

## REVIEW | SPECIAL ISSUE: ACCULTURATION REIMAGINED

# Intercultural contact in the digital age: A review of emerging research on digitally mediated acculturation

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Traditionally, intercultural contact has been constrained by physical proximity, but increased access to and use of digital technologies has broken down barriers and resulted in intercultural relations being increasingly digitally mediated. Technology has changed the acculturation experiences and outcomes of migrants, refugees, and international students who can access huge amounts of information throughout their migration journeys, maintain near-synchronous contact with their country of origin regardless of their location, and connect to individuals and groups both within and outside of the settlement culture. There is growing literature on the effects of social media on cultural adaptation and the interactions of diaspora communities online, yet there is a dearth of research that seeks to integrate this evidence into the broader acculturation literature. This narrative review addresses this gap, exploring three cases of digitally mediated acculturation among distinct migrant groups and types of digital technology: (1) mobile phones in refugee and asylum seekers' migration journeys, (2) social media and the acculturative adjustment of international students, and (3) digital diasporas and the experiences of migrant groups. The findings not only highlight the impact of digital technologies on migrants' acculturation experiences and adaptive outcomes but also suggest critical questions and possibilities for future acculturation research.

**Keywords:** acculturation, migrants, digital diaspora, digital technology, mobile phones, social media

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Acculturation has been broadly defined as the changes that occur when different cultural groups come into contact (Redfield et al., 1936), with the dominant model of acculturative processes for immigrants characterised by two dimensions: the preservation of cultural heritage and the engagement with, or adoption of the culture of the settler society (Berry, 1997; Berry & Sam, 2016). Research in this area is particularly concerned with the adaptive outcomes of acculturation, broadly classified into psychological, sociocultural, and intercultural adaptation (Berry & Sam, 2016). Within this corpus of research, acculturation theories, models, frameworks and outcomes (e.g., Berry, 1997, 2005; Ward, 2001; Ward & Kennedy, 1999; Ward & Geeraert, 2016) have historically been conceptualised in the realm of the physical. This is analogous to what Ferguson and colleagues refer to as proximal acculturation, where the nature of cultural contact is face-to-face, direct and long-term (Adams et al., 2021; Ferguson & Bornstein, 2012). However, in our contemporary globalised world, where social and personal life is often digitally facilitated, it could be argued that individuals and groups from different cultures are equally, if not more, likely to come into contact with each other or with their cultural communities through technology.

Not only are digital technologies and the new media forms they have spawned transforming communication across cultures, mobile phones, the internet, and social media (among other technologies) have dramatically increased contact among geographically dispersed cultural groups and between individuals and groups from different cultures (Ponzañesi, 2020; Tsagarousianou & Retis, 2019). No longer limited primarily to face-to-face encounters, people can communicate, connect and engage with others regardless of geopolitical boundaries or physical distance. This phenomenon is aligned to the 'annihilation of space' and the 'death of distance' concepts

that emerged during the industrial era to illustrate the impacts of technologies on increasing the speed and mobility of connections between people, goods, and services, terms which have now also come to mean the compression of physical distance and relational proximity due to cyberspace (Cairncross, 1997; Litvine, 2022; Tranos & Nijkamp, 2013). It is no longer accurate to characterise digitally mediated intercultural interactions as inherently different from proximal acculturation due to the affordances of modern technologies. Digital intercultural contact can be direct (whether synchronous or asynchronous), can be long-term, and co-presence is becoming more analogous to face-to-face interactions with advances in interactive technologies and immersive realities (Shkurko, 2022). In this narrative review, therefore, we examine and synthesise emerging research cases that act as exemplars for the distinct ways in which digital technologies are transforming acculturation processes for different migrant groups. We start by outlining the research at the intersection of cyberspace and acculturation to explicate the concept of digitally mediated acculturation. Then we provide an overview of the three exemplars (i.e., mobile phones in refugee and asylum seeker journeys, social media for international students, and digital diaspora among migrants) where digital mediation is reshaping cultural contact within and between groups, challenging traditional acculturation frameworks and creating new risks and opportunities for acculturative adjustment, identity negotiation, and community formation.

### 1.1 Cyberspace and Acculturation

Although cyberspace is not a tangible space in the traditional sense, it is recognised as a legitimate place that has powerful effects on affect, behaviour and cognition, where people create a sense of meaning, belonging, and identity (Floridi, 2015; Wellman et al., 2001). To put this into perspective, there are currently 5.35 billion people connected to the Internet, and this number is expected to increase to 7.9 billion by

2029 (International Telecommunications Unit, 2023). Approximately 66% of the world's population is online, although this proportion ranges from 26% in low-income economies to 92% in high-income economies (International Telecommunications Unit, 2023). The majority (97.7%) of adult internet users own a smartphone and use social media (92.7%) with an average of 6.5 hours per day spent online, of which around 3.75 hours are spent on a mobile device, and nearly 2.5 hours on social media (Kemp, 2024). The growth and ubiquity of internet-connected devices have significantly impacted all aspects of social, economic, and political life. Thus, there is little doubt that as the world becomes more complex and digitally connected, our models for understanding intercultural contact and acculturation need to better represent self-presentation, social interactions, and psychological outcomes in the context of cyberspace.

Notably, emerging research highlights the critical importance of the internet in influencing patterns and outcomes of migration. Indeed, digital technologies are key in tracking global migration movements and predicting streams and flows of people within countries and across borders (Sîrbu et al., 2021). Research also finds that internet penetration impacts migration intentions, whereby in countries with higher proportions of internet users and higher levels of mobile internet access, greater numbers of people have aspirations and plans to migrate (Adema et al., 2021; Pesando et al., 2021). Some reasons for this are suggested to be that increased access to information about economic and social life in the destination country reduces the uncertainties associated with migration and that ease of online communication with diasporic communities in the settlement country creates extended support and information networks for potential migrants (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Dekker et al., 2016; Kotyrlo, 2020). Additionally, new forms of media have allowed for social imaginaries of a destination to be disseminated in a way that affects

the decision to migrate. One way that this occurs is via (overly) optimistic narratives of life and economic opportunities in the settlement country that are shared on social media (Coletto & Fullin, 2019).

Beyond affecting migration decision-making, digital technologies offer greater opportunities for people who have migrated to connect and communicate with those who remain in the country of origin. Traditionally migrants have been limited by the amount of information that could be conveyed via distal social networks, and the inaccessibility of such communication channels both constrained the maintenance of transnational ties and necessitated the forging of new links within the settlement society, either with co-ethnic or co-migrant communities, or with the majority society. This technological-historical pattern of migration, in which movements of people resulted in reduced opportunities for connection to the country of origin and where resources for adjustment were predominantly in physical form or face-to-face, was critical to the context in which traditional models and theories of acculturation were developed (e.g., Berry, 1974; Ward, 2001). However, since then, there has been an exponential increase in the ability to engage in low-cost transnational communication and a proliferation of accessible information sources; from the rise of phone cards which allowed for cheap international calls, to search engines and extensive availability of information sources, to voice-over-internet-protocol (VOIP) services, and now to direct messaging and social media that permit cost minimal communication for most people with an internet connection and mobile phone.

Social media platforms, in particular, have allowed the majority of migrants to be in near synchronous and sustained contact with their heritage culture, or indeed other cultures, through individualised channels such as text and voice messages, via active and passive participation in large-scale groups on social media,

and through prosumption (the ability to concurrently be both a producer and consumer of new media). However, social media has also been found to enable sociocultural and psychological adjustment by forging new connections, language learning, and gaining knowledge about the settlement culture (e.g., Bolhuis & Van Wijk, 2021; Li & Peng, 2019). Critically, digital technologies have provided diverse ethnic communities with relatively cheap, accessible and flexible forms of connection to social networks, thus reducing the psychological and socio-cultural burden of cultural adaptation (Kotylo, 2020).

## 1.2 Digitally Mediated Acculturation

As Sam and Ward (2021, p. 32) emphasise, "current conditions arising from massive social, political and technological changes in a globalised world need to be taken into account in our evolving theory and research," implying that new conceptualisations and measures of acculturation are needed that reflect current socio-political and technological changes. This is echoed by van der Zee and van Oudenhoven (2022, p. 120), who suggest that "demographic and technological developments require a more dynamic approach to acculturation," both because of the increased geographical proximity of many different cultural groups and because of the increased opportunities for virtual contact. In this paper, we follow Mitra and Evansluong's (2019) contention that technological advances provide new spaces for acculturation studies but that research in this area remains sparse and fragmented.

Notably, there is a growing literature that suggests digital technologies affect acculturation processes and outcomes in a myriad of ways, with particular emphasis on the associations between social media and acculturation (e.g., Akter et al., 2024). However, to the authors' knowledge, there have been no specific attempts to synthesise research on *digitally mediated acculturation*, defined here as the broad range of ways that digital technologies

impact the process and/or outcomes of acculturation for migrant groups. Importantly, we suggest that digitally mediated acculturation does not replace traditional face-to-face acculturation but takes place concurrently and is deeply embedded into processes of adjustment and adaptation for migrants who must navigate an increasingly complex context comprised of online and offline information sources, relationships, and opportunities for self-expression.

Therefore, while migrants have historically been considered to negotiate the heritage and settlement cultures in physical contact within acculturation, there is now a need to account for the additional dimension of cyberspace. This also necessitates an understanding of geographically proximal and distal locations of cultural communities. For instance, an online community can consist of co-ethnics and majority members living in the settlement country who are also part of an in-person community, could be among known or unknown ethnic group members who are widely geographically dispersed, or (more likely) could be some mixture of these relationships. Beyond conceptual challenges, new technological realities come with benefits and drawbacks for those undergoing acculturation. As such, there is a need to include a more nuanced exploration of the processes and outcomes of acculturation in our digitally interconnected world. In the next sections, we review and summarise emerging research in this area. Specifically, to guide the synthesis of a broad, multidisciplinary, and relatively fragmented literature, three distinct migrant groups were examined and the most prevalent issues at the intersection of acculturation and digital technologies were selected for review. This approach not only allows for broad coverage of the topic, but also an in-depth exploration of specific and critical current issues concerning digitally mediated acculturation. The cases selected for review are: (1) mobile phones in refugee and asylum seekers' migration journeys, (2) social media and the

acculturative adjustment of international students, and (3) digital diasporas and the experiences of migrant groups. Each of these areas is discussed and their potential influence on acculturation processes and outcomes are described to provide insights into how to advance the field and establish a more robust literature on digitally mediated acculturation.

### 1.3 Mobile Phones and Forced Migrants

There is now a growing literature indicating that mobile phones offer distinct affordances to enhance the psychological adjustment and sociocultural adaptation of forced migrants (i.e. refugees and asylum seekers) via their portability, affordability, availability, and ease of use (Mancini et al., 2019; Moran, 2023; Stremlau & Tsalapatanis, 2022). Importantly, as mobile technology has evolved, capabilities such as online browsing, data storage, mobile banking, and GPS navigation meet some of the unique challenges forced migrants face, such as navigating unfamiliar environments, accessing critical (often life-saving) information and services, and maintaining communication under precarious circumstances (Miellet, 2021). The portability and ease of use of smartphones, in particular, make them significant in times of crisis, as they are compact, multi-functional tools that can be easily carried and used in a variety of situations. Studies have found that smartphones aid in journey planning and are essential tools for maintaining safety, route planning, saving and sharing documents, sending and receiving money, accessing information and services, and translation (Epstein et al., 2018).

Notably, research in refugee camps finds that smartphones form a critical part of an informal economy in that they are bought, sold, exchanged, bartered, and gifted, as well as being central to social dynamics and community building through the sharing of devices and SIMs (Mancini et al., 2019). This reflects the immense value of mobile devices during protracted displacement, with some research

finding that the prospect of losing or damaging one's mobile phone raised existential and physical insecurities associated with a loss of safety, connection and identity among refugees (Gillespie et al., 2018; Gough & Gough, 2019).

During resettlement, mobile phones continue to play a critical role for refugees, with two recent research reviews showing that mobile phones create opportunities to develop and maintain social capital and provide access to information and resources for routine activities (e.g., transportation, banking, social services, and even resettlement-specific apps) in new cultural contexts (Alencar, 2020; Mancini et al., 2019). Broadly speaking, the affordances of mobile phones can enhance the capacity to navigate novel and challenging contexts, effectively offering sources of support and information that promote positive psychological and social outcomes throughout refugee journeys. More specifically and in relation to cross-cultural resettlement and psychological adaptation, both bonding and bridging social capital (which can be increased through the use of mobile phones) have been shown to relate to provision of social and practical support and a greater sense of belonging and hope among refugees (Ziersch et al., 2023). At the same time, the sociocultural competencies of forced migrants are increased as they navigate the digital sources of information, including via mobile phones, and this has been identified as a critical component of the resettlement process (Abood et al., 2023).

Mansour's (2018) study with displaced Syrians showed that mobile phones were the main device used to search for support services and to access information concerning refugee rights and obligations, thus being mechanisms for empowerment; however, the key focus of the research to date has been the role mobile phones play in helping refugees maintain social connections with their friends and family left behind and create new connections within the settlement society (e.g., Alencar, 2020; Shah et

al., 2019). An intervention project among resettled refugee women in Australia found that providing free mobile phones and recharge vouchers allowed participants to be connected to their families and to create wider support networks that assisted them in accessing healthcare and other settlement services with greater ease (Liamputpong et al., 2016; Woltersheim et al., 2017). A further study found that mobile phones enabled refugee communities to share information and support, which had positive implications for both the recipient and the sharer and increased solidarity and belonging in the community (Canevez et al., 2022). These findings highlight that the connectedness afforded by mobile phones is crucial for a positive acculturation experience as it enables refugees to share information, support one another, and access opportunities that might otherwise be inaccessible.

While smartphones provide numerous advantages, they also present risks of exploitation and surveillance, both of which are exacerbated by cybersecurity issues such as lack of encryption, inadequate privacy mechanisms, and insufficient authentication measures (Alencar et al., 2019; Gillespie et al., 2018; Mancini et al., 2019). Notably, research has found that mobile phones may be a vector for fraud, theft, and extortion or tracking, monitoring and control by government officials both from the country forced migrants are fleeing from as well as within the resettlement country where data on phones can be used to verify (or refute) identity and asylum claims (Bolhuis & Van Wijk, 2021; Wall et al., 2017). Additionally, smartphones may impose significant pressures to stay connected. They can lead to feelings of anxiety and stress, as refugees may feel compelled to navigate complex digital landscapes, manage multiple social media platforms, and maintain contact with family and friends both in the settlement country and back home, notably among those who rely on their remittances (Awad & Tossell, 2021). Moreover, some research suggests that

communication with separated family members through digital technology is mentally and emotionally difficult and may lead to the selective use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to hide adversities from families (Shah et al., 2019). As highlighted in a study by Cascone and Bonini (2024), digital disconnection – or the right to intentionally limit one's digital connectivity and media use – is often not viable for forced migrants.

Aside from the risks and benefits of mobile phones, it is also important to highlight their affordances in enabling digital self-representation and agency of vulnerable communities. Research finds that smartphones, with their storage capacity, high-quality cameras and connection to social media, often serve as personal archives that enable forced migrants to document their experiences and allow for both self-directed and research-oriented narrations of migration journeys and outcomes in their voice (Fernandes et al., 2023; Georgiou & Leurs, 2022). Rae et al. (2018) label the efforts of forced migrants to construct and disseminate their stories online as removed from the control and shaping of others as 'digital witnessing' or representing the lived experiences of human rights abuses and injustices faced. However, the prevalence of social media connection enabled by smartphones can also expose forced migrants to online hate and misinformation about their communities, which can hinder their ability to navigate new social environments and access vital resources as well as erode trust, feelings of safety, and wellbeing (Al-damen, 2023; Arunasalam et al., 2024).

This duality of smartphones in acculturation processes—serving as a tool facilitating adjustment and enabling empowerment as well as a source of risk and pressure—illustrates the complex relationship between technology and the experiences of displaced people. Yet, given the increasing centrality of mobile devices in daily life, acculturation research must seek to understand how they affect forced migrants'

interactions, behaviours, and access to resources, especially as these devices are central in the lives of refugees and asylum seekers. In an age where mobile technology is pervasive, neglecting to consider these devices in the acculturation process risks overlooking critical elements that can either aid or hinder experiences of adjustment.

#### 1.4 Social Media and International Students

Social media broadly refers to applications that enable “the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61), with Social Networking Sites (SNSs) being the sub-category specifically oriented towards relationship building such that users construct a profile, connect with other users, and share content either publicly or privately (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). A large body of research has established that social media use is elevated among young adults and is often used to meet normative developmental needs such as social validation, self-expression, and relationship building. However, this research also indicates that not all social media use has positive outcomes (Best et al., 2014). Thus, the focus of research on social media use among international students is understandable, as they tend to be relatively young, and having left their established social networks in their home countries, find themselves in a new environment where they need to rebuild their support systems. Consequently, international students are more likely than local students to rely on social media and online resources to meet their needs for connection and communication, especially during the initial stages of adjustment (Chang et al., 2022).

Thus far, four published literature reviews on international students’ use of social media have been undertaken. These have examined social media and information-seeking (Hamid et al., 2016); the personal and educational uses of social media (Sleeman et al., 2016); and the relationships between social media use, coping, acculturation processes and psychological outcomes (Pang & Wang, 2020), with the most

recent review attempting to consolidate earlier material (Zhou & Yin, 2024). While each of these reviews offers unique perspectives, they also share common foci on the positive and negative impacts of social media on cultural knowledge acquisition and social capital development and maintenance, defined as the resources embedded in social networks that can be accessed and utilised, in this case for acculturative adjustment (see Doucerain et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2013). Notably, findings suggest that social media use is associated with bonding social capital, connections within a close-knit group or community characterised by strong ties (i.e., home culture communities of close friends and family,) as well as bridging social capital, the resources available from heterogeneous social networks predominantly characterised by weak ties (i.e., host nationals and other international students in the settlement country). Broader research finds that social capital facilitates integration, which has been shown to be the most adaptive acculturation strategy for international students (Ozer, 2015). Therefore, by utilising distinct social media platforms and/or different types of social capital, international students can acquire resources (informational, social, academic, and psychological) from various sources to support their adaptation (Gaitán-Aguilar et al., 2022; Hofhuis et al., 2023; Rui & Wang, 2015).

Research finds that bonding social capital derived from the maintenance of strong ties to family and friends in the home country can reduce acculturative stress, especially during the early stages of adjustment (Park et al., 2014; Sandel, 2014; Yu & Leung, 2024). This positive effect of social media use arises from the proximal nature of the virtual social support provided by known others along with sharing information, connecting with cultural values, and constructing a narrative of one’s sojourn and experiences (Alamri, 2018; Billedo et al., 2020). Social media use also enables passive monitoring of and sharing with others in a way that does not require a high degree of effort or

intentionality but provides an 'ambient' awareness of being deeply interconnected or a sense of presence that, in turn, contributes to psychological well-being (Komito, 2011). However, not all online social networks offer the same benefits, with research among Chinese international students finding that online social networks from the home country were more impactful on psychological disturbance than in-person social networks or online ethnic networks, but that in-person and online ethnic networks were more impactful on social difficulties (i.e., leading to low sociocultural adaptation; Ye, 2006).

A key research finding is that international students who engage more with ethnic social media tend to show stronger ethnic cultural identification, which is a critical component of integration (e.g., Li & Tsai, 2015; Park et al., 2014). However, it has also been found that international students who spend an extensive amount of time connecting with their home country via social media may have higher acculturative stress, a greater degree of homesickness, enhanced feelings of loneliness or alienation, and less motivation for sociocultural adaptation (Croucher & Rahmani, 2015; Guo et al., 2014; Hendrickson et al., 2011; Hofhuis et al., 2019). Sleeman and colleagues (2016) suggest that the potential negative effects of primarily engaging with ethnic social media may be due to the creation of virtual boundaries that act to separate or exclude international students from engaging with the host culture. They also suggest, however, that social media can allow for hybrid spaces where home and host country connections can be negotiated and work together to promote adjustment. The research of Hofhuis et al. (2019) reinforces this finding showing that social support from both home and host country through social media is uniquely beneficial for decreasing international students' acculturative stress and supporting well-being.

The available research has found various

positive associations between host country social media usage and acculturative outcomes, including host culture language proficiency, academic engagement, cultural learning, and psychological well-being (Hofhuis et al., 2023; Park et al., 2014; Sandel, 2014). Effectively, host culture social media can increase bridging social capital which, in turn, allows for the development of new relationships and access to information. Similar results have been found for social media among international students and their co-ethnic communities in the host country (international student or otherwise). Specifically, it has been found that online communities of individuals with lived experience in the host country can assist international students in meeting information needs and supporting sociocultural adjustment, and while new connections may be established online, these often transition into meaningful in-person relationships (Cao et al., 2024; Chen & Yang, 2015). In their research with migrant youth in Hong Kong, Lai and Cai (2023) found that social media interactions with strong ties facilitated positive psychological adaptation. In contrast, weak tie interactions with people from the host culture can facilitate knowledge acquisition, but these interactions also run the risk of exposure to prejudice or discrimination, leading to negative perceptions about the host society. Similar results are likely true for international students' acculturation experiences.

The existing research has generally found positive effects of social media on international students' acculturation outcomes, which is reassuring in the current global context of pervasive use and centrality of these media in everyday life. Nonetheless, recent research by Pang and colleagues (2023, 2024) has raised concerns about the potential negative effects of excessive social media use among international students, as this may be driven by fear of missing out and negative social comparison, which can result in greater anxiety and indirectly impact international students' academic performance. Furthermore, the literature has only recently

begun to examine the longitudinal and bidirectional relationships between social media use and acculturation. Research among international students in China found host culture social media use was associated with greater academic and social engagement behaviours over time (Cao et al., 2024), and two studies with international students in Europe found that it was longitudinally associated with reduced homesickness and greater psychological adaptation (Billedo et al., 2020; Gaitán-Aguilar et al., 2022). As such, much more research is needed to examine how, why, and which social media platforms influence international students' acculturation outcomes and whether these effects differ across host national contexts and over time.

### 1.5 Digital Diasporas and Migrant Communities

The term diaspora has a long and contentious history but was recently explicitly defined by Grossman (2019, p. 1267) through a critical synthesis of the literature as "a transnational community whose members (or their ancestors) emigrated or were dispersed from their original homeland but remain oriented to it and preserve a group identity." The concept of transnationalism is critical to this definition as it refers to people of immigrant background or ancestry who maintain connections with and are socially embedded in both their ethnic heritage and settlement countries, as well as with members of their ethnocultural group who are dispersed elsewhere (Brubaker, 2017; Van Oudenhoven & Ward, 2013). Diaspora communities, by definition, live outside of their homeland but voluntarily preserve and develop material and symbolic ties to their cultural groups, and, as such, occupy an essential social and economic space due to their connections, identities, and allegiances across countries (Arifat, 2022; Grossman, 2019). Notably, these communities can be very influential in their home countries due to the provision of remittances, support, activism, and political engagement, all of which have implications for

peacebuilding as well as for conflict exacerbation (Brinkerhoff, 2011; Quinsaat, 2018; Toivanen & Baser, 2020).

Technological advancements that contribute to diasporic cohesion have enabled new configurations of engagement among geographically disparate ethnocultural communities, thus providing greater possibilities for and means of connection to a *digital diaspora* (Andersson, 2019). Although there is a lack of agreement on the definition, Ponzanesi (2020, p. 987) suggests that the term digital diaspora is a "relational one that operates around the unfolding of new identity and virtual communities that are informed by new forms of communication that recalibrate and intensify patterns of mobility and hybridity." According to this conceptualisation, digital technologies enable the diaspora to coexist across contexts, effectively reconfiguring the notion of a static community and allowing for a technologically mediated reimagining of the self and one's cultural group (Candidatu & Ponzanesi, 2022; Ponzanesi, 2020; Tsagarousianou & Retis, 2019). Therefore, it has been suggested that belonging to and identifying with one's ethnocultural group has become a flexible and dynamic process of (mostly) digitally mediated interactions with those who remain in the homeland, the ethnocultural community in the society of settlement, and the global ethnocultural diaspora of those living outside of the homeland (Andersson, 2019; Ponzanesi, 2020). As such, digital diaspora can be seen as a mechanism by which those who reside outside their home countries intentionally engage with, self-express, and enact forms of ethnocultural community as mediated by digital technologies and free from temporal and spatial constraints.

Importantly, the digital diaspora can potentially impact acculturation processes and outcomes. Similar to van Oudenhoven and Ward's (2013) suggestions concerning transnationalism, digital diasporas provide ethnocultural groups with a broader range of alternatives for life in their

new country and opportunities for influence in their homelands. For instance, the omnipresence, immediateness, and low barriers of connection enabled by diasporic collectives through the affordances of social media provide information and social capital, allowing for emerging solidarities based on needs and interests, making them key resources for the most vulnerable or disenfranchised migrant groups (Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2018; Ponzanesi, 2020). Social media also provide platforms for narrating, constructing, and recreating the stories and identities of marginalised ethnocultural groups. For example, emerging research has found that migrant groups use social media to share and discuss their experiences of acculturation among the digital diaspora, including sociocultural and psychological adjustment to the host country as well as experiences of perceived discrimination (Mitra & Evanslong, 2019; Velasquez & Montgomery, 2020). However, a more established body of research has focused on how homeland political participation is enacted across digital technologies by the diaspora, including on discussion boards (Brinkerhoff, 2012) and social media (Davidjants & Tiidenberg, 2022).

The research finds that digital diaspora is particularly salient in political matters where ethnocultural communities are geographically removed from their homelands but can consume, produce and spread vast amounts of information as community insiders. Notably, many essential behaviours of the diaspora such as activism, remittances, volunteering of specialist skills, and awareness raising can be facilitated (and now almost always are) through digital systems, platforms, and social media (Pirkkalainen & Abdile, 2009; Toivanen & Baser, 2020). However, digital technologies are also used as a means by which migrants can express their political dissidence (Aziz, 2024; Brinkerhoff, 2012; Chernobrov, 2022) and the digital diaspora is effectively mobilised to “coordinate resistance, publicize atrocities, and counter-propaganda and censorship” (Moss,

2018, p. 276). Research has found that social media can forge connections between communities, improve awareness, and mobilise support in times of conflict and tension. For instance, social media is used for fundraising and lobbying efforts, encouraging civic engagement and group solidarity among diasporic communities, and raising global awareness and influencing policy during active conflict and crisis around the world (Aziz, 2024; Chernobrov, 2022; Christensen, 2012; Kozachenko, 2021; Stuart, in press). Social media can also be used as a tool for peacebuilding by countering extremism and misinformation (for example through targeted interventions; Saleh et al., 2023), by providing alternate points of view, and providing real-time information and coverage of conflict events (Baytiyeh, 2019).

However, social media can similarly be used to spread disinformation, propaganda and hate speech, and even to rally groups to engage in violent activities (Witteborn, 2019). Social media does not simply provide communication avenues for digital diasporas; it is transforming how, when, and whether conflict manifests by facilitating vast information flows that can create online echo chambers and intensify perceptions of threat (Mercy Corps, 2019). Research has found that the digital diaspora may create distance (or separation) between migrant groups and the settlement society and serve to reinforce ‘long-distance nationalism’ or ‘political nostalgia’ (Ponzanesi, 2020; Schiller, 2005) that is out of sync with the realities of their homelands and their settlement countries. Similar to the findings of both previous sections, the associations between the digital diaspora and acculturation outcomes are complex and marred by tensions that illustrate the potential for both positive and negative effects. As this field is only just emerging, there remains much to be done by researchers to integrate these dynamic, flexible, and intangible online communities into traditional models of acculturation.

## 2. FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR DIGITALLY MEDIATED ACCULTURATION

In this review, three interrelated yet distinct areas of *digitally mediated acculturation* were reviewed illustrating the ways technology impacts the acculturation experiences of migrants. To explicate these findings and situate them within acculturation theory, Ward's ABC model (Affect, Behaviour, and Cognition: Ward, 2001; Ward & Szabó, 2019) is used as a theoretical framework. As such, in the following sections, future directions for research are outlined related to psychological adjustment and sociocultural adaptation as aligned with (1) stress and coping, focusing on the stressors introduced by digital technologies as well as the potential for technology to support coping during acculturation, (2) culture learning, exploring the acquisition of culture-specific skills and behaviours through digital platforms, and finally, (3) cultural orientations, illustrating how cyberspace influences the way one sees themselves, their cultural group, and other cultural groups.

### 2.1 Stress and Coping

As highlighted in the cases reviewed, the integration of digital technologies into the acculturation journeys of migrants introduces unique stressors as well as potentialities for coping that warrant further investigation. This review has shown that mobile phones and social media, while providing essential (and sometimes lifesaving) tools for navigation, communication, and accessing information, also present novel challenges such as cybersecurity threats, connectivity pressures, social skills deficits or social exclusion, and exposure to misinformation and online hate speech. Future research would benefit from exploring how stressors specific to digital technologies are associated and interact with acculturative stressors or vice versa and, in turn, how this is related to psychological adjustment and sociocultural adaptation. For example, there is a

growing body of research on digital stress, defined as "the stress and anxiety that accompanies notifications from and use of informational and communication technologies enabled through mobile and social media" (Steele et al., 2020; p. 16), including factors such as availability stress, approval stress, and connection overload (see Khetawat & Steele, 2023). These stressors are considered to be unavoidable due to the increasing prevalence of digital technology in everyday life, but their relationships with acculturation processes and outcomes are a major gap in the research. Additionally, there is a dearth of research examining how migrants cope with digital stressors in general, for example through limiting online connections or utilising privacy-enhancing technologies.

There is, however, emerging evidence concerning the use of digital technologies for coping with acculturative stress among migrant groups, especially regarding the access to and availability of online social support networks and the potential for these networks to buffer the negative effects of acculturative stress. Notably, the research with international students reviewed underscores the positive role social media plays in providing resources needed for cross-cultural adaptation (e.g., Mitra & Evanslong, 2019; Pang & Wang, 2020; Li & Peng, 2019). Other studies included indicate that engagement with home country social media and online social networks are used as a positive coping mechanism and are associated with increased psychological adjustment (Cemalcilar et al., 2005), but can also become maladaptive or ruminative, leading to homesickness, alienation, and reduced sociocultural adaptation (Hendrickson et al., 2011; Hofhuis et al., 2019; Hofhuis et al., 2023). Furthermore, emerging research highlights the potential for digital technologies to exacerbate or alleviate specific stressors, such as those related to discrimination and marginalisation. Notably, Yang and Tsai (2023) found coping with discrimination via direct messaging others and reading anti-discrimination was associated with increased

race-based traumatic stress, but this effect was mediated via social support, whereas posting and commenting about experiences both directly and indirectly (via social support) increased positive emotions. However, there remain many gaps and opportunities for integrating the research on acculturative stress and coping with digital technologies. Future research needs to take a nuanced approach to the integration of this literature, examining new stressors brought about through digitally mediated acculturation, the potential for digital technologies as both adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanisms, and the distinct manifestation of different types of acculturative stressors in cyberspace.

## 2.2 Culture Learning

The culture learning approach to acculturation emphasises the acquisition of culture-specific knowledge, skills, and behaviours (e.g., communication competence and intercultural effectiveness), and emerging research in this area indicates that digital technologies now play a critical role in this process for migrants. Notably, even the early acculturation literature highlighted the effects of settlement society mass media consumption on intercultural communication competence via language learning and knowledge of the host culture (e.g. Kim, 1977, 1979). More recent research on remote acculturation extended this work to examine cultural changes in values, attitudes, and behaviours brought about through indirect intercultural contact via media and technology (Ferguson & Bornstein, 2012; Ferguson et al., 2020). The importance of engagement with media for acculturation was reinforced in this review, with research underscoring the influence of online ethnic social media in bolstering heritage social networks and cultural identification as well as the use of settlement society social media in supporting language learning and sociocultural adaptation (e.g., Li & Tsai, 2015; Park et al., 2014). However, accessibility and exposure to cultural expressions via media are not the only ways that digital technologies

can influence cultural learning. This review highlights that the online context gives a huge variety of cultural learning opportunities through interactive social spaces with culturally similar and culturally diverse others where their forms of engagement are varied; both shallow and deep, public and private, textual and virtual.

A clear area for future research on cultural learning would be investigating the use of digital technologies as a tool for knowledge building concerning the settlement culture, including language acquisition, social norms, and cultural practices. Research reviewed here has already shown progress in this area, finding that diverse groups of migrants utilise information on social media to learn about and prepare for migration journeys as well as during settlement (e.g., Bolhuis & Van Wijk, 2021; Dekker et al., 2016). However, the sources of information accessed, their accuracy, and the potential for mismatched expectations remain under-researched. Notably, Coletto and Fullin (2019, p. 46) found that social media images of destination countries often create “over-simplified representations of the destination places and common imaginaries,” which may not accurately reflect true experiences or difficulties in migration. The literature on expectation-experience discrepancies during cross-cultural transition indicates that there is often a mismatch between expectations and the reality of migration and that these discrepancies are related to adaptive outcomes. Mähönen and Jasinskaja-Lahti (2013) found that migrants’ psychological well-being was low when they anticipated fewer sociocultural difficulties than they experienced; similarly, Geeraert et al. (2021) reported that large discrepancies between international students’ expectations and experiences of psychological and sociocultural adaptation were associated with greater post-migration stress and lower levels of life satisfaction when expectations were more positive than experiences. Future research should examine the role of digital technology in these processes and the

extent to which they may be shaping migrant expectations. Also, there is an emerging literature that was included here, which examines beliefs in and sharing of migration related misinformation via digital technology, both among migrants as well as members of settlement societies concerning migration (Dekker et al., 2016; Witteborn, 2019). The spread of damaging, malicious, or harmful content concerning migration and its influence on undermining intercultural competence or promoting negative acculturation outcomes is a critical area for further investigation and potential intervention.

Finally, although this was not a key area highlighted by this review, research should also explore the role of digital technologies in facilitating both informal and formal cultural learning such as through virtual language exchange programs, online cultural orientation sessions, and social media groups dedicated to cultural learning. A growing body of research concerning online intercultural exchange and foreign language learning, in particular, shows promise for the development of intercultural and social competence among diverse learners (see Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016). Other research has begun to explore the possibilities of immersive realities, such as augmented and virtual realities, and finds that it can be a powerful tool to support embodied and autonomous intercultural and language learning experiences (e.g., Gao et al., 2021; Gaurav, 2022; Liaw, 2019). However, even with many novel opportunities for cultural learning using digital technologies, research must understand how digitally mediated cultural exposure and interactions complement or substitute face-to-face cultural learning experiences and the implications of this for acculturative outcomes.

### 2.3 Cultural Orientations

The cultural orientations approach concerns negotiating heritage culture maintenance and participation in the wider society, particularly changes in attitudes, behaviours and identities

resulting from intercultural contact (often measured by Berry's acculturation framework; Berry, 1997, 2005). As found in this review, especially regarding the digital diaspora literature, cyberspace has created a context where connections to cultural communities can be initiated, managed, and even reimagined without the same constraints of physical co-location. This allows increased opportunities for engagement in cultural groups across vast distances and contexts, reconfiguring the notion of a static community and giving rise to new forms of identity and belonging (Ponzanesi, 2020; Tsagarousianou & Retis, 2019). In this context, the participation of individuals in cultural groups, the expression of cultural values, and engagement with cultural practices and ethnic languages are more accessible than ever. Also, there are increasing opportunities for exposure to and interactions with many different cultural groups online and the distinction between online and offline interactions is becoming negligible. However, how this influences the processes of "maintenance of heritage culture and identity" and "relationships sought among groups," which underpin acculturation orientations, currently remains unclear and under-researched (Berry, 1997, 2005).

There is a critical gap in the literature framing online and digitally mediated experiences and interactions of cultural groups as related to acculturation strategies. It may be interpreted from the research in this review that digital technology is often associated with increased ethnic cultural maintenance due to the accessibility of both proximal and distal social networks from the home country and decreased host culture participation (i.e., separation). Notably, the research on the digital diaspora indicates that when connection to the homeland is prioritised (or politicised), this may promote nationalism and reduce engagement or interest in connection with the settlement society (Ponzanesi, 2020). Similar interpretations can be made concerning international students whereby it has been found that over-reliance

on online ethnic social networks and social media is associated with social skills deficits and social disconnection in the host society (Croucher & Rahmani, 2015; Sleeman et al., 2016).

In contrast, other studies demonstrate that digital technologies can promote agency and enable diverse forms of cultural expression that support the revival or maintenance of rituals, customs, traditions, and languages, and this has positive effects on psychological adjustment and may support integration (Georgiou & Leurs, 2022; Rae et al., 2018). Specifically, in their research with migrants in Sweden, Mitra and Evansluong (2019) found that opportunities for cultural self-expression coupled with potentialities for interaction with host nationals on social media had positive impacts on integration into the settlement society. Their results illustrate that migrants who were actively engaged in diverse types of social media were able to negotiate relationships with co-ethics as well as host nationals, but that those who were passive participants on social media demonstrated lower engagement with the host community. Additionally, in their research with second-generation migrant youth, Dekker and colleagues (2015) found that social media use was associated with both increased inter- and intra-ethnic contact, and this was guided by motivations and interests. Such research highlights that the affordances of digital technologies and how they are used can facilitate both ethnic cultural maintenance and participation in the wider society (i.e., integration).

Additionally, cyberspace has intensified cultural diffusion through public and private social media tools, allowing opportunities for connection with multiple cultural perspectives and influencing cultural identification in profound ways (Bala, 2024). Effectively, digital platforms have reshaped intercultural contact and introduced complexities, such as hybrid cultural identities and asynchronous interactions, from which cultural and sub-cultural identities have

emerged. For example, there is a proliferation of cultural content within visual media, music, and gaming that is having major influences on users who have been found to adopt some cultural elements as a result of exposure, but may even take on new identity positions and behaviours (Fennell et al., 2013; Mao, 2024; Yoon, 2017). While remote acculturation, or cultural change resulting from indirect exposure to physically distant cultures different from one's own (i.e., Ferguson et al., 2020; Ferguson & Bornstein, 2012), offers insight into these issues, it does not account for the new technological realities that allow direct and synchronous interaction with other cultures. Notably, this type of connection facilitates participation and engagement with cultural content in ways that have never before been possible and with outcomes that are yet unknown (Li, 2023; Oh et al., 2020). Future research is needed to understand how individuals navigate the complexities of integrating the multiple, often partial, cultures they encounter through digital technologies, why they choose specific cultural elements to engage with, adopt, or maintain, and how these processes affect their sense of self and community. However, this requires researchers to account for the intertwined nature of online and offline acculturative experiences and treat cyberspace as a legitimate site of identity development, negotiation, and maintenance.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Traditional acculturation theory and research have been instrumental in understanding how, why, and with what outcomes cultural change occurs among groups of diverse people in long-term intercultural contact. Proximal, face-to-face acculturation continues to be relevant in our globalised world, but cyberspace and its affordances mean that acculturation experiences are vastly different from how they have been in the past. For example, migrants are now able to be virtually present in the host society before they arrive and be virtually present in their home society after they have physically departed. In our review, we focused on three

exemplars concerning *digitally mediated acculturation* to explicate this new and important field. The review found that migrant groups exist in ever more, often incongruous, online spaces that are both beneficial in navigating their experience and potentially risky for their acculturation outcomes. The review highlighted the transformative role of digital technologies in reshaping acculturation processes, as well as offering critical suggestions for future research to better represent acculturation as it occurs in contemporary contexts. Importantly, it was highlighted that cyberspace is not only critical for migrants' engagement in ethnic and settlement cultures, but that this context contains a myriad of potentials for accessing cultural information and connecting with diverse others.

However, this review is not without its limitations. The narrative and selective case study approach was intentionally implemented to provide an overview of the fragmented, broad, and interdisciplinary literature concerning digital technologies and migrant groups, but not to systematically review and represent the research in its depth and complexity. The focus on specific groups coupled with particular technologies does not fully capture the diverse experiences of migrant populations, nor does it focus on all types of technology use, and it was not within scope to include the literature on non-migrant groups (e.g., majority cultural groups, and Indigenous peoples). These limitations underscore the need for future research that includes broader and more representative samples and more comprehensive coverage of digital technologies and contexts.

There is still much more to be explored, especially concerning our understanding (or lack thereof) of emergent cultures in online communities and the impacts of new technologies such as Artificial Intelligence and immersive realities on acculturation. It is suggested that acculturation studies need to extend into the spaces created by the blurring of online and

offline life in more dedicated ways to continue developing our understanding of these complex dynamics. As digital technologies become increasingly central to acculturation experiences, addressing these challenges will require interdisciplinary collaboration and innovative approaches that account for both the benefits and risks of digital connectivity. By doing so, we can better support positive adaptation outcomes in a digitally mediated world.

## 4. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no competing interests.

## 5. AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

J.S designed and conceptualised the study. J.K and R.M conducted dedicated reviews of the research and drafted sections of the manuscript. J.S conducted reviews of the research, wrote the introduction, two review sections, integrated all of the inputs and conducted a major revision. J.K supported the manuscript revision and C.W provided extensive conceptual and practical inputs into the manuscript revision and editing.

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