

Maintaining Long-Distance Friendships: Communication Practices For Seeking And Providing Social Support Across Geographic Divides

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ABSTRACT

People seek and provide support through their personal social network, especially when they must cope with stress, deal with an emergency, or need help. Coping with a new culture or new environment is a stressful situation that sojourner students must face. Support through friendship plays an important role in facing such new situations. Focusing on the perspectives of Asian student sojourners, this study addresses the challenges that they face in soliciting, receiving, and providing social support from friends back home. The results from interviewing 25 Asian student sojourners revealed that few students included in the study lacked physical support. However, when they found that they must cope with a big problem, their friends would still be close and help them. The participants in this research reported perceiving emotional support from their friends while abroad, similar to the support they enjoyed when they were home. The participants also noted that they experienced satisfaction through mediated communication but that they preferred face-to-face communication.

Keywords: Long Distance Relationship; Social Support; Friendships

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, our world has changed in tremendous ways as a variety of forces have compelled Asian countries to convert their structure so as to compete in a global market. Advanced technologies, such as modern transportation and communication technologies, are factors that have facilitated changes. Human resource mobility has pushed forward to developing Asian countries. Many Asian students, working and studying in many fields, have sought their education abroad with the goal of gaining more money and knowledge. The United States is a popular choice for Asians pursuing university degrees.

Traveling to another country raises many problems for sojourners, such as difficult experiences with culture, language, and adaptation to new experiences. Asian student sojourners who decide to study abroad face not only a new environment that can affect their physical health on account of differences in food and climate among other factors, but they must also cope with many factors that can affect their emotional well-being in a negative way and that can result in periods of insecurity, self-doubt, and loneliness. Unfortunately, living abroad is a difficult time for sojourner students to find social support that they can easily obtain when they are living in their hometown. Thus, long distance relationships pose communication challenges that contribute to reluctance on the part of the sojourners to receive the support from their personal networks in their home countries.

Long Distance Relationships and Personal Network Support

Based on a review of the literature, Albrecht, Parks and Adelman (1987) observed that people need support when they cope with a crisis or a turning point in their life. Cutrona, Suhr and Macfarlane (1990) suggested that social support should be categorized into two major groups – both instrument and emotional support. Meanwhile,

instrument supports are those that tend to find possible solutions to solve the problems by tangibles, such as financial, transportation or childcare, and also information support. On the other hand, emotional supports are usually expressed in terms of caring and feeling including verbal and non-verbal communication between receivers and providers or receivers and their network. Both instrumental and emotional support from all kinds of close relationships that one has can be important in relieving a receiver's problems. Kim (1987) explained that, in general, people do not encounter change alone. The networks that people belong to share experiences and regularly help each other cope with difficult times by providing information, resources, or emotion support. People usually seek support from those with whom they have a close relationship in their network back home before creating a new network (Clark, 1983). Likewise, Asian student sojourners residing aboard also seek to stay in touch with their personal network in their home countries because they need the support to reduce their uncertainty and stress. However, sojourners experience difficulty in immediately receiving support as they might have enjoyed residing in their home countries. Time zone differences created by geographic distance complicate the coordination of communication and timely response. The Internet, instant messaging, and telephones help sojourners stay in touch and reduce the gap in their long distance relationships, but communication researchers have not explored whether these features are sufficient to fulfill the physical and emotional needs of the sojourners.

Long Distance Relationship and Friendships Support

Cook and Weigel (1983) found in their study that friends often provide emotional support and assist each other in the day-to-day practical activity of coping with new experiences. In addition, Adelman, Parks, and Albrecht (1987) stated that friends usually provide emotional support, such as sharing activities, listening, consulting, or offering advice about problems. They also pointed out that friends are in a better position than family to offer emotional support, in part, because those relationships usually have "weaker ties" than those with family and the comparative ease that friends have in talking about confidential topics. Canary and Stafford (1994) argued that friendships seem sensitive and easy to change depending on social context and frequency of contact because friendships do not evolve out of social obligations. Friendships are typically thought of as "weak ties"; therefore, if people cannot maintain a friendship through communication, they run the risk of losing that friendship. One implication of this observation for current research is that friendships have greater risk of termination when the members of the relationship become geographically separated.

According to Fehr (1999), long distance friendships seem to be frail because maintaining them requires investment of costs (time and energy) and they are difficult to maintain through everyday engagement. These relationships are challenged by the difficulty of providing emotional support and instrument support created by geographic distance. The creation of a geographic distance between friends is a factor that can place such a strain on the relationship that it may result in a decline in closeness. This decline in closeness can be the product of reduced availability to each other and reduced opportunity to share in mutual activities. Adelman and Albrecht (1987) stated that a lack of reciprocity in emotional support or lack of ability to exchange information within an individual's network can result in the break-up of the relationship and the loss of support that was previously available.

SUMMARY

Previous researchers (e.g., Eckenrode & Gore, 1981; Fortaine, 1986; Shuval, 1982) have described the problem of geographic mobility reducing the support available from close friends and limiting people access to support. Notwithstanding, Johnson, Becker, Craig, Gilchrist, and Haigh (2008) reported that geographic distance actually increases the level of commitment between friends, despite the fact that geographically separated friends are not able to interact on a face-to-face basis. From the previous reviews, we are left, then, with different pictures concerning the effect of geographic distance on friendships. Adelman and Albrecht (1987), and the scholars they cite, paint a cautionary picture while Johnson, Becker, Craig, Gilchrist, and Haigh (2008) provide a more optimistic view.

Nowadays, advanced communication technologies, including email and instant messaging, create a new environment for individuals involved in geographically distant relationships. Increasingly, communication channels can reduce the gap between people who are far away from each other and can help people to solicit and receive support from their networks more easily than before (Blieszner & Adams, 1992). We can no longer rely on the

research of the 1980s to provide a complete picture concerning the ability of friends to provide instrumental or emotional support for each other when faced with the challenges posed by geographic separation. As suggested by this review of literature, the effect that geographic separation will have on friendships and support is unclear. Additionally, previous literature has tended to focus on friendships within the United States, an individualistic culture. Little attention has been devoted to friends from collectivist cultures where people have stronger social ties within their groups than persons living in individualistic societies (Hofstede, 1991). To address this gap, this research took advantage of the presence of Asian student sojourners at a mid-size university in the United States in a study of their perceptions of the challenges that geographic separation pose for soliciting, providing, and receiving support from friends back in their native country. The specific research questions were:

RQ1: From the point of view of an Asian student sojourner, how does geographic distance affect his or her ability to seek, provide, or receive tangible and emotional support from friends residing back home?

RQ2: Are mediated communication technologies, such as telephones and computers, perceived as sufficient to fulfill the social support needs of Asian sojourners who wish to maintain contact with their friends residing back home?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY & DATA ANALYSIS

Twenty-five Asian students at a mid-sized university in the United States were interviewed. The interview was conducted in English, which is a second language for both the interviewer and interviewees. The interview was designed in such a way as to ask a series of questions about friendships. Specifically, the researcher explored the aims of this study for the 25 interviewees who described their friendships.

The interviewer contacted friends and organizations, described the general aim of this research, indicated the required procedures and time commitment, and invited volunteers. The research proceeded with face-to-face interviews. The interviews took place at a reciprocally convenient, quiet location where it was possible for the interviewer and interviewee to engage in a private conversation and for the interviews to be tape recorded. Interviews were semi-structured with the interviewer able to add questions to gain more understanding during the interview process. Also, the interviewer allowed interviewees to avoid answering questions that interviewees were uncomfortable answering.

The participants who volunteered to talk about their friendships included seven males (three Chinese, two Indian, one Thai, and one Indonesian) and 18 females (four Taiwanese, three Thai, three Japanese, two Chinese, two Indonesian, one Vietnamese, one Korean, one Sri Lankan, and one Laotian). The male participants were between 20 and 31 years old and the female participants were between 22 and 36 years old.

All interviewees had overseas travel experiences. Table 1 provides the information concerning how long interviewees have been living in the United States.

Table 1: Staying Period in United States of Asian Student Sojourners

Period	Female	Male
Less than 1 year	10	5
1 to 2 years	5	1
More than 2 years	3	1
Total	18	7

Twenty-five recordings and transcriptions were used and the data set was analyzed by comparative analysis techniques (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The comparative analysis was used to find patterns in the transcriptions by comparing perceptions of participants' experiences at different times (before and after arriving) and category varieties (male and female). In addition, the researcher looked for themes and patterns within the interview transcriptions.

FINDINGS

In Memory of Friendships (Past to Present)

Both male and female interviewees defined the meaning of close friendships in terms of equality. For example, a Taiwanese female and a Chinese male expressed this idea:

F: When we go together, we are very relaxed and we can talk about everything that I really want to talk about. Sometimes I am more open to talk about my romantic relationship with her more than my family because we are in same generation. We understand each other. We share almost everything.

M: We are very close. We do everything together. We are studying together. We want to go into the same career. Everything that he would like to do, I will do. We have the same point of view.

Furthermore, sharing activities and information, exchanging information, listening and understanding a problem, and giving advice to friends are popular answers for how interviewees explained their relationship when they resided in their home country. For example, the Indian who lived in the United States for six months said:

We lived, worked, and ate together. We went outside and traveled together. Sometimes we went out to a movie and sometimes we went to buy stuff, such as a computer and scanner, or common purposes. Any minor and major decision we can share and discuss with each other.

While a Chinese female who had lived in the United States for four years recalled, “I talked to my close friend if I had a problem when I lived in China. I will talk with her. I feel comfortable when I talk to her. She is a very nice person. She is the one who will help me to resolve my problems.”

These results illustrated that Asian student sojourners perceived close friendships as very important to them when they lived in their home country. Close friends not only provide physical support, but also emotional support. Close friends are valuable in terms of support when people live together.

The Effect of Geographic Distance and Friendships

Long distance creates reluctance in asking for support from close friends. The Indian male related the following:

I think long distance affects both physical and emotional support. Even though we have a very strong understanding, living in the U.S. has affected us because when you see your friend almost every week, you can go out to talk about things, but now we can only talk. So, we want to make sure that we stay in touch. I think it is better if I was there. The relationship will be fine. If he needs anything, then he can call me and I can be there, but now it's not like that. Because of distance, I don't know how he thinks of me - as a close friend or not.

However, the interview transcripts suggest that both males and females feel comfortable and able to keep in touch and receive emotional support from their close friends, even though they are not living in their home country. For example, an Indonesian female said, “Often my friend calls me to complain about her work.” A Thai male said, “I talk to him more than my family when I have a problem because he gives me advice.” A Chinese male said, “Every time I have a problem, I will call him.” A Taiwanese female said, “I share my feeling with her.” A Japanese female said, “Actually, when she has something that is upsetting, she always calls me.” A Thai female said, “We are talking about our experiences and support each other when one of us feels bad. You know she worries about me and when she feels bad, I always listen.”

Physical Versus Emotional Support

This evidence suggests that Asian student sojourners feel like they still receive the same emotional support from close friends when they need it. Moreover, they can provide emotional support to their friends in their home

country when their friends have a problem (e.g., distresses, worries, and sharing experience) because both of them can use the phone or the Internet and can talk with each other to encourage or cheer each other up.

On the other hand, a Taiwanese female thought she perceived lack of physical support from her friend because of the geographic separation:

When I get hurt, I do not tell her because she would worry about me. In Taiwan, I will talk to her suddenly because we can help each other directly, but now I'm outside the country, so it's difficult to get help immediately.

Also, an Indonesian male said, "She spends less time on me because she is becoming closer to my other friend. Actually, it happens because of the rate of physical meeting."

A Vietnamese female argued that she still supported her friend even though they did not see each other, "I talked to her often or every day because she asked me to go shopping for her or help her resolve a problem." An Indian male perceived his relationship with his friend differently. He stated,

Sometimes I asked him to go to my home and take my niece's pictures because I have a new niece at my home. No one sent me pictures yet. I asked him to send all the pictures through email or upload them on "YouTube." Then he said he was busy.

The results showed that most interviewees perceived lack of physical support from close friends in their home country, but some interviewees did not perceive that. It seems not quite clear when the sojourners are separated by geographic distance. They might lack physical support. However, a Thai female who had lived in the United States for ten years said, "I am confident. I do not lack any support from close friends in my home country because they are really close friends." Later, she elaborated on her experience further:

It's kind of funny because we knew each other for such a long time. When I am here, we contact each other only once a month. When I was back in Thailand, we came back to be the close friends we were again and met each other every week.

Furthermore, this research showed that close friends do not necessary help each other in everyday life, but close friends still stand beside each other everywhere and are ready to help each other upon request or without request. A Thai female said, "My friend always understands who I am. We love to be what we are, and she is ready to help if I ask for it."

To gain more understanding, the interviews allowed for comparison between two points of view. First was a Thai male who lived in the United States for six month and another one was a Thai female who lived in the United States for ten years.

M: Right now my feeling is the same, so we can ask someone when we have a problem. I do not have any reason to call him because I do not have a problem. I mean when we separate, we still have a good relationship, but when we have a problem, close friends always support each other.

F: It is not an urgent thing or important thing to spend time and money to talk about that at all, such as tell her that my mom is still fuzzy again or whatever. It's not as important to contact her for long distance. It's just kind of fun when you talk about that. We will call each other only when we have emergencies, such as our children or husband, something like that only.

Obviously, talking in everyday life can provide social support for both physical and emotional well-being. Although communication happens less, social support still occurs. Close friends are not concerned with talking too much because they have understanding and commitment. As a Chinese male said, "We trust each other, and even if we did not talk in half a year, we still know that this guy is my best friend." An Indian male said, "I think my close friend is pretty satisfied in our relationship. We have less contact, but we both have a strong understanding. We realize we are busy in life and we are so far apart, so we cannot keep in touch." Additionally, a Sri Lankan female said, "The relationship and support from my friend has not changed. I can approach it in the same way – a very

minor change, but in my mind, it is still very close.”

An Indonesian female said, “Sometimes distance is just one factor we have in our own life, so we cannot expect to always contact each other.” Additionally, a Taiwanese female said, “We are both busier than before.” An Indonesian female pointed out, “No matter what, we are always friends. We continue our own life, then sometimes we might meet again in the future.”

A Thai female stated, “We know each other well. More than time and distance can break down our relationship. We keep in touch and update with each other sometimes because you never know what is going to happen. Friends can cheer you up when you feel bad. They are waiting to help you.”

Use Media and Technology to Keep in Touch

Several communication media have developed a significant means for helping people remain in contact with each other. The cell phone, computer, and the internet, for example, are used to reduce geographic distance. Most of the interviewees used these media to contact close friends in their home country and were rather satisfied with these ways of relating.

A variety of communication media can create more choices for the sojourners. Some media are expensive but useful and some are cheap but of low quality; however, more choices give the sojourners opportunities to seek and provide support to their close friends. For example, an Indian male said, “Because everything here is based on the computer and everything is online, if you are not good at the computer, you will have a big problem.” Moreover, ten interviewees suggested that the internet, email, instant messaging, and cell phone helped them maintain their support from their friends in their home country. For example, a Laotian female said, “I’m kind of lucky because my friends can get access to the internet and keep in contact with me all the time, and I can afford to buy things for them.” Also, a Japanese female said, “Skype and email make it easier to keep in touch.” A Korean female said, “The internet phone is cheap and convenient.”

Although these communication media help people keep in touch and maintain their support with their friends in their home countries, they still encounter some problems, such as the phone being too expensive or access to the internet being difficult. A Taiwanese female explained, “I don’t use the phone to call her. Usually, I just meet her online, so when she is online, I can connect with her; but she is not always available online, and I am not able to contact her.” However, these media cannot replace face-to-face communication.

Finally, interviewees felt more comfortable and preferred communicating face-to-face rather than through communication media because they wanted to express their feelings. Even though they can see each other online, it does not provide quality of feeling one has meeting face-to-face. For example, a Taiwanese female explained, “It’s not easy to talk about things on MSN. I can talk, but I prefer face-to-face.” A Japanese female explained, “If we meet face-to-face, I will talk about secrets. I will see whether my friend wants to share a secret, and then I feel more open to talk about things that you know I might talk about.” Most of the interviewees were satisfied using communication media because it helped them maintain contact and support with their close friends in their home country, but they still preferred face-to-face if the topic of conversation concerned expression of a feeling or a secret.

DISCUSSION

The major goal of this study was to analyze and compare support systems used by Asian students studying in a mid-size university in the United States. The support system was further analyzed in terms of instrumental and emotional support. Additionally, this study investigated the level of satisfaction with communication media used by Asian students to maintain social support with their friends in their home countries.

The interview data were used to compare how Asian students received instrumental and emotional support before they left their home countries and how they received such support after they arrived in the United States. The difference between perceived instrumental support and emotional support, in the context of comparing

geographically close relationships and long-distance relationships, has challenged researchers who study interpersonal communication. The results of this study suggest that even though Asian students have been separated from their close friends by geographical distance, they still maintain their relationship through instrumental and emotional support, especially the latter. So, in response to RQ1, the results of this study indicate that from the point of view of an Asian student sojourner, geographic distance does not seem to affect the sojourner's ability to seek or provide tangible support to their friends residing back home.

However, instrumental support or physical support has been perceived to have decreased by geographical distance because such distance poses obstacles in their ability to do activities together. Also, on account of geographic distance and different environments among Asian students and their close friends in their home country, informational support decreased. They were less aware of each other's activities, so the advice that they provided to each other to solve problems was not in depth. Such advice was often general in nature. However, many participants reported that if they had a difficult time or a crisis, they could ask their friend to help them solve their problem. They were confident that their friends were willing to help.

Asian students separated by geographic distance only perceived a little lack of instrumental support. However, diminishment of perceived instrumental support has little effect on perceived emotional support. The sojourners perceived that they supported each other psychologically, which helped them when coping with a crisis. The evidence from the interviews substantiates the point that the interviewees found it very easy to continue their relationships with their friends in their home country and will be able to ask for help from them when they go back. They do not perceive distance as a problem in seeking and providing support because they are proud to support each other. However, they perceived time constraints as a problem because many of them developed several obligations and commitments over time.

The results can also be interpreted in light of RQ2. Communication media, such as telephones and computers, are sufficient in fulfilling the instrumental and emotional support needs of Asian sojourners who wish to maintain contact with friends residing back home. The results show that both the sojourners and their friends are very satisfied with the large number of communication media available to them, even though they did not talk every day or as often as they would have in their home countries. A variety of media made communication convenient for them to connect to their home networks and get up to date on each other's life experiences. In other words, they were still able to keep in touch with their friends in their home country. They were able to use everyday talk strategies to support each other even though they were separated by geographical distance. Today, communication technology, such as the computer and the internet, can help Asian students simulate face-to-face communication (e.g., Skype, MSN Messenger, Yahoo! Messenger, etc.) with their close friends in their home countries. These technologies reduce the perception of distance and enable them to express their feelings. One of the biggest problems these students faced is not so much the geographical distance, but the knowledge about and limited access to a computer.

In addition, this research provides support for the point that males and females do not have different perceptions regarding their approaches to seeking and providing social support from their friends in their home country. Additionally, the length of time between separation—whether they left their friend for more than two years or less than one year—does not show significant differences regarding how they seek or provide support.

CONCLUSION

Close friends maintain a strong relationship and commitment when they are separated by geographic distance and they find their usual ways of relating before they leave their home countries easy to resume when they see each other again. The advantage of technology greatly improves how friends maintain their relationships and keep in touch with each other. They are satisfied with a variety of communication media, but they still prefer face-to-face communication because of how they typically express feelings.

LIMITATIONS OF THIS RESEARCH

Because the interviewees and the interviewer were not native speakers of English, some interviewees found difficulties expressing their ideas and the interviewer found difficulties transcribing the data. Additionally, this research did not analyze the new networks that the Asian students created after they left their country. New networks could potentially affect the sojourners' perceptions of support from their old network, which in turn could reduce their expectations for support from their close friends in their home country.

DIRECTION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The study of support received by Asian students from the new networks they build in a host country may further their understanding of this research. Researchers will want to raise questions about the new networks that Asian students create. How does a new network affect sojourners? Do sojourners perceive differences in support practices between their new network and their old network? Last, researchers will want to consider which communication media sojourners prefer to use in providing and seeking social support from their close friends in their home country and why.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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