Using Communication Technology to Manage Uncertainty during Organizational Assimilation: Information-Seeking and Information-Giving

Abstract

This study examined how employees used new communication technologies, including internal and external social media, to manage their uncertainty during the anticipatory and encounter phases of the assimilation process in two different cultural contexts. Based on interviews of Chinese and United States employees, the study explored how they used technologies to address their information-seeking, information-giving, and impression management concerns. Results were surprisingly similar despite differences in the two cultural contexts. In addition to managing uncertainty about jobs, relationships, and organizational norms, employees from both countries were concerned about presenting a positive image by demonstrating normative technology use and appropriate professional–personal life balance in their technology use.

Keywords: Uncertainty management, information-seeking, information-giving, impression management, communication technology.
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In a seminal work on information seeking during the assimilation process of joining organizations, Miller and Jablin (1991) identified seven strategies organizational newcomers use to manage uncertainty in their new work environment. Those strategies ranged from active (e.g., indirect questions, third party inquiry) to passive (e.g., surveillance and observation), as well as from overt (e.g., overt questions) to covert (e.g., disguising conversation and testing). Numerous assimilation studies have used this typology as a framework (for a review see Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo, & Tucker, 2007). Due to the technological advances since its publication, important new sources for information seeking are available to newcomers. In the United States, those sources include company websites, enterprise social media (ESM or internal organization media), public social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter), and Web 2.0 websites that allow individuals to post information about organizations (e.g., Glassdoor.com, Indeed.com). These communication technologies provide new opportunities for information seeking before and after joining organizations and opportunities for information giving and impression management when individuals post content or interact with others through these technologies.

Scholars have called for examination of how new technologies influence the organizational assimilation process (Treem & Leonardi, 2013). A few studies have focused on social media’s role in assimilation (e.g., Gonzalez, Leidner, & Koch, 2015), but often focused specifically on ESM (e.g., Leonardi, Huysman, & Steinfield, 2013). In addition, access to new communication technologies varies across companies and countries. For example, many medium and small organizations do not adopt ESM for intra-organizational communication. Even when similar technologies exist in different countries, the use of these media may differ due to social
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and cultural differences (Briggs & Burke, 2009; Katz & Rice, 2002). As a result, research examining the use of the broad range of new communication technologies during organizational assimilation in different countries is warranted.

To begin to address these concerns and answer the call to explore the use of new communication technologies during workplace assimilation, this study interviewed employees in two different cultural settings, the United States and China, concerning their uses of new communication technologies. These countries represent the two largest economies in the world (The World Bank, 2016), but have distinctive cultural and political systems (Hofstede, 2001). They also have access to similar social media, such as Facebook and Twitter in the United States and QQ and WeChat in China, as well as organizational-specific ESM. By interviewing employees in both contexts, this study provides valuable insights into how employees use the information-seeking and information-giving features of new media as they manage uncertainty in their organizational positions.

**Literature Review**

Because broad summaries of the assimilation (often called socialization) literature already exist (Jablin, 2001; Kramer & Miller, 2014; Scott & Myers, 2010), we provide a few general concepts before focusing on the information-seeking and information-giving literature related to new communication technologies. The assimilation process is generally presented as consisting of four phases: (1) *Anticipatory Socialization*, the time prior to when individuals become organizational members; (2) *Encounter*, the time when individuals join the organization and feel like newcomers; (3) *Metamorphosis*, the time when individuals participate as full organizational members; and (4) *Exit*, the time when individuals leave and become former members (Jablin, 2001). These phases may overlap and individual experiences may differ from
this pattern, but the phase model provides a useful framework for studying employee experiences (Kramer & Miller, 2014).

Individuals experience particularly high levels of uncertainty during the anticipatory and encounter phases. As they join organizations, new employees must gain information to manage their uncertainty in four broad areas: (1) the tasks they must complete including how they will be evaluated; (2) their relationships to supervisors, peers, and other organizational members; (3) the organization’s history, norms, and culture; and (4) the power dynamics within the organization (Kramer & Sias, 2014). Uncertainty management theory (UMT) provides a strong theoretical framework for understanding the process by which individuals assign meaning to their experiences during the assimilation process (Kramer & Miller, 2014).

Unlike the original conceptualizations of uncertainty reduction theory which assumed individuals were always motivated to seek information to reduce their uncertainty (Berger, 1979), UMT recognizes that the process is more complex. For example, individuals may manage uncertainty through cognitive processes without seeking information (Kramer, 2004) or they may prefer to maintain their uncertainty levels or even increase them (Brashers, 2001). Even if they are motivated to seek information, competing motives, such as impression management concerns, may inhibit information seeking (Ashford & Northcraft, 1992). In addition, uncertainty may increase, decrease, or remain the same after gaining information (Kramer, 2004). UMT suggests organizational newcomers with access to multiple communication technologies may seek information to manage their own uncertainty, as well as give information to help others manage uncertainty about them as newcomers (Gallagher & Sias, 2009). Although information sharing may occur interactively through email or face-to-face communication, it may also occur without one party being explicitly aware of the information exchange process.
Examining information exchange within this new media-rich environment then becomes critical for a comprehensive understanding of employees’ uncertainty management. One important part of information exchange is gaining information to manage uncertainty. Three broad strategies for information seeking have been identified: passive, such as observing or receiving unsolicited information; active, such as requesting information from one person about someone else; or interactive, such as asking for information from the source of uncertainty (Berger, 1979). Miller and Jaclin (1991) expand these broad categories to specific strategies: (1) overt questions, indirect question, and disguising conversations to gain information by interacting with sources of uncertainty; (2) third party inquiries of interacting with one source to gain information about another source; (3) observing and surveillance as passive methods to gain information in the environment; and (4) testing by breaking perceived norms to observe responses. Typologies like this have produced valuable research (e.g., Waldeck, Seibold, & Flanagin, 2004). However, new communication technologies blur the clear distinctions these typologies assume. So although social media facilitate knowledge sharing within organizations (e.g., Treem & Leonardi, 2013), when individuals seek information on a company ESM to understand their coworkers and company culture, they are not directly interacting with their peers nor are they passively receiving information. Similarly, reading posts on Glassdoor.com functions as an active third party inquiry, but without personal interaction or relationships. Thus, it is important to build on previous research by exploring how new communication technologies, like internal and external social media sites among others, offer new information seeking means for employees to manage their workplace uncertainties.

Another important part of information exchange that is understudied involves giving information to others during assimilation. Existing organizational members experience
uncertainty about how newcomers will affect the task and relational aspects of their work setting (Gallagher & Sias, 2009). Individuals give information by responding to requests from others, modeling desirable behavior, or providing unsolicited information to others (Kramer, Callister, & Turban, 1995). Through a reciprocal process of seeking and giving information, new and existing employees communicate to manage their workplace uncertainty (Gallagher & Sias, 2009). New communication technologies provide additional channels for information giving beyond in-person interactions. The new technologies are more time-flexible since they can be used for both synchronous and asynchronous interactions and can be either personal or impersonal depending on individuals’ relationships with others and their communication patterns.

Scholars have begun to explore how new communication technologies influence the assimilation process. Communication channels, such as email and instant messaging, are considered essential to effective newcomer assimilation (Waldeck et al., 2004). Intranet adoption is positively associated with new members’ job performance, role clarification, social integration, and cultural learning (Chu & Chu, 2011). Both public and enterprise social media help employees build and expand their social networks (Mak, 2013), and cultivate a sense of belonging to their company (Leidner, Koch, & Gonzalez, 2010; Steinfeld, Dimicco, Ellison, & Lampe, 2009). Social media serve as one of the most powerful assimilation forces from which job candidates and employees acquire up-to-date advice, suggestions, and insider information (Taylor & Kent, 2010). For instance, Diga and Kelleher (2009) found that public relations practitioners who used social network sites more routinely when assimilating into their field reported perceiving themselves as having greater structural, expert, and prestige power. However, new communication technologies can also bring negative effects so that new and experienced employees may resist using them (Leonardi, 2009). Research has not broadly
explored how various communication technologies as channels for both information seeking and giving relate to employees’ uncertainty management.

In addition, because communication technology access varies by society (Katz & Rice, 2002) and usage patterns are influenced by cultural contexts (Briggs & Burke, 2009), additional insight into employees’ technology use during assimilation in more than one country is needed. Exploring these issues in the world’s two largest economies, the U.S. and China (The World Bank, 2016) provided an opportunity to compare two contexts with likely differences in adoption and use of technologies based on distinctive cultural and political systems. For example, based on Hofstede (2001) commonly identified cultural dimensions, China is a relatively collectivist, hierarchical, and uncertainty avoidant society while the U.S. is individualistic, less hierarchical, and more accepting of uncertainty. These cultural differences suggest that organizational assimilation may occur more rapidly in Chinese organizations than U.S. organizations as employees’ collectivist orientation and deference to authority leads them to quickly adapt to the familial cultures of Chinese organizations (Zeng, Croucher, Kelly, & Chen, 2018). In addition, the Chinese government actively censors the Internet and specifically attempts to ban certain social media available in the U.S, but similar alternatives, such as QQ instead of Facebook and WeChat instead of Twitter, are available. By including respondents from these two dissimilar contexts, examining any commonalities and differences in use of comparable technologies provides a more comprehensive understanding of employees’ communication during assimilation. Thus, the first research question was:

**RQ1:** How do U.S. and Chinese employees use both the (a) information-seeking and (b) information-giving characteristics of communication technologies to manage uncertainty during the anticipatory and encounter phases of assimilation?
In addition to aiding in uncertainty management, both seeking and giving information via communication technologies have potential consequences for employees’ impression management. For example, directly asking for information in-person may make the newcomer seem incompetent or insecure (Morrison & Bies, 1991). As a result, newcomers are often reluctant to use direct information-seeking methods (Ashford & Northcraft, 1992). However, communication technologies such as company websites, intranets, and social media are information repositories where employees can search and find necessary information concerning their task or organizational personnel without asking their colleagues or supervisors directly. Thus, using technological sources for unobtrusive information seeking without direct interaction can serve as a strategic self-presentation tool for new employees.

Since providing information is a form of self-disclosure, the information-giving functions of new technologies provide employees additional channels for attempting to create the desired impression of themselves. Employees must be strategic in their information giving because obvious impression management efforts can also be perceived as self-serving or contrary to organizational expectations (Bolino, 1999). Additionally, since organizational and group norms exist for communication technology use (Flanagin & Waldeck, 2004; Fulk, Schmitz, & Steinfield, 1990), failure to follow those norms by disclosing too much or lurking (viewing only) too long means that new communication technologies create additional challenges for employees managing professional impressions as they seek and give information.

The reduced nonverbal cues and asynchronicity of computer-mediated communication can influence self-disclosure (McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Walther, 1996), in addition to other relevant factors such as varying motivations, different settings, and target of self-disclosure (Kim & Dindia, 2011). Online self-disclosure may differ from in-person situation because in many
cases, the communicators do not know exactly who views their profiles. As much as employees can engage in strategic self-presentations by posting only “safe” information about themselves on their social media accounts, they do not have complete control over how the photos and texts they post to project their desired images will be interpreted by certain audiences, especially their colleagues and supervisors. Due to the possibility that individual employees’ public social media involve all kinds of their social networks (e.g., work and personal), they may also experience “context collapse” (Marwick & boyd, 2011) which occurs when people from different areas of a person’s network (e.g., work, leisure, religion, family) intersect in one setting (e.g., social media space). Thus, the second research question was:

**RQ2**: How do impression management concerns influence U.S. and Chinese employees’ information-seeking and information-giving via communication technologies during the anticipatory and encounter phases of assimilation?

**Method**

We used a qualitative research method to explore how employees used new communication technologies to manage uncertainty during their assimilation process. Qualitative methods focus on understanding the individuals’ lived experiences (Weick, 1995). Conducting interviews provided the opportunity to probe individuals’ responses to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences expressed in their own words (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

**Participants**

Participants were recruited through personal contacts and snowball sampling in two locations. In China, 25 Chinese employees of international companies with offices in one of three metropolitan areas were interviewed in their native language (i.e., Mandarin) by the native Chinese author. The Chinese participants included 14 males and 11 females all working as
office-based professionals, such as staff members or assistants. They worked for their companies between 1 and 18 months. All had Bachelor’s degrees and half had Master’s degrees. They ranged in age from 24 to 30 years old with a median age of 27.

In the U.S., 25 employees of companies located in either a Midwestern and Northeastern metropolitan area were interviewed in English by another author. The American participants included 6 males and 19 females all working as office-based professionals such as HR managers or customer representatives. They were primarily Caucasians (20), but included three Asian Americans, one African American, and one African permanent resident. American participants were slightly older (median age 29) and with a wider age range (22 to 58) than the Chinese sample.

**Interview Procedures**

Individuals were contacted and asked to participate in interviews after hearing an explanation of the study. Those that agreed signed IRB approved consent forms before being interviewed either in person, over the phone, or via Skype depending on their schedules and accessibility. Interviews lasted 30 to 90 minutes.

**Interview Protocol**

We designed a semi-structured interview questionnaire to provide consistency across interviews, but also to allow for probing participants’ specific examples or unique experiences. The protocol (available upon request) included three sections concerning communication technology use: (1) before joining the current company; (2) while initially entering the company; and (3) as a current member. Sample questions included “What kinds of messages do you remember seeing on the company’s website/social media before joining the organization, if any?” (before joining); “How did using social media help you learn about people in the company?”
(initially entering); and “Who do you communicate with regularly to discuss work-related issue and receive career advice (in your team/company)? Are you friends with them on any social media? Do you use social media to talk about work-related issues with them?” (current member). Additionally, participants filled out a short survey of demographics and organizational experience.

**Data Analysis**

The Chinese interviews were first transcribed in Mandarin and then translated into English by the author who is fluent in both languages. This resulted in 88 pages of single-spaced transcripts. Transcripts of the U.S. interviews produced 125 pages of single-spaced transcripts. To allow for differences in the two samples to occur, the data were first analyzed separately and then compared. However, both data sets were analyzed using the same approach.

We used a modified constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Suddaby, 2006). After reading the data repeatedly, comments related to the use of communication technologies before and after joining their organizations were separated from other data, a process of data reduction (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). For example, comments about the advantages or disadvantages of different media were retained while comments about job duties were removed. Next, retained data were divided into units suggestive of one idea or theme. Units ranged from a few words to extended passages. Then during open coding each unit was reread, compared to previous units, and then placed either in a category with other similar units or given its own category using NVivo, a qualitative data management system. During focused coding, units within initial codes were compared and separated if they seemed to represent more than one theme and initial codes were compared and combined if they seemed to represent only one category. The process was cyclical rather than linear. Finally, during axial coding, categories
were examined for potential connections and relationships to the research questions.

Verification

According to Creswell (2007), qualitative researchers should use a minimum of two methods of verification to validate the rigor of their analysis. First, we provide thick, rich description by including direct quotes from participants to allow the reader to access the appropriateness of our interpretations. Second, we conducted member checks of an early draft of the study which suggested we accurately captured participants’ lived experiences. In addition, the credibility of the coding was indicated by the emergence of the same focused codes in the separate analyses of the two data sets and indicated that technology use was quite similar for both sets of respondents.

Findings

RQ1a: Information Seeking for Uncertainty Management

Participants in both contexts reported using various communication technologies as they sought information to manage their uncertainty concerning organizations they were considering joining. Two overall strategies were gathering both official and unofficial information. They often made use of different media during the anticipatory and encounter phases.

Official information. Nearly all participants in both contexts gathered information from companies’ public websites prior to their job interviews. They reported that visiting the website provided background information such as the organization’s size, products or services, and organizational culture among other information. For example, a newly-hired Chinese banker explained the website’s value: “The website information shows the company strength. The domestic and international cooperation projects they have done, their business partners, and the company structure; all made me feel that this can be a good place to work.” Participants
recognized that this official information was almost uniformly positive and so it was not necessarily perceived as presenting an accurate assessment of the work environment or their job role. For example, a U.S. participant reported that after searching the company website and not finding anything about her position, “I was kind of confused because I knew I was … interviewing for the recruiter position but everything I found online was for the financial representative.” In other cases, website information seemed geared more toward potential customers or clients and so did little to help potential employees. Thus, although public websites assisted employees in preparing for their interviews and seeking general information about the company, they were not usually viewed as providing realistic workplace or job previews.

Seeking information through other official sources besides the website during the anticipatory phase was uncommon in China, but common in the U.S. Other sources included company sponsored social media pages, like Facebook, Twitter, or LinkedIn in the U.S., although many companies did not have them when these employees were hired. A 25-year-old U.S. attorney explained how he was influenced after seeing several successful cases or awards mentioned on a company Twitter account: “Noticing that they were some heavily awarded attorneys changed my perception and let me know that it would be good working there.” The information reduced his uncertainty about the quality of his potential employer.

External company-sponsored social media, when accessible, also provided an opportunity for seeking information through visual images as well as texts. For example, a 23-year-old employee at a U.S. corporate tax group reported her company had a Facebook-like page which job candidates were invited to join to watch existing employees’ interviews. For applicants like her, the combination of verbal and visual content helped reduce their uncertainty about a company based on seeing current employees and events depicted. Applicants developed certain
expectations about the organization’s climate and culture from these sources. Content on external social media was still largely controlled by the company. Although social media provided additional information to supplement company websites, applicants recognized that they had similar biases of providing mostly positive information.

Once employed, employees continued to seek information through internal organizational communication technologies, such as company intranet and instant messaging programs or ESM. A 23-year-old bank employee in the U.S. commented,

   We do have a news board. That internal bank website…has “meet this exec” and kind of an article about them and what they do, and articles about maybe something an employee of the bank did for volunteering or…any update to technology, anything like that.

Internal company websites like this provided detailed information to help employees reduce uncertainty about their workplace and complete actions, such as enrolling in benefits programs.

During the entry phase in both contexts, internal social media or ESM provided employees an opportunity to learn about other employees and company activities in their new organizations. A female sales representative in China mentioned,

   The online system (i.e., Intranet) provides information about the company structure, responsibilities of each department, and ongoing company events, like the latest products in the field or various types of available training. When the veterans are busy, the system is where I can learn a lot.

For employees like her, accessing these internal communication technologies helped reduce uncertainty about their roles and the company culture. Surprisingly, nearly all the Chinese participants mentioned making similar use of an ESM, perhaps because they all worked for large international companies. By comparison, very few U.S. employees (only two) had access to an
ESM. Those who had access mentioned rarely using it because there had not been a company-wide adoption of it. One participant acknowledged its potential utility for information seeking. When asking job-related questions, she did not know people by name yet as a newcomer; thus, checking the coworker’s profile information on the company ESM helped her locate specific colleagues more easily.

**Unofficial information.** Participants also relied on seeking information from various unofficial sources in both cultural contexts to manage their uncertainty. For example, in China, some individuals joined online forums or QQ where they gathered information during the anticipatory phase to supplement official website information. As a young Chinese accountant explained, “QQ and Wechat have many public accounts where I found people who were either former employees of the company I applied to, or from companies in the same field. The insiders’ information like previous interview questions were super helpful.” This suggests that newcomers used unofficial sources to seek information to assist them in making job application decisions and to better understand the organizational culture for interviews.

Four U.S. participants specifically mentioned the job review website, Glassdoor.com, as an additional information source during their job search. Glassdoor.com is a social media site where current and former company employees or those who interviewed for the company anonymously provide feedback and reflections of their experiences. Participants gain information about potential salary, pros and cons of the company, work environment, different jobs, and interview questions through Glassdoor.com. As much as they found seeking information on Glassdoor helpful in preparing for job interviews and gaining a sense of their potential employer, participants commented that they took the information with “a grain of salt” since they thought complaints about certain companies could be from disgruntled employees, a
bias in the opposite direction from company controlled media outlets.

**Overall.** Communication technologies played an important role in newcomers’ information seeking in both cultural contexts. During the anticipatory phase, potential employees consulted publicly available communication channels, primarily company websites, but also social media like Facebook or QQ, to seek information to assist them in preparing for interviews and determining if the potential employer was a good fit for them. Once employed, they gained access to additional internal media and used those channels to seek additional information as they made sense of their new organization and coworkers. A surprisingly small number of companies in the U.S. sample had an ESM at the time of the study, compared to all in the Chinese sample who worked in international companies. In both cultural contexts, applicants also used social media not sponsored by the companies to gather additional insider information about their potential employer throughout the process. Employees expressed skepticism towards both formal and informal channels, with company sponsored external sources viewed as overly positive and unofficial sources viewed as overly negative.

**RQ1b: Information Giving for Uncertainty Management**

In addition to seeking information, employees managed uncertainty through information giving. Although participants generally limit information giving during both time periods, they described a number of information-giving strategies they used during anticipatory socialization and after organizational entry.

**During anticipatory socialization.** Most respondents seemed unaware that they were possibly giving information to potential employers other than by submitting a physical or electronic resume or by responding to interview questions. Since potential employers are increasingly visiting applicants’ social network sites, at least in the U.S. (e.g., Slovensky & Ross,
2012), applicants may inadvertently provide unsolicited information to potential employers who access their posts on Facebook or LinkedIn in the U.S. or various job hunting websites (e.g., 51job.com, Zhaopin.com) in China during anticipatory socialization. A few applicants were conscious of this and managed their privacy setting of social media rather strictly. One cautious U.S. employee hid or disabled his Facebook page when he was applying for his current position and said he would likely do so the next time he was on the job market. In this way, he limited his information giving during anticipatory socialization.

**After organizational entry.** Once employed, participants were aware of the information-giving potential of new technologies. Employees saw an ESM as an opportunity to voluntarily give information about themselves. A Chinese product management associate stated, “When reading people’s posts on WeChat, I can speculate about them. I believe that they would do the same thing about me [my posts].” In some cases, employees did not have a choice about providing information; they were required to give information through their company’s ESM. For example, one American employee stated:

> I had to have a profile…You had to put on there, you know, what your bachelor’s was, what your master’s was, how long you’ve worked at the company, what you do when you’re not at work….But I guess I saw the benefit in it though because honestly I used it— … like where someone would say, “well if you have a question, go ask Lisa…”

As this example suggests, employees often gave rather impersonal information initially on social media, such as background information that likely would have been shared instead during an initial face-to-face interaction if it occurred.

Employees often mixed their information giving with information seeking. By sharing information, they developed relationships, which meant they received information as well. For
example, a Chinese engineer explained, “Each team has a QQ group. At work, we use it to send quick files.” Similarly, a U.S. assistant branch manager at a bank explained about connecting with someone on Facebook:

So, if you’re really talking to someone about their family and their kids and their house and whatever, then I would add them on social media websites because you actually talk about your lives outside of work. So then, you would be friends on social media and actually know, see what’s going on in their life outside of work.

As these participants indicated, the new communication technologies provided them opportunities for information giving which often led to them receiving work and social information as they developed relationships with coworkers through social media.

Many participants indicated two ways that they limited their information giving. First, they often shared only minimal information, especially, when they were newcomers. They preferred to “lurk” on the ESM rather than provide information and rarely used external social media to communicate to others. A Chinese designer limited information giving on an ESM, saying, “You probably don’t want to disclose too much before learning about the veterans. You never know if something is appropriate or not, or if your post would create misleading impressions for others.” Similarly, a U.S. marketing coordinator explained, “I’m liking things on their LinkedIn. Very, very, very few times are they writing happy birthday on Facebook…That’s about as far as it would go.” Thus, in both contexts employees limited their information giving by not disclosing much information about themselves or only sharing rather impersonal information such as birthday greetings.

The second way they limited their information giving was by controlling their social media connections. When participants in the U.S. sample were asked what communication
connections they made in social media, most interviewees mentioned connecting with coworkers or supervisors on LinkedIn, but limiting their connections on Facebook. As an associate HR manager commented:

Facebook, probably within the last four months, I’ve probably added like maybe 6 to 10 coworkers. LinkedIn, probably more like 30. It’s a lot easier to do on LinkedIn because there’s more professional representation. Facebook is much more personal to me, so I try not to…”

A Chinese HR assistant was conscious of differences between “friends and coworkers on WeChat by setting up different levels of privacy” so that only certain people could see posts. As these quotes suggest, employees in both contexts limited their information giving with coworkers to work-related information through more professional and work-related social media and shared more personal information in separate external social media.

Finally, individuals in both contexts, at least some employees preferred to do more information giving in face-to-face interactions rather than through social media. A Chinese engineer explained, “Off work we go to eat to chat or have activities together, like having parties.” Several U.S. employees primarily used face-to-face interaction for more personal information giving and receiving. Attending company-wide events, working out together, or playing recreational sports together facilitated giving and receiving social information. Thus, more personal information giving seemed to occur apart from their social media use.

Overall. Participants potentially gave information through their social media posts during their job searches, although not all of them seemed conscious of this. Once employed, they participated in mandatory or voluntary information sharing in companies with ESM. They tended to manage their information giving when using company and professional social media by
limiting it to giving work-related information to supervisors and coworkers while reserving more personal information for separate social media available to friends. Some also seemed to restrict more personal information giving to face-to-face interactions rather than through social media.

**RQ2: Impression Management Concerns**

In both contexts, employees faced challenges in presenting a preferred self-image due to context collapse in which multiple audiences had access to social media posts. They addressed impression management concerns through four primary communication strategies: (1) self-monitoring posted information; (2) creating relationships; 3) using technology appropriately; and (4) managing work-life balance.

**Self-monitoring posted information.** An important way employees managed their impressions during organizational assimilation was by carefully monitoring information they posted on ESM or external social media. A U.S. customer service representative at a bank said:

> I’m actually very careful about what I say and how I say it. Thinking about the audience that’s going to view it cause it’s not just my friends; it’s also my family, coworkers, everyone like that. So I have to, I really do take the time to look at it from all sides and make sure that this is something I’d want people to hear, and know and see about me.

This quote demonstrates how new employees were cautious about their online communication and monitored their postings because the information can go to work, social, and family contacts. Citing a negative example, a newly married Chinese accountant recognized a coworker posted too much information when coworkers knew “if you fought with your husband last night.”

Another U.S. employee noted, “I definitely deleted things or edited things before” after reexamining a post over the weekend and recognizing “that’s not the best perception to put out there.” As these interviewees indicate, posting the right information and the right amount of
information was important for impression management. Unlike face-to-face impression management, online impression management is more challenging due to context collapse where multiple portions of their network, work, family, and social have access to their posts (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Impression management while using communication technologies was not necessarily new to these young individuals. Some interviewees mentioned that they already monitored their social media accounts vigilantly in college due to organizational constraints, such as membership in a sorority.

**Creating relationships.** Seeking out relationships with coworkers through social media was another impression management technique for building social capital (i.e., resources embedded in social networks; Lin, Cook, & Burt, 2001). A young Chinese banker emphasized,

> It’s hard to maintain constant contact with employees outside my own department, but it’s possible now once two become WeChat friends. It’s particularly efficient after project cooperation because I can keep managing the relationships on WeChat from a long-distance, despite positional, age, or gender differences.

Similarly, a U.S. employee commented:

> So, on LinkedIn, I actively, every so often, I’ll go on and I’ll look for [company name] employees that either I’ve interacted with at all. Like if I’ve interacted with them, I look for them out there because again, I’m building my social capital.

These employees connected with others at work through social media as an impression management strategy to create social capital. Building and maintaining professional workplace relationships helped create positive impressions of themselves as serious and motivated organizational members.

**Using technology appropriately.** One important part of impression management was
demonstrating competent technology use by following organizational norms and policies. Important technology norms or policies included knowing when to use and not use emails or knowing how quickly to respond to them, among others. For example, using the correct format for emails was one way to present a professional self-image. A Chinese junior accountant said:

Usually we are expected to respond to emails within a day, which is one way to demonstrate professionalism here. Writing an email requires a certain format. You need to follow the requirements in order to represent the company’s image.

Similarly, a U.S. IT customer representative indicated:

We had training where we learned about the company’s social media policy, and learned about what’s appropriate and not appropriate to tie to the company. And when it comes to that, I feel like there’s never really a time where I feel I have to hash tag the company just because all my friends and family know where I work.

In both cases, the respondents modeled organizational norms and policies for technology use to project a professional self-image while exchanging work-related information with others and protecting their companies’ image. Chinese employees seemed to be encouraged to promote their organizations on their personal social media, whereas U.S. employees were not, perhaps due to the international companies involved.

**Work–life balance.** Participants spoke about presenting a preferred self-image in the way they managed their work-life or professional-personal balance which often involved separating work and personal relationships through their technology use. Many Chinese participants expressed concerns over whether they should add a coworker as a friend on WeChat. An association editor justified not adding supervisors and coworkers to social media this way: “Some of my coworkers even have two WeChat accounts for personal and work relationships.”
Adding a coworker on external social media like WeChat and especially the more personal WeChat Moments, potentially blurred the professional-personal life boundary.

Similarly, U.S. participants presented professional-personal life boundaries by making distinctions between the people with whom they interacted on LinkedIn versus Facebook. As a 23-year-old marketing coordinator at a software company explained:

[LinkedIn] is the only one that I’ve requested others. If some coworkers friend-request me on Facebook, I accept on a case-by-case basis….I typically do not accept, because I don’t really want to mix my work and personal life.

Others like her maintained links to coworkers and supervisors through LinkedIn but communicated with them on Facebook only if they developed friendships outside of work. One flexible way to present an appropriate image of professional-personal life boundaries was to provide access to their personal social media only to close friends at work.

**Overall.** Participants in both contexts were conscious of impression management concerns particularly in light of context collapse. They presented a positive self-image by carefully monitoring what they posted on internal and external social media, including sometimes editing previously posted materials. They increased their social capital by making connections to others via social media. They demonstrated their competence as an employee by using technology in ways that were consistent with organizational norms and by presenting appropriate work-life balance.

**Discussion**

The current study explored how a sample of employees in the world’s two largest economies, the U.S. and China, used features of new technologies to manage uncertainty during organizational assimilation. In addition, it examined how they addressed impression management
concerns while using social media. The findings provided new insights into the process of both information seeking and information giving in uncertainty management and the role of communication technology in impression management as part of the assimilation process.

Berger (1979) described three general information-seeking strategies for managing uncertainty: passive (observing or receiving unsolicited information), active (requesting information from one person about another), or interactive (asking for information from the primary source). Our RQ1a findings indicate that this typology is incomplete. Due to communication technologies’ advances, participants in both contexts could actively seek information without personal interactions through impersonal electronic sources. Social media’s public information sharing allows for a new type of indirect access information exchange strategy. Through indirect access, employees gained information to manage their uncertainty from the actual sources (e.g., coworkers) who posted information on social media without direct interaction. This strategy also differs from specific strategies identified by Miller and Jablin (1991). Unlike the inquiry strategies (e.g., direct, indirect, third party), indirect access does not involve direct interaction through social media. It differs from observing or surveillance, two strategies where the targets are often unaware of their information giving, because targets actively provided the information by posting it on social media. For indirect access, both parties are actively involved in the information exchange either by posting or reading information, but without direct interaction with each other. In addition, indirect access was often asynchronous whereas previous information-seeking strategies have consisted largely of synchronous face-to-face interactions or direct observations. Indirect access occurs by posting information and others reading that content presently or at some future, indefinite time rather than through personal contact or observation. New communication technologies provide indirect access as a new
strategy for managing uncertainty.

Limited previous research identified three main information-giving strategies: (1) responding to requests from others; (2) modeling desirable behavior; or (3) providing unsolicited information to others (Kramer et al., 1995). Although our RQ1b findings include examples of all three, they extend our limited understanding of information giving because each deviated from the original conceptualizations. First, although they did give information in response to requests as they developed relationships with other employees through online or face-to-face interactions, at other times, employees were required to give information through their ESM indicating less freedom and control than responding to requests implies. Second, employees did not attempt to influence others’ behaviors by modeling desirable behavior in following organizational norms for technology use and maintaining work-life balance. Instead, modeling appropriate behaviors seemed like an impression management strategy designed to present a positive self-image to improve others’ attitudes toward them. Finally, the unsolicited information they provided was less targeted when they posted information on external social media (i.e., Facebook or QQ and WeChat). The information became available asynchronously to unspecified others through the public portions of their postings and when they gave coworkers access to the private content, it provided access to their entire social media history, not just current activities.

Although our research expanded on the three information-giving strategies, what was more striking was the tendency for participants to actively limit or even avoid information giving. Especially as newcomers, many respondents seemed reluctant to give much information about themselves through social media. Most prefer to use the indirect access strategy of information seeking on internal and external social media with limited information giving, such as an occasional like of someone’s post, rather than sharing personal information. Although, there
were exceptions to this pattern, it suggests that they focused on their own professional impression management during the early period of assimilation rather than on giving information to assist other employees in managing their uncertainty about the newcomers (Gallagher & Sias, 2009) and they may have missed opportunities for relationship development as a result. Taken together, results emphasize the need for further exploration of the information-giving during organizational assimilation.

Our RQ2 findings indicate that most participants seemed very conscious of complexity that social media brings to impression management due to context collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2011). They carefully monitored and edited posts on internal and external social media considering that multiple audiences may access their posts. Given popular press concerns over inappropriate information sharing through social media (e.g., sexting), it was refreshing to see these employees seemed aware of the importance of impression management on social media. It is not so clear why so few mentioned taking advantage of social media’s information-giving qualities for impression management during anticipatory socialization. Knowing that organizational personnel are increasingly visiting social media as part of the hiring process (Slovensky & Ross, 2012), job seekers could more consciously use the information-giving features of social media to enhance their self-images. For example, job seekers can share news on social media related to their professional expertise and accomplishments or post hobby or voluntary activities that demonstrate their values and skills. Such posts may create common grounds with future coworkers and serve as a “social lubricant” for conversations and relationship development (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011).

Our findings suggested that to appear professional and develop relationships with peers, these employees had two specific concerns that have not received much attention as impression
management issues in previous literature. They were quite conscious of projecting a positive self-image by demonstrating competent technology use by following organizational norms for correct formatting of emails and maintaining an appropriate presence on ESM. ESM norms were a source of uncertainty for employees since ESM are not universally available for all types of organizations and in cases where they exist, may not be universally adopted.

These employees also wanted to project an image of professionalism by maintaining appropriate work-life balance. They experienced relational uncertainty (Kramer & Sias, 2014) about who they should connect with through social media. The impression management strategy most participants used to address this issue was to maintain a professional social media relationship with a large group of coworkers through LinkedIn or an ESM that could include higher ranking organizational members and to maintain a separate social network site for friends from work. Given the increasing pressure on white-collar employees to be available 24/7 without additional compensation (Fraser, 2001), impression management of the work-life boundary is likely to become an increasing concern in coming years as integrating work and personal technology becomes more common.

The high degree of similarity of the assimilation process for these participants from the U.S. and China was unexpected given the differences in the availability of technology due to economic, political, and cultural differences. Applicants in both countries used company sponsored internet resources similarly during the anticipatory stage and used internal communication technologies quite similarly after joining an organization. After joining, participants in both countries seemed conscious of the information-seeking and information-giving capacities of electronic communication for managing uncertainty and were cautious when using it for impression management concerns.
Differences between the two samples tended to be minor. Even though Web 2.0 sources like Glassdoor.com do not exist in China, applicants there instead used discussions in QQ to gather similar informal information to manage their uncertainty before joining new organizations. One unexpected difference concerned access to ESM. These Chinese employees working for international companies actually reported more access to ESM than U.S. employees and appeared to make more voluntary or mandatory use of it. Many of the U.S. companies either did not have ESM or it was not widely used at this time. This difference may be related to the types and size of organizations involved. Many previous studies on organizational members’ usage of ESM utilized high-tech (e.g., Gibbs, Rozaidi, & Eisenberg, 2013) and large multinational corporations (e.g., Ellison, Gibbs, & Weber, 2015) as their research sites, whereas our U.S. sample did not include any employees working for tech companies, but for a large pharmaceutical company and several financial companies including banks and insurance companies.

As such, this study is not without limitations. Previous research indicates that the assimilation process differs across state-owned, privately-owned, and foreign-investment enterprises in China (Zeng et al., 2018). Since all the Chinese employees in this study worked for international companies, their experiences were likely different from employees working in other contexts in China. This factor may also help explain why the cultural differences did not result in significantly different use of technology between the Chinese and U.S. employee working for a range of companies. Despite its limitations, the study provides new insights into how these particular Chinese and U.S. employees behaved in quite similar ways as they sought information during anticipatory socialization and managed the exchange of information through new communication technologies. Although email was universally available, there were
differences in the availability of various ESM and external social media. Thus, the study can only shed light on the changing landscape of technology. The median age of both samples indicates that these are not all new graduates. Individuals initially entering their careers may behave differently, particularly as technology continues to change. The results are transferable to similar settings of this study, such as international business settings in other relatively healthy economies, but are not generalizable.

**Conclusion**

New communication technologies, including social media, are changing the possibilities for employees to manage their uncertainty as they join and participate in organizations as part of the assimilation process (Kramer & Sias, 2014). For example, indirect, asynchronous access for information exchange through social media is frequently available to replace forms of direct information sharing. Results suggest that employees take advantage of these new technologies to manage uncertainty in an unprecedented way as they apply for jobs and accept positions in organizations. These communication technologies also create additional impression management opportunities and concerns. Specifically, the results suggest employees must now focus on presenting a professional self-image by demonstrating competence in using technology and by maintaining appropriate work-life balance.
References


