

The role of Internet-based Social Support Networks in Immigrant Settlement

Presented by

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Immigrants, especially newcomers, have need for a wide range of settlement services

- **Advocacy**
- **Counseling and support,**
- **Education,**
- **Emergency food services,**
- **Employment,**
- **English as a second language (ESL),**
- **Form filling,**
- **Health/Medical,**
- **Housing,**
- **Information and referral,**
- **Legal,**
- **Orientation,**
- **Recreation, and**
- **Translation and interpretation**

(Lim et al 2005, p.4).

Lack of settlement services often leads to:

- **acculturative stress**
- **psychological/mental illness**
- **poverty**
- **social exclusion**

In search for solutions to settlement service provision

- **government agencies and not-for-profit NGOs are often the focus of attention;**
- **oftentimes, immigrants are mentioned only as a problem: that is, they have needs to be met at the cost of taxpayers; the role of immigrants as part of the solution has rarely been examined.**

In this study

- **we examine an internet-based social network, which was created and maintained by immigrants themselves as part of the solution to their own settlement needs.**

Internet-based social network is not new. It has existed for quite some time and in different forms

Commonly used terms include:

- web-based discussion groups**
- online discussion groups**
- online discussion forums or usenet**
- email lists, listserve**
- chat rooms**
- newsgroups**
- discussion boards**
- online support groups**
- computer mediated network**
- virtual community**
- online board**
- or bulletin board**

(Colvin, 2004; Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005; Eastin & LaRose, 2005; Matei & Ball-Rokeach, 2001; Ye, 2006)

Previous research found that participants of such networks can obtain four types of social support:

- **social companionship support**
- **informational support**
- **self-esteem support**
- **instrumental support**

(Eastin & LaRose, 2005).

Social support increases, as the size of the online social network grows.

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Another study shows that online social network can increase user's social capital

- **In their study of the social interaction of 180 mothers with young children from an online bulletin board on a parenting website, Drentea and Moren-Cross (2005) found that this bulletin board created an online community which helped increase social capital of new mothers at a time when these women were confined to home and were more isolated than usual. These social capitals were gained through both informational and emotional supports, and with the feeling of protection in the virtual community. Mothers obtained valuable information for the care of their newborn babies.**

In a study of caregivers, researchers found three advantages that are associated with the attributes of computer-mediated communication:

- anonymity**
- asynchrony**
- personalization**

(Colvin et al. 2004)

A literature review reveals that no academic study has been done on internet-based immigrant social support networks

- Hence this study:

“The role of internet-based social support network in immigrant settlement– a case study of NewBridger”

NewBridger

- **NewBridger is a moderated email list**
- **It was created by James Wang in 2005**
- **The list is used by recent Chinese immigrants**
- **It has grown to a membership of 2,200 people.**
- **Several offline groups are formed by Newbridger members (English study group and recreation),**
- **the Newbridger website was launched in September of 2008,**

Research questions:

- **What support functions does Newbridger serve in helping Chinese immigrants settle in Canada?**
- **What specific settlement needs are met through the use of Newbridger?**
- **Which types of social support are most attainable through Newbridger?**
- **What are the qualities that make Newbridger a choice for recent Chinese immigrants?**
- **Does Newbridger help immigrants increase their social capital? If the answer is “yes”, what settlement needs can be met with increased social capital?**
- **How does Newbridger assist immigrants in reducing acculturative stress?**
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Data Collection and Findings

Data Collection:

- 10 Semi-structured interviews
- Questionnaire survey
- Email messages

Interviews:

- 6 settled immigrants, 4 new immigrants
- 1997 - 2008
- Mature
- Well educated

Questionnaire:

- Questions finalized after preliminary interview result
- Demographics and results are similar with interviews

Email Messages:

- Between Feb.9, 2007 and Dec. 24, 2008
- Not fully analyzed
- Used as examples

Research Findings

1. Informational Support
2. Socio-emotional Support
3. Social Capital
4. Other Functions
5. Comparison w. Service Agencies
6. Qualities

1. Informational Support (A)

- **Employment**

- workshops and training opportunities
- links to writings of related issues
- personal experiences
- job postings, fairs & vacancy notices
- volunteer opportunities
- questions and discussions on specific issues

- **Self-employment & entrepreneurship**

1. Informational Support (B)

Education

- E.g. Uni./col. programs, language training
- E.g. child's choice of university major

Healthcare

- E.g. Family doctor
- E.g. Discussion about giving birth in Canada

Housing

- E.g. Short term rental dwelling for newcomers
- E.g. Room-mate

1. Informational Support (C)

Daily Living

E.g. childcare, internet service provider,
second hand cars, banking service, income tax

Community Involvement & Receptions

- Within and outside Chinese community
- E.g. Concert, holiday celebrations, outings
- E.g. Girls trip to Edwards Gardens - men
- E.g. Volunteers for MPP election

1. Informational Support (D)

Characteristics

- Simplified Chinese
- Backup info bank
- Voluntary & solicited info (Interactive)
- Source: individual, non-profit, government
- Personal experience and advice
- Reflect priorities of members and moderator
- Open – links to info outside of the network

2. Social-emotional Support (A)

Sense of Belonging

- Shared cultural background
- Virtual community

Interviewee #7: *“Here (in Newbridger), I don’t feel isolated. ... This is a group of people I can mingle in. This is where I belong.”*

Interviewee #4: *“Newbridger is a group of people of same background. ... if someone throws in a joke, I can truly understand it. I can laugh whole heartedly. ... I belong here.*

2. Social-emotional Support (B)

Friendship and Mutual Help

Interviewee #10: *“ we can make friends based on common interests, such as sports and classical music. ... From Newbridger, we not only get help, we also get friendship. For other organizations, we are only clients.”*

Interviewee #6: *“I am not a very active member of Newbridger. ... I stay with the group because maybe one day I can help. Maybe one day I will need help.”*

2. Social-emotional Support (C)

Love and Care

Interviewee #4: *“Newbridger brings out the best in people, good side of human nature. ... Other places feel like a store. You go shopping there and get what you want and leave. That’s it. (There is) no connection. But Newbridger has love and giving in it. It feels like a big family. It has love, similar to church group and friends. ... I can feel the warmth here.*”

Interviewee #9: *“Other organizations only provide service, but Newbridger is friends help friends. Newbridger members care about one another.”*

2. Social-emotional Support (D)

Encouragement

Interviewee #3: *“Our lives here are a long journey. (It is) full of challenges and frustration. We have to keep working hard. We need more encouragement. ... (but) some media (are) very negative.”*

Interviewee #9: *“The emails I receive through Newbridger are encouraging. (The moderator) selects success stories. It makes me feel that if someone can do it, I can, too. (The success stories) have that psychological suggestion impact.”*

2. Social-emotional Support (E)

Acculturative Stress

- Prevention
- Reduction

3. Social Capital

- Increase size of social network faster

Interviewee #2: “One day, I read a message a person posted on Newbridger looking for a place to play Ping Pong. I knew a good place, so I responded. So, we met and went to play ping pong together. ... Now we still go sometimes. We also chat on the phone sometimes. ... You can meet more people and meet people faster through Newbridger.”

- Social capital >>> cultural & economic capital

4. Other Functions

- ❑ Instrumental support
 - Bulletin board for donations and call for help
 - E.g. traveler to accompany senior parents
 - E.g. employment referral

- ❑ Fun

- ❑ Social mobilization

Concluding Remarks

- **Informal social networks (such as NewBridger) cannot replace formal or official websites (such as 'settlement.org' and the municipal Immigration & Settlement Portals, as the information they provide are not authentic.**
- **Still, this research confirms that internet-based informal social networks are able to provide useful information, and social and emotional support, to recent immigrants.**

**Among the 14 common settlement need areas,
Newbridger is capable of providing direct assistance in
6 areas**

- **advocacy**
- **counselling and support**
- **health and well-being**
- **information and referral**
- **orientation**
- **recreation**

It is also capable of offering indirect assistance in the remaining areas mainly through its informational support function.

In terms of employment assistance, Newbridger can be helpful in three aspects by providing:

- **employment related information including job postings,**
- **instrumental support such as personal recommendation**
- **encouragement to boost immigrant's confidence.**

Internet-based social support network is both flexible and accessible.

- Members can access the network from home, during work breaks, and anywhere that has a computer and internet access.
- It helps break the barriers of distance.

- **Internet-based social support networks are low-cost infrastructure. Many other immigrant groups can establish such a network without large sums of investment.**
- **This study also calls for the government(s) to recognize the contributions of the informal social support networks to immigrant settlement, and to support these efforts, including financial support.**

- **In the case of NewBraider, communications are conducted mainly in the immigrants' native language.**
- **While this is convenient for, and appreciated by, the members, its role of facilitating interactions with outside of the community is not clear.**
- **We recommend that the moderators of such networks give some serious thoughts about how to help members to reach out and interact with the larger society (to facilitate integration)**

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Thank You !