Full length article

Self-efficacy as the moderator: Exploring driving factors of perceived social support for mainland Chinese students in Taiwan

Ying Chieh Liu [a, *], Yun Ying Hung [b]

[a] Department of Information Management, Chaoyang University of Technology, 168, Jifeng E. Rd., Wufeng District, Taichung 41349, Taiwan, ROC
[b] Department of Nursing, Chung Hwa University of Medical Technology, No.89, Wenhua 1st Str., Rende Dist., Tainan City 717, Taiwan, ROC

ABSTRACT

More and more mainland Chinese college students study in Taiwan. Social support is one of the main factors helping them study and live happily in Taiwan. This study aims to investigate the relationships among self-efficacy, social identity, and perceived social support through online social networks in helping mainland Chinese college students improve their adaption ability of diversified campuses in Taiwan. We assume social identity affects positively perceived social support, and self-efficacy served as a moderator of the relationships between social identify and social support. A convenience sample of 366 mainland Chinese students from five universities in Taiwan was conducted to validate the hypotheses. The results revealed that affective and cognitive identification were significantly and positively related to perceived emotional, tangible and informational support. The moderator, self-efficacy, was shown to moderate the three relationships from affective identification to emotional, tangible and informational support. Also, it moderated the relationships from cognitive identification to tangible support, but not the relationships from cognitive identification to emotional and informational support. The suggestions for Taiwanese host universities to lighten the stress of study adaptation of mainland Chinese college students are provided.

© 2016 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

1. Introduction

More and more mainland Chinese Students study in Taiwanese universities recent years. These students have brought benefits for Taiwanese universities, including the cultural advancement of domestic students, the facilitation of international interdependence and cooperation, the enhancement of university research programs, and the income represented by the tuition paid. According to the Common Wealth Magazine (2015), there are 5851 students from China studying for a university degree in Taiwan. Also, for the past four years, Taiwanese universities have hosted credit programs of one or two semesters for over 80,000 Chinese college students. The numbers of Chinese students are expected to increase in the future. However, researchers have found some issues for their live and study in Taiwan, such as culture and teaching environment adaption and adjustment, scholarship application, health insurance and political issues (Lee, Lee, Yan, & Chao, 2013). It would hinder

the recruitment of mainland Chinese students if these issues are not managed well. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate and understand the driving factors assisting Chinese college students in adapting to a new environment, and further propose methods to improve their study and life in Taiwan.

Although study abroad experiences nurture students with opportunities to increase their professional knowledge, expand their worldview, and grow personally within a new culture, social support plays an important role in helping students adapt to a new environment. Social support originates from the interaction with new friends, activities participation, emotional responses, academic demands accomplishment and the feeling of institutional belonging which are all manifestations of the adaptation level of foreign students (Chung, 2001; Wang, & Mallinckhrodt, 2006; Ying, Lee, Tsai, Yeh, & Huang, 2000).

Social support is evidenced to be an important source to improve people's ability to adapt the environment. Individuals can ease stress and cope with the difficulties when individuals obtain more social support. Most mainland Chinese students are staying in Taiwan alone without family's company. Sufficient and appropriate social support helps them feel respected, cared and belongingness,

* Corresponding author.
    E-mail addresses: allanliu@cyut.edu.tw (Y.C. Liu), Kyyh7@hotmail.com (Y.Y. Hung).

and further improves their adaption ability for their life and study in Taiwan. Additionally, online social networks, such as Line, Facebook, Google+, are the important platforms for students to communicate each other, which means online social networks play a crucial role for students to perceive social support.

In this study, we are interested in how and what kind of social support mainland Chinese students perceive from their classmates through online social networks. Current online social network research focuses on categorizing social support or investigating the impacts of social support on individuals' life adaption. Little research has explored why individuals are able to perceive social support. Our study intends to examine the driving forces for mainland Chinese students to perceive social support in aspect of recipients instead of providers. Thus, this study aims to:

(1) Identify the factors affecting perceived social support in a setting of online social networks for mainland Chinese Students studying in Taiwanese universities; and
(2) Develop and empirically examine hypotheses and provide advices for Taiwanese host universities to improve the campus services for mainland Chinese Students.

To achieve these goals, we first developed causal relationship hypotheses by discussing social support and social identity theory. Then, self-efficacy was used as a moderator to hypothesize the moderating effects between social support and social identity factors. Survey data was collected from 366 Mainland Chinese students studying at five Taiwan universities to validate our hypotheses. Based on our analysis, we drew insights on factors driving how the students obtain social support from their classmates through online social networks. Finally, we proposed methods for Taiwanese universities to improve their services for mainland Chinese students.

2. Hypotheses development

2.1. Online social support

"Social support is an exchange of resources between at least two individuals perceived by the provider or the recipient to be intended to enhance the well-being of the recipient" (Shumaker & Brownell, 1984, p.13). It refers to the functions performed for the individuals by significant others or secondary group members (Thoits, 2011), like a social network community. This definition brings about the importance of relationships for social support study. Social support scholars think social support is an interactive relationship between an individual and other community members. This relationship helps individual face challenges, pressures and difficulties, and improves the individual's ability to adapt the environment (Caplan & Killilea, 1976). Social support is a communicative behavior which brings about affective comfort, informative, knowledge and material exchange (House & Kahn, 1985).

Traditional social support research focuses on the interactions between individuals, family, friends and referrals. Online social support mainly focuses on the relationships between recipients and providers including online friends or strangers. Most focused groups for the two search streams do not overlap. Online social support occurs between the members of the same online social network. Past online social support research categorizes social support as informational, tangible, emotional, appraisal, affirmation, belonging and esteem (Chang, 2009; Coulson, 2005; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Lin, Hsu, Cheng, & Chiu, 2012). Informational and emotional support have been found to be the most frequent supports shown in online social networks, which could contribute to the characteristics of online social networks. Lack of face-to-face

contact, asynchronous and text-type communication is the main method for online members to exchange information. Also, some sensitive and private issues can be posted online to seek for suggestions and affirmation without embarrassment. These conditions facilitate the information and emotional support. Additionally, tangible support appears to be the least in the online social networks in the past research. The reason is that tangible support is difficult to be realized without face-to-face contact. But the interaction in online social networks can be a media of providing follow-up tangible support. For example, other members may send messages of goods delivery, expressing the wish to accompany to attend some activities or provide monetary support. This is to say, online interaction can trigger tangible support. Therefore we synthesize social support as threefold for this study: informational, emotional and tangible support.

2.2. Online social network identification

Social identity is defined as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63). Past studies reported that social identify provides the basis for group members both give and receive social support. For example, Haslam, O'Brien, Jetten, Vormedal, and Penna (2005) surveyed 34 heart surgery patients, 20 bomb disposal officers and 20 bar staff. The results showed that social identity is a significant predictor of social support and stress reduction. When individuals identify themselves as part of a social group, they perceive higher social support, less stress, higher personal self-esteem and higher satisfaction toward their life. Levine, Prosser, Evans, and Reicher (2005) conducted two experiments to shed light on the relationships between social identity and helping behavior. They concluded that an injured stranger wearing an in-group team shirt of soccer fans is more likely to be helped than when wearing a rival team shirt or an unbranded sports shirt. Their study shows the importance of shared identity between bystander and victim and the inclusiveness of salient identity for increasing the likelihood of emergency intervention.

Affectively, social identity provides a sense of pride in and belongingness to the group, and it reflects the value of the identity to group members (Albert et al., 1998). Cognitively, social identity directs a way for individuals to place themselves and others in society such that individuals define their positions in a group. Henry, Arrow, and Carini (1999) classified group identification based on social identity as threefold: affective, cognitive and behavioral identification. Affective identification is associated with the positive feelings about one's membership in a group, including pride, enthusiasm, and belongingness. Cognitive identification regards to individuals define themselves as a member of a group. Behavioral identification includes not only cognitive, attitude and value but also behavior which presents the characteristics of the group. However, in our setting of online social networks, behavioral identification is hard to measure and identify in a virtual environment. Affective and cognitive identification imply to an individual's perceptions of affection and belongingness in the online community. Thus, we conceptualize social identify as affective and cognitive identification, both of which are the predictors of whether individuals perceive social support.

We assume that individuals with higher cognitive identification would perceive higher extent of social support. Individuals with higher cognitive identification would have higher extent of commitment to their group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Carmeli, Gilat, & Weisberg, 2006). Individuals with a higher degree of commitment to their group would make efforts for group well-being.