reflecting on the experiences of related challenges can be used by consumers as coping strategies for dealing with various forms of challenges (Bruce and Banister, 2019; Dietrich *et al.*, 2017). This social media platform provides immigrant users with a social space in which they can reflect and communicate their experiences with other immigrant users who may share such experiences, and with non-immigrant users who are eager to know about life in Australia.

Additionally, the wellbeing outcome is also related to the other two acculturative outcomes (i.e., self-validating and ordinary experts) in the sense that they can result in positive psychological states. Fulmer et al. (2010) reported how the consistency between an individual's personality and a specific sociocultural setting (i.e. a person feels right in a cultural context) can lead to positive psychological outcomes and improved wellbeing. Similarly, our data shows when a sociocultural context is in line with an individual's achievements or leads to the recognition of them as experts, it can also result in positive wellbeing outcomes. For example, in a discussion thread labelled as "let's hear it from those who live in Australia", Roya (an immigrant user) actively and patiently replies all the questions about life in Australia, in a way that after a few posts, Roya becomes the main target of all the questions – questions that range from the cost of eating out in Australia to how to obtain driving license to Roya and her husband's salary. Her patience in providing detailed, 'expert' answers even surprises a couple of other users. For example:

> Ali (non-immigrant user): Why don't you collect all these posts and publish a travelogue – [you can title it as] step by step guidelines of living in Australia by Roya.

And,

> Vahid (non-immigrant user): Wow! You are really a patient person!

For Roya, however, participating in these discussions provides her with the opportunity to talk about her experiences and express her feelings about her life in Australia – for example, through saying "*the honeymoon stage of immigration is over for us and we are now living in the bitter-moon stage!*" Additionally, she is being distinguished and appreciated as an expert of everyday life in Australia by other users, which can also lead to the positive psychological wellbeing.

5. Discussion

This section discusses how the findings of this study address the research questions. It also presents the contributions and implications of the findings, along with the study's limitations and future research directions.

The rapidly increasing intercultural communications due to technological innovation and globalisation processes are reflected in consumers' agency and behaviour (Askegaard *et al.*, 2009; Veresiu and Giesler, 2018). How these intercultural communications in social media influence acculturative processes for immigrant consumers is a question that has largely remained unexplored by previous research (Kizgin *et al.*, 2020; Yen and Dey 2019), especially when it comes to communicating with the home country. This paper addresses this gap in the literature by investigating the following research questions: 1) How do online interactions between Iranian immigrants and non-immigrants lead to the formation of acculturative processes?, and 2) What are the outcomes of these acculturative processes for immigrant users?

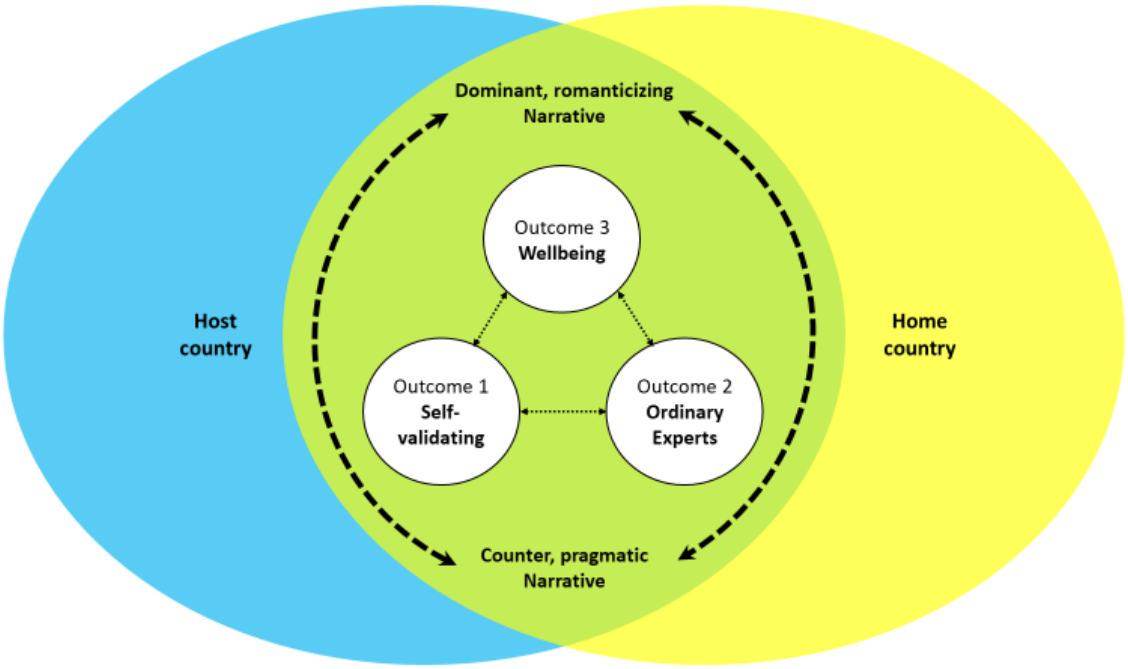
As illustrated in Figure 1 below, the findings of this study underscore the formation, circulation and operation of two competitive, collective narratives (i.e., dominant and counter narratives) through which different representations of the home and host countries, and migrating from home to host, are produced. These two narratives are formed as the result of

the interactions amongst immigrant and non-immigrant users in this platform. This study's findings indicate that these collective narratives come into play as acculturative processes for immigrant users in their relationships with the home country through social media. In other words, the notions of the home and host countries and the idea of migrating from home to host are constructed within this unique social context, and in relation to the dominant and counter narratives.

The netnographic data also produced three situational, dynamic and related acculturative outcomes amongst immigrant users, resulting from their interactions with the dominant and counter narratives. These acculturative outcomes are 1) self-validation, 2) ordinary experts, and 3) wellbeing, as represented in Figure 1.

On the one hand, these acculturative outcomes are the result of immigrant users' interactions within the unique social context that is constructed on the social media platform (shown by the green space in Figure 1), especially in relation to the concepts of the home and host countries and immigration within the two competing, collective narratives. On the other hand, these outcomes can also guide better understanding of immigrant users' motivations for participating in the discussion threads with non-immigrant users. For example, in the case of the self-validating outcome, as highlighted in the findings section, participation in the discussions with non-immigrant users provided immigrant users with an upward social mobility emanated from the association between immigration and success in the dominant narrative. These motivational factors are in addition to the other factors that encourage immigrant users to interact on this platform, especially in relation to other immigrant users (e.g., what kind of recreational activities can be done on a weekend in Sydney, what to do in a specific legal situation, and other possible forms of community support).

Figure 1 The dynamic acculturation process of immigrant users in social media.



Source: Developed in this study

The findings highlight the dynamic and situational nature of these acculturative outcomes, which is in line with previous consumer acculturation research (e.g., Askegaard *et al.*, 2005; Peñaloza, 2018). However, this study's findings show that the acculturative outcomes in social media can be even more instable, dynamic and fluid. In this study, this fluidity and instability resulted from the clash of the two collective narratives within the various discussion threads (please see section 4.1.2). This can be explained through the differences in social, spatial and temporal properties of the offline and online spaces, which provide social media users with the opportunity to actively produce cultural meaning in their own right (Askegaard *et al.*, 2009; Belk, 2013). However, it is important to consider that this reflexivity does not result from a volitional type of agency (Thompson *et al.*, 2018). Rather, as discussed earlier, users' agency is being framed by the discursively constructed notions of the home, host and migration on the social media platform.

Theoretical contributions

The findings of this study extend the boundaries of consumer acculturation research by highlighting how communicating with the home country through a social media platform can influence acculturation processes. Whilst previous consumer acculturation studies have limited the home-culture focus to ethnic community perspectives (e.g., Cruz and Buchanan-Oliver, 2020; Luedicke, 2015), or restricted the use of social media to the influence of the host society (e.g. Li *et al.*, 2019; Mitra and Evansluong, 2019), the findings of this study extend our understanding of the acculturative processes, particularly in relation to the inclusion of the home-country perspective.

Influenced by Berry's (1980) theorisation of acculturation, in understanding acculturative processes, previous consumer acculturation research is primarily focused on the host culture as the force/agent of assimilation and home culture as a force/agent of maintaining ethnic values and identity. However, the findings of this study show how interacting with the home culture through social media can result in more nuanced and complicated acculturative processes. Most importantly, the findings highlight that interacting with the home country can also serve as an agent of assimilation through romanticizing the host country (i.e. Australia) as a utopia that its values and ways of being are regarded as superior to the ones at the home country (i.e. Iran). This is a common theme produced and circulated in what we identified as the dominant collective narrative in the investigated social media platform.

Additionally, this study contributes to the consumer acculturation literature by moving away from the traditional acculturative outcomes. When it comes to the investigation of acculturative outcomes, previous studies directly or indirectly repeat Berry's (1980) traditional classification of acculturation outcomes; namely, assimilation, separation, marginalisation and integration (c.f. Askegaard *et al.*, 2005; Khan *et al.*, 2018; Peñaloza,

2018). This approach to conceptualising acculturative outcomes is restricted to the dichotomy of the home and host cultures, and whether and to what extent, immigrants are involved with these two cultural orientations. The use of Berry's (1980) outcomes is also the case in studies that investigated consumer acculturation through social media. For example, Dey *et al.* (2020) used a similar approach by suggesting digital integration, separation and deprivation as acculturative outcomes. However, the findings of this study show that, if we consider the relationship with the home country through social media, these outcomes may take different forms that are not necessarily determined by the extent to which immigrants are involved with these two cultural orientations (i.e. the home and host cultures). Instead, the findings of this paper underscored that the acculturative outcomes can be determined as the result of the specific socio-spatial dynamics that are created in a social space (in this case, the dominant and counter narratives) on this particular social media platform that enables immigrant users to communicate with the home country.

In other words, the findings of our study show that the conceptualisation of acculturative outcomes, especially in an online setting, do not necessarily have to adhere to previous conceptualisations that are primarily investigated and theorised in the offline world. As the findings of our study suggest, the special social context in the investigated platform, especially in relation to immigrant users' interaction with non-migrant users in the home country, can lead to three unique acculturative outcomes.

The findings of this study also underscore social media's capabilities for influencing wellbeing outcomes for immigrant users. The findings highlight that the social and spatial properties of the investigated social media platform place immigrant users in a storytelling role through which they reflect on their experiences of living in Australia. Previous studies have highlighted the wellbeing outcomes of sharing experiences of related challenges (Bruce and Banister, 2019) and expressing and reflecting on these experiences (Dietrich *et al.*, 2017).

Therefore, beyond its self- and taste-expressive functioning, such storytelling practices in social media interactions provide immigrant users with a counter-site (i.e., an alternative space) to escape the power relations in their offline social interactions. Such interactions are subtle, discursively constructed power relations (Foucault, 1980) that arise from the creation and circulation of anti-immigration and xenophobic discourses in the socio-political context of immigration countries (Benveniste *et al.*, 2016).

This finding of wellbeing as an outcome can be discussed regarding a paradoxical situation related to immigrants' social mobility. Whilst international migration can lead to downward social mobility in the host society because of insufficient social, cultural and economic capital (Massey et al., 1993, Üstüner and Holt, 2007), interacting within a social context where migration is portrayed as a (positive) value provides immigrant users with a form of social status and temporary upward social mobility. In this sense, social media performs as a heterotopic space, a counter-site, wherein 'the real site' (i.e., the offline world) is 'represented, contested and inverted' (Foucault, 1986, p. 24) by immigrant users. In other words, immigrant users can escape the undermining power relations in the offline world through their social media interaction with the home country. This is best shown in immigrant users' reflection and stories about the challenges associated with immigration and being away from home.

Coping with the consequences of immigration as a lifestyle discontinuity (Thompson *et al.*, 2018), identity challenges and undermined social, cultural and economic capital (Üstüner and Holt, 2007) through social media can take on different forms. Previous consumer acculturation studies have shown how immigrants use nostalgic feelings and consumption as a strategy to cope with such difficulties and to help negotiate tensions in the context of immigration (Kreuzer *et al.*, 2018; Stamboli-Rodriguez and Visconti, 2012). Our

findings also show how nostalgia is used by immigrant users in a social media context to resist these difficulties.

Managerial implications

The findings arising from this study offer important insights for ethnic marketing practice, policy makers and NGOs (non-governmental organisations). Social media, as an important and effective means of communication, can be adopted by these various organisations to effectively target their potential customers. For example, brands can advertise on web-based forums, independent websites and social media platforms (such as Facebook and Instagram) to target potential immigrants to sell relevant products (e.g., home furnishings, consumer electronics, appliances) and services (e.g., banking, telecommunications, insurances, employment) when they are planning and/or are arriving in the host country. This finding is especially important for service providers considering that a significant part of the discussions on the investigated platform are about the regulatory and cultural aspects of services such as banking, legal procedures, healthcare and recreational and touristic activities. This is primarily due to the higher levels of ambiguity and uncertainty resulted from, for example, sociocultural or regulatory/legal aspects of a servicescape (Rosenbaum and Montoya, 2007; Rosenbaum et al., 2017), compared to more tangible, standardised products.

Additionally, the findings of this study underscore the importance of word of mouth (WOM) in ethnic marketing communications. This is especially relevant to our findings, 'ordinary expert' acculturative outcome. These immigrant users are regarded as the 'experts' of everyday life in Australia, producing and distributing marketing information on this social media platform – a role that sometimes resembles to influencers on social media in spreading the marketing buzz. Immigrant users as ordinary experts in an online platform highlights the importance of e-WOM in ethnic communities. These findings inform ethnic marketing

practice that is especially important in a multicultural country such as Australia, where large and small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs) target ethnic markets (Collins and Low, 2010).

The research findings also suggest social media can be adopted by policy makers to engage with potential immigrants even before migration takes place. For example, governments may seek to target and better appeal to potential immigrants to attract desirable applicants and to reduce the potential for cognitive dissonance in recent arrivals through reinforcing the benefits of life in the host country and/or where to seek assistance for government (e.g., immigration and consumer protection public agencies), NGO and private-sector (e.g., immigration advice and rights centres, ethnic-community-based services and support) services. Equally, these bodies can use social media to facilitate acculturation with the host country and smooth the process of adapting to a new way of daily life and enabling opportunities for societal awareness and role readiness in the marketplace. This is especially relevant in relation to the findings of this study on the wellbeing benefits of social media interactions for both immigrant and non-immigrant users, which could be used in settlement and integration policies to overcome vulnerability and increase inclusion in the marketplace.

The findings of this study also inform policy makers and NGOs on the important role social media can play in improving the wellbeing of both ethnic minorities and immigrants through self-expressive and storytelling activities and community-building potentialities. An avenue for facilitating immigrants' use of social media could be paying more attention to digital deprivation amongst immigrants (Kizgin *et al.*, 2020), especially in the case of those who were raised before the digital-technology revolution (i.e., non-digital immigrants). Such efforts could support new immigrants to more quickly adapt to their sociocultural environment and help reduce stress and anxiety if they begin to feel isolated (Berry, 2006; Luedicke, 2011).

Limitations and future directions

The findings of this study should be considered in light of its limitations, which also provide avenues for future research. One limitation of this study arises from lack of data on the offline experiences of users, the presence of which could have enabled this study to develop a better picture of the acculturation process in social media and how it is reflected in users' offline experiences. Accordingly, one suggestion for future research is to collect data from both online and offline spheres to create a more comprehensive description of acculturation processes in social media and how this is reflected in the offline world.

Although the findings of this research shed new light on the issue of users' reflexivity and agency, the importance of social media in cultural change and identity construction warrants further research on how such agency is patterned in social media across its various forms and contexts. There is also a need for studies that specifically focus on sociocultural processes in social media and how these facilitate and/or impede a user's agency in both the online and offline realms (c.f. Askegaard and Linnet, 2011). This is especially important considering that most of the theories and concepts used in social media studies are borrowed from the offline world. This also necessitates the need for theoretical and conceptual development emanating from exploring and examining social media interactions (Belk, 2013; Kent and Li, 2020).

Another important direction for future research can be investigating the outcomes of these acculturative processes amongst 'non-immigrant' users on such social media contexts – i.e., those users that are planning for migration and participate in such platforms in order to develop a better insight about 'their future home'.

In conclusion, we invite researchers to examine and extend the findings of this study in other sociocultural contexts in order to confirm and expand the robustness and generalisability of the findings, especially on other social media platforms.

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