The Use of Online Social Media and Expatriate Adjustment and Integration in the Netherlands

Richard Theemling

335141

Supervisor: Yuping Mao, PHD

Master Media Studies

Media & Business

Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication

Erasmus University Rotterdam

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Abstract

This qualitative study sought to identify and understand the ways that expatriates living in the Netherlands use social networking sites (SNS) and other online platforms during the adjustment and integration process. Grounded in the Sense of Community (SOC) theory, the study incorporated semi-structured interviews with 12 expatriates who originated from countries outside of the European Union (EU). Not only was the goal of the study to identify the ways that expatriates use SNSs, it also sought to understand the perceived influence such use had on adjustment and integration. The study investigated five distinct areas of interest: the use of SNS to meet and socialize with others; meeting others who share common interests; maintaining social connections with those in the host country; developing and maintaining friendships with colleagues; and using various platforms to acculturate.

The study revealed interesting results. First, it was discovered that many participants have used various virtual communities to meet and interact with others. Furthermore, many participants reported developing friendships as a result of such use. In many cases, developing these friendships has positively influenced adjustment. Second, while many participants reported having hobbies and interests, only a few reported using SNS and virtual communities to meet others who share their interests. However, many participants reported being partial to meeting and befriending others who share their nationality. These participants felt that engaging in such interaction positively influenced adjustment. Third, many reported that using SNSs and other online communicative platforms played a particularly important role during the adjustment and integration process. Fourth, it was discovered that many participants actively meet and socialize with colleagues in settings outside of the work environment. Many of these events are planned via virtual communities and were found to positively influence adjustment.   Finally, for some participants, the use of SNSs and different online platforms was found to be highly beneficial during acculturation.

Keywords: Sense of Community, Sense of Virtual Community, Expatriation, The Netherlands, Social Networking Sites, Acculturation, Adjustment, Integration, Qualitative, Interviews, Hermenuetical Phenomenology

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1. Introduction

The Netherlands is one of the smallest countries in the European Union (EU) and is located in northwestern Europe. Despite its small size, the country is home to more than 16.4 million residents and is currently the sixth largest exporter and foreign investor in the world (UWV, 2010). Between a high number of Dutch and internationally-owned multinational companies operating in the Netherlands, and a thriving economy in the late 1990's and early 2000's, a high number of expatriates have moved to the country for employment purposes.

The proliferation and ever-increasingly popularity of online social networking platforms has provided users with ample opportunities to communicate, collaborate, and bond on a whole new level (Bodle, 2010). It's through the proliferation of such platforms that virtual communities have been created which facilitate interaction amongst community members (Bodle, 2010). Virtual communities can be described as "a group of people with common interests or goals, interacting *predominantly* in cyberspace" (Koh & Kim, 2004, p. 76).

For many expatriates, moving to a foreign country poses challenges regarding the adjustment and integration process (Westwood & Ishiyama, 1991). Many of these challenges relate to the fact that previous social networks that were once available in the home country are no longer available in the host country (Black & Gregersen,1991). However, many of the affordances introduced through the advent and proliferation of online social networking platforms provide users with opportunities to connect and socialize with others, regardless of time and geographical distances. As such, the use of such online social networking platforms and virtual communities by expatriates may serve to influence the adjustment and integration process within the host country.

Grounded in the Sense of Community (SOC) theory developed by McMillan and Chavis (1986), this research project used qualitative interviews with expatriates who are living in the Netherlands to identify and understand the ways in which they utilize the affordances of the internet and social networking sites (SNSs) during the adjustment and integration process. The specific aims of this study were fivefold. First, this study investigated the ways that internationals living in the Netherlands use SNS to meet and socialize with other expatriates as well as Dutch nationals in both online and offline environments. Second, it sought to identify the ways in which expatriates use SNSs to meet others who share common interests. Third, it investigated the ways that expatriates use SNSs to maintain social connections with friends, family, and colleagues in their home country. Fourth, this study investigated the ways that expatriates use SNSs to develop and maintain

personal and professional relationships with colleagues in the Netherlands. Finally, it sought to develop an understanding regarding the ways expatriates use SNSs and other communicative internet platforms to acquire information which facilitates acculturation. As a result, this study answered the following research question:

> *How do expatriates living in the Netherlands utilize the affordances of websites and social networking platforms during the adjustment and integration process?*

1.1 Social Context

Covering an area of about 41-thousand square kilometers, the Netherlands is a relatively small country (Nations Online, 2012). However, despite its small size, the Netherlands is home to about 16.4 million inhabitants and is currently the sixth largest exporter and foreign investor in the world (UWV, 2010). The nation's fair, vibrant, and effective parliamentary democracy, in combination with a multitude of trade and business-related tax benefits and incentives, has attracted more than 6,300 foreign companies that have established more than 8,800 business operations in the Netherlands (Holland Trade, 2012). In addition to a high number of foreign companies operating in the country, the Netherlands is also home to a multitude of domestically owned multi-national companies that employee a high number of foreign employees (Transnationale, 2013). The largest of these Dutch-owned companies is Shell, which has more than 90,000 employees globally and was ranked by Fortune Global 500 as the world's largest company (CNN Money, 2012).

The high number of foreign and domestically-owned multinational organizations has resulted in the development of a labor market with a high number of employment positions for both foreign and Dutch nationals. Despite the current recession in the global job market, "the Netherlands is still an attractive destination for highly-skilled migrants, and companies still have trouble recruiting for certain professions within the Dutch labor market" (Shaw, 2012).

As a result, the Dutch government has implemented a very liberal admissions policy for highly skilled migrants (IAmsterdam, 2013). Highly skilled migrants are described by the Dutch Immigration and Naturalization Service (2007) as "legislators, senior officials and managers; professionals; technicians and associate professionals" who have valuable skills and/or knowledge to make a valuable contribution on the economic or societal level" (p. 13).

In 2012, "5,800 highly skilled migrants arrived to the Netherlands from non-EU countries", most of whom originated from India (2,020), the United States (780), Japan (360),

and China (320) (Government of the Netherlands, 2013). To be admitted as a highly skilled migrant, the company employing them must be recognized by the IND and, as of 2013, highly skilled migrants must earn an annual salary of €52,010 if over the age of 30 or €38,141, if under 30 (Expat Law, 2013). As of 2010 there were over 26,000 foreign nationals living and working in the Netherlands as highly skilled migrants (Netherlands Foreign Investment Agency, 2010).

In addition to non-EU citizens working in the Netherlands as highly skilled immigrants, there are also avenues that foreign nationals can take if they want to live and work in the Netherlands. Specifically, citizens of non-EU countries can remain in the country for employment purposes following the successful completion of a Dutch higher educational program which results in a diploma (Expat Law, 2013). In this case, persons who have obtained a diploma in the Netherlands must acquire an employment position with a minimum annual salary requirement of €27,336 (Expat Law, 2013). There were 69-thousand international students enrolled in higher education programs in the Netherlands during the 2011-2012 academic year, 19-thousand of whom originated from countries outside of the EU (Nuffic, 2012, p. 3). Some of these international students will presumably seek employment opportunities in the Netherlands following the completion of their academic programs.

1.2 Relevance

The relevance of conducting such a study is threefold. First, the findings provide other researchers and the academic community at large with greater insight regarding the ways in which expatriates use online platforms and the impact those platforms may have on expatriate adjustment and integration. While many scholars have investigated expatriate adjustment and integration (e.g. Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2002; Hattingh, Matthee, & Lotriet, 2011; Pruetipibultham & McLean, 2011; Sanchez et al., 2000; Stroppa & Spieb, 2010; Hattingh et al., 2011; Tung, 1986), it is apparent that not many studies have explicitly investigated the use of online social media during the adjustment and integration process. In addition, no known study has specifically investigated the use of online social media by expatriates living in the Netherlands. As a result, this study provides the academic community with insight regarding the ways expatriates in the Netherlands use online social media during the adjustment and integration process.

Secondly, organizations may acquire a better understanding pertaining to the ways that expatriates use online social media and the impact such use may have on the overall adjustment and integration process. Understanding the role of online social media during the

adjustment and integration process from an organizational perspective is important for several reasons. First, the inability of expatriates to adjust within new cultural and/or organizational environments may result in premature termination and return from international assignments (Coperland & Griggs,1983). This may be very costly for organizations and may even result in a damaged company reputation, loss of business opportunities, and loss of market share (Black & Gregersen, 1991). Second, while failure to complete an assignment has obvious negative implications for organizations, it may also be harmful for the expatriate. Tung (1987) acknowledges that failure to complete an assignment may lower the expatriates' self-esteem and self-confidence, as well as cause a sense of shame amongst co-workers. Finally, failed expatriation may serve to decrease future commitment to the organization and job performance upon reparation (Adler, 1981; Naumann, 1993).

By developing an understanding regarding the ways that expatriates use online social media to adjust and integrate within the Netherlands, organizations may be better prepared to manage and counter the problems associated with misadjustment. Furthermore, organizations may be better equipped to implement policies that promote the use of online tools to facilitate expatriate adjustment and integration.

Finally, expatriates are provided with a better understanding regarding the ways that the use of SNSs may influence the adjustment process. In 2012, more than 5,800 highly skilled migrants arrived in the Netherlands, many of whom originated from the U.S., Japan, and China (Government of the Netherlands, 2013). Previous research indicates that expatriate adjustment can be a challenging and stressful process (Stroppa & Spieb, 2010). Many expatriates experience a form of uncertainty that has been termed as *social uncertainty*. This form of uncertainty is experienced when expatriates are cut off from previous social support networks, such as friends, family, and colleagues in the home country, and feel socially isolated and lonely in their host country (Fahr, Bartol, Shapiro, & Shin, 2010; Hattingh et al., 2012). One of the ways in which expatriates can overcome many of the challenges associated with expatriation is through the development of a social support network within the host country (Shaffer & Harrison, 2001).

Previous research has found that the use of online social media platforms to connect with other expatriates in the host country, HCNs, colleagues, and social connections in the home country, may influence the overall adjustment process (Farh et al., 2010; Hattingh et al., 2012; Ong & Ward, 2005; Shaffer & Harrison, 2001). By providing expatriates with a better understanding regarding the affordances of online social media and the influence such use

may have on the adjustment and integration process, they may be able to develop their own personal adjustment strategies during expatriation.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Sense of Community

One of the primary goals of this study was to identify the ways expatriates who are living in the Netherlands participate in and become part of virtual communities via online social networks. Ultimately, the goal was to develop a comprehensive understanding pertaining to the ways these virtual communities are used by expatriates to meet and socialize with other expatriates and Dutch nationals alike, and the influence such use may have on the adjustment and integration process. While much of the socialization through social networking sites and virtual communities will be initiated in the online realm, an additional point of investigation pertained to the ways friendships develop online and transition to the offline realm. As such, the overarching theories and concepts incorporated in this study relate to sense of community (SOC) and virtual communities. The concept of community is defined by Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton (1985) as

> a group of people who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussion and decision making, and who share certain practices that both define the community and are nurtured by it. Such a community is not quickly formed. It almost always has a history and so is also a community of memory, defined in part by its past and its memory of the past. (p. 333).

An additional definition of community is provided by McMillan and Chavis (1986). They define community as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (p. 9). Finally, Gusfield (1975) distinguishes between two different types of communities, *geographical* and *relational*. The concept of geographical communities pertains to communities that exist in relation to geographical areas, such as neighborhoods, towns, and cities, while relational communities refer to "human relationships without reference to location—communities of interest, such as hobby clubs, religious groups, or fan clubs" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 3). Some of the communities identified in this study were both geographical and relational. For example, one particular community that was found to be popular amongst members was the *Expats with Dogs in Amsterdam.* This community was geographically based in Amsterdam and attracted members who lived in the city. In this sense, the community is geographical. However, the community also attracts members who have niche hobbies and interests (i.e. their dogs). In this sense, the community takes on a relational component. Simultaneously, some communities were found to be purely geographical. For example, some expat-oriented communities were identified

that catered to expatriates who were living in a specific geographical location within the Netherlands. Additionally, some communities were found to be more relational. For example, a community that attracts members who share the interest and intent of learning the Dutch language. A community of this nature attracts members based on their shared interest rather than geographical location.

In 1986 McMillan and Chavis introduced and described the dynamics behind the SOC theory. Within their description and definition of SOC, the authors identified four fundamental elements: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. As described by McMillan and Chavis (1986),

> The first element is *membership.* Membership is the feeling of belonging or of sharing a sense of personal relatedness. The second element is *influence,* a sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group and of the group mattering to its members. The third element is reinforcement: *integration and fulfillment of needs. This is* the feeling that members' needs will be met by the resources received through their membership in the group. The last element is *shared emotional connection,* the commitment and belief that members have shared and will share history, common places, time together, and similar experiences. (p.9).

10 years later, in 1996, McMillan revised and extended the principles presented by McMillan and Chavis (1986). The revised SOC theory contained the same original principles, however, they were rearranged and renamed as follows: *Spirit*, *Trust*, *Trade*, and *Art* (McMillan, 1996).

Spirit. The element termed *spirit* was initially labeled as 'membership' and "emphasized boundaries that limit *us* from *them* and that create the form of emotional safety that encourages self-disclosure and intimacy" within groups and communities (McMillan, 1996, p. 315). While the concept of boundaries is still present within the *spirit* element, the *spirit* dimension within the current SOC theory "denotes recognition of membership in a community and the feelings of friendship, cohesion, and bonding" that develop amongst community members (Rovai, 2012). McMillan (1996) notes that the *spirit* element places a high amount of emphasis on friendship between community members.

An additional concept incorporated in the *spirit* element is *emotional safety*. The underlying principle of this concept within SOC theory is that community members are more likely to develop closer bonds and disclose more personal information when they feel that there is a high level of trust and emotional safety within the group (McMillan, 1996). Several previous studies found that higher degrees of personal disclosure occur when emotional safety

and the perception of trust are higher (Canary & Spitzberg, 1989; Canary & Cupach, 1988; Prager, 1989; Roscoe, Kennedy, & Pope, 1987). In relation to this study, the *spirit* element will relate the formation of close friendships and bonds that develop between members of different communities.

      Trust. The second element of the SOC theory developed by McMillan (1996) is *trust*. The concept of *trust* is defined as "the feeling that community members can be trusted and represents a willingness to rely on other members of the community in whom one has confidence" (Rovai, 2002). Doney and Cannon (1997) note that there are two dimensions of *trust*, perceived credibility and benevolence. The first dimension, perceived credibility, "focuses on the objective credibility of an exchange partner, an expectancy that the partner's word or written statement can be relied on" (p. 36). Benevolence, the second dimension, is based on "the extent to which one partner is genuinely interested in the other partner's welfare and motivated to seek joint gain" (p. 36).

      McMillan (1996) notes multiple requirements that must be fulfilled if trust is going to be established within communities. First, some form of order must be established and community members must have a clear understanding in regards to what they can expect from each other as well as the community. This sense of order and understanding facilitates the development of community norms, rules, or laws and enables community members to predict, plan, and commit.

      Second, following the establishment of order, the next element to building trust is authority. McMillan (1996) acknowledges that an individual or individuals must be in charge if information is to be disseminated effectively and decisions are to be made. Having decision makers in a community maintains a sense of order within the community. In regards virtual communities in the form of online social networks, authority may come in the form of a group or page administrator who may moderate and facilitate interaction amongst group members and/or may organize and host offline events.

      Finally, trust can be established within communities when the norms and rules established "allow members and authority to influence each other reciprocally" (McMillan, 1996, p. 320). Previous research indicates that the cohesiveness of communities becomes stronger when leaders influence members and when members are able to influence leaders (Miller, 1990). In this sense, the force of cohesiveness is transferred from individual community members to the community, and from the community to individual members. Furthermore, establishing a high level of trust within communities has been found to be

highly effective in producing intimacy within communities (Roark & Sharah, 1989). In regards to this element of trust within online communities, communities may become stronger and more intimate when individual community members have the ability to assist in the planning of different online and/or offline events. As a result, this study investigated the influence that community members have on community functions and activities.

Trade. The third element introduced into the revised SOC theory is that of *trade*. According to McMillan (1996), after a live spirit exists within a community and the elements related to trust have been established, a social economy can develop within the group. McMillan (1996) explains that this form of social economy within communities pertains to the ways that each member can benefit other members in the community. Furthermore, the community functions in a way that integrates members' needs and provides social resources. While the discovery of similarities between community members is said to be the strongest bonding force, it's also acknowledged that diversity within and between community members can also serve as a strong bonding force (McMillan, 1996). In regards to the discovery of similarities as a bonding force, McMillan and Chavis (1986) note that when people share similar values, needs, priorities, and goals, bonding and community cohesion become stronger.

In regards to this research project in relation to the development of communities through SNSs, the *trade* element of the SOC theory may pertain to the development of virtual communities in which community members share and exchange information with other members. Additionally, this aspect of the SOC theory may be used to identify similarities and differences between group members and the ways each of these elements serve to increase overall cohesion within the community. For example, community members may report the development of closer bonds with those whom have similar interests and/or backgrounds.

Art. The final element in the SOC theory has been termed by McMillan (1996) as *art*. Formerly labeled 'Shared Emotional Connection in Time and Space', this element can exist only after the other three elements have been established within a community: *Spirit*, *Trust*, and *Trade*. The concept behind this element is that community intimacy, cohesion, and bonding will only occur through group contact (McMillan, 1996). It's through this contact that community members engage in interaction and share collective experiences that become part of the community's collective heritage. Furthermore, McMillan (1996) notes that contact

between group members "must have a certain quality for it to become a collected memory that is art" (p. 323).

In relation to the identification of the *art* element within this study, many of the core concepts of this element may be established when communication and interaction transition from the online to the offline realm. For example, when an offline community event is planned, community members will have the opportunity to come together, communicate, and share collective experiences. Sharing collective experiences and developing friendships with other community will contribute to the community's heritage.

2.2 Sense of Virtual Community

Directly related to the SOC theory is the concept of Sense of Virtual Community. Koh and Kim (2004) describe virtual communities as a form of communication whereby community members share information and knowledge for mutual learning or problem solving. Furthermore, Balasubramanian and Mahajan (2001) defined virtual community in relation to the presence of five identifiable Characteristics. First, virtual communities are constituted by an aggregation of people; Second, community members are rational utility maximizers; third, community members interact with each other without being physically connected; fourth, community members engage in a social-exchange process that entails mutual production and consumption; Finally, there is a common objective, identity, or interest that is shared by all members.

While a primary element of virtual communities is that community members socialize and interact in the online realm, many members also engage in offline social interactions and activities, Koh and Kim (2004) note that these offline interactions are most apparent within virtual communities that initially originated in an offline context, such as fan clubs, alumni associations, or professional networks. As a result, Koh and Kim (2004) defined a virtual community as "a group of people with common interests or goals, interacting *predominantly* in cyberspace" (p. 76).

In regards to the concept of Sense of Virtual Community, this study investigated the ways that expatriates engage in different virtual communities and the ways they used these communities to meet and interact with other expatriates and Dutch nationals alike. Specifically, it sought to understand how community members interactions transition from the online to offline realms; how community members use virtual communities to share and exchange information; and how the use of such communities is perceived to influence overall adjustment.

2.3 Defining Expatriates

This study investigated the ways in which expatriates living in the Netherlands use internet technology and social media during the adjustment and integration process. Therefore, it is necessary that a thorough definition and conceptualization of what constitutes as an expatriate be provided. Additionally, because this study investigated expatriate adjustment, it is essential that a definition of *expatriate adjustment* be provided. Expatriate adjustment will be defined here as "the process by which the expatriate interacts with the social aspects of the local environment to obtain psychological well-being" (Wang & Nayir, 2006, p. 452)

As of 2012 there were more than 673,000 non-Dutch nationals living in the Netherlands, this equates to about 4% of the total number of people residing in the country (European Website on Integration, 2013). With a high inward flow of migrants arriving and taking up residence in the Netherlands, it is important that this conceptualization differentiates between expatriates from other forms of migrants who are living in the country. For example, many migrants living in the Netherlands may have migrated to the country as a result of family reunification, marriage/relationship, or asylum, which may disqualify them from being classified as expatriates. The forthcoming conceptualization will be based on previously identified definitions as well as information provided by the Dutch government.

Gatti (2009) provides a simple, yet effective, explanation in regards to what differentiates expatriates from other types of migrants. According to him, expatriates are motivated to move to a foreign country by professional reasons or because they seek experience abroad. Migrants, on the other hand, "are perceived as people who are obliged to leave their countries because of the tough life and work conditions in their homeland" (p. 2). In addition to being motivated to live abroad for professional reasons, Gatti (2009) notes that expatriates usually hold at least a bachelor´s degree, can speak multiple languages, and have had other experiences abroad. The differentiation between expatriates and migrants is quite pronounced, they have different biographies, different links to their country of origin, and a different perception of their host country and their future there (Gatti, 2009).

In an effort to meet the demand to fill different employment positions requiring scarce knowledge and skills, the Dutch government has implemented the Highly Skilled Migrant Program. The Highly Skilled Migrant Program allows employers in the Netherlands to hire foreigners from abroad who possess a valuable and scarce type of knowledge or skill (Office for Labour and Highly Skilled Migrants, 2012). Despite the current recession in the global

job market, "the Netherlands is still an attractive destination for highly-skilled migrants, and companies still have trouble recruiting for certain professions within the Dutch labor market" (Shaw, 2012).

As a way of attracting more highly skilled migrants to the Netherlands, the government has also implemented the Highly Educated Migrant program. Under this program, individuals who have acquired a Master's or PhD degree from either a Dutch higher education institution or a foreign university listed in the top 200 education rankings published by the Times Higher Education Supplement, may apply for an orientation year in the Netherlands (Euraxess, 2010). Within this time period, highly educated migrants must locate an employment position which pays them a minimum annual salary of €27,336.

Another way of retaining highly educated and skilled migrants is through a program which allows foreign students, upon obtaining a Bachelor, Master, or PhD degree from a Dutch higher education institution, to remain in the Netherlands on a special residence permit (Expatlaw, 2013). The residence permit allows these former students to remain in the Netherlands for up to a year while they are in search of employment. Just as with the Highly Educated Migrant program, former students taking part in this program must also find an employment position which pays them a minimum annual salary of €27,336.

The conceptualization of expatriate used in this study is related to both the conceptualization provided by Gatti (2009) as well as the legislation enacted by the government in an effort to attract and retain highly skilled and knowledgeable migrants. As a result, expatriates were conceptualized as those who moved to the Netherlands either as highly skilled or highly educated migrants. Additionally, the conceptualization is extended to former students who graduated from a higher education institution in the Netherlands with either a Bachelor, Master, or PhD degree and have since found employment while using the orientation year allowed by the government. Gatti (2009) noted distinctive differences between expatriates and other types of migrants. As a result, migrants who entered the Netherlands for reasons other than those listed above were omitted from being considered expatriates.

2.4 Using SNS to Meet and Socialize with Others

The challenges faced by expatriates when adjusting and integrating within a new and foreign environment can bring about high levels of stress and uncertainty (Stroppa & Spieb, 2010). Sanchez, Spector, and Cooper (2000) explain that "learning to manage in and cope with a foreign environment involves such a profound personal transformation that it has an

analog in the process of human development throughout the life-span" (p. 96). Furthermore, the authors note that successful adjustment and integration requires expatriates to undergo a profound personal transformation which involves the formation of a new multicultural identity. Doing so will allow expatriates to overcome many of the stress related issues associated with an international reassignment. If expatriates are unable to adjust to their new environment, there is a risk that they will become overstressed, will not be able to work effectively, and may have to terminate their overseas assignment prematurely (Stroppa & Spieb, 2010).

An important consideration that was taken into account during the design of this research project has to do with the fact that multiple factors may influence expatriates ability to integrate and adjust to life in the Netherlands. Previous research has shown that a multitude of factors influence expatriate adjustment and adaptation within their host country (Hattingh et al., 2011). Some of these factors include the level of expatriate knowledge and training in regards to the host nations' culture and traditions (Waxin & Panaccio, 2005), fluency of the host nations' language (Tung, 1986), the maturity and personality of the expatriate (Shaffer, Harrison, Gregersen, Black, & Ferzandi, 2006), and the development and presence of a social network within the host country (Bruning et al., 2012). A social network can be described as "a set of actors connected by work or social connections with other individuals" (Bruning, Sonpar, & Wang 2012, p. 445).

The form of social networks that were investigated in this study are those of virtual communities, which are embedded within SNSs. Within virtual communities, member interaction is facilitated through computer mediated communication (CMC). CMC refers to human communication through computers or other internet connected devices that allow users to communicate with each other (Simpson, 2002). Additionally, Simpson (2002) explains that CMC includes "various types of text-based online chat, computer, audio, and video conferencing" as well as "email, discussion forums, and mailing lists" (p. 414). One of the beneficial aspects of CMC is its ability to transcend the limitations of space and time. While CMC supports the development of virtual communities, many of these communities are either rooted in, or sustained by, real physical community (Hiller and Franz, 2004).

The use of virtual communities to meet and interact with other expatriates and host country nationals may influence expatriate adjustment and integration. Previous research indicates that frequent social interaction with other expatriates and host country nationals provides expatriates with an invaluable information source regarding culturally acceptable behaviors and norms and reduces uncertainties pertaining to work and non-work-related

issues (Feldman and Bolino, 1999; Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2002). Furthermore, Caligiuri and Lazarova (2002) claim that the social support received through social networks (from family, colleagues, and other expatriates) helps to mobilize psychological resources and "serves to provide feelings of reinforcement, recognition and affirmation that can greatly enhance expatriate' cross-cultural adjustment" (p. 762).

The acquisition of social support through various social networks is a necessary component in our daily lives and is specifically significant in the context of adjusting and integrating within a foreign country. Stroppa and Spieb (2010) acknowledged two social support mechanisms:

> First, social support is a primary need, in which humans have a phylogenetic need to work in a social group. A lack of social support automatically leads to a diminution of well-being. Second, positive feedback connected with social support directly affects self-confidence and thus other components of mental well-being. In the context of support by family, family to work facilitation is a family protective factor that offsets and buffers the deleterious effects of work family conflict on mental health (p. 2307).

The acquisition of social support and the development of social networks are closely related. As a result, this aspect of the study focused on the ways in which expatriates living in the Netherlands use virtual communities to meet and socialize with other expatriates and Dutch national alike.

Socializing with Other Expatriates. Social support theory suggests that individuals are more likely to socialize and seek emotional support from those they perceive to have shared similar experiences and stressors (Cohen, Underwood, & Gottlieb, 2000). In the context of expatriation, common problems experienced by expatriates during the adjustment and integration process may serve to create a bond between expatriates and the development of a network that facilitates social support through adjustment empathy. Farh et al. (2010) explain that "[a]ctors with adjustment empathy—that is, actors who are going through or have gone through stressful adjustment experiences similar to those of the focal expatriate—are likely to be perceived by expatriates as helpful sources of emotional support" (p. 441). Furthermore, those with adjustment empathy are better able to relate to "the expatriate's feelings of bewilderment and confusion in the host country, reassure the expatriate that he or she is not alone, and help the expatriate make sense of the new environment" (Farh et al., 2010, p. 441).

While no known study has investigated the effects of SNSs and virtual communities on expatriate adjustment and integration in the Netherlands, several studies have sought to understand the effects of social networks on expatriates living in other countries. Pruetipibultham and McLean (2011) conducted a study in which they investigated the influence of social networks on the adjustment of Thai nationals who were living in the Lao PDR and Indonesia. A key aspect of this study was its investigation of relationship closeness with fellow expatriates in relation to adjustment. The findings of the study revealed that "the feeling of closeness to social actors was the key factor to enhance expatriates' overall adjustment " (p. 10). Additionally, Pruetipibultham and McLean (2011) found that the development of close relational ties with other expatriates provided expatriates with greater feeling of emotional support, trust, and feeling of communicative openness.

A study conducted by Hattingh et al., (2012) investigated online social media use amongst expatriates living in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). The study applied the SOC theory and sought to develop an understanding pertaining to media use and the formation of the expatriate community within the country. In conjunction with the *spirit* element of the SOC theory, which suggests that community membership creates a form of emotional safety by emphasizing boundaries that distinguishes between community members and non-members, the study found that expatriates living in KSA were more likely to identify with and befriend other expatriates (Hattingh et al., 2012). Moreover, the authors found that expatriates were more likely to bond with other expatriates who were of the same nationality and worked at the same organization. Pruetipibultham and McLean (2011) had similar findings. Their research revealed that more than half of all actors within expatriate networks were of the same nationality as the expatriate. While both studies had similar findings, the findings of Hattingh et al., (2012) confirm those found in the earlier study by Pruetipibultham and McLean (2011). As a result of the findings by Hattingh et al., (2012) and Pruetipibultham and McLean (2011), this study investigated the ways that expatriates living in the Netherlands use virtual communities to meet and interact with other expatriates who share their nationality and/or employment organization. Moreover, it also sought to understand the perceived influence such connections had on expatriate adjustment.

Socializing with Host Country Nationals. In addition to socializing with other expatriates, meeting and interacting with host country nationals (HCN) has also been found to be highly beneficial for expatriate adjustment and integration. Caligiuri and Lazarova (2002) note that establishing a social network with HCNs reduces many of the challenges and

uncertainties faced by expatriates. For example, host country nationals can provide expatriates with valuable information pertaining to schools, shopping, clubs, etc. (Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2002). Additionally, developing such networks provides expatriates with opportunities to learn new languages, cultural norms, and behaviors that are accepted and expected within the host country (Toh & DeNisi, 2007). Ultimately, these networks provide expatriates with informational and instrumental resources that assist in their adjustment.

In regards to expatriates living in the Netherlands, developing friendships and close relational ties with Dutch nationals may provide expatriates with a high level of support during the adjustment and integration process. Toh and DeNisi (2007) developed a model that focused on the role of HCNs on expatriate adjustment. The model highlighted two fundamental socializing behaviors of HCNs regarding their role in expatriate adjustment and integration: providing role information and offering social support. In regards to providing role information, the authors note that "expatriate newcomers need to learn what to expect, how to interpret various stimuli, and how to behave appropriately in their new role in the host country" (p. 283). In response to this gap of knowledge, HCNs possess important knowledge and essential links to valuable informational resources that contribute to the expatriates' sense-making process (Toh & DeNisi, 2007; Feldman & Bolino, 1999). As a result of the model developed by Toh and DeNisi (2007), this study investigated the role HSNs had on providing role information and social support during the adjustment process.

Second, HCNs are able to provide expatriates with social support. Toh and DeNisi (2007) claim that "because expatriates are no longer in a familiar social environment where their network of friendships is readily available, they need to develop alternative sources of social support" (p. 283). Social support can be described as quality friendships or caring relationships that provide "emotional reassurance, needed information, or instrumental aid in dealing with stressful situations" (Fisher, 1985, p. 40). Furthermore, the acquisition of social support, from other expatriates and HCNs alike, has been found to reduce stress and facilitate adjustment amongst expatriates (Toh & DeNisi, 2007; Bruning et al., 2012; Bhaskar-Shrinivas, Harrison, Shaffer, & Luk, 2005).

Previous research indicates that the development of social networks between expatriates as well as HCNs serves to influence the adjustment and integration process. Caligiuri (2000) found a positive relationship between the amount of time expatriates spend bonding and socializing with HCNs and adjustment. Furthermore, the development and proliferation of social networking sites provides expatriates with a plethora of opportunities to meet and interact with others through virtual communities. As a result of the potential

influence that developing social connections with other expatriates and HCNs may have on the adjustment process during expatriation, this study sought to answer the following research question:

> *RQ1: How do expatriates use social networking sites to meet and socialize with other expatriates and Dutch nationals alike in both the online and offline realms?*

2.5 Meeting Others who Share Common Interests

An additional element of this study pertained to the ways that expatriates who are living in the Netherlands use SNSs to meet and socialize with others who share their common interests. A fundamental aspect of developing friendships and close relational ties with others has to do with the identification of common interests and activities between individuals (Hartup, 1993). Sias and Cahill (1998) also note that similarity in regards to attitudes, values, and interests serve to facilitate the formation of friendships. The formation of friendships and close relational ties may serve to influence the overall adjustment process. Liu and Chen (2003) claim that the development of friendships may serve as important sources of emotional support and mutual assistance during expatriate adjustment.

The concept of *common interests* is quite broad and is not necessarily limited to specific interests or activities. While the concept can pertain to something very specific, such as expats living in Amsterdam who wish to become more proficient in the Dutch language, Hiller and Franz (2004) note that people may develop common interests simply based on geographical proximity to one another or sharing some prior place-based identity.

SNS and Common Interests. SNSs and other forms of online social media provide users with a plethora of opportunities to meet, socialize, and befriend others who share common interests and activities. Boyd and Ellison (2008) acknowledge that there are "hundreds of SNSs, with various technological affordances, supporting a wide range of interests and practices" (p. 210). A main function of SNSs is their ability to assist in the maintenance of pre-existing friendships and social networks, but they can also be used to help strangers connect based on their similar interests, political views, and/or activities (Boyd & Ellison, 2008).

The multitude of SNSs that cater to specific interests provide users with seemingly endless opportunities to meet and connect with other like-minded individuals. For example, Care2 is a platform that allows activists to meet and organize events; Linkedin is SNS and job search site for professionals; Couchsurfing connects travelers to people with available accommodation; and MyChurch connects church members to their churches. In addition to

interest-specific SNSs, there are also SNSs that are more general in nature. Facebook, which has more than 1 billion active users and is currently the world's largest SNS (Ortutay, 2013), does not cater to any specific user interest. Nevertheless, Facebook users can create and join virtual communities and fan pages based on specific interests (Ellison et al., 2007). For example, photography enthusiasts can join photography-related virtual community, dog owners can join a virtual community that allows them to meet other dog owners, expatriates living in a particular country can join a virtual community that allows them to connect and socialize with other expatriates.

Previous research highlights the importance of identifying common interests when socializing and making friends online, especially if those friendships are to carry-over to the offline realm. Xie (2007) conducted a study in which he explored the ways that older Americans utilize the communicative function of the internet to meet and socialize with others in first online and then offline settings. In conjunction with the idea that successful friendship formation is closely related to the identification of common interests (Hartup, 1993), the study revealed that participants were more likely to develop friendships and social relationships with those who share their common interests (Xie, 2007).

Clearly, the proliferation of SNSs and virtual communities has provided users with a plethora of opportunities to meet and interact with others who share their interests. Furthermore, previous research indicates that the identification of shared interests serves to facilitate the formation of friendship (Sias & Cahill, 1998) and the creation of such friendships may serve as important sources of emotional support and mutual assistance during expatriate adjustment (Liu & Chen, 2003).

While previous research indicates that the identification of common interests between individuals can serve to facilitate the development of friendships, relatively little research has been conducted which investigates the ways that SNSs and virtual communities can mediate this process. Moreover, no known research has specifically investigated the use of SNSs and virtual communities by expatriates to meet others who share their interests. As a result of previous findings and the apparent gap in research, this study sought to investigate the ways expatriates living in the Netherlands use such platforms to meet and interact with others who share their interests. Therefore, this study sought to answer the following research question:

> *RQ 2: How do expatriates use social networking sites to meet others who share common interests?*

2.6 Maintaining Social Connections with Others Back Home

The advent and proliferation of SNS sites and other CMC platforms has provided expatriates with a plethora of opportunities to stay connected with friends, family, and colleagues who are located in the home country and other locations throughout the world (Hattingh et al., 2012). The support received from friends and family in the home country can help to mobilize expatriates' psychological resources and emotional well-being, which ultimately serves to enhance their confidence and ability to successfully manage the obstacles associated with cross-cultural adjustment (Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2002). As a result, one of the purposes of this study was to identify the ways that expatriates use SNSs to maintain social connections with those in their home country.

Many expatriates experience high levels of stress and uncertainty upon relocating to their host country (Stroppa & Spieb, 2010). While there are many contributing factors, Black and Gregersen (1991) acknowledge that a significant source of this uncertainty has to do with the fact that the emotional and informational resources, in the form of social networks, that were available in the home country are no longer present or relevant. This form of uncertainty, which can be termed *social uncertainty*, is experienced when expatriates are cut off from previous social support networks and feel socially isolated and lonely in their host country (Fahr et al., 2010; Hattingh et al., 2012). Different expatriates may experience different levels of uncertainty at different times. Fahr et al. (2010) note that the highest levels of uncertainty will occur either just after arrival into the host country or after the initial 'honeymoon' period has ended and the 'culture shock' period has set in.

As a result of expatriation, many participants in this study may experience high levels of uncertainty. Therefore, this study investigated the ways in which expatriates use SNSs and virtual communities to overcome these feelings. One of the ways that expatriates can overcome social uncertainty is through the acquisition of social support by maintaining regular contact with friends, family, and other social connections in the home country (Shaffer & Harrison, 2001). Maintaining connections with connections back home may provide participants with the ability to overcome feelings of loneliness and uncertainty. Previous research indicates that social support is a "significant factor in reducing life-change stress and promoting positive health outcomes, including both physical and psychological well-being" (Ong & Ward, 2005, p. 637). In their study of English-speaking expatriates living in Singapore, Ong and Ward (2005) found that the majority of expatriate social network connections consisted of those who were located outside of the host country. Furthermore, the majority of participants in their study felt that their home country social connections "were much stronger, closer, and more familiar compared to local ties and that they served more

personal needs such as the provision of spiritual, emotional, moral, and psychological support" (Ong & Ward, 2005, p. 639).

The communicative affordances provided by SNSs, virtual communities, and other CMC platforms allow expatriates to maintain social connections with friends, family, and colleagues in their home country, and thus negotiate feelings of loneliness and isolation (Hattingh et al., 2012). Many of the communicative barriers once associated with geographical distances are now perceived to be more permeable, this is mainly due to the fact that it is now possible to maintain continuous contact with those in the home country (Hiller & Franz, 2004). In their study of expatriates living in Saudi Arabia, Hattingh et al. (2012) found that social networking tools, such as Facebook and Skype, were perceived by expatriates to be invaluable resources when maintaining social connections with people back home. The maintenance of these social connections through frequent communication served to confirm expatriates' sense of belonging within the traditional family unit and home-based social networks (Hattingh et al., 2012).

Previous research has investigated the use of SNSs and other communicative platforms by expatriates to stay connected with friends, family, and colleagues in the host country, however, no known study has specifically investigated the use of such platforms by expatriates who are living in the Netherlands. In an effort to close this research gap, this study sought to identify and understand the ways expatriates living in the Netherlands use SNSs and other communicative platforms to stay connected with friends, family, and colleagues in their home countries:

> *RQ 3: How do expatriates use social networking sites to maintain social connections with friends, colleagues, and family in their home country?*

2.7 Developing and Maintaining Relationships with Colleagues

An additional element of this study investigated the ways that expatriates use social networking sites and virtual communities to develop and maintain personal and professional relationships with colleagues in the Netherlands. As stated previously, expatriates face many challenges during the adjustment and integration process that can bring about high levels of stress and uncertainty (Stroppa & Spieb, 2010). The stress and uncertainty experienced during this process may serve to threaten both the physical health and psychological well-being of expatriates (Ong & Ward, 2005). Furthermore, previous research indicates that the primary cause of cross-cultural failure, poor job performance, and early termination of assignments abroad is the stress and uncertainty experienced by expatriates and thus their

inability to adjust to their new environment (Forster, 1997; Tung, 1981). Wang and Kanungo (2004) note that expatriates "psychological well-being will be threatened not only by the uncertainty of the environment and culture, but also by the loss of their previous social networks" (p. 777).

The development of social support networks through personal and professional relationships with colleagues may assist expatriates in the overall adjustment and integration process. Social interaction with colleagues makes expatriates feel that their presence is valued and results in a sense of acceptance, belonging, and satisfaction, which ultimately serves to facilitate cross-cultural adjustment (Aycan 1997; Stroppa & Spieb, 2010). The development of such social networks may also be beneficial for organizations who employ expatriates. Stroppa and Spieb (2010) note that colleagues who are already working at the organization can teach expatriates the appropriate behaviors necessary to be successful and can thus assist in the organizational socialization process. Additionally, the support received from such networks may play an instrumental role in strengthening expatriates psychological well-being so they can carry-out their international assignments effectively (Wang & Kanungo, 2004).

Previous research indicates that a key component of successful expatriate adjustment is directly related to social interaction and the acquisition of social support (Adelman, 1988; Aycan, 1997). One of the sources for such social support is through the establishment of close social ties and the development of friendships within the workplace. A study of expatriates in Japan revealed that those who developed close social ties with colleagues and perceived positive attitudes and support from their bosses, colleagues, and subordinates were significantly better adjusted to the host country (Napier and Taylor, 1995). Furthermore, this aspect of social support will allow expatriates to learn appropriate organizational behaviors and has been found to positively influence job performance (Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2002).

Oftentimes, many of the friendships and social connections that are established at the workplace are transferred and further developed in other non work-related environments (Wang & Nayir, 2006). A common nationality has been found to be one of the key components when forming close social and relational ties with colleagues (Manev & Stevenson, 2001) and generates shared perspectives and potential conversational content (DiMaggio, 1992). Furthermore, Manev and Stevenson (2001) note that friendships and bonds are more likely to be developed between those who share common backgrounds and interests. The development of friendships and social networks with colleagues may provide expatriates with valuable substitutes for the lack of geographical connectedness with friends

and family in the home country. Sanchez et al. (2000) highlight the fact that whereas friends and family provide simple emotional support and consolidation, colleagues and other expatriates provide a form of tangible support that directly reduces stressors and ultimately serves to facilitate adjustment.

The use of SNSs and virtual communities within organizations provides members with a wealth of opportunities to informally meet, interact, and socialize with colleagues. It's through this type of informal communication that organizational knowledge and expertise can be shared between colleagues (Hansen, 1999). Previous research has also suggested that the use of SNSs by colleagues can be used to organize offline social events which may ultimately serve to reinforce meaningful relationships within the workplace (Coleman, 1988; Dekker, 2004). As was discussed above, the acquisition of social support through the development of meaningful relationships with colleagues makes expatriates feel that their presence is valued and results in a sense of acceptance, belonging, and satisfaction, which ultimately serves to facilitate cross-cultural adjustment (Aycan 1997; Stroppa & Spieb, 2010).

Clearly, previous research has found there to be a positive relationship regarding the development of friendships and social connections with colleagues and adjustment within both the workplace and host country. However, no known study has investigated the use of SNSs by expatriates living in the Netherlands to meet and interact with colleagues and the influence such use may have on adjustment. Therefore, this study sought to answer the following research question:

> *RQ4: How do expatriates use social networking sites to develop and maintain personal and professional relationships with colleagues in the Netherlands?*

2.8 Expatriation, SNSs, and Acculturation

Finally, this study sought to identify and understand the ways in which expatriates living in the Netherlands use SNSs and other websites to acquire information that facilitates acculturation within the host country. Acculturation is closely related to expatriate adjustment and can be described as "those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups"(Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936, p. 149). The concept of acculturation can be broken down into two dimensions: *cultural preservation*, which is "the extent to which members of a cultural sub-group need to preserve their own cultural norms"; and *partner attractiveness*, which is "the extent to which members of a cultural sub-group are attracted to the norms of the larger society in which they operate"

(Tung, 1998, p. 126). Because this study is focused the acculturation of expatriates who are living in the Netherlands, the *partner attractiveness* dimension of the concept is particularly relevant.

For expatriates living in the Netherlands, learning about the Dutch culture and cross-culturally adjusting may significantly and positively influence their overall ability to adjust. In their study of cross-cultural adjustment, Yamazaki and Kayes (2004) identified nine core competencies necessary for successful cross-cultural adjustment of expatriates. These competencies include: building relationships; taking action and initiative; listening and observing; translating complex information; adaptability and flexibility; valuing people of different cultures; coping with ambiguity; managing others; and managing stress. While Yamazaki and Kayes (2004) note that each of these core competencies are essential for successful expatriate adjustment and acculturation, the first four competencies listed are specifically relevant to this study and can be applied to virtual community and internet use by expatriates in relation to acculturation.

Yamazaki and Kayes (2004) explain the core competency of *building relationships* as the deliberate engagement and interaction with others in the host country, particularly members of the host country. From a communicative standpoint, expatriates must be able to recognize and effectively deal with misunderstandings and develop a willingness to maintain communication with others, even when communication is difficult. This element is closely related to the second core competency of *taking action and initiative*, which involves expatriates ability to take the initiative to approach and interact with strangers of the host country.

Previous research indicates that expatriates who are more socially active and engage in interpersonal communication with others, fellow expatriates and host country nationals alike, are better adjusted, both psychologically and physically (Kim, 1978). Furthermore, developing friendships and close relational ties provides expatriates with opportunities to learn new languages, cultural norms, and behaviors of the host country, thus facilitating the acculturation process (Toh & DeNisi, 2007). In regards to the use of virtual communities by expatriates living in the Netherlands, this element may consist of the use of virtual communities to meet and interact with Dutch nationals.

The third core competency listed, *listening and observing*, entails spending time observing, reading about, and studying the host culture (Yamazaki & Kayes, 2004). This requires expatriates to ask questions and take careful account of situations before taking actions or making presumptions. From the perspective of virtual communities and expatriate

acculturation, expatriates may use virtual communities or other internet platforms to learn about the host country's culture and traditions. A survey of expatriates living in Denmark revealed that 68% of respondents had used social networking sites and other online tools to learn about the Danish culture and locate cultural activities and events in their area (Expat Survey, 2012).

In addition to providing users with information about the host nation's culture, such platforms can be used to reduce uncertainty by providing a deeper understanding of a society's values, norms, and traditions (Chen, 2013; Yang et al., 2004). Yang et al. (2004) conducted a study in which they investigated acculturation in relation to media use amongst Chinese students in the U.S. The study found that the use of various SNSs and other internet platforms were used by Chinese students to develop a better understanding of American culture and traditions. Furthermore, the study found that students who reported persistent patterns of such media use were better adjusted to their new cultural surroundings.

Finally, the authors note that successful acculturation and adjustment requires expatriates to *translate complex information*. This entails the development of a working knowledge of the host country's language and the ability to translate personal thoughts into that language. (Yamazaki & Kayes, 2004). Lu et al. (2011) claim that understanding and being able to communicate in the host nation's language is a prominent factor in determining one's ability to adequately acculturate and adjust within the host country.

In combination with using virtual communities to learn about the host nation's culture, such platforms can also be used by expatriates to learn the Dutch language. Ota (2011) notes that virtual communities that exist within SNSs, such as Facebook and MySpace, have been used in many countries throughout the world to teach and learn a second language. Moreover, while much of the learning and interaction takes place online, many of these groups also have an offline dimension that provides group members with opportunities to meet and further develop their language skills in person Ota, 2011). For example, in Japan there are virtual communities that provide foreigners with the opportunity to learn the Japanese language. Ota (2011) also claims that in combination with fulfilling the language learning needs of group members, such communities are also important for the gratification of social needs.

One of the ways in which expatriates living in the Netherlands may acquire a working knowledge, or become entirely proficient, in the Dutch language is through online social meet-up groups that bring expatriates together who share the desire to learn the country's language. Gaining a better understanding of the Dutch language might also be achieved

through the use of language learning websites as well as other platforms. Engaging in such communities may further assist in the acculturation process.

The use of SNSs and other websites provides expatriates with a plethora of opportunities to learn about and become accustomed to the culture of the host nation. Additionally, the development and ever increasing popularity of SNSs has provided users with additional opportunities to learn a second language. However, the use of different online platforms for the purpose of acculturation and language learning is a relatively new phenomenon that has not been studied extensively. Moreover, no known study has investigated the use of SNSs and other online platforms amongst expatriates living in the Netherlands in relation to acculturation and learning the Dutch language. Therefore, this study sought to investigate the ways expatriates used such platforms during the acculturation process.

RQ5: How do expatriates use social networking sites and websites to acquire information which facilitates the acculturation process?

3. Research Design

The qualitative methodological approach chosen for this study is that of hermenuetical phenomenology. Phenomenological research investigates and describes the meaning of a concept or phenomenon as experienced by a specific group of people (Creswell, 2007). Furthermnore, hermenuetical phenomenological research focuses specifically on a phenomenon or concern that interests the researcher and is oriented towards interpreting and describing lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). Ultimately, the aim of utilizing a phenomenological approach was to acquire comprehensive descriptions which provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the experience regarding the phenomenon being studied (Moustakas, 1994).

The hermenuetical phenomenological approach was chosen for this study for three distinct reasons. First, this approach is used to explain the ways a limited number of individuals experience the same phenomena (Creswell, 2007). In this regard, this study sought to investigate the ways a relatively small number of expatriates living in the Netherlands use websites and SNSs for various purposes during the adjustment and integration process. Secondly, topics pertaining to this form of research are based on the concerns and interests of the researcher (Creswell, 2007). In this case, I myself am an international from a non-EU country who is residing in the Netherlands. In addition, I have actively used the internet and social media platforms to assist in the integration process. Therefore, I am not only interested in this topical area as a researcher, but also as an expatriate who is living in the Netherlands. Finally, phenomenological research in general, and hermeneutical in particular, provides both a description and interpretation of the phenomena as experienced by participants (Creswell, 2007). In conjunction with this characteristic of phenomenological research, this study provides both a thick description and thematic analysis regarding the ways study participants experienced the phenomenon.

3.1 Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured open-ended individual interviews with 12 expatriates living in the Netherlands. The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Babbie (2008) describes the qualitative interview as an "interaction between an interviewer and a respondent in which the interviewer has a general plan of inquiry including the topics to be covered, but not a set of questions that must be asked with particular words and in a particular order" (pp. 335-336). Using this form of data collection allowed for the acquisition of comprehensive and in-depth data pertaining to the topic of the study.

The format of the interviews was semi-structured in nature. This particular interview format incorporates a list of issues and topics that should be discussed with participants during the interview process (Thomas, 2011). A key benefit of following a semi-structured interview format is that it allows for follow-up questions and 'probes' (Thomas, 2011). As a result of utilizing this structure, the interviews incorporated pre-determined open-ended questions that for follow-up questions and probing based on the responses of interviewees. The semi-structured nature of the interviews also allowed for the identification of other, previously unknown, aspects pertaining to the ways expatriates use social media. See Appendix I for an overview of interview questions and topics.

In accordance with a set of interview procedures discussed by Creswell (2007), the interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions that were developed based on the central research question and subsequent sub-questions. In addition to taking detailed notes during the interviews, the interviews were also be audibly recorded and the recorded data was transcribed into text.

3.2 Sample

The participants sampled for this study consisted of expatriates who originated from non-EU countries. In accordance with the conceptualization of what constitutes as an expatriate in this study, the sample consisted of non-EU professionals who are living and working in the Netherlands and have either entered the country as highly skilled migrants or have acquired a diploma from an institution of higher education in the Netherlands and have since found employment in the country. The number of participants chosen for this study is 12. For phenomenological studies, such as this one, Polkinghorne (1989) recommends that researchers should interview between 5 to 25 participants. For the scope and topic of this research, it was determined that 12 participants would provide sufficient information and insight necessary to answer the research questions.

Sampling was conducted through purposeful sampling. Participants acquired through the purposeful sampling technique are selected "because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study" (Creswell, 2007, p. 125). In order to recruit participants, snowball sampling was employed by asking interviewees to suggest additional people for interviewing and "is appropriate when the members of a special population are difficult to locate" (Babbie, 2008, p. 205). Specifically, criterion sampling was employed to select participants. This form of sampling involves the

selection of a sample that meet some predetermined criterion of importance (Patton, 2001). The specific criterion and factors that determined sample selection are discussed later in this section. Because this study specifically investigated the social media use of expatriates living in the Netherlands, and the number of foreign nationals living and working in the Netherlands as highly skilled migrants is relatively low (26,000) (Netherlands Foreign Investment Agency, 2010), it was decided that these two sampling techniques were optimal for this study.

The initial (purposeful) sample was located through two channels. First, I myself am a non-EU citizen who has been living, working, and studying in the Netherlands for over 3 years. I am also very active on social media platforms which cater to expatriates who are living in the country. As a result, some of the participants were located through my own professional and personal networks. Second, a close relationship has been developed between myself and the organizational leaders of one of the largest websites which provides daily news and information to international communities in the Netherlands. The organization has an expansive database of internationals living in the Netherlands and offered to supply this study with qualified participants. When interviewing the participants through each of the channels above, snowball sampling techniques was used to locate additional participants.

There were other factors that determined which participants were chosen for this study. Hiller and Franz (2004) identified a typology of migrant phases in relation to the integration process: the *pre-migrant*, the *post-migrant*, and the *settled-migrant*. The authors describe each of the phases as follows:

> The *pre-migrant* has not yet moved and is still located in their place of origin. The pre-migrant is considering the possibility of moving and typically is seeking information and linkages to assist in making the decision to move or has already made the decision and is looking for informational supports to facilitate the move. The *post-migrant* has completed the move but has been away from the community of origin, or conversely located in the new destination, for less than five years. While five years is a somewhat arbitrary timeframe, it suggests a reasonable period of adaptation. The third phase focuses on the *settled migrant* who has been located at the destination for more than five years. (p. 737)

As a result of the typology identified by Hiller and Franz (2004), participants selected for this study were those who could be classified as post-migrants. This is due to the fact that post-migrants have not been living in the country for very long and therefore may still be going through the adjustment and integration process. The other two typologies will be omitted from this study. Pre-migrants have yet to move to the Netherlands and therefore have

not experienced living in the country. And settled-migrants may have completely assimilated and integrated into Dutch culture and may not be reliant on virtual communities to interact with and receive information from other internationals.

Gender Differences. The sample of participants for this study consisted of both males and females. However, it should be noted that men and women may experience the adjustment and integration process differently. Guthrie, Ash, and Stevens (2003) note that there are gender-based personality differences between men and women that may influence the ways in which members of each of the genders successfully adjusts during expatriation. Furthermore, Sackett and Wilk (1994) investigated gender differences using various personality measurement instruments and identified sizable personality differences between men and women. While there is still considerable debate and discussion regarding the ways in which these differences influence expatriates ability to adjust (Guthrie et al., 2003; Morrison & Von Glinow, 1990), a study conducted by Haslberger (2010) found that women, in general, are better adapted than men to successfully adjust during expatriation. Specifically, the study revealed that women are stronger than men at building and maintaining relationships with members of the host country, other expatriates, and business partners (Haslberger, 2010).

Marital Status. Marital status may also influence expatriates ability to adjust and integrate within the new country. While this study incorporated married and unmarried participants alike, it should be noted that previous research indicates that married expatriates may have an easier time adjusting than those who are single or separated from their spouse (Hattingh et al., 2011; van Oudenhoven, Mol, & van der Zee, 2003). This is due to the fact that a spouse can provide additional emotional and psychological support that assists in the adjustment and integration process (Black & Stephens, 1989; Kraimer, Wayne, & Jaworski, 2001).

Age. Additionally, the participants selected for this study were from a wide range of age groups. Nevertheless, it is important to understand the ways in which age may influence expatriate adjustment. Previous researchers has found that older expatriates are better able to adjust during the expatriation process (Church, 1982). This is because many older adults are generally more satisfied with their work than younger adults (Brush et al., 1987). Feldman (1991) notes that middle-aged adults may experience the most problems when it comes to

engaging in expatiation and adjusting to a new foreign environment. This is due to the fact "they are neither young enough to have few family responsibilities and few established roots, nor old enough to be largely done with parenting and to have large amounts of status and responsibilities" (Feldman, 1991, p. 510). Moreover, while younger adults may face more challenges and stressors due to the high number of uncertainties associated with expatriate adjustment, Church (1982) notes that younger adults are more prone to be socially active with other expatriates and HCNs when compared to older expatriates.

3.3 Analysis

Following the collection and transcription of data in the form of interviews, the data was analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative analytical method and is used to analyze data in relation to identifiable themes (Marks, 2004). According to Braun and Clarke (2008), thematic analysis is a highly useful and flexible research tool which provides a rich and detailed account of data. Furthermore, thematic analysis can incorporate two forms of coding, deductive coding, in which the researcher introduces pre-determined theoretical ideas and themes, and inductive coding, in which themes are identified as a result of the raw data collected (Marks, 2004).

This form of analysis was chosen for this study based on its flexibility and versatility. Additionally, thematic analysis allowed for in-depth and thorough analysis pertaining to the ways expatriates use the internet and social media. The primary form of coding that was utilized is deductive. The predetermined themes were derived from the themes previously identified within the intensive literature review. However, the analysis also incorporated inductive coding. This is due to the fact that data collection was semi-structured, which resulted in the identification of new themes in relation to internet use and expatriate adjustment.

As a result of the abovementioned sampling criteria, the 12 participants selected for this study are quite diverse. In terms of gender, the selection of participants consisted of 7 males and 5 females. 7 of the participants reported being married and living with their spouse in the Netherlands and 5 claimed to be single. The ages of participants were also quite diverse. 3 participants reported being in their 20's, 4 in their 30's, 3 in their 40's, and 2 in their 50's. As stated above, all participants originated in countries outside of the EU. 3 participants were from the United States, 2 were from Canada, 2 from Brazil, 2 from Australia, 1 from Russia, 1 from Pakistan, and 1 was from Kazakhstan.

4. Findings

4.1 RQ1: How do expatriates use Social networking sites to meet and socialize with other expatriates and Dutch nationals alike in both the online and offline realms?

The first goal of the study sought to understand the ways in which expatriates used social networking sites to meet and interact with other expatriates as well as Dutch nationals since making the move to the Netherlands. During the interview process it was discovered that all participants had used SNSs, at least to some extent, to meet and interact with other expatriates and/or Dutch nationals since moving to the country. Furthermore, while the level of use and amount of activity varied amongst participants, many expatriates reported joining different virtual communities as a result of expatriation in the Netherlands. Many of the virtual communities were oriented towards expatriates and the international community within the Netherlands. However, some of the virtual communities that participants reported being a part of are more specialized in nature and attract members based on niche interests, so they are not necessarily oriented towards expatriates.

In terms of the platforms used to meet and connect with others, all participants reported being active Facebook users. Another popular platform used by many participants in this study is LinkedIn. While Facebook is generally used to maintain personal relationships with friends and family, LinkedIn is a business-oriented social networking site that allows users to develop and maintain professional network connections.

Virtual communities. Many of the virtual communities that participants reported being part of are hosted by either Facebook or LinkedIn, with Facebook communities seemingly being the most popular. Furthermore, most of these virtual communities provide community members with opportunities to meet and interact with each other in both online and offline settings. Katie, a 31-year-old Brazilian expatriate who has been residing in the Netherlands since 2009, reported being part of multiple Facebook groups that provide expatriates with opportunities to share information online and, on some occasions, meet and interact in offline social settings. Specifically, Katie is a member of *Expats in Rotterdam*, *Expats in the Hague* and *Internationals in Rotterdam.*

One virtual community that was particularly popular amongst participants in this study is *Expats with Dogs in Amsterdam*. Three participants reported active engagement and participation within the Facebook-based community. Jim, a 39-year-old Australian who has been residing in the Netherlands since 2010, explains that the *Expats with Dogs in Amsterdam* Facebook group is a virtual community with about 150 members. According to him, "it's a group of people that love dogs and they get together to walk their dogs and socialize". Carol,

a 52 year-old American who has been living in the country since 2009, and John, a 37 year-old Australian who has been living in the country since 2009, also reported being active members of this community.

An additional virtual community that is frequently used by participants is Couchsurfing. Katie, Jim, and Alex each claimed to be active members within this community. Jim describes Couchsurfing as an online platform for locals and travelers. The premise of the community is that local residents provide travelers with a free place to stay. The Couchsurfing network is global. However, there are different chapters of the organization in different cities and regions throughout the world. Katie lives in Rotterdam and is thus part of the Rotterdam Chouchsurfing community. Jim and Alex live in Amsterdam and are therefore members of the Amsterdam Couchsurfing community. Jim really thinks highly of Couchsurfing and boasts:

> *It's certainly a community that I think is fantastic, I think it's how the world should be. I think people should be out helping each other and I'm happy to be part of it. People come by and want a place to stay, we have a spare room and are happy to have them.*

In combination with becoming members of expat-oriented groups, participants also claimed to be part of other online groups and communities that are not necessarily oriented towards expatriates. For example, Alex, a 24 year-old Russian who has been living in the Netherlands since 2012, is part of an online Facebook community called *Reddit Amsterdam*. According to him "It's [Reddit Amsterdam] for everybody. It's really for everybody. It's for locals, it's for internationals, it's for tourists when they are coming". The virtual community is not oriented towards any specific interest or group of people, it simply serves as a platform where people can come together, meet, interact, and share information.

Gary, a 41-year-old American who moved to the Netherlands from California in 2009, has also become part of different virtual communities that are not specifically targeted at expatriates. He is a small business owner who joins virtual communities for the primary purposes of professional networking and growing his business. It was through LinkedIn that Gary learned about, and subsequently joined, two different virtual communities for professionals: the *Den Haag International Network* and the *South Holland Bureau of Tourism*. Each of these groups are oriented towards professionals and provide members with opportunities to interact, share information, and meet offline.

Offline events. In combination with using virtual communities to meet and interact with others online, many expatriates have also used these communities to meet other expatriates and Dutch nationals offline. The use of virtual communities to meet and interact with others in offline environments is important for the gratification of social needs (Ota, 2011, p. 145). Furthermore, virtual communities that connect community members offline through the creation events provide members with opportunities to engage in interaction and share collective experiences. These experiences become part of the community's collective heritage, what McMillan (1996) refers to as the *art* element of the SOC theory.

Couchsurfing. Couchsurfing hosts their own social meet-ups that bring locals as well as travelers together in an offline social setting. Katie regularly attends the Couchsurfing meet-up events and has found them to be a great way to meet and socialize with others. She feels that the events are very cozy and welcoming, "you can just show up by yourself and strike up a conversation with somebody". Katie has also been able to develop friendships with connections she has made at the Expats in Rotterdam and Couchsurfing meet-up events. In many cases, she has met with these connections following these events for movie nights, parties, and Sunday brunch. She also acknowledges that she would have missed out on many opportunities to make new friends had she not attended these events. As a result of Katie's experiences within this community, it seems that the *art* element of the SOC theory is present within this community. The concept behind the *art* element is that community intimacy, cohesion, and bonding will only occur through group contact (McMillan, 1996). It's through this contact that community members engage in interaction and share collective experiences that become part of the community's collective heritage.

While Katie's experiences within this community indicate the presence of the *art* element, Alex's experiences indicates otherwise. Alex has also been to a couple Couchsurfing meet-up events, "I really liked it because it was mixed. There were locals, expats, and tourists". However, even though Alex liked the mixture of attendees at these events, he also has his complaints:

> *I didn't like it because there were way too many people at the event and it was really impossible to get around and meet everybody, or at least to say hello to everybody. And another thing that I didn't like about it, too many people who were there were tourists, most of the people I met were tourists. I don't mind meeting tourists, but I would really like to meet people who are local, whether other expats or other locals...I like the local context of events like this.*

Even though Alex had positive remarks about the community, his experience is different than that of Katie. He feels that too many people show up at these events and there are too many tourists. The high number of community members that show up to events may prevent members from effectively engaging in meaningful interactions and collective experiences that are necessary for the creation of a collective heritage. Furthermore, the high number of tourists who show up at these events means that many of these community members are not permanent. The lack of permanent members who consistently show up to community events may impede on community intimacy, cohesion, and bonding that is necessary the *art* element of the SOC theory to be present. It should be noted, however, that Katie is a member of the Rotterdam community and Alex belongs to the Amsterdam community. Therefore, the dynamics of each of the communities may differ.

Jim is also an active member of the Couchsurfing virtual community. While he is aware of weekly Saturday night social meet-ups that take place at a cafe near his house, he admits that he has never actually attended these events. The 39-year-old expatriate from Australia claims that on a couple occasions he stopped to have a look inside the cafe but felt that it wasn't his type of scene:

> *To be honest with you, I don't quite fit into the standard, stereotypical Couchsurfing demographic. I'm certainly much older than most of the people who are hosting a visitor. I am also not into the 'let's go out and get drunk' scene that a lot of Couchsurfers are looking for. It's not really a community that I feel particularly attached to.*

Even though Jim has no particular interest in attending the social meet-up events that are put together by the Couchsurfing organization, he still thinks highly of the community and likes the idea of providing travelers with a free place to stay while they are in Amsterdam. Jim's engagement, and thus experiences, differ significantly from both Katie and Alex. While he has provided accommodation for community members, his engagement and interaction within this community is minimal.

Expats with Dogs in Amsterdam. The *Expats with Dogs in Amsterdam* community provides its members with opportunities to meet and interact with each other in offline social settings. This particular community can be considered both a geographical and relational community. It's relational because it exists in relation to a geographical area and is relational because it attracts members based on their specified interests.

Unlike most other communities, which host scheduled events that are planned by community leaders and administrators, the offline events that are scheduled for members of the *Expats with Dogs in Amsterdam* community are planned and organized by the members themselves. The scheduling of events is also less formal and more sporadic. The SOC theory claims that the cohesiveness of communities becomes stronger when community members are able to influence the community (McMillan, 1996). This is the case for the *Expats with Dogs in Amsterdam* community because each member has the ability to plan and organize an event. Jim explains that "someone [one of the community members] will just post in the group that they are going to the park and will ask if anyone wants to join". Jim and his partner, Karen, are very active within this particular community, they try to make it every time there is a meet-up. Jim explains that during these meet-ups all the dog owners will get together and talk and share stories while the dogs are out running around and playing together.

These meet-ups also create an interesting social dynamic that has allowed for the creation of friendships and a sense of community amongst members. Jim and his partner have developed close friendships with other expatriates as a result of their participation in this community:

> *There are multiple people from that group who we go out to dinner with or sit down to have a drink with. Also, when we go on holidays and when other group members go out on holidays, we will have other members of this group babysit our dog or we will babysit the dog of other members of the group. We've actually just finished up a month-long babysit of a friend's dog from that group. We babysat their dog, looked after their car, and watched their house while they were back in Malaysia.*(39, Australia).

An interesting aspect of this community is that members are willing to look after the pets and belongings of other members when they are out of town. As a result, it is clear that the *trade* element of the SOC theory is present within this community. This element relates to the ways in which the community functions in a way that each member can benefit other members within a community (McMillan, 1996).

Jim was not the only participant who reported the development of friendships with other expatriates through participation in offline events within the *Expats with Dogs in Amsterdam* community. Carol and her partner, Susan, also attend a lot of meet-ups which are hosted by members of the community. Carol thoroughly enjoys these events and sees them as a great way to meet and socialize other expatriates. She explains, "[t]he expats with dogs group is geared towards finding other people you can interact with, it's a great opportunity to

socialize with other expatriates". Like Jim and Karen, Carol and Susan have also developed friendships with other expatriates as a result of their participation in this community. They have recently met a couple from the United States and have since made plans to have dinner with them.

The numerous and seemingly strong friendships that have developed within this community indicates a strong presence of the *spirit* element of the SOC theory. According to McMillan (1996), the *spirit* element places a high amount of emphasis on the development of friendships between community members. Each of the participants who are active members of this community reported that they have been able to develop friendships as a result of their membership.

The *Expats with Dogs in Amsterdam* community has resulted in countless meet-ups and social interactions between members. As a result, what McMillan (1996) has termed the *art* element of the SOC theory has been established within this community. Frequent meet-ups and the development of friendships between community members have allowed members to share collective experiences in a way that has increased intimacy, cohesion, and bonding between members.   This has allowed the community to develop a collective heritage.

Contributing and acquiring information.

During the interview process it was discovered that many expatriates used virtual communities to contribute and acquire information which pertained to their needs and interests. Alex says that he frequently posts questions and seeks out advice from other expatriates:

> *I don't speak the Dutch language and when I get some mail from the Dutch government or if I get a letter and it's in Dutch, I will go on to different expat groups online and ask for some advice. For example, I will post in the group, 'I have a question about taxes' or something like that.* (24, Russia).

Alex found that members within these expat communities are very helpful when it comes to providing information, he has received a lot of helpful advice from other expatriates who have been in the same or similar situations. Additionally, Alex claims that he tries to return the favor when other expats post questions that he may be able to help with: "for example, when people are planning to move to the Netherlands and have questions like 'which internet provider should I use?' I will give them advice and information".

Other expatriates reported sharing and acquiring information as well. However, they were more active in regards to acquiring information and less active at contributing it. Jill, a 32-year-old expatriate from Kazakhstan, is a member of several expat-oriented Facebook groups.

> *I joined these groups about a year ago so I could see what people do [for fun] in Rotterdam and Amsterdam. I wanted to find out what types of interesting places and events there were within these cities and where you can go to meet people and find out which art exhibitions are going on in these places. They often post information about this kind of stuff.*

While she uses these groups to find out about different things to see and do, she rarely contributes information. However, she claims that she will respond to other community members' posts if she thinks she can help them out.

> *I really just like to read what people are doing. However, if somebody is asking for help, if somebody needs to move out or something, if I have free time I will always volunteer and try to help out.*

Like Jill, Katie also describes herself as someone who uses these communities to learn about different events and activities, but rarely contributes. According to Katie,

> *I would say that I'm a lurker. I don't contribute. But when someone posts something that interests me, I will go ahead and respond or make a comment or something like that. Or, if someone posts a really cool event, like a movie night or something like that, then I will comment on this event and probably attend. I mostly use these groups to stay informed, not necessarily to interact.* (31, Brazil)

As a result of following the posts of others within these virtual communities, Katie claims that she has been able to learn about and attend various events and activities that are of interest to her. For example, she learned about and recently attended a secondhand clothes swap event. It's an event where people can bring their old clothes that are still in good condition, they can then trade these for other clothes. According to Katie, "I wouldn't have found this event if I wasn't checking different expat groups".

Gary also contributes information through different virtual communities. However, he does so in a way that is different from all other participants. Gary owns an expat-oriented website in the Netherlands. The website provides users (expatriates) with different business and event listings in the country. As such, he uses different virtual communities in a way that will promote his business. Gary claims that when he sees a post on one of these communities, he will provide information and link back to his website. Gary explains,

If I see that someone posts on one of these communities that they are looking for a dentist that specializes in something and they are in the Hague or Delft, or somthing like that, I will go ahead and provide the entire list of options that they are looking for and I will link it back to my own website.(41, United States).

These findings are closely related to the *trade* aspect of the SOC theory which suggests that communities integrate members' needs and provide social resources that are beneficial to each member of the community (McMillan, 1996). Furthermore, virtual communities have been found to be particularly important at facilitating information exchange between community members (Koh & Kim, 2004). This is due to the fact that community members have a direct link to the community through an internet connection. As a result of participating in various virtual communities, many participants were able to provide and receive information that is valuable for the adjustment and integration process.

Meeting expatriates and Dutch nationals. Through the use of virtual communities and attending social events, many participants have met and developed friendships with other expatriates as well as Dutch nationals. Previous research indicates that frequent social interaction with other expatriates and host country nationals provides expatriates with an invaluable information source regarding culturally acceptable behaviors and norms and reduces uncertainties pertaining to work and non-work-related issues (Feldman and Bolino, 1999; Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2002). While many participants developed friendships and social connections through expat-oriented virtual communities, some acknowledged that the development of social connections has also occurred through other channels. For example, many participants have developed friendships with others through pre-existing social connections or attending different events that aren't necessarily related to virtual communities.

An interesting finding regarding the development of friendships with other expatriates and Dutch nationals has to do with the fact that some participants reported having a social network that consisted almost entirely of other expats, while others claimed that their social network consisted almost entirely of Dutch nationals. The majority of participants reported having more expatriate and international friends here in the Netherlands. Previous research found that expatriates are more likely to connect with and befriend other expatriates (Hattingh et al., 2012; Pruetipibultham & McLean, 2011). This is due to the fact that many expatriates experience many of the same situations and difficulties. Furthermore, individuals are more likely to socialize with and befriend those who they perceive to have shared similar experiences and stressors (Cohen et al., 2000).

Jill and Fatma each came to the Netherlands for educational purposes. Following the completion of their studies, they remained in the country and have since found employment. The majority of people in their social networks are expatriates and other internationals. Both Jill and Fatma attribute this to the fact that they previously studied in the Netherlands and were thus able to develop extensive social networks that consisted of other international students who share similarities with them. Each reported that the social networks they have developed with other students has been particularly important for adjustment. Furthermore, these findings are consistent with an aspect of the SOC theory which states that similar experiences, needs, and priorities between individuals serves as a strong bonding force (McMillan, 1986).

Jim and Katie, who each moved to the Netherlands as a result of expatriation, both reported that their social networks within the country consisted mostly of other expatriates. Interestingly, they each attribute this to the fact that they perceive the Dutch society to be very closed off to foreigners. Jim claims that the Dutch people he has met are very closed and don't like going out to meet new people. He has invited several Dutch people out for social drinks on many occasions, but they have always declined.

Katie has been proactive with trying to extend her social network to include Dutch people. However, she has had difficulties acquiring Dutch friends. Katie explains,

> *I feel that Dutch society as a whole and as a rule of thumb, you cannot just waltz in and become their friends. That's just not done, it's not possible. Unless you get introduced to them by a really close friend of their who also introduces you as a very close friend, then it's very difficult to become friends with them.* (31, Brazil).

She doesn't feel that the Dutch are rude, narrow minded, or xenophobic, Katie just doesn't feel that the Dutch are as open and inviting as they say they are. Carol also doesn't have many Dutch friends. She understands the Dutch to be very difficult to try to get to know. However, she also attributes this to the fact that she is an expat. Carol explains that a lot of Dutch people do not want to become friends with expatriates because they know that they are on limited contracts and will eventually leave the country permanently. As a result, she says that Dutch people don't want to invest the time and emotional energy into a relationship that is only temporary.

Most participants reported that their social networks consisted of more expatriates in comparison to Dutch nationals. However, in some cases it was the other way around. Some expatriates reported having a social circle that consisted mostly of Dutch people. Kelly, a 31-year-old Canadian who has been living in the Netherlands for 4 years, claims that her social

network consists of mostly Dutch people. In fact, Kelly claims that she avoids developing social connections with other expatriates. She explains,

> *I tend to think that expats live here without actually living here. I tend to think that they move within their own closed circles and spend a lot of time speaking English and focus on going to bars where other expats hang out. In my own personal opinion, they do not integrate well and they tend to be of a certain socioeconomic background that I do not find terrible interesting.* (31, Canada)

Kelly explains that there are two significant factors that have allowed her to develop friendships and social connections with a high number of Dutch people. First, her boyfriend is a Dutch national who has a social network that consists mostly of other Dutch nationals. Additionally, Kelly is fluent in the Dutch language. Because she is fluent in Dutch, she frequents pubs and other events that are attended by Dutch people. As a result, Kelly has been able to meet, interact with, and befriend a high number of Dutch people.

Even though John has many friends who are expatriates and is very active within different expat-oriented virtual communities, he has also sought to include Dutch nationals within his social network. According to John, many of the expatriates he knows have very few Dutch friends. He also claims that many of them have not fully adjusted to life in the Netherlands and spend a lot of time complaining about the Dutch and how their society functions. In contrast to many of John's expat friends, he feels that he has adjusted to life in the Netherlands and has openly embraced the Dutch culture and way of life.

As a result of developing extensive social networks with Dutch nationals, both Kelly and John feel that they are well-adjusted to life in the Netherlands. Each has been able to acquire social support and learn about Dutch culture through these networks. These findings are consistent with a model created by Toh and DeNisi (2007) which highlights two roles of host country nationals (HCNs) within expatriates' social networks. First, HCNs provide expatriates with social support. Second, HCNs can provide expatriates with cultural and role information that facilitates adjustment and integration.

Virtual communities, friendships, and adjustment. During the interview process it was discovered that many participants felt that their use of virtual communities to develop friendships and social connections with others has profoundly influenced their ability to adjust. For Jim and his partner, the use of such communities has positively influenced the adjustment process. When speaking about the influence these communities has had on adjustment, Jim says, "I don't think we would still be here if we didn't join some of these

groups". Jim claims that he has developed many close friendships with other expatriates and Dutch nationals alike through the *Expats with Dogs in Amsterdam* community. The development of such friendships has reduced feelings of isolation and loneliness and have provided the couple with a plethora of opportunities to socialize and integrate within Dutch society.

Katie also feels that the development of friendships as a result of her social media use has positively influenced her ability to adjust. She has developed many close friendships and, like Jim, feels that these friendships and social connections have reduced feelings of isolation and loneliness. Katie notes that because of the friendships she has made through such communities, she always has a friend she can call on when she wants to talk or go out. According to her,

> *If I ever feel lonely, if I ever feel like I want to chat, or if I ever feel like I want to go out with someone, I have people who I can reach out to and I think that's a really good feeling.* (31, Canada).

Kelly reported similar experiences. When she first arrived in the Netherlands, Kelly didn't have any friends and didn't know where she could go out and have a good time. She felt that there wasn't anything in her city, Amsterdam, that really appealed to her interests and, as a result, felt lonely and isolated. However, by using SNSs to meet and connect with others, Kelly has been able to develop friendships with others that have positively influenced her ability to adjust.

The majority of participants reported, at least to some extent, that the use of SNSs to develop friendships has had a positive influence on their ability to adjust. However, this was not always the case. For example, Jill felt that such use had almost no impact on her adjustment. According to her,

> *I don't think it had very much influence. I feel that the natural communication with others has had more of an influence than the connections I have made online through the use of social media platforms.* (31, Brazil).

Additionally, the use of such platforms has also not had any influence on Carol's ability to adjust. It should be noted, however, that neither Jill nor Carol have used virtual communities as extensively as other participants to meet and socialize with others since moving to the Netherlands. Jill initially moved to the Netherlands as a student and was able to develop an extensive social network during her time studying. Carol is very busy professional and admits that she hasn't had the time to participate in virtual communities and interact with others as she would like.

Discussion. This aspect of the study sought to identify the ways in which expatriates use social networking sites to meet and socialize with other expatriates and Dutch nationals alike. It was revealed that all participants had used SNSs to meet other expatriates and/or Dutch nationals since moving to the country. Moreover, many participants claimed to be active members within different virtual communities that facilitate member interaction in both the online and offline realms. Through the provision of online communication channels as well as a multitude of opportunities to meet offline, it was revealed that many participants perceived a strong sense of community within the various virtual communities that they reported being part of. While some elements of the SOC theory were found in all communities discussed, the community that was found to have the greatest sense of community was the *Expats with Dogs in Amsterdam* community. Three participants reported being active members of this community.

In regards to the ways that expatriates use different virtual communities, it was discovered that many participants use communities for the purpose of exchanging information with other members. Much of the information that is exchanged is practical in nature and was found to assist in the adjustment process. In this sense, the virtual communities frequented by expats had a strong sense of the *trade* element of the SOC theory. This element is present when members benefit each other in a way that integrates members' needs and provides social resources (McMillan).

Finally, it was discovered that many participants have developed friendships with other expatriates as well as Dutch nationals as a result of their membership in different virtual communities. Participants reported having social networks that consists almost entirely of other expatriates or Dutch nationals. Many participants reported that using SNSs to develop friendships and social connections with either other expatriates or Dutch nationals has beneficial for adjustment. These findings are consistent with the findings of previous research that found such connections to be beneficial for the adjustment process (Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2002; Farh et al., 2010; Pruetipibultham & McLean, 2011)

4.2 RQ2: How do expatriates use social networking sites to meet others who share common interests?

An additional aspect of this study sought to understand the ways in which expatriates used different SNSs and virtual communities to meet and interact with others who share their interests. One of the affordances of virtual communities is their ability to help strangers

connect based on their shared interests and activities (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). The identification of common interests between individuals has been found to be a significant determinant as to whether or not a close friendship or bond will be formed.

During the interview process it was discovered that many participants had hobbies, interests, and activities that they liked to engage in during their free time. For example, Kelly enjoys watching independent films, cooking, photography, and going to live shows. Jill likes to spend her free time cycling and has been on several cycling treks throughout Europe since moving to the Netherlands. Fatma enjoys painting. While many participants revealed that they actively engage in recreational activities, a surprising finding was that only a few of them have actively used social networking sites and virtual communities for the purpose of meeting others who share their interests.

Online to offline. Only a few participants claimed to use SNSs and virtual communities to meet and interact with others who share their interests. One particular group that was frequently mentioned during the interview process was the *Expats with Dogs in Amsterdam* community. The events hosted by this community usually comprise of a meet-up in one of Amsterdam's parks. The members bring their dogs and spend the time socializing while the dogs play together.

Jim and Carol are each active members of the group and have been able to form friendships with other expatriates based on their shared interests. Both Jim and Carol reported that the friendships developed within this community have extended outside of the community. For example, each has met with other members for social drinks, dinners, and other activities. Jim also feels that owning a dog and participating in this community has positively influenced his ability to adjust. In fact, had he not joined this group and developed social connections with others who share his interests, Jim claims that he probably would have moved back to Australia. Surprisingly, with the exception of the above-mentioned participants and the *Expats with Dogs in Amsterdam* community, no other participants reported using virtual communities to meet others online who share their interests.

Offline to online. While only a few participants reported using SNSs for the explicit purpose of meeting others who share their interests, many participants reported meeting others offline who share their interests and then connecting with those individuals online. This is the case for Kelly. According to her,

Meeting people online who you haven't met in actual real life and then going to a space, it's a little bit creepy as a woman and also a little bit sad. I know it's old-fashioned and it might be a little close-minded, but to me, you need to meet somebody face-to-face first and then establish that connection online instead of the other way around.(31, Canada)

Kelly noted several instances in which she met others who share her interests offline and then developed a connection with them online. One of her hobbies is cooking. A friend informed her that another expatriate who lives in Amsterdam hosts cooking/dinner parties in the city and has established a virtual community regarding this topic. Kelly attended one of these parties with her friend and was able to meet others who share her interest in cooking. It was only after she attended this event that she joined the virtual community and connected with others who were also at the event.

Gary also reported meeting others who share his interests offline before connecting with them online. Gary is a 41-year-old American business-owner in the Netherlands and uses SNSs to further his business and professional interests. He is a member of several business-related organizations, one of which being the Amsterdam-American Business Club. The organization hosts monthly meetings for business owners, which Gary attends. Gary claims that he has not connected with the organization through online social media and does not connect with other members online without meeting and getting to know them first. On many occasions Gary has met and befriended other business owners while attending monthly meetings. It was only after meeting these other members who share his interests in business in person that Gary has connected with them through SNSs.

Shared interest: shared nationality. A notable element pertaining to the identification of shared interests between individuals relates to the inclusion of those who share the same nationality. While the identification of similar interests may include specific hobbies or activities, this is not always the case. Hiller and Franz (2004) note that people may develop common interests simply based on geographical proximity to one another or sharing some prior place-based identity. As a result, this study sought to understand participants' perceived importance of meeting and interacting with others who share their nationality.

During the interview process it was discovered that many participants' social networks included a high number of friends who share their nationality. Furthermore, these participants perceived social connections with those who share their nationality to be particularly important and beneficial during the adjustment process. For example, Katie has used various

expat-oriented Facebook groups to meet and socialize with other Brazilians. Not only has the development of such connections influenced her ability to adjust, they have also helped Katie to maintain her cultural and national identity as a Brazilian who is living abroad. Katie explains,

> *For me, if I don't reach out to other Brazilians, then I don't get to speak Portuguese at all - unless I call my mom every day, and you don't want to do that either. So it's nice to connect with someone from my background that will get my silly jokes that really involve culture and some Brazilian aspects that I can only share with another Brazilian.* (31, Brazil)

Andy, a 34-year-old Brazilian who has been living in the Netherlands since 2011, reported having a diversified network of friends that consisted of other Brazilians, expatriates, and Dutch nationals alike. Like Katie, Andy also understands the importance of having other Brazilians within his social network. He also highlights the benefit of being able to speak Portuguese, his native language. According to Andy, "I think it's really good when you are able to express yourself in your own language. It's good when you are together and you can speak freely in your own language and express yourself".

Gary (41) and Mike (31), who are Americans, also acknowledged the importance of meeting and interacting with others who share their nationality. However, Mike notes that the United States consists of a large geographical area with many different sub-cultures. As a result, he says that feels more of a connection with those who are from California, where he is from. According to Mike, "To me, I feel that I have more of a connection with Californians than anyone else. The United States is so huge, the California experience is a lot different than the Mississippi experience". He also reported having a social network in the Netherlands that consisted almost entirely of other Americans. Gary's social network in the Netherlands is rather diverse. However, he feels particularly close to an American who he frequently meets for coffee. He claims that sharing the same nationality with her has positively influenced their friendship. This is due to the fact that he shares many commonalities with this person as a result of being from the same country.

Based on these findings, it is apparent that sharing a nationality with other expatriates can be highly beneficial to the adjustment process. For Katie and Andy, two native Portuguese speakers from Brazil, meeting and interacting with other Brazilians provides them with opportunities to speak their native language, something they each found to be particularly important. Similarities based on having a shared nationality were also important for Mike and Gary. Each of these two participants felt stronger connections with others who

shared their nationality. These findings are consistent with the claims by Hiller and Franz (2004), who suggest that bonds and social connections may be formed simply based on a prior place-based identity.

Even though many participants reported having an affinity for those who share their nationality and made it a point to connect and interact with such individuals, this was not always the case. Alex, John, and Kelly were each indifferent when it comes to meeting and interacting with others who share their nationality. For Alex, he is more concerned with meting good people, their nationality has no bearing when it comes to developing such friendships and he hasn't had much contact with other Russians since moving to the country. Jim is part of an Australian soccer club in Amsterdam and has been able to meet many other Australians as a result of his membership. However, he stressed the fact that he did not join the soccer club for the purpose of meeting other Australians and hasn't purposefully set out to meet those who share his nationality. Finally, Kelly expressed no specific desire or need to meet other Canadians. According to Kelly, "I don't think that just because we are Canadian that we are to have something in common".

Even though previous research suggests that a shared nationality will serve to create commonalities and bonds between individuals, it is apparent that this is not always the case. It can be speculated that Alex, John, and Kelly have all developed extensive social networks that have enabled them to adjust since moving to the Netherlands. Each of the participants claimed to have developed extensive social networks with others since moving to the country. Additionally, other factors that were not revealed during the interview process may have also decreased their need to meet and interact with others who share their nationalities.

Discussion. This aspect of the study sought to understand the ways that expatriates use SNSs to meet and interact with others who share their hobbies and interests. The hundreds of different SNSs and various affordances of CMC provide users with a plethora of opportunities to meet and interact with others share their interests (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Interestingly, while many participants had hobbies and interests that they linked to share with others, only a few of them have actively used SNS and virtual communities for the purpose of meeting others who share their interests. Moreover, the participants who actively sought to meet others who share their interests through SNSs are those who are members of the *Expats with Dogs in Amsterdam.*

Even though the findings revealed that participants didn't actively use SNSs to connect with others who share their interests, an interesting finding was that many participants

reported meeting and befriending others who share their nationality. Previous research indicates that that the development of common interests may be formed as a result of a prior place-based identity (Hiller & Franz, 2004). Consistent with the claims made by Liu and Chen (2003) that the creation of friendships as a result of the identification of common interests may serve as important sources of emotional support and mutual assistance during expatriate adjustment, many participants reported that befriending those who share their nationality has had a profound and positive impact on their ability to adjust.

Some of the findings of this aspect of the study are consistent with the *trade* element of the SOC theory. This element of the SOC theory relates to the social economy that develops within communities and the ways members serve to benefit each other (McMillan, 1996). Moreover, McMillan and Chavis (1986) note that the discovery of similarities between community members is the strongest bonding force. Additionally, when people share similar values, needs, priorities, and goals, bonding and community cohesion become stronger.   While only one virtual community, *Expats with Dogs in Amsterdam,* was found to bring community members together based on a specific interest, other participants reported having an affinity for meeting others who share their nationality. These findings indicate a presence of the *trade* element of the SOC theory.

4.3 RQ3: How do expatriates use social networking sites to maintain social connections with friends, colleagues, and family in their home country?

An additional aspect of this study sought to understand the ways that expatriates use SNSs and different online platforms to maintain social connections with friends, colleagues, and family in their home country. During the interview process it was discovered that all participants actively use SNSs and other online communicative platforms to maintain social connections with those back in the home country. Moreover, most participants reported that maintaining social contact has had a positive and significant influence on their ability to adjust. Interestingly, each participant reported using both Facebook and Skype to maintain such social connections.

Facebook. Facebook was found to be the primary online platform for keeping in touch with friends and family who are located in the country of origin. In fact, all participants reported using Facebook as a tool for maintaining such social connections. Jim, Carol, and Dan, each claim to use Facebook in similar ways when it comes to staying in touch with contacts. Each of the participants frequently post information and images, which keeps

friends and family updated about their lives in the Netherlands. Dan describes Facebook as a great facilitator of communication. According to him, "I am able to follow people and make comments about what they are doing and they make comments about what I am doing. Facebook has served to facilitate communication back-and-forth, more than would have occurred without it".

Katie also claimed to be an avid Facebook user. However, she describes herself as more of a lurker and prefers to read updates from friends and family instead of posting many of her own. According to Katie,

> *I am much more of a lurker and use it [Facebook] to keep myself informed about everything and what everyone is doing. I check what my friends and family back home are doing, but I don't feel the need to update them publicly unless I have to.* (31, Brazil)

Some participants claimed that because of the communication affordances of Facebook, many of their social connections in their home country have actually strengthened since they moved to the Netherlands. This was reported by Dan, John, and Gary. Dan explains,

> *There are people back home who I think I have more communication with now than when I was living in Calgary. Just because they will post something I will make a comment or I will post something and they will make comments. So we will end up having a short exchange back-and-forth.* (47, Canada).

John reports similar experiences. He claims that his interaction with family members back in Australia has been more frequent since he moved to the Netherlands. Gary provides a possible explanation as to why he interacts more frequently with friends and family back home since moving to the Netherlands. Gary feels that he has been much more active on Facebook since moving to the country. When he was living geographically closer to these connections, he claims that his interaction with them was relatively infrequent. However, now that he is connected with them on Facebook he receives very frequent updates from them in his newsfeed, which allows him to monitor what's going on in their lives and vice versa. By being able to view what his connections are up to back in the United States, Gary says he feels more connected to them. Gary also notes that the idea that he is closer with these connections now is more of a perception and not necessarily reality. According to him,

> *It's more of a perception because it's not like you interacted with each other more, but you were able to keep up with them without them really evening knowing it, so*

you felt like you were much more up-to-date on what was happening because you would follow their Facebook posts. (41, United States).

Skype. An additional online communication tool that was frequently mentioned by participants is Skype. In fact, all participants claimed to use this voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) application to maintain contact with friends and family in their home countries. In combination with allowing users to make phone calls over the internet, Skype also has a video calling feature that allows users to see the person they are speaking to. Even though Skype cannot be classified as a SNS, the fact that it's used by every participant to keep in touch with social connections back home makes it a significant online communication tool that is worth discussing.

Interestingly, many participants reported using Skype to maintain connections with those in their home countries who did not use Facebook. Skype served as an essential substitute for maintaining such connections. For example, Mike (31, United States) claims that Skype has been particularly important in maintaining his relationship with his grandmother, who he has a very close relationship with. While Mike claims that the main platform he uses to maintain communication with connections back home is Facebook, using this platform to keep in touch with his grandmother is not possible because she does not use Facebook. As a result, Skype is the primary platform that he uses to communicate with his grandmother and he tries to make contact with her on a weekly basis. Gary and John also reported using Skype to maintain contact with their parents, who also do not use Facebook.

The video calling feature was particularly important for many participants. Carol (52, United States) claims that her sole reason for using Skype is for the video feature. Carol, Fatma, and John each noted that they particularly enjoy the video feature because it allows them to feel like they have more of a connection to the people they are speaking with. According to Fatma, "It's really nice when I can see my family as I am talking to them, like, it just makes me feel like they are here with me...I feel closer to them".

Other platforms. In combination with using Facebook and Skype, some participants reported using other social networking platforms from their own countries to keep in touch with family and friends. For example, Andy was an active member of a Brazilian SNS called Orkut when he first moved to the Netherlands. He used the platform to stay up-to-date with social connections in Brazil. However, soon after moving to the Netherlands he cancelled his

account and began using Facebook exclusively. Andy claims that most of his Brazilian friends had also started using Facebook so he didn't see the point of having two accounts.

Alex (24, Russia) and Jill (32, Kazakhstan) also reported using other platforms. Specifically, they each use a Russian-language SNS called VK to keep in touch with friends and family in Russia and Kazakhstan. Alex describes VK as being identical to Facebook in almost every way and claims that he uses VK more frequently. The reason why Alex and Jill each use this SNS is because their friends and social connections in their home countries use VK and, for the most part, don't use Facebook. As a result, VK holds significant value for both Alex and Jill when it comes to maintaining social connections.

All participants reported using various platforms to maintain social connections with others who are located in the home country. Clearly, the use of these platforms plays a significant role in the lives of participants. While Facebook and Skype were found to be the most popular platforms used, an interesting finding was that some participants also used platforms that are particularly popular in their countries of origin.

Perceived influence on adjustment. Many participants reported that maintaining contact with others in their home country has had a profoundly positive impact on their ability to adjust since making the move to the Netherlands. These findings are consistent with previous research which suggests that the support received from friends and family in the home country can help to mobilize expatriates' psychological resources and emotional well-being, which ultimately serves to enhance their ability to successfully manage the obstacles associated with cross-cultural adjustment (Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2002). Carol, who reported using Facebook and Skype frequently to connect with friends and family in her home country, claims:

> *I think it clearly makes it less lonely. I think it clearly makes us less Isolated. It has been a real help. I think it [adjusting] would have been much more difficult had we not been able to stay in touch and stay connected [with friends and family] on a daily basis. And visually, I think the visual aspect of Skype is really important.* (52, United States).

Like Carol, John also feels that maintaining contact with connections back home has positively influenced his ability to adjust by making him feel less isolated. John reports that the communicative affordances has allowed him to have "an immediate connection with a network of people", which has subsequently removed feelings of isolation.

Shaffer and Harrison (2001) claim that one of the ways that expatriates can overcome social uncertainty is through the acquisition of social support by maintaining regular contact with friends, family, and other social connections in the home country. This is the case for both Andy and Mike. For them, not only has maintaining connections allowed them to keep in touch with friends and family, maintaining such connections has also served as a social support mechanism. Andy explains,

I think that when you have more contact with your family, you derive more support and strength to stay so far away from home for so long. It's really good because you know that you can get information about the family very easily. Because we are so connected I can always contact them and hear what's going on in their lives.(34, Brazil).

Andy goes on to explain that having frequent contact provides him moral support and helps him to negotiate feelings of loneliness. Mike admitted that life as an expatriate in the Netherlands has been a very lonely experience from him. He hasn't made many social connections outside of work and has not developed any close friendships. As a result, the use of SNSs and other communicative platforms to keep in touch with friends and family in his home country has played an instrumental role in helping him cope with the hardships of expatriation. One particular connection that has been especially beneficial for him is grandmother, who he speaks to weekly via Skype. When talking about the benefits of these frequent interactions, Mike explains, "I think it's good because I get encouragement. So when I'm feeling down, my grandmother can kind of cheer me up. She provides me with added motivation to try to get out there and meet people or do stuff". For both Andy and Mike, maintaining social connections with those back home has provided them with a great deal of social support that has made adjustment to life in the Netherlands much smoother.

Katie and Fatma, who each use Facebook and Skype to stay connected with friends and family, reported that connecting with others back home through various online communicative platforms is a wonderful alternative to face-to-face communication. It has helped each of them feel that they are not missing out on the lives of their loved ones back home as a result of expatriation. If she was not able to maintain such connections, Katie explains,

I would be feeling that part of my life is missing, but I don't feel that any part of my life is missing at all...I have everything I need. I have contact with them [friends and family] and I keep them up-to-date and they keep me up-to-date. We know about each

other's lives so I don't feel link I am missing out on anything back home. It has really

helped. (31, Brazil).

Like Katie, Fatma (27, Pakistan) also feels that keeping in touch with friends and family has helped her to adjust. She admits that she really misses her home country of Pakistan, but the communicative affordances of the internet has allowed her to stay connected with friends and family back home. Fatma claims that when she is able to video-chat with her connections back home, "it's like they are sitting right in front of me, so it has helped me a lot in adjusting over here and not being sad and missing them terribly".

Overwhelmingly, the majority of participants reported that staying connected with friends and family in their home country has positively influenced their ability to adjust. The above-mentioned findings are consistent with the claims made by other scholars who argue that the support received from friends and family in the home country can help mobilize expatriates' psychological resources and emotional well-being, which ultimately serves to enhance their confidence and ability to successfully manage the obstacles associated with adjustment (Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2002).

While the majority of participants claimed that maintaining contact with friends and family has had a positive influence on their ability to adjust, these claims were not unanimous. Surprisingly, despite the fact that all participants used SNSs and other communicative platforms frequently to maintain contact with friends and family, some participants felt that maintaining these connections has had little or no impact on adjustment. While Kelly didn't know why this was the case, she was adamant that such contact hasn't played any role in her ability to adjust, "I don't feel that maintaining contact with my friends and family has had any impact on my ability to adjust".

Additionally, Alex also felt that maintaining contact with friends and family had no influence on adjustment. He attributes this to the fact that the frequency in which he communicates with others has not changed since moving to the Netherlands. According to him,

> *I don't feel that it affects this ability [adjustment] in any way. It doesn't prevent*
> *adjustment and it doesn't assist in adjustment, it's just there. All of the same people*
> *who I still keep in touch with, I used to see them like once a week in Russia. And now*
> *that I am here, instead of seeing them, I just chat with them [online], so I am still in*
> *touch.*(24, Russia).

Finally, Jill also felt that maintaining communication with friends and family has had no influence on her ability to adjust. She attributes this to the fact that she initially moved to

the Netherlands for the purpose of acquiring a degree at a Dutch higher education institution. As a result of studying in the Netherlands, Jill has been able to develop a large social network that consists of both friends and colleagues. The large social network she has acquired in the Netherlands has played a vital role in substituting many of the connections she left behind in her own country, which has made her less reliant on those connections back home in terms of social, emotional, and psychological support.

Negative Aspects. Interestingly, even though a majority of participants reported that maintaining social connections with those in the home country had positively influenced adjustment, there were also negative aspects. Fatma and Katie, who were each very positive regarding the ways that such connectivity influenced their adjustment, noted two negative features associated with maintaining such connections. Fatma feels that she is too connected and reachable by friends and family back in Pakistan. She claims that her parents are too controlling and are able to reach her at any given time, which annoys her. Fatma explains, "I also feel that being connected to my family is negative. You know, right now I think all of these mediums have just trapped people. I mean, you're always online, you're always connected, so you really don't have time for yourself". She also feels that always being connected is distracting and subtracts from other aspects of her life.

Like Fatma, Katie also feels that always being connected and available can be a distraction. According to Katie,

Staying connected to everybody, all the time...it distracts me from everything else. So I wouldn't say I am an addict, but everybody kind of is a little bit. The problem is that you are always connected. For me, it does distract me and sometimes keeps me away from other things. But what's the alternative? You are completely unreachable by people you love and you don't want that either. (31, Brazil).

Despite the negative aspects of always being connected and thus reachable, both Fatma and Katie feel that their use of SNSs and other communicative tools to maintain contact with friends and family has positively influenced their ability to adjust.

Discussion. During the interview process it was discovered that all participants actively use SNSs and other online communicative platforms to maintain social connections with those back in their home country. In fact, SNSs and other communicative platforms play a positively significant role in expatriates' ability to adjust and cope with many of the challenges associated with expatriation. These findings are consistent with those of other

studies which found that maintaining social connections with friends, family, and colleagues in their home countries can serve to alleviate feelings of loneliness and isolation (Hattingh et al., 2012, p. 174). The most popular platforms for maintaining contact with social connections in the home country was Facebook and Skype. However, some participants also reported using other platforms that are more frequently used in their home country to maintain such connections.

Even though nearly all participants claimed that maintaining social connections has had a profoundly positive impact on adjustment, which is consistent with the findings of previous research (Hattingh et al., 2012; Ong & Ward, 2005), it was discovered that some participants experienced negative aspects of maintaining such connections. Specifically, two participants reported that they felt too connected to friends and family back home. While each of these participants noted negative aspects, they also claimed that, overall, maintaining these connections has had a positive influence on adjustment.

The findings of this portion of the study are consistent with previous findings regarding both the positive and negative aspects of maintaining social connections with those in the home country. However, no clear linkage was discovered regarding the findings in relation to the SOC theory. This may be attributed to the fact that there is no element of community involved when maintaining contact with friends and family in the home country. Rather than using virtual communities to communicate with families in a virtual community setting, participants reported that they engaged in one-to-one communication through different online channels.

4.4 RQ4: How do expatriates use social networking sites to develop and maintain personal and professional relationships with their colleagues?

This aspect of the study sought to understand the ways that expatriates use social networking sites to develop and maintain personal and professional connections with their colleagues. Another element that was explored pertains to the ways that employers facilitate adjustment and integration through the implementation different policies and the organization social events for employees. The findings were quite diverse. Many participants reported that they regularly met up and socialized with colleagues outside of work. Many also claimed that their employers regularly schedule different social events for their employees. Moreover, as a result of attending such events, many participants claimed that they have been able to develop professional and personal relationships with their coworkers.

Socializing with colleagues outside of work. During the interview process it was discovered that many expatriates actively meet and socialize with colleagues outside of the work environment. For example, Andy and his colleagues organize barbeques, social drinks and dinner parties together on a regular basis. These activities are always organized and planned through Facebook. Andy claims that he doesn't actively connect with colleagues through SNSs. However, he does not turn down invitations when others invite him to their network. Moreover, as a result of developing many close connections with colleagues, he notes that many of them are connections on Facebook.

Kelly, John, Jim, and Alex, also meet with their colleagues regularly for social drinks. Kelly and her colleagues frequently meet for drinks at a bar near her office. She explains,

> *There is a bar about two doors down from the office that has basically become our bar. Any day of the week you can go into that bar and there will be colleagues of mine there. And when someone is new or has just arrived to the office, all of the colleagues in that department will take them out for drinks and meet in that bar. It's unofficial, but it happens all the time.* (31, Canada).

She has also been able to develop some close friendships with a number of colleagues. With these connections, the social interactions are more frequent and personal. Kelly and her colleagues frequently organize dinner parties, movie nights, and other social activities together. Additionally, she reports that she has connected with many of these colleagues on Facebook. Subsequently, much of the event and activity planning that is conducted by Kelly and her colleagues takes place through Facebook.

Like Andy and Kelly, John is also very active one Facebook and has found it to be an essential tool for organizing and hosting various events with colleagues. John and his colleagues also meet regularly for barbeques, social drinks, and dinner parties. He explains,

> *We go to different parks and have barbeques and sometimes we even go to the beach. I often like to have people back over at my place so we can cook, and some other employees were also into cooking so I would invite groups of people over. We get together and watch some films every now and then as well.* (37, Australia).

He also claims that his work environment is very dynamic. John and his colleagues work very close together and also put in a lot of hours at the office. As a result, John feels that a high degree of camaraderie has developed between him and his colleagues. In fact, on several occasions John and four or five of his colleagues have vacationed in Spain together.

Some participants reported that they had neither developed friendships nor engaged in any social events with colleagues outside of their work environment. This was the case for

both Carol and Katie. Despite the fact that Carol has implemented policies within her organization that encourage and stimulate the development of social bonds between employees, she herself has not formed any close connections with employees that extend beyond the workplace. Because Carol is the Managing Director at her branch, she claims that she cannot connect and socialize with her employees the same way that she could if they were her peers.

In terms of connecting with her employees through social media, Carol states that she only accepts invitations from her employees but does not seek out such connections. Furthermore, she only accepts LinkedIn invitations from employees and ignores invitations that are sent through Facebook. She explains,

> *Facebook is personal. I just ignore invites all the time. I don't want to have to censor myself on Facebook so I make sure that the people who are my friends are people who I don't mind seeing whatever it is that I am posting.*(52, United States).

Katie also reports that she does not engage in any social activities with colleagues outside of work. Additionally, she has also emplaced limitations on how she connects with colleagues online. According to Katie, "I don't mix my professional life with my personal life. I would add them [colleagues] on LinkedIn, but not on Facebook". She further explained that she has connected will all of her colleagues on LinkedIn.

Employer-organized social events. Many participants reported attending different social events that are hosted by their employers. Andy and Carol each claimed that their organizations host regularly scheduled social drinks and lunches that bring employees together in less formal environments, such as bars and restaurants. Andy explains,

> *We organize a happy hour every second month. It's just for everybody to get together and relax for a little bit. And from time-to-time we organize lunch and bring everybody together for that. For example, I have seven people working for me and from time-to-time the seven of us will get together for lunch.* (34, Brazil).

Carol reported similar experiences within her organization. Carol is the Managing Director for her organization and has made it a goal of hers to bring organizational members together for the purpose of socializing. According to her,

> *Since I have come on board we have always had a holiday party and a Summer party. I have brought all the groups together because it used to be divided up by each department. So now I have kind of put it all together, which was an important goal of*

mine. And now we have actually started quarterly drinks, we all get together and go out for drinks. (52, United States).

Mike also indicated that his employer organizes and hosts different events for employees. Additionally, he notes that his employer has set up a special virtual community for employees. This virtual community is in the form of a private Facebook group that is only accessible by employees of his organization. It's through this community that different events and activities are planned and organized. Some of these events include social drinks, movie nights, and parties. As a result of attending different employer-organized events, Mike claims that he has been able to interact with and befriend colleagues who he would have never met otherwise.

Many of the social events that were hosted by organizations for employees were found to be planned and organized online. Some participants reported that they learned of the events through internal e-mails or through a social network that could only be accessed by employees who worked at the organization. Regardless of the specific online channel that was used, all participants claimed that knowledge about employer-organized events was distributed internally.

Not every participant reported having the opportunity to attend social events that were hosted by their employer. For example, Kelly and Katie each noted that their employers hosted no such events. However, Katie indicated that she would like it if social events were planned by her employer. According to her, "I wish they did because it would be a lot nicer for me coming from an overly-friendly context. But they don't do that in my office".

Adjustment. In many cases, socializing with colleagues outside of work and engaging in employer-organized events has had a profound influence on expatriates ability to adjust. These findings are consistent with previous findings which suggests that social interaction with colleagues makes expatriates feel that their presence is valued and results in a sense of acceptance, belonging, and satisfaction, which ultimately serves to facilitate cross-cultural adjustment (Aycan 1997; Stroppa & Spieb, 2010). As a result of socializing and developing friendships with colleagues, Kelly feels very adjusted to both her life in the Netherlands and her work environment. She explains,

When you go to work in the morning and you go to the lunch room in the afternoon, you see friends and people who you can talk to. That makes work a lot nicer and more pleasant. When I first started working there, I didn't know anybody and showing up

to work every day felt awkward. I don't feel awkward anymore because now I have

friends and people I know.(31, Canada).

Dan also feels that he is well-adjusted. As a result of socializing with colleagues outside of work, Dan has been able to develop strong friendships and social connections with colleagues. According to Dan,

> *Because I have these connections and because of everything that the company does, I*
>
> *don't feel isolated. The organization played a really big role in terms of getting us*
>
> *going and getting us set up to the point where we can do things on our own. It's great*
>
> *to know that if we ever have questions there are people in the office, whether they be*
>
> *other Canadians or members of the ex-pat group, we know where we can go to ask*
>
> *questions. And also, making the connections with my colleagues here at the company*
>
> *has really helped us to feel that we are not isolated.*(47, Canada).

Mike admitted that he feels a bit lonely and isolated since moving to the Netherlands. However, he has found that attending different events and socializing with colleagues has really helped to alleviate these feelings of loneliness and isolation. According to him,

> *Attending these events has led to greater adjustment. We have been to a Christmas*
>
> *Market in Keukenhof, it was great to go these with all of my colleagues. Without*
>
> *these people I would feel even more isolated and my experience would be worse - it*
>
> *would be awful.*(31, United States).

Furthermore, as a result of participating in different events and activities with colleagues, Mike has been able to develop a strong friendship with one colleague in particular. Mike claims that the development of this friendship as really helped him to adjust, "she has been essential to adjustment. If I did not have her to talk to on occasion, then I would feel much more isolated. I do hang out with other people, but I don't feel as connected to them".

Discussion. During the interview process it was discovered that many expatriates actively meet and socialize with colleagues outside of the work environment. Moreover, in many cases, SNSs have played a pivotal role during the organization and planning of events with colleagues. Many expatriates reported that they socialize with colleagues at events that are organized and hosted by their employer. In combination with employer-organized events, many participants also organize social events and meet with colleagues outside of the work environment.

As a result of socializing with colleagues, many participants have been able to develop friendships that have positively influenced the adjustment process. Furthermore, these

findings are consistent with the claims made by other scholars that social interaction with colleagues results in a sense of acceptance, belonging, and satisfaction, which ultimately serves to facilitate cross-cultural adjustment (Stroppa & Spieb, 2010).

Not all participants reported that their organizations plan an host official company events. However, the participants who reported attending such events revealed that the planning and organization of events was all done internally. Additionally, many participants reported meeting and interacting with colleagues at informal events that were not organized by their employers. Regardless of the type of event, whether it was a formal organizational event or an informal social gathering with colleagues, the events were exclusive and could only be attended by organizational members. This indicates a presence of the *spirit* element of the SOC theory. According to McMillan (1996), the spirit element emphasizes "boundaries that limit 'us' from 'them' and that create the form of emotional safety that encourages self-disclosure and intimacy" within groups and communities (p. 315).

An additional element of the SOC theory that was found to be present is *art*. McMillan (1996) explains that group contact results in community intimacy, cohesion, and bonding. Some participants reported that as a result of socializing with colleagues at both formal and informal events, they have been able to develop close friendships and bonds. Furthermore, some participants reported that these friendships and bonds and positively influenced the adjustment processed.

4.5 RQ5 : How do expatriates use SNSs and other websites to acquire information that facilitates the acculturation process?

The final aspect of the study sought to understand the ways in which expatriates used SNSs and other websites to acculturate and integrate into Dutch society. Specifically, this section investigated expatriates knowledge of the Netherlands and Dutch culture prior to moving to the country; the different platforms used by participants to learn about the Netherlands and Dutch culture; the use of different platforms used to locate information about different events; and their knowledge and fluency of the Dutch language.

Previous knowledge about Dutch history and culture. Surprisingly, all participants reported having very limited knowledge about the Netherlands and Dutch culture prior to moving to the country. John, who had never traveled outside of Australia before making the move to the Netherlands in 2009, admits that he knew nothing about country. Carol had visited Amsterdam twice many years prior to moving to the Netherlands. However, despite

having traveled to the country in the past, Carol felt that her knowledge about the Netherlands was surface-level and her knowledge about the culture was nonexistent. Moreover, both John and Carol claimed to have no preconceptions about the Netherlands or Dutch culture before moving to the country.

Prior to moving to the Netherlands, Alex had traveled to Amsterdam on several occasions as a tourist. As a result of these visitations, Alex had developed different perceptions about the city and Dutch culture. According to him, "I viewed Dutch culture as very liberal, they really don't care about what other people do unless they annoy and bother other people around them. I also knew that Dutch people drink a lot of beer and knew a little about their food". Even though Alex felt that he had some knowledge about the Netherlands before moving here, he admits that it wasn't extensive. Alex explains, "it's a lot different living here compared with being a tourist. It was only after moving here that I realized how little I knew [about the country]".

Mike had also traveled to Amsterdam as a tourist before moving to the Netherlands in 2012. While he claimed to know very little about Dutch culture and the country in general, he notes that many of his preconceptions were based on stereotypes. Mike explains,

> *All of my previous knowledge was based on stereotypes. For example, I knew they were very progressive with drugs, so marijuana is legal, mushrooms are legal, that sort of thing. I knew prostitution is legal. I also knew they were very big on windmills. Yeah, other than that, I just didn't really know much about the Dutch.* (31, United States).

Learning about Dutch history and culture. Even though all participants reported having very limited knowledge about the Netherlands and Dutch culture prior to moving to the country, it was discovered that the majority of expatriates had a keen interest in learning more about the country following their arrival. Many participants reported accessing different platforms, both online and offline, to learn more about their host-country. In terms of channels used to acquire more information about the Netherlands and Dutch culture, most participants reported using different virtual communities and websites to access such information.

One website that was particularly important for both John and Alex is Wikipedia. John notes that Wikipedia is a great jumping off point for a lot of research. Rather than using Wikipedia as a direct source, John claim that he uses this particular website to locate the sources of information. John explains, "my methodology is to skip the first section and then

to go directly to the references and start linking out to the original source". Jim has found that Wikipedia is great for providing basic information about a subject or topic, but he finds that it doesn't always provide a lot of detail. For example, John wanted to learn about the Dutch holiday tradition of Sinterklaas and Zwart Piet. According to him,

> *Wikipedia tells you what Sinterklaas and Zwart Piet is, but it doesn't tell you what the tradition is all about and why the tradition is. So there's a lot of further research that I have to conduct- and Wikipedia links [to the original source], I do that extensively.*(37, Australia).

Alex also reported using Wikipedia to access information about the Netherlands. Alex is interested in the history of the Netherlands and has used this website on several occasions to increase his knowledge about the country. He has found that Wikipedia offers a vast amounts of information relating to his interests. According to Alex,

> *I mostly read things from Wikipedia. There are a lot of different articles I like that are about Dutch culture. The website has many articles, if you just type 'Dutch history' into Wikipedia, there are like 100 different articles that provide information about   history and culture.*(24, Brazil).

Jim also reported using different websites to learn about the Netherlands. While Jim admits that his prior knowledge of the country was very limited, he claims that him and his partner carried out extensive online research before making their final decision to move to the Netherlands. Jim explains,

> *We did a lot of research before we made the final decision to move to the Netherlands. We did a lot of research about what to expect culturally, we did a lot of   reading on places such as the Expatica forum and communicated with people about how they adjusted and how they adapted. So both my partner and I were very aware of what we were getting ourselves into.*(39, Australia).

Fatma describes herself as someone who is intrinsically interested about different people and cultures. One of her first priorities upon arriving in the Netherlands was to meet and interact with others from different cultural backgrounds. In an effort to learn more about the Netherlands and Dutch people, she conducted a lot of research online and visited multiple websites that are oriented towards expatriation and integration. According to Fatma,

> *I was so excited, I just started going to different Amsterdam websites. There is this one website called IAmsterdam and another one called IAmExpat. They both give you a lot of information about getting to know the Dutch community and how to survive over here. There are also these really good community pages on Facebook,*

like Surviving in Holland and expat pages which are basically for expats who are coming to Amsterdam and need help adjusting. It's been really helpful using these websites.(27, Pakistan).

As a result of using different websites to learn about the Netherlands and Dutch culture, Fatma was able to locate and join an organization that specializes in teaching international students about Dutch culture and history. The organization, called the International Student Meeting Association (ISMA) is an virtual community that organizes and hosts different offline events that allow students to meet and interact with one another while simultaneously learning about Dutch culture. Fatma initially arrived in the Netherlands as a student and was thus eligible to join this association. She has found ISMA to be an invaluable resource for learning about the Dutch culture. She explains that the association also has Dutch members who teach international members about the Netherlands. She explains,

> *They have small games and quizzes where they [Dutch members] provide information and then say, 'okay, we've given you the information, so now we will quiz you and you have to tell us about everything that we've told you'. And then you get small gifts and everything, so it's a really fun way of interacting and learning about   the Dutch culture.*

By using different online platforms to actively seek out information about the Netherlands, expatriates exhibited the cross-cultural adjustment competency of *listening and observing*. This core competency is present when expatriates spend time observing, reading about, and studying host country culture (Yamazaki & Kayes, 2004, p. 372).

Events & outings. In combination with using different websites to learn about the Netherlands and Dutch culture, many expatriates also reported using online platforms to find different events taking place throughout the country. Alex and Carol both reported using a website called IAmsterdam to locate different events. Alex explains,

> *I sometimes go check things out on IAmsterdam because I have found it to be a very good site for locating information about things that are going on in or around the city. It's a really good website for both expats as well as tourists.* (24, Russia).

Alex checks the website on a weekly basis to learn about different events and activities.

> *I check it for the agenda, the different things that are happening around the city. For example, a while ago they had an event going on in Amsterdam where they had different artwork all over the city that was made out of lights. So I would go on there and look to see where this artwork was because each day or week it would be moved*

to a different location. Also, I've gone on there to look up information about Queen's Day and where to find DJs and things like that.

He's also used the IAmsterdam website to learn about other events that are taking place outside of Amsterdam.

I went down to Den Bosch for carnival. I knew that carnival was going on but I didn't really know the best city to go to really experience it. I also didn't know exactly what it was all about and when it was taking place so I went to the IAmsterdam website and a different website. I used these websites to learn about the time of the   event, where to go, and things like that. It really helped me.

Like Alex, Carol also uses different websites to learn about events taking place in Amsterdam. For example, after a 10-year renovation, Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum recently reopened. A large ceremony was held and Carol used various websites to find out information about the ceremony and when the Dutch queen would be there. Through the use of various online platforms to actively seek out information about different events and activities in the Netherlands, Alex and Carol demonstrated the cross-cultural adjustment competency of *listening and observing*. This core competency is present when expatriates spend time observing, reading about, and studying host country culture (Yamazaki & Kayes, 2004.

Fatma reported learning about and attending various events as a result of her participation within the International Student Meeting Association (ISMA). For example, the association provided members with information about Queen's Day and the significance of the holiday in the Netherlands. Moreover, ISMA also organized and hosted a Queen's Day event for association members. They also host dinners where all the members bring different meals that are native to their home country. Not only have these dinners exposed Fatma to Dutch food and culture, but she has also been able to learn about the cultures of other countries, something she has found to be particularly rewarding. As a result of being part of ISMA and attending different cultural events, Fatma feels that she is well-adjusted to life in the Netherlands. In addition to *listening and observing*, Fatma also exhibits the competencies of *building relationships* and *taking action and initiative* identified by Yamazaki and Kayes (2004). She has demonstrated these competencies through her active participation within ISMA, meeting other foreign nationals and Dutch nationals alike, and attending various cultural events. *Building relationships* can be described as the deliberate engagement and interaction with others in the host country. particularly members of the host country, and

taking action and initiative involves expatriates ability to take the initiative to approach and interact with strangers of the host country (Yamazaki and Kayes, 2004, p. 372).

Dutch language. During the interview process it was revealed that nearly all participants had made at least some attempt to learn the Dutch language. In fact, many participants reported receiving free language courses or language-learning software from their employer. Surprisingly, only one participant claimed to be completely fluent in the Dutch language. Learning the Dutch language is very important during acculturation. Lu et al. (2011) claim that understanding and being able to communicate in the host nation's language is a prominent factor in determining one's ability to adequately acculturate and adjust within the host country. An additional core competency for successful acculturation and adjustment requires expatriates to *translate complex information*. This entails the development of a working knowledge of the host country's language and the ability to translate personal thoughts into that language.

Many participants claimed to be learning Dutch. However, they admitted that they are not yet fluent and still speak English in their day-to-day interactions with others. Despite the fact that SNSs and other websites have been used extensively throughout the world for teaching and learning a second language (Ota, 2011), this was not the case for participants in this study. Participants reported using more traditional approaches to learning the Dutch language. Moreover, many participants claimed that their employers have provided them with courses and other opportunities to learn the language. For example, Carol's employer provided Carol and her partner with 200 hours of Dutch lessons. Mike and Alex also reported that their employers have provided them with free Dutch courses. Mike began taking these courses upon arriving in the Netherlands but discontinued them after three months. As a result of taking Dutch courses, Alex claims to be fluent enough to conduct general day-to-day interactions with Dutch people, "I am making some progress but it's not as good as I would like it to be. I can order some stuff in a bar or in a shop and stuff like that, but it's still really basic".

Gary claimed to have a working-knowledge of the language but still speaks English on a daily basis. Unlike other expatriates, who work for companies and have had Dutch language-learning courses provided by their employers, Gary is self-employed and has taken it upon himself to learn Dutch. Gary hasn't taken any courses, instead, he has been learning Dutch through different language-learning applications that he installed on his mobile phone. Gary has found these applications to be highly beneficial. As a small business-owner, Gary is

a very busy individual and says that he uses these applications to learn Dutch when he is on the go. For example, he uses these applications to learn Dutch when he is in transit from one location to the next and when he is at the gym.

Only one participant, Kelly, reported being completely fluent in the Dutch language. As a result, Kelly is the only participant who has fully acquired the *translation of complex information* competency. Acquiring this competency is a result of developing a working knowledge of the host country's language and the ability to translate personal thoughts into that language. (Yamazaki & Kayes, 2004). While this competency may be present to a limited extent in other participants who have a basic understanding and knowledge of Dutch, Kelly has acquired this competency to the highest degree.

While the majority of participants claimed to be learning Dutch, at least to some extent, a few participants claimed that they did not see the value in learning the language for the purpose of integration. Jim, who lives in Amsterdam, claims that "you just don't need to learn Dutch in Amsterdam, everyone speaks English". He continues, "They don't speak it [English] day-to-day, but once they know you speak English, they will speak it right back to you". Nevertheless, Jim claims that both him and his partner do have a desire to learn the language,

> *We are looking into learning Dutch, not for any belief that speaking Dutch will help us integrate or anything. But we both like the Netherlands and plan on staying here for a long time. We're coming up on three-years since we have been living here and when the five-year mark comes around, we will both apply for permanent residency and one of the requirements is that you must speak Dutch, so that's the only motivation we have to learn Dutch.*(39, Australia).

John also didn't find see the value in learning Dutch and has not made any attempts to learn the language. Like Jim, John lives in Amsterdam and has found that everyone he comes in contact speaks English. John explains,

> *The company I work for is English-language only and I don't have a Dutch partner. I live just outside of the canal district in Amsterdam, so absolutely everyone speaks English and if you start speaking Dutch to them, they will start speaking English right back to you.*(37, Australia).

In addition to feeling that it is not necessary to learn the Dutch language, John also claims to be too busy to learn the language. According to him, it's a matter of his priorities and he feels like his free time could be better spent doing other things, like working on his house.

Discussion. It was revealed that most participants knew very little about the Netherlands prior to moving to the country. However, many participants felt the need to learn about the Netherlands and used various SNSs and websites to acquire information pertaining to the country's culture, history, and different events. It was discovered that many participants have actively sought out information about the country through different websites. In addition to using websites, one participant reported joining a virtual community that is oriented towards teaching internationals about Dutch history, culture, and language. By actively seeking out information, participants demonstrated the cross-cultural adjustment competency of *listening and observing*. This core competency is present when expatriates spend time observing, reading about, and studying host country culture (Yamazaki & Kayes, 2004).

In addition to *listening and observing*, some participants also demonstrated having the core competencies of *building relationships* and *taking action and initiative*. This was achieved by participants as a result of making an effort to meet Dutch nationals and actively seeking out various events. The findings indicate that different websites play an instrumental role in helping participants to locate and learn about different cultural events that take place throughout the country. While the extent that each participant sought out information about different events varied, most participants reported that that learning about and attending different events is very important to them.

Learning the Dutch language was also found to be important for most participants. One participant reported being fully fluent. As a result of the effort that has been put forth to learn the Dutch language, many participants have, at least partially, acquired the *translation of complex information* competency. Acquiring this competency is a result of developing a working knowledge of the host country's language and the ability to translate personal thoughts into that language. (Yamazaki & Kayes, 2004). While many participants have made active attempts to learn the Dutch language, it was discovered that the use of different online platforms and websites was absent during the learning process. Participants reported using traditional approaches when learning the language.

5. Conclusion & Discussion

The goal of this qualitative study was to identify and understand the ways that expatriates who are living in the Netherlands utilize the affordances of the internet and SNSs during the adjustment and integration process. Specifically, this study sought to identify the ways expatriates use such platforms and perceived influence such use has had on participants ability to adjust since moving to the country. In an effort to acquire a comprehensive understanding of how SNSs influence adjustment, this study investigated five topical areas associated with SNSs and adjustment.

Using SNS to meet and socialize with others

During the interview process it was discovered that all participants had used SNSs, at least to some extent, to meet and interact with other expatriates and Dutch nationals alike. Many participants reported being active members of several different virtual communities that are hosted on Facebook and/or LinkedIn. Furthermore, some participants reported being part of other virtual communities that operate independently of the abovementioned platforms, such as Couchsurfing.

Nearly all of the virtual communities that participants reported being part of also host different offline events that provide community members with opportunities to meet and interact in offline social settings. Many participants reported attending these events and, as a result of their attendance, have been able to develop close friendships with other community members. In combination with engaging in general interaction with other community members, it was discovered that many participants use different expat-oriented virtual communities to exchange information with others.

As a result of the ways that participants used different virtual communities, as well as the perceived influence community membership and participation had on adjustment, it was revealed that many of the elements of the SOC theory were present within these communities. First, the strong friendships and bonds that have developed between community members indicates a strong presence of the *spirit* element of the SOC theory. Secondly, through the exchange of information between community members, each member is able to benefit other members within communities. As a result, it was discovered that the *trade* element exists within many of these communities. Finally, in one particular community, *Expats with Dogs in Amsterdam,* frequent meet-ups and the development of friendships between community members have allowed members to share collective experiences in a way that has increased

intimacy, cohesion, and bonding between members. This indicates the presence of the *art* element of the SOC theory.

Meeting Others who Share Common Interests

The second aspect of this study sought to understand the ways expatriates used SNSs to meet others who share common interests. During the interview process it was discovered that many participants had specific hobbies and interests. However, despite the fact that many participants reported being members of virtual communities, a surprising finding was that only a few of them have actively used virtual communities for the purpose of meeting others who share their interests.

Interestingly, only a few participants used SNSs and virtual communities to connect with others who share their interests. Coincidentally, the three participants who used a virtual community to meet others who share their interests all reported being part of the same community, *Expats with Dogs in Amsterdam*. As a result of their participation in this community, participants reported that they have been able to develop strong friendships and relationships with other community members. In many cases, the social activities that these participants engage in extend beyond the community they are part of.

One aspect of this study sought to understand participants' perceived importance of meeting and interacting with others who share their nationality. The study revealed that many participants had social networks that consisted of a high number of connections who share their nationality. Furthermore, these participants perceived social connections with those who share their nationality to be particularly important and beneficial during the adjustment process. These findings are consistent with the claims by Hiller and Franz (2004), who suggest that bonds and social connections may be formed simply based on a prior place-based identity. Consistent with the claims made by Liu and Chen (2003) that the creation of friendships as a result of the identification of common interests may serve as important sources of emotional support and mutual assistance during expatriate adjustment, many participants reported that befriending those who share their nationality has had a profound and positive impact on their ability to adjust.

Maintaining Social Connections with Others Back Home

The third aspect of this study investigated the ways that expatriates used SNSs and other communicative platforms to maintain social connections with those in the home country. The study revealed that all participants use SNSs as well as other channels to

maintain such connections. Furthermore, most participants felt that maintaining these connections played an important role during the adjustment process.

It was revealed that all participants actively used both Facebook and Skype to connect with friends and family in their home countries. Facebook was reported as being the most popular platform used. Many participants claimed that they used Facebook to share information about their lives in the Netherlands with connections back home while simultaneously using this platform to keep up with the lives of their friends and family in their home country. Interestingly, some participants claimed that because of the communication affordances of Facebook, many of their social connections in their home country have actually strengthened since they moved to the Netherlands.

The finding that maintaining social connections with those in the host country is consistent with previous research which suggests that the support received from friends and family in the home country can help to mobilize expatriates' psychological resources and emotional well-being, which ultimately serves to enhance their ability to successfully manage the obstacles associated with cross-cultural adjustment (Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2002).

Developing and Maintaining Relationships with Colleagues

An additional aspect of the study sought to understand the ways that expatriates use social networking sites to develop and maintain personal and professional connections with their colleagues. Another element that was explored pertains to the ways that employers facilitate adjustment and integration through the implementation different policies and the organization social events for employees. The findings were quite diverse. Many participants reported that they regularly met up and socialized with colleagues outside of work. Many also claimed that their employers regularly schedule different social events for their employees. Moreover, as a result of attending such events, many participants claimed that they have been able to develop professional and personal relationships with their coworkers.

As a result of socializing with colleagues, many participants have been able to develop friendships that have positively influenced the adjustment process. Furthermore, these findings are consistent with the claims made by other scholars that social interaction with colleagues results in a sense of acceptance, belonging, and satisfaction, which ultimately serves to facilitate cross-cultural adjustment (Stroppa & Spieb, 2010).

Expatriation, SNSs, and Acculturation

The final aspect of the study sought to understand the ways in which expatriates used SNSs and other websites to acculturate and integrate into Dutch society. It was revealed that most participants knew very little about the Netherlands prior to moving to the country. However, many participants felt the need to learn about the Netherlands and used various SNSs and websites to acquire information pertaining to the country's culture, history, and different events. It was discovered that many participants have actively sought out information about the country through different websites. By actively seeking out information, participants demonstrated the cross-cultural adjustment competency of *listening and observing*. This core competency is present when expatriates spend time observing, reading about, and studying host country culture (Yamazaki & Kayes, 2004).

In addition to *listening and observing*, some participants also demonstrated having the core competencies of *building relationships* and *taking action and initiative*. This was achieved by participants as a result of making an effort to meet Dutch nationals and actively seeking out various events. The findings indicate that different websites play an instrumental role in helping participants to locate and learn about different cultural events that take place throughout the country. While the extent that each participant sought out information about different events varied, most participants reported that that learning about and attending different events is very important to them.

Learning the Dutch language was also found to be important for most participants. One participant reported being fully fluent. As a result of the effort that has been put forth to learn the Dutch language, many participants have, at least partially, acquired the *translation of complex information* competency. Acquiring this competency is a result of developing a working knowledge of the host country's language and the ability to translate personal thoughts into that language. (Yamazaki & Kayes, 2004). While many participants have made active attempts to learn the Dutch language, it was discovered that the use of different online platforms and websites was absent during the learning process. Participants reported using traditional approaches when learning the language.

5.1 Relevance

The relevance of the study is threefold. First, the findings provide other researchers and the academic community at large with greater insight regarding the ways in which expatriates use online platforms and the perceived impact using such platforms have on expatriate adjustment and integration. While many scholars have investigated expatriate adjustment and integration (Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2002; Hattingh et al., 2011;

Pruetipibultham & McLean, 2011; Sanchez et al., 2000; Stroppa & Spieb, 2010; Hattingh et al., 2011; Tung, 1986), it is apparent that not many studies have explicitly investigated the use of online social media during the adjustment and integration process. Furthermore, this is the first known study to investigate expatriate adjustment in Netherlands in relation to the use of SNS. As a result, this study may provide the academic community with insight regarding the ways expatriates in the Netherlands use online social media during the adjustment and integration process.

Secondly, organizations that hire expatriates may utilize the findings of this research to develop and implement policies which facilitate adjustment and integration through the use of SNSs and other online platforms. Developing such policies may be beneficial for organizations for several reasons. First, the inability of expatriates to adjust within new cultural and/or organizational environments may result in premature termination and return from international assignments (Coperland and Griggs,1983). This may be very costly for organizations and may even result in a damaged company reputation, loss of business opportunities, and loss of market share (Black and Gregersen, 1991). Second, while failure to complete an assignment has obvious negative implications for organizations, it may also be harmful for the expatriate. Tung (1987) acknowledges that failure to complete an assignment may lower the expatriates' self-esteem and self-confidence, as well as cause a sense of shame amongst co-workers. Finally, failed expatriation may serve to decrease future commitment to the organization and job performance upon reparation (Adler, 1981; Naumann, 1993).

By developing an understanding regarding the ways that expatriates use online social media to adjust and integrate within the Netherlands, organizations may be better prepared to manage and counter the problems associated with misadjustment. Furthermore, organizations may be better equipped to implement policies that promote the use of online tools to facilitate expatriate adjustment and integration.

Finally, expatriates may use this study's findings to develop a better understanding regarding the ways that the use of online social media may influence the adjustment process. Previous research indicates that expatriate adjustment can be a challenging and stressful process (Stroppa & Spieb, 2010). Much of the stress and uncertainty that is experienced when expatriates are cut off from previous social support networks, such as friends, family, and colleagues in the home country, and feel socially isolated and lonely in their host country (Fahr et al., 2010; Hattingh, 2012). One of the ways in which expatriates can overcome many of the challenges associated with expatriation is through the development of a social support network within the host country (Shaffer & Harrison, 2001). By providing expatriates with a

better understanding regarding the affordances of online social media and the influence such use may have on the adjustment and integration process, they may be able to develop their own personal adjustment strategies during expatriation.

5.2 Strengths and Limitations

A key strength of this study pertains to the size and diversity of participants sampled. The participants used in this study originated from a multitude of countries throughout the world and varied in regards to their employment positions, educational background, and socioeconomic status. As a result, participants were able to provide the study with rich and diverse accounts of their experiences, which served to enhance the overall quality of the data collected.

An additional strength pertains to the study's use of theory. The primary theory that was utilized in this study is that of SOC. Many of the findings were consistent with both the SOC theory as well as previous research that was conducted by other researchers. This serves to increase the validity of both the findings and the SOC theory.

In regards to weaknesses, one particular weakness is that all the participants originated from countries outside of the EU. While this was done on purpose, a study including participants who originated from countries within the EU may yield different results. As a result, a future study that investigates the use of SNSs in relation to expatriate adjustment should include participants from countries within the EU.

An additional weakness relates to the fact that no participants in this study were employed by an exclusively Dutch organization. One aspect of this study investigated the ways in which employment organizations influence the adjustment process through the organization and implementation of different social events. All participants reported working for either a multinational or American organization. While the study resulted in greater insight in regards the ways that employers serve to facilitate adjustment and integration, no information was gathered about how Dutch organizations provide such assistance. It might be speculated that Dutch organizations would differ in regards to the type and amount of assistance offered. As a result, future research should investigate the ways that Dutch organizations serve to facilitate adjustment and integration for expatriate employees.

Appendix I - Interview Topics/Questions

RQ1: How do expatriates use social networking sites to meet and socialize with other expatriates and Dutch nationals alike in both the online and offline realms?

- Which online communities/websites/forums do you frequently use to connect with others since making the move to the Netherlands?
    - Is there a specific platform you prefer? Why?
- If at all, describe how your social media use has changed as a result of expatriation?
- Describe the ways you have used such platforms to meet others since arriving in the country?
- How often have these online interactions transitioned to offline meetings?
- Are the majority of the people who you met since living in the Netherlands Dutch or of another nationality?

RQ 2: How do expatriates use social networking sites to meet others who share common interests?

- What are your interests/hobbies?
- How have you used social networking sites to interact with others who share your interests?
- How have you used different online platforms to meet others who share your interests?
- When meeting and interacting with others online, how important is it for you to meet others who share your interests?
- Are you apart of any specific online groups/communities that bring people who share your interests together?
- In terms of the nationality of your friends and social connections you met online while living in the Netherlands, do many of your connections share a similar nationality?
- Do you feel more prone to meet and interact with those who share your nationality?
    - Why (not)?

RQ 3: How do expatriates use social networking sites to maintain social connections with friends, colleagues, and family in their home country?

- How have you used online platforms to keep in contact with connections (friends, family, colleagues) back home?
- What are the specific platforms you use to maintain such connections?

- How has engaging with family and social connections back home influenced your overall ability to adjust?

RQ4: How do expatriates use social networking sites to develop and maintain personal and professional relationships with colleagues in the Netherlands?

- What measures, if any, has the organization you work for taken to assist you in adjusting since moving to the country?
- Is there any form of formal or informal social support network (online or offline) within your organization?
- How many of your colleagues have you connected with through social networking sites?
    - Besides interacting with colleagues at work and in person, do you use social networking sites to communicate with colleagues outside of the work environment?
- Have you developed any close friendships with colleagues?
    - (If yes) How have these friendships influenced your ability to adjust to life in the Netherlands?

RQ5: How do expatriates use social networking sites and websites to acquire information which facilitates the acculturation process?

- Prior to moving to the Netherlands or immediately following relocation, how interested were you in learning about Dutch culture and heritage?
- What steps did you take to educate yourself about Dutch culture and life in Holland?
    - Any specific websites or online platforms?
- In regards to meeting and interacting with Dutch nationals (online), what impact has this correspondence had on your overall knowledgability about the country, its people, and their culture?
- In which ways have you used websites and/or social networking sites to learn about different cultural activities and events in your area? (For example, Queen's Day, World Port Days, Carnaval, etc).
- How much effort have you put into learning the Dutch language?
- Have you used any social networking websites to connect with other expats who also want to learn the language?

- Have you used, or considered using, any websites that facilitate the learning for the Dutch language?

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