Expatriate adjustment in the digital age: The co-creation of online social support resources through blogging

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A B S T R A C T

Support provided through social contacts in the host environment has long been recognized as critical for expatriate adjustment. Internet technologies are changing the way individuals form and interact with social contacts and access social support. These technologies have the potential to offer expatriates new sources and means for accessing social support. We investigated the role of blogging technology in expatriates' adjustment to foreign environments through a qualitative analysis of a set of blogs written by foreign individuals living in Canada between 2005 and 2012. We found that the blogging system, which is comprised of the blogging technology, bloggers, discussants, and co-created digital discourse, generated online adjustment support resources which were accessed by expatriates. Online adjustment support resources are social support resources, created and residing online, which may help expatriates deal with their experiences of uncertainty, ambiguity and anxiety and include information, interpretation schemas, and comfort.

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1. Introduction

Millions of people are engaged in work abroad every year resulting from migration, expatriation or short overseas assignments. To succeed, these individuals must adjust to work and non-work conditions in the host country (Farh, Bartol, Shapiro, & Shin, 2010). That is, newcomers living abroad must establish a relatively stable and functional relationship with the host environment (Sobre-Denton & Hart, 2008), such that they are able to predict the behavior of others in the host environment; explain others' attitudes, feelings and behaviors; interact competently (Gudykunst, 1998); and go about their everyday lives with relative ease and a sense of psychological comfort (Farh et al., 2010; Sobre-Denton & Hart, 2008; Ward, Okura, Kennedy, & Kojima, 1998). Understanding the drivers and outcomes of newcomers' adjustment to foreign environments has been a focus of international management research since the late 1970s (see Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1991 for a review) and is of key importance to individuals living and working in foreign contexts and to the organizations that employ them. For parsimony, in this paper we use the term 'expatriates' indiscriminately to refer to different types of newcomers, including migrants, traditional business expatriates, trailing spouses, or short-term sojourners.

Research has established the critical role of social support provided by contacts in the host country to expatriates' adjustment to foreign environments (Farh et al., 2010; Glanz, Williams, & Hoeksema, 2001; Johnson, Kristof-Brown, Van Vianen, & De Pater, 2003; Manev & Stevenson, 2001; Sobre-Denton & Hart, 2008). Contacts in the host country provide social support

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(Adelman, 1988), which, in the context of adjustment to foreign environments, is defined as communication that helps individuals manage uncertainty and ambiguity and increases their perceptions of control regarding life (Albrecht & Adelman, 1987; Albrecht, Goldsmith, & Thompson, 2003). This definition focuses on social support that addresses uncertainty, ambiguity and anxiety, which are key barriers to expatriates' adjustment to foreign environments (Gao & Gudykunst, 1990; Gudykunst, 1995, 1998, 2005; Sobre-Denton & Hart, 2008).

Traditionally face-to-face encounters were expatriates' primary means of engaging and interacting with contacts and accessing social support for adjustment. Internet technologies, such as blogs, social network sites and wikis, are now widely recognized to be changing the way individuals make and interact with social contacts (Grudin, 2006; McAfee, 2006; Steinhuser, Smolnik, & Hoppe, 2011) and thereby access social support (Mikal, Rice, Abeyta, & DeVilbiss, 2013; Rains & Young, 2009).

Studies have shown that technology-mediated social support has a positive influence on adjustment to a variety of life transitions such as those brought on by parenthood, diagnosis of a serious illness and change of career status (Kralik, Visentin, & Van Loon, 2006). Given the importance of social support from contacts in the host country to expatriates' adjustment to foreign environments (Farh et al., 2010; Glanz et al., 2001) and the growing use of Internet technologies for interacting with others (Rains & Keating, 2011; Treem & Leonardi, 2012), a complete understanding of the process of expatriates' adjustment to foreign environments in the digital age requires an understanding of the role these technologies play in supporting expatriate adjustment. We expand understanding of the potential of Internet technologies in expatriates' adjustment to foreign environments through a qualitative, grounded analysis (Birks & Mills, 2011; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Locke, 2001) of a set of blogs written by foreign individuals living in Canada.

We found that bloggers (the principal authors of blogs) and readers interacted through blogs with each other, and the texts they created, to generate online adjustment support resources. We define online adjustment support resources as resources created through interaction with social contacts, which may be particularly necessary in helping expatriates deal with their experiences of uncertainty, ambiguity and anxiety. Online adjustment support resources were continually constituted and updated and remained available to current and future expatriates. We conceptualized the blogging system as a technical subsystem ("a space in which work is made possible through the imbrication of social [human] and material [technological] agencies" (Leonardi, 2012, p. 27)) and developed a model explaining the role of the blogging system in expatriates' generation of and access to, online adjustment support resources. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our findings for theories of expatriates' adjustment to foreign environments. Our study contributes to research on expatriates' adjustment to foreign environments and suggests fruitful paths for future research of expatriates' adjustment and more broadly, to research of online social support.

2. Expatriate adjustment and technology-mediated social support

We view expatriate adjustment as a type of transition (see Adelman, 1988; Mikal et al., 2013). Life transitions are instigated by events that require an individual to move from one life context, identity and/or role to another, such as being diagnosed with a serious illness or moving to a foreign country (Kralik et al., 2006; Mikal et al., 2013). Individuals undergoing transition typically experience stress stemming from uncertainty and a disruption to social networks (Adelman, 1988; Mikal et al., 2013). Adjustment to a transition is facilitated by social support (Adelman, 1988; Albrecht & Adelman, 1987; Mikal et al., 2013). Social support has been generally defined as the experience of assistance and reassurance resulting from social relationships (High & Solomon, 2011), what people use when responding to problems of life (Pearlin, 1989), and as the transfer of advice and information to help cope with a stressor (Mikal et al., 2013). More specifically, in the context of adjustment to foreign environments, we focus on social support as "communication that serves to help manage uncertainty and increase perceptions of control regarding one's life" (Rains & Keating, 2011, p. 513). In the next section, we elaborate on the nature of the specific transition facing expatriates, which has implications for the types of social support they may require.

2.1. Expatriate adjustment[1]

Expatriates undergo many disruptions similar to other types of life transitions, including disruptions to existing roles, identities and social networks, which result in the experience of uncertainty, ambiguity and anxiety. Research on expatriate adjustment conceptualizes this experience as culture shock (Kim, 2008). To manage culture shock and adjust to the new environment, expatriates need to understand, make sense of, and interact within the new social environment (Glanz et al., 2001). Expatriates' local contacts provide social support that helps expatriates manage their experience of uncertainty (Gao & Gudykunst, 1990; Gudykunst, 1995, 1998, 2005), ambiguity (Adelman, 1988; Glanz et al., 2001), and anxiety (Gao & Gudykunst, 1990; Gudykunst, 1995, 1998, 2005).

An expatriates' experience of *uncertainty* results from the inability to predict or explain behaviors in the host environment (Gudykunst, 1998, 2005; Sobre-Denton & Hart, 2008). An expatriate's experience of *ambiguity* results from the inability to

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[1] We explored and integrated literature into our research as our data suggested its relevance as is typical of research adopting a grounded theory approach. For ease of reading, we review the literatures we came to draw on, together, here.