

Social Media as a Source of Social Support: Evidence from Chinese Young Migrant Workers

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Abstract

By interviewing young migrant workers in Shenzhen, China, this study discusses what kind of social support the use of social media will bring to them. Our research shows that the use of social media such as QQ and Wechat, on the one hand, will reshape their interpersonal relationships in real life, including restoring the emotional support they had lost in childhood from their kinship group and receiving multiple social support from fellow-townsmen. On the other hand, it will help them build some new weak ties, giving them instrumental support from colleague relationships and identity support from interest groups. Social support from social media has effectively improved their psychological and life status, helping them better integrate into urban life.

Keywords

social media; social support; young migrant workers.

1. Introduction

At the end of the 20th century, with the reform and opening up of Chinese society and the policy of urban-rural integration, a large number of farmers swarmed into the city and formed a unique social group: migrant workers. After this group developed into the new generation, new social problems appeared, attracting the attention of the academic community. The "young migrant workers" mainly refers to the young people born after 1980, who are registered in rural areas but work in cities. They are about 16-35 years old and spend most of the year working in cities, engaging in various industries and less involved in agricultural production. In reality, although the young migrant workers are also urban workers, they are significantly different from the first generation of migrant workers in terms of education level, lifestyle, values, consumption patterns, work expectations, etc. Most of them not only lack the experience of farming but also have a simpler connection with rural families. Their characteristics of urbanization are increasingly prominent. However, the young migrant workers, limited by social policy, cultural identity, economic conditions, and other factors, can not integrate into the urban society while being separated from the rural society, and become the actual marginal people, with poor social support.

The growing popularity of smartphones makes the Internet an important part of the life and work of young migrant workers. The network is reconstructing the lives of the young migrant workers. The Internet is not only a technical resource but also a kind of social resource. Taking the Internet as the platform, the young migrant workers have gradually constructed a new form of social support-online network social support. As a new form of social support, the relationship between online social support and real-life social support and its influence on the young migrant workers has become one of the concerns of researchers. Mobile social media, represented by WeChat and QQ, has been widely used in China and has become an important media channel for maintaining social relations, enabling people to transform interpersonal relationships in virtual space into social support. Based on such background, this paper puts

forward the following research questions: what kind of social support does the use of mobile social media bring to the young migrant workers.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Social Support and Online Social Support

The theory of social support was first proposed by Caplan, who first identified the important role of social support in people's response to crises and adversity. For the first time, Cobb S et al. (1976) defined the concept of social support as "information-oriented, members of mutual help network feel cared for, loved and respected". To better understand the mechanism of social support, some scholars describe social support as a "meta-structure" composed of several sub-components (Vaux A et al, 1983). At present, the binary structure is often used in research, that is, obtained social support and perceived social support. Obtained social support aims to evaluate the specific support behaviors provided by the support network to the recipients. Perceived social support assesses the overall availability and/or satisfaction of the recipient with support (Barrera, 1986). The function of social support is usually further described as perceiving or obtaining different forms of social support, such as emotion, information, self-esteem and network support.

Social support describes face-to-face interaction between people. With the rapid growth of social network users, online channels have become increasingly important for people to give and receive social support. Compared with a traditional social support community, the online support community has a bigger influence in time and space (Wellman B et al, 1996). Many theories and research methods of online social support come from social support. Many scholars do not redefine it when they study online social support, but directly apply the concept of social support in face-to-face communication to online social support in the Internet environment. The terms "computer-mediated communication social support (CMC social support) and online social support" are often used. They define online social support from the similarities and differences between online and traditional social support. For example, Walther J et al. believe that online social support fundamentally changes the socio-economic relationship between support seekers and providers in traditional face-to-face social support behaviors (Walther J, 2005). Finfgeld D L (2002) believes that online social support is an important supplement to traditional social support, and analyzes the advantages and disadvantages of online social support. Online social support in the field of information and communication technology has been studied extensively. Research in this area has focused on online support groups formed through the "traditional" model, such as BBS, mailing lists, etc. But SNS is indeed different from the "traditional" model and has a greater impact, SNS allows users to exchange information and establish relationships with people around the world. It allows individuals to express themselves, establish or maintain contact with others, so it is an ideal place to seek and provide support (Xie, 2008).

2.2. Social Support for Immigrants

Social support is essential for immigrant groups. When they leave their original place of residence to live in a new community, they need to face many problems of settlement and adaptation, such as housing, employment, interpersonal relationship, language, etc., which demand a lot of social support. They seek social support from formal institutions and informal social networks to obtain emotional attention, instrumental support and information. Immigrant groups rely more on the social network. How to use a social network to obtain social support greatly affects the social and psychological adaptation of immigrants.

Similar to the situation of international migration, most of the migrant workers in China get social support from the informal social network (Wong et al, 2007). Researchers found that the

scale of the social support network of migrant workers decreased significantly after their mobility, mainly with strong relationships and the social support network was dominated by strong relationships(Jian&Huang,2007). The social support network of the floating population shows obvious "small group phenomenon", which is characterized by small scale, high density, and low heterogeneity. When the barriers between urban and rural areas are still hard to eliminate, the primary relationship based on consanguinity and geography is the basic form of the social network of this group(Wang, 2006). At the same time, frequent professional and regional mobility makes it difficult for migrant workers to maintain the reconstructed social network, so they largely rely on strong relationships with their spouses and relatives to obtain all aspects of social support. Compared with informal social networks, migrant workers receive less help and support from formal institutions. The support provided by the government, media, social groups, and other formal institutions mostly stay at the level of moral solidarity (such as media attention, public opinion and policy texts), which is far from enough to provide substantive support.

Researchers hold different views on the access of migrant workers to different types of social support. Some studies have found that there are more network members in the mental support of the floating population, and there is a relative lack of instrumental support (including financial support and information support)(Chang,1996). Other studies show that migrant workers' social networks are better at providing instrumental support, playing a more important role in finding a job, choosing shelter, borrowing money, etc., but lack spiritual and emotional support. The analysis of the influencing factors of social support shows that age, gender, marital status, education level, economic status, and the industry have an important impact on the quantity and quality of social support. For example, Li Shuzhuo's (2008) research on the floating population in Shenzhen found that in terms of the scale of social support networks, men's social support networks are larger than women's; the higher the income, the larger the social support network; The longer they live in the city, the larger their emotional support network. As far as the incidence of weak relationships in social support networks is concerned, the incidence of weak relationships in social support networks of men and older groups is relatively low. The research on the young migrant workers shows that the social support of married people is better than that of unmarried people. Although the better the income status is, the more social support they get, the change of social support level is not significant when the income level reaches a certain level; The longer the population flows, the more social support it gets, but the utilization rate of social support is lower. Besides, some studies have shown that educated workers in technical industries who are recruited directly from rural areas by factories are more likely to establish non-kinship support networks based on friends and expand the scale of social support networks.

The above research provides an important reference for understanding the social support of the young migrant workers, however, at present, there are few studies on migrant workers' social support from social media, which is a blank that this study hopes to make up.

3. Research Method

We interviewed 21 young migrant workers aged 19 to 25 whose parents had also worked in cities, they come from ten different provinces in China and work in garment factories, logistics, catering and other industries, at present, they all work in Shenzhen, which is one of the cities with the most developed economy and the largest number of migrant workers. We interviewed them online and offline, and the interview was conducted from August to December 2018, then we closely analyzed the data using the grounded theory approach.

3.1. Research Findings

3.1.1. Reconstruct Relationships in Real Life: Family and Fellow Townsman

3.1.2. New Home on the Palm

Consanguinity is the basic relationship of society, and among many consanguinities, the family relationship is the most basic. Li Qiang believes that in terms of the support that individuals can obtain in the society, the support from family members can play an irreplaceable and incomparable role in a quite long period. Family members live together and communicate frequently, so they can often give care and comfort to their relatives in time and provide them with enough emotional support.

In the interview, we found that because the parents of migrant workers left home for work when their children were young, the migrant workers did not get enough understanding and care from their parents. Of the 21 respondents, 16 had parents who worked outside the home during their childhood and 3 had father or mother who worked outside. Most of them were raised by grandparents. It can be said that their emotional support before work mainly comes from their grandparents, and their parents are very strange in their memory:

“My parents came home for the Chinese New year, and sometimes they came back in the summer vacation. When I was a child, I almost would not let them hug me. When I mentioned the concept of parents as a child, I felt that we were related by blood, but not very close.”(Respondent Y)

“My parents came home once a year when I was a child, the main way to contact them was by phone. They called back mainly to talk with my grandparents, they did not say much to me when they called. They mainly asked me to study hard and help my grandparents do housework.” (Respondent M)

As the young migrant workers embark on a similar path of life with their parents, the urban life that needs to depend on each other provides them with the possibility of improving their relationship with their parents. Social media provides a suitable platform for communication. 15 of the 21 respondents' parents are using QQ, Wechat and other social media, 13 of them have set up online family chat groups with their parents, and 10 respondents interact with their parents on social media at least three times a week. Social media also provides them with a variety of vivid ways to interact, including text and video chat, commenting on the content displayed on social accounts, sending red envelopes within chat groups, and so on. The ease and convenience of using social media make it easier for young migrant workers to communicate with their parents:

“After I registered a Wechat account for my mother, she became a heavy user, she often finds some interesting things on Wechat. She will forward them to the family chat group, and then she will ask us to watch them quickly and chat on Wechat all day long.”

In general, social media, as a widely used media tool, has formed an emotional link between the young migrant workers and their parents. It is also worth noting that the use of social media, to some extent, as a symbolic ritual, also helps to bridge the emotional rift between the two generations.

3.2. Electronic Companion

In rural society, the geographical relationship is second only to blood relationships. Although the rural identity of the young migrant workers is not as strong as that of their parents, the geographical relationship also plays an important role in their interpersonal communication. However, this geographical relationship is cut off by the fact that few people remain in their rural hometowns, and most young people of working age go to work all over the country.

“People of the same age in my family are not at home. The young people in several surrounding families have gone out. My classmates in primary school and junior high school have gone far to earn money.” (Respondent T)

Another 11 respondents also reflected the diaspora of geographical groups. In this kind of diaspora, the original social support is also weakening. “Due to the different working environment and the lack of contact, the relationship is naturally weak.” (Respondent L)

With the popularity of QQ and Wechat in the young migrant workers, more social media are used for communication among geographical groups, and chat groups of fellow townsmen and alumni are established to consolidate geographical relations. Respondent Z, who has been working abroad for eight years, describes this phenomenon: “When I first came out to work, I often called them, but later, I did not often call them. Everyone was busy with their own affairs, and there was no common topic. But now if I see them online, I will occasionally chat with them and ask them where they work and how they are doing.” Although according to some respondents, this kind of contact is different from person to person, the emergence of social media does facilitate information exchange and emotional communication. In this kind of communication, some geographical groups provide them with social support, such as emotional support, social support, identity support, and instrumental support.

Research by Procidano et al. Shows that from adolescence to adulthood, people are increasingly seeking emotional support from their peers rather than their parents. Eight respondents expressed similar feelings. Geographic groups have the most friends of the same age, and they are often able to give themselves more intimate care. Moreover, online communication is relatively convenient and cheap, so many young migrant workers choose to use social media to seek emotional support from geographic groups.

In addition to seeking emotional support from close friends in geographical groups, the young migrant workers will also seek identity support and social support from more fellow townsmen on social media. With the help of mobile phones and other media, former classmates and neighbors have become electronic companions in a foreign land. Respondent M gave the reasons why he likes to chat with his fellow townsmen online: “We came from the same place, and we grew up together. I just wanted to see what she was doing now, so I could see if there was anything wrong with the way I was going, and I could refer to it later.” M also likes to send a group message to his classmates and friends in his spare time, then see who replies first, and then start a chat with him in this way. In addition, fellow-townsmen have also become a source of information and opportunities, providing instrumental support for the young migrant workers. Respondent L talked about the help she got from her hometown when they were chatting on QQ: “For example, one of my classmates went to Guangzhou to look for a job. We talked on QQ before and he said he wanted to change his job. I also wanted to go there, He used to work there and introduced two job opportunities for me.”

Generally speaking, the geographical relationship is a close relationship in the interpersonal communication of the young migrant workers. The young migrant workers are not as good as ordinary urban workers in terms of social security, working conditions and access to information, so fellow townsmen are very important in their social support network. The immediacy and multimedia nature of social media enables geographic groups to provide them with multiple social support they need.

4. Weak Ties: Instrumental Support and Interest Groups

4.1. Instrumental Support from Colleague Relationship

The young migrant workers not only need to maintain the old relationship formed in the rural society but also need to develop new relationship in the urban life, colleague relationship is one of the most important, colleague relationship tend to provide practical instrumental support,

such as job information sharing, and social media plays an important role in maintaining such relationships. If the parents help the young migrant workers to settle down when they first arrive in the city, then the colleague relationship groups they meet later may open the door to a new world for them. Five respondents had a similar experience, because of some colleague relationship, their degree of integration into the city and working conditions have changed a lot.

However, the instrumental support of colleague relationship is not stable, the instability of the young migrant workers' work makes the colleague relationship always changing, colleague relationship can provide the young migrant workers with instrumental support in urban life and work, which is also affected by population mobility.

The use of social media, such as QQ and WeChat, makes it easier to maintain such instrumental support. Respondent L has changed 9 jobs since he graduated from middle school in 2010. After changing his job, he will also keep his colleagues' QQ. Although he seldom contacts them, he will send them blessing messages during festivals, he said that the main purpose of doing this is to keep in touch with them. If you want to change jobs, you can also ask them about the working conditions there, so you don't go there for nothing. Respondent T got his current job because of the colleague relationship: "I saw my former colleague who posted the company's recruitment information on WeChat, and then I went to the interview and passed it smoothly".

As early as 1973, Granovetter proposed the theory of strong and weak ties in interpersonal relationships, believing that weak ties are more important resources when providing possible opportunities. Colleague relationship has become an uncertain, mobile weak relationship, but it has more efficient communication efficiency and wider communication range than "strong relationship". Social media like QQ and WeChat play a huge role in building connections between weak ties.

In a word, blood relationship can enable the young migrant workers to survive in the city, but to surpass the development path of their parents, the colleague relationship often plays an irreplaceable role. As for the young migrant workers, their job mobility is relatively strong, and their instrumental and social support between them and the occupational relationship group is hardly conducive to the formation of intimate relationships. With the convenience of communication, social media has become an applicable means to maintain this kind of instrumental support.

4.2. Interest Groups

During the interview, we also found another unique group of young migrant workers who communicate with each other in social media: the interest group. The so-called interest group is a group of people who are united by common interests and hobbies. Interest groups have existed since ancient times, but there are generally more such groups in the city, rural society has less leisure time, so interest groups are less.

Cai Qi pointed out: "with the renewal of Internet technology and application, the scattered and small interest groups in the real society are now thriving in the network virtual community. The young migrant workers often do not have a special interest relationship group in real life, so they can not get the social support of this group. In real life, the young migrant workers often do not join the special interest relationship group, and naturally can not get social support from such a group. Social media provides them with a chance to get to know interesting groups so that they can get corresponding identity support. Three of our respondents also joined the virtual interest group on social media.

Respondent T is 21 years old. He has been obsessed with online games since junior high school, and his favorite game is "League of Legends". After playing the game together for a long time, many players who often form teams in games also exchange QQ with each other, so as to continue cooperation and communication in the future. Respondent T described: "we have a

chat group on QQ. We often chat about the skills of the league of legends in the group, we seldom talk about other things. We are pure net friends. If we don't play that game one day, maybe the relationship doesn't exist. "They gathered together because of the game, and because of the game they have a common topic to maintain the relationship, the game fan group that TC joined is an interest group. The core value of this group is the identity of "league of legends", and what they communicate with each other through social media also conveys or confirms such identity. Therefore, some kind of psychological support - identity support has been formed. However, the role of such support varies from person to person.

Another interviewee LD has been infatuated with Korean band EXO since high school. To support her idol, LD has joined several fan groups in QQ. She said, "we are all crazy about EXO. every time they release a new album, everyone will buy the new album. And we would find someone to buy it from South Korea. When the new album and songs came out, people would vote for their idols every day. Many times, they would use their mobile phones, pads, and computers and encourage their relatives or classmates to vote for them." LD is active in the virtual community with the help of social media, showing the real personality that is difficult to express in real life. Although online interest groups are virtual, the identity that supports their existence is objective and real. When communicating with the interested groups in the virtual space, with the help of the virtual and linked nature of social media, the side that is difficult to be understood by people around us in real life can be recognized here.

5. Conclusion

Because the young migrant workers can not integrate into the city and return home, their social relations are in alienation and isolation, this directly affects their psychological state and daily life. Faced with the impact of such social marginalization on themselves, the young migrant workers use social media to obtain and strengthen various social support and relieve psychological tension and pressure in life. At the same time, it should be noted that although social media is beneficial for users to obtain and strengthen various social support, the media is just a mirror image which is dominated by a profound reality. As a tool, social media has a dual role, users may use this communication means to make their life better, but they may also avoid life or magnify the defects of life. In this respect, this paper is limited by the research framework and vision, and more research is needed in the future.

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